

# GOING WITH THE FLOW

A RIVER CRUISE  
IS THE BEST WAY  
TO EXPLORE  
THE LIFE OF THE  
LOCALS

A FLOAT DOWN THE MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER IN  
VIETNAM IS AN AFFAIR TO BE REMEMBERED

BY KALPANA SUNDER



IT'S A SURREAL MOMENT... in a day filled with both tourist traps and genuine 'wow' moments. My daughter catches my eye and we both try to hide our smiles at the high-pitched singing. The distinctive singing here in the Mekong region is Cai Huong, where people sing in the rivers from one boat to another over long distances, in long and high tones. It's a water-dominated landscape of browns, grays and greens where the street is the river and life is dominated by the ebb and the flow of the waters. The mighty Mekong starts in the icy Tibetan basin, flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia before finally emptying into the South China Sea through nine snake-like tributaries. The delta is a mosaic of mangroves, rice

paddies, fruit orchards and shrimp farms and irrigates one of the largest rice growing areas of South East Asia. The Vietnamese call the river Cuu Long or the river of the nine dragons, referring to the tentacle-like braided nine tributaries that the Mekong spreads in to.

The Mekong Delta was originally Khmer territory — it used to be marshland and swamps. When the Nguyen kings took over, they built canals and today the people living here, come from different cultures like the Chams, local Vietnamese and people of Chinese origin. During the Vietnam War, it used to be a dangerous stronghold of the Viet Cong in the south. Today, it's a peaceful scene of houses on bamboo stilts, many of them with underground netted chambers to trap fish. We

hear that a lot of the Mekong fish is exported and ends up in Japan.

My Tho is a Mekong delta town, noisy and crowded. It's the jumping-off point for trips on the Mekong. Our guide Thung tells us that it's well known for snake farms and snake wine (which is known to improve your libido) and snake meat is on the local menu. This brown and murky river with gentle waves and water hyacinths, is a working river as we can see: mothers do their washing and shopping, men dredge the silt from the river bed to be used in the construction industry, fishermen mend their nets and smiling children wave to us from the banks.

It's a gentle soporific pace of life, punctuated by visits to a coconut candy factory, where local women make cauldrons of the

sticky paste, and cut them into long strips. The intersections between canals and rivers are usually the floating markets: huge areas of the river, where there is commerce and trade. We visit the colourful Cai Be floating Market. There are large seller boats and smaller 'customer' sampans, doing brisk business in sugarcane and a variety of fruits.

There are also mobile 'Starbucks' selling strong Vietnamese coffee and the omnipresent *pho* sellers, selling the fragrant broth of rice noodles, meat and herbs for a song.

Fruit orchards, bursting with tropical fruit and emerald green paddy fields border the river. There are small irrigation canals, with slim bamboo 'monkey' bridges for people to cross them. Ramshackle homes, a mobile petrol

shop — there are interesting sights all along this watery highway. Boats of all shapes, sizes and speeds cough and splutter providing a unique soundtrack to our journey. The unique feature of many of the Mekong boats is jazzy 'fish eyes' painted on the bow.

We get off the boat at noon, and trudge through the countryside and people's backyards. Women in conical hats sit under the shade of trees, sorting their baskets of fruits; young children wobble riding their cycles through narrow roads and bridges.



We are surprised to see family graves in the middle of rice fields; Thung tells us that a family can have a grave anywhere on their land and they prefer to have their loved ones close to them. Lunch is at Mr Kiet's Historical home, a restored home built in 1838.

Orchards, ponds, exquisite bonsai and trees bursting with star fruits, jackfruits and pomellos — the setting is wondrous. Our meat-eating friends gorge on the local speciality — divine 'elephant ear fish' brought in a stand, and eaten, wrapped in small rolls of rice paper with mint and lettuce, dipped in pungent fish sauce. We enjoy a simple vegetarian meal of Vietnamese spring rolls, fried rice and dragon fruit juice. It's a welcome break from the sultry weather outside.

## THE DELTA IRRIGATES ONE OF THE LARGEST RICE GROWING AREAS OF SOUTH EAST ASIA

The return journey is by a small sampan at the water's level, where we are given the trademark local conical hats to protect us from the blazing sun.

Vinh Long is where we end our journey for the day. We travel to our stop for the night — Can Tho, on a modern road with a state-of-the-art bridge built with Japanese help. Can Tho is a bustling port city in the heart of the delta





## IT'S A RAUCOUS SIGHT WITH A FRENZIED PACE. WOMEN ROWING WITH ONE OAR, SMALL BOATS SELLING FOOD...

with tree lined boulevards and old French colonial buildings. The Hotel Victoria Can Tho is our pit stop for the night. Its brightly coloured tiles and spanking new spa gives us a respite from the watery world. Whitewashed façades, teak wood balustrades and bamboo ceiling fans; this is a piece of colonial Vietnam.

At the crack of dawn, we visit the Cai Rang floating market — one of the biggest markets in this area. It's an atmospheric market

with brisk business. Many call this the 'poor man's version of Thailand's floating markets', but what we like is that it is not a stage-managed scene for tourists. It's a raucous sight with a frenzied pace: women rowing with one oar, men throwing fruits from one boat to another and small boats selling food and drinks weaving their way in and out expertly. There are long bamboo poles rising in the air, sporting watermelons, pineapples, even cabbages. Our guide explains that this is the advertisement strategy of the sellers, so that people know what they are selling.

Besides visual poetry and photo-ops galore, our journey on the Mekong has demonstrated how a river can provide a livelihood to many and brought us up-close with the local people.

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