

Aqua Expeditions: AQUA MEKONG River cruising in Cambodia



4 Nights Low Water Itinerary Phnom Penh - Phnom Penh (December-August)

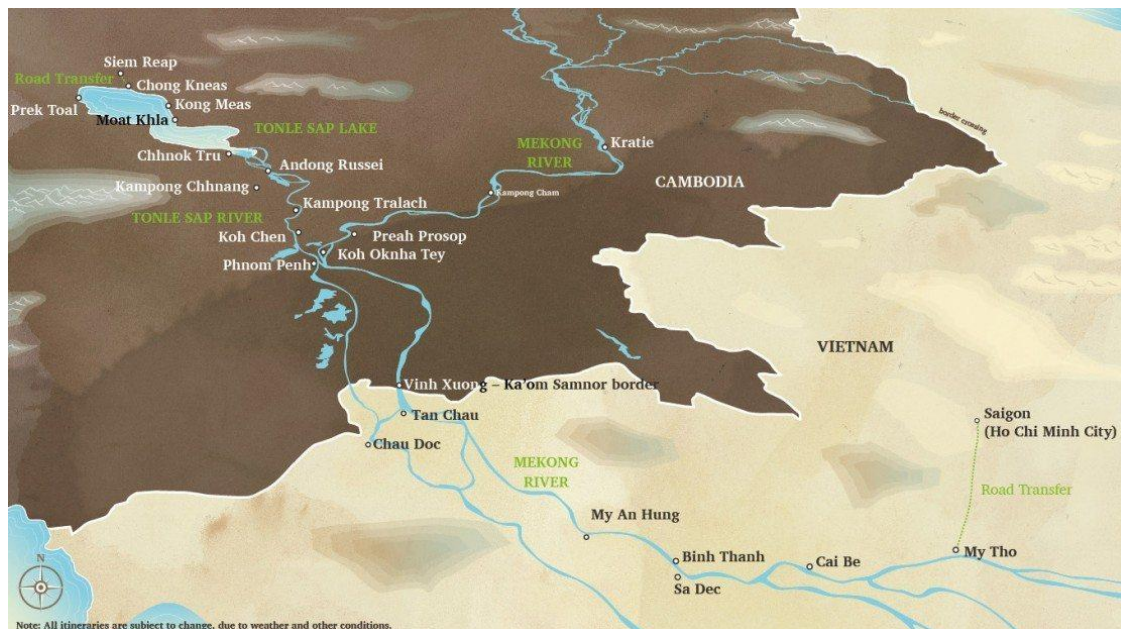
FRI 31MAR17: Phnom Penh (Mekong River)

SAT 01APR17: Koh Chen & Kampong Prasat (Tonle Sap River)

SUN 02APR17: Kampong Chhnang & Kampong Tralach (Tonle Sap River)

MON 03APR17: Koh Oknha Tey & Preah Prosop (Mekong River)

TUE 04APR17: Phnom Penh (Mekong River)



I have lived in third world Asia, I know how challenging it can be – what Aqua Expeditions are able to achieve, is astonishing! They make it so easy ☺

TOP 3 REASONS TO CHOOSE AQUA MEKONG

- The ship, its skiffs & the on board experience : there is nothing else like this on the Mekong
- The food: Superb! (see recipe attached)
- The guides : worth gold

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOW WATER & HIGH WATER

LOW WATER – DEC to AUG (itineraries do not include Siem Reap)

HIGH WATER – JUL/AUG to NOV (itineraries include Siem Reap)

SHIP's DRY DOCK – for about 3 weeks in either APR or May (timing varies)

Judging by the very high stop banks and extreme stilt arrangements supporting buildings – the water level moves heaps between LOW and HIGH.

We were there beginning of April during Low Water season. Our voyage started and finished at Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, which is where the Mekong River and Tonle Sap River's meet. We spent time on both rivers.

There's a natural dyke further upstream on Tonle Sap river which keeps the water in the Tonle Sap Lake. Preventing vessels from passing between the two areas, and keeping the Aqua Mekong in the lower part of the Tonle Sap river during low water season.

Siem Reap is north of the Great Lake. Only High Water itineraries on Aqua Mekong include Siem Reap and the Lake district.

CLIMATE 26°C - 38°C (MAR-APR hottest – that's when I went!)

WET SEASON: MAY – OCT (most rain JUL-SEP)

Less popular but can be a good time to go. It's not dusty and everything looks lush & very green. Will rain 2 out of 3 days, usually real heavy in the afternoon at same time each day. Aqua time their expeditions so you are under cover at this time, probably enjoying a nice drink ☺

DRY SEASON: OCT – APR (Nov is coolest, JAN most dry, APR hottest- dry, dusty, windy & very hot!)

