

Travelling down the Mekong in Vietnam and Cambodia

The mighty Mekong river runs nearly 5,000 km through Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and while it may not be the longest river in Asia, it is certainly the most beautiful.

The river flows into the South China Sea just south of Saigon, known today as Ho Chi Minh City, and its delta is the starting point for many cruises.

It is not possible to navigate the entire length of the Mekong since the Sambor rapids prevent further passage. Luckily, the confluence with the Toble Sap, the river's main tributary, is just above Phnom Penh and ships can use it to reach the celebrated temple complex of Angkor Wat.

Gliding along the lower reaches of the Mekong offers the visitor broad tableaux of local everyday life. Only two cruise vessels ply this section, the Tonle Pandaw and the Mekong Pandaw, which can carry 66 or 64 passengers. Those who have booked a trip upriver, board their ship in My Tho in Vietnam, some 60 km south of Saigon.

The journey unfolds past mangrove forests and green rice paddies, offering glimpses of many villages and cottage industries along the way. Now and then, the ships pass a bathing spot where children enjoy a dip while their mothers wash clothes and crockery in the water. There are hardly any roads here, the river is the main transport artery and that explains why it is so busy. Motorboats dart past canoes being paddled from bank to bank while the traditional sampan wooden cargo boat is a common sight.

When it runs close to larger towns and cities the Mekong becomes even livelier. Take the bustling town of Cai Be, where the big river cruisers tie up at the dockside. A maze of canals, it boasts many gardens, some temples and a church but no streets to speak of.

The floating market is the main attraction here and it lures farmers from the outlying districts who trade their wares straight from the deck of a sampan.

Chau Doc is another hive of activity. A huge dockside market selling local produce and commodities dominates the town on the border with Cambodia. The fresh food booths offer anything from dried fish to peeled grapefruit or even frog's legs for the gourmet.

Beyond the border there are fewer settlements and houses alongside the river compared with the stretch inside Vietnam. The Cambodian riverside is less busy until shortly before Phnom Penh. This energetic city is the largest settlement along the river. The waterside is dominated by relics of the past; pagodas and palaces attract the eye alongside handsome villas built in the French colonial style.

The best place to muse over artefacts of the Khmer culture is the National Museum, whose riches were fortunately not plundered during the murderous reign of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. It is best to set aside a whole day to admire the many statues and bas-reliefs. The huge central market erected in the art deco style is also well worth a visit along with the Royal Palace.

The horrors of Cambodia's recent past can be seen at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. After a tour of the former Pol Pot torture chambers, the proverbial gentleness and friendliness of the

Cambodians seems all the more astonishing.

Beyond Phnom Penh, the cruise ship leaves the Mekong to chug up the Tonle Sap. This river is unique since for half of the year, starting from the rainy season in June, it reverses its flow. From November onwards, the normal flow to the river mouth is resumed.

On the northern shore of Tonle Sap lake is the booming provincial town of Siem Reap. The most compelling reason to come here is to visit Angkor Wat, one of the world's most spectacular ancient temples. The complex has been on UNESCO's list of world cultural monuments since 1992.

Around 1,000 relics lie strewn across this vast site stretching across some 200 square km. Visitors can book individual tours or explore on their own. Those with only a few days to spare should concentrate on Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious structure, and plan trips to the overgrown city of Angkor Thom and the Ta Phrom temple district.

Both world culture and subculture are catered for in Siem Reap, which offers a wide range of bars and clubs in the centre, one street is even called Bar Street. One of the establishments is the Red Piano Bar where actress Angelina Jolie was a guest when she filmed the movie 'Tomb Raider' in Angkor in 2001. It comes, as no surprise that the most popular drink here is Tomb Raider Cocktail.

Thomas Gross (© IANS / India eNews)