Best months to visit: November (coolest time and still HIGH Water itineraries available), & DEC-FEB

I was there in early April. What the pretty brochures and internet sites don't show you is how hot & humid it feels, making it sticky and tiring when you are getting around, and when in larger built up villages and cities it's dirty and smelly!

Aqua Expeditions make life in a sweaty climate -so easy ☺

Here's an example of what I mean....

Pre cruise we had one night at Phnom Penh to do our own thing. We thought a Tuk-Tuk ride to see the Grand Palace would be a good idea. So "3 white chicks" in a Tuk-Tuk pull up at the Grand Palace, instantly we are overwhelmed by beggars, some in wheelchairs with missing limbs, plus the heat and smell of the sewer/whatever under the hot tar-seal road, made us say to the driver, "Just keep going we've changed our minds, we don't want to get out".

4 days later we are back at the same spot, this time with Aqua Expeditions' own guides and organised Tuk-Tuk's. No beggars come near us, they have got us up early to beat the crowds and the extreme heat of midday, and when we get back to our Tuk-Tuk at the end of the tour of the Palace there's an icy cold clean white refresher towel which smells of beautiful fresh lemongrass. There are also ice cold water bottles. I tell you, these guys are worth every cent!

CAMBODIA

The people are beautiful ☺

Despite a horrific past-under Polpot and the Khmer Rouge, they are happy, the locals I met were smiling & friendly especially in the little villages and rural areas. It reminded me of Thailand in the early 80's when there weren't so many tourists. Traditional timber houses on stilts, rice paddy & lotus flower fields, roadside markets, Buddhist temples - timeless.

Cambodia today has schools & roads, but is definitely third world. Since 1993 Peace Agreement & new government, economic reform has happened, GDP growth 6.9% in 2015 and Inflation 3.25%. There are corruptions though. Next year there's an election, and there's still some political unrest. They can't hide what's going on.

Schools restarted in 1998, but they had lost their teachers; killed under Polpot. There still isn't enough teachers and the drop-out rate of older pupils is still high as Cambodian parents still believe kids don't need education to work in the field. But the children are ambitious, keen to learn, they want smartphones etc. They are the key to the future. Depending on who you talk to they are hopeful in 5-10 years Cambodia will be better.

Cambodia used to be 70% forest, today that has reduced to less than 20%. Forests cleared to grow crops for China during Polpot. I saw the Chinese influence still today. Factories where cheap Cambodian labour worked, owned by Chinese sending products & profits back to China. The river which supports so much life, fish (12% of GDP), rice & other crops depend on it. 1.2 mill. People live in 173 floating villages along the river; water buffalo, farmers & fishermen depend on the water. Yet a dam is planned, to produce power to be sent to China. This will be a major change to the environment and way of life here, over fishing, pollution. Without water, communities will not survive.

Aqua Expeditions have a strong environmental ethic and they have a goal to raise US\$10,000 by the end 2017 to establish a full library and support girls' education. They have teamed up with Room to Read, focused on literacy and gender equality. We visited 2 villages where Aqua Expeditions supports the schools.



The children were lovely. By the end, I gave the Aqua guides some of my clothes & my sport shoes to donate to the villages. You can't help but be touched by these people & what they have been through.

LIFE ON BOARD

Just so easy, from the moment you first step on board, smell the clean fresh aromas, the contemporary timber panelling and airy spaciousness – you know you are in for something very special.



Life on board is relaxed and elegant at the same time.



Cabins are spacious 322 sq.ft. and very comfortable.



They all feature floor to ceiling windows with full panoramic view of life on the river. In all cabins these windows slide open; either as a French style lean out from your window at waist height or a full exterior balcony you can step out into, with daybed, table and chairs outside. Cabins with exterior balconies have less interior space, but I thought there was still plenty of room.

Total Guest Capacity: 40

One-to-one staff-to-guest ratio.

2 Decks of guest accommodation. There's only 10 cabins on each deck (4 of which have balconies).

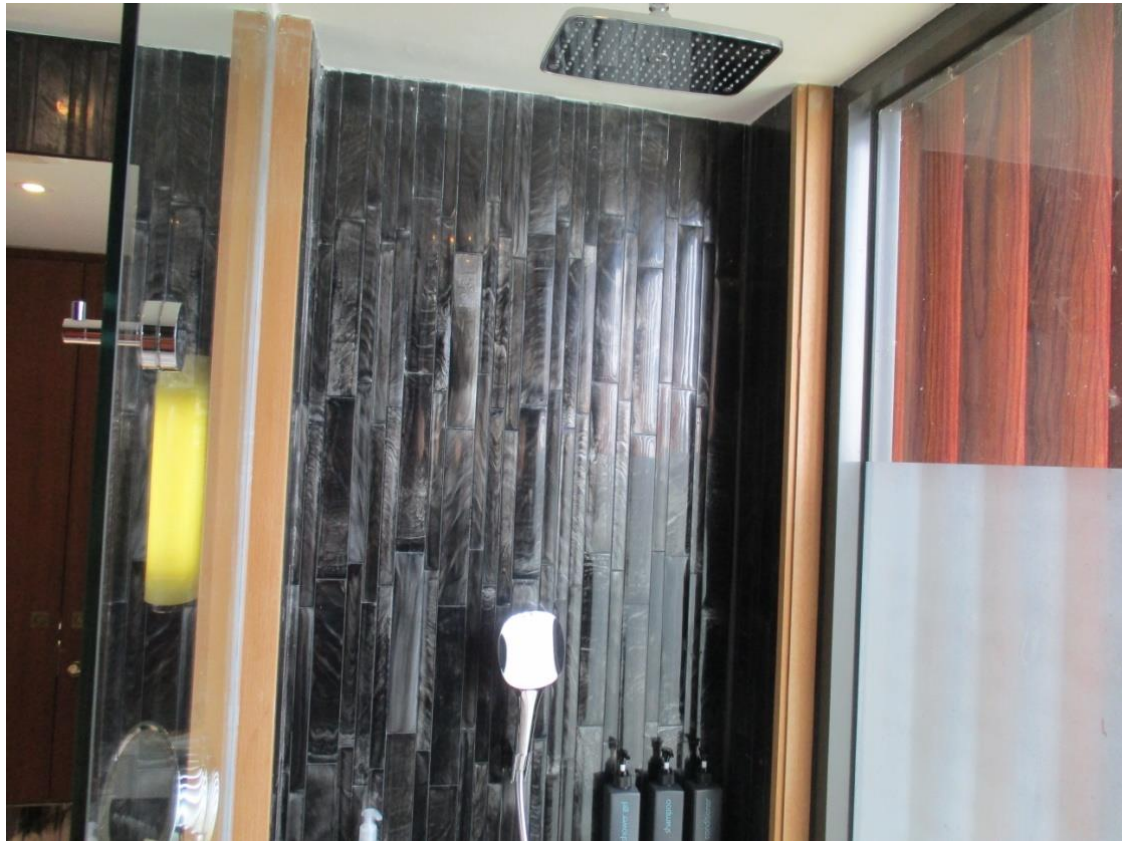
Families are welcome (Min child age 7 years). There are 4 interconnecting cabins on each deck which can accommodate up to 5 guests in each pair of interconnecting cabins.



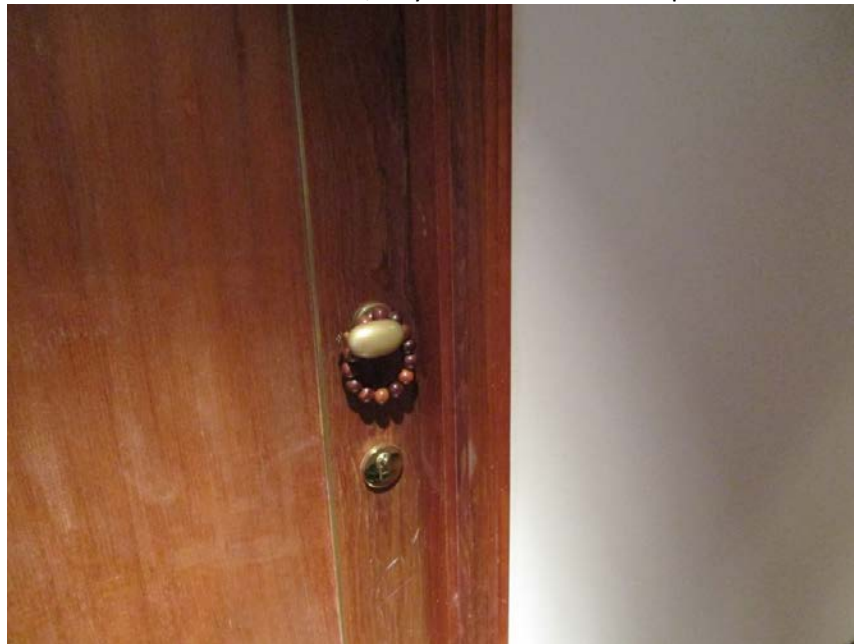
Contemporary design suites have every modern feature you could want:

- Espresso coffee machine
- 220 volts International power plugs so you don't need to bring an adaptor
- Mood lighting with switches everywhere
- Modern air-con temp control system, safe, large wardrobes, robes, jandals.
- Free water bottles, and your own Aqua Expeditions water bottle with your name on it.
- Spacious bathrooms with the biggest shower I've been in on a ship, complete with rainforest shower or hand held showerhead. Marvellous water pressure ☺
- AND a magical grey basket into which you put your clothes for FREE daily laundry.
- Cabins are serviced 3 X Daily





You do feel safe and relaxed, as you would on a small private vessel.



Cabins are not locked, they encourage this homely feel, just put the beads outside on your door handle if you don't wish to be disturbed (Pls note they will organise a key if you prefer).

Aqua Mekong

Length: 205 Ft

Beam: 38 Ft

She draws 1.5 metres and has a cruising speed of 12 knots. It's always smooth sailing 😊

Aqua Expeditions started in 2007, they have been operating in Cambodia & Vietnam for 2 years. Majority of their guests have come from US. We are committed to getting Kiwi's on board this amazing vessel, & to the joy of Cruise Director, Joni Aker, who's from Nelson, NZ 😊

Water on board

They have the latest technology on board including advanced water systems (8x filtration). I brushed my teeth with it, was very safe. There is plenty of bottled water in your cabin, and they always fill your water bottle before you go ashore.

Daily Routine

7am: Wake up call
7:30 – 8:30am: Breakfast
9am: Transfer to skiffs for morning shore excursion
12 noon: Return to the ship – shoes are taken away to be cleaned & returned outside your cabin door.
12:30am: Leisurely Lunch & time to rest, watch a dvd with popcorn, chill out on the sundeck or by the pool with a cool drink.
3pm: Transfer to the skiffs for the afternoon excursion
5-5:30pm: Back on board
6:15pm: Pre-dinner drinks and nibbles while listening to the evening presentation by our guides about local area/history and what was coming up in tomorrow's excursions.
7:30pm: Dinner (always a delight!)



3 courses with a shared family style main course, made up of 3 – 4 dishes which we would share among 3-4 guests. The food is amazing, fresh with incredible flavours and combinations all inspired from the diverse regions along the river, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand. Designed by Australian chef David Thompson, who's been awarded the first ever Michelin star for a restaurant serving South East Asian food. There is an alternate western style menu available too. Over dinner and wine we'd share stories of the day's adventure and discuss which shore excursion we would opt for the next day, be it kayaking, cycling, Tuk-Tuk or OX-cart ride. I'm 50 years old and not particularly fit, but was able to give everything a go, it was fun ☺



Getting Ashore

The skiffs are fantastic, very safe and easy to get in and out of. They add another whole dimension to your experience.



The Aqua Mekong is equipped with 4 skiffs. They are modern, very safe, strong and fast. Meant we could go ashore pretty much anywhere. Other companies have to rely on local vessels, and from what I saw of them, I would question their safety standards. For security reasons and to avoid damage from other vessels the Aqua Mekong always anchored out in the river, even at Phnom Penh. The skiffs are used for embarkation and debarking.

And when we got tired of kayaking a skiff came and picked us up ☺



Shore Excursions are all included

Most of the time I never took any money ashore with me, just my camera and water bottle. The guides have radio contact with each other and the ship all the times. They have first-aid, water, towels, backup tuk-tuks following behind the cyclists, everything is sorted.

Some activities are weather dependent. The skiffs carry heavy duty wet weather ponchos, so they can still go out, and there is always a beautiful hot shower waiting for you when you get back on board Aqua Mekong ☺



Shore Excursions we did included:

- Kayaking or taking the skiff through floating villages
- Ox-cart ride
- Buddhist temple visits; including Q & A with monks and receiving their blessing
- Cycling through villages, paddy and lotus flower fields
- Local school visits
- Many visits to little traditional villages, to see silversmiths, silk-weavers, potters and palm-sugar farmers; still doing these activities the way they have always done.



One of the guides had studied at a monastery, sharing insights to monk life with us.



Aqua's guides are so knowledgeable. We called Hoem (pictured above) "Mr Google", because he could answer any question, and his depth and detail was incredible.

He shared with us his father's experience of that dreadful time which started 17 April 1975 under the command of Polpot and the Khmer Rouge, when they had come to his village, and when his father was asked if there were any teachers or village leaders, he said "Oh no, not here, they are all poor farmers" because he knew what was happening, intellectuals were asked to come to the "re-education centres in the city" so they could become the future leaders, but when they got there, it was a prison & they were told that the guards who collected them said they heard them saying things against Polpot & the Khmer Rouge and they were tortured to confess for something they had not done, and then taken to one of over 300 killing fields/mass graves in the country at that time, it's estimated $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population was killed.



The **killing fields** are not included as they are about 40mins outside Phnom Penh. However a tour of Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide is included on the last day of our voyage when the ship returns to Phnom Penh. It was quite sickening to see and hear about what happened in this place.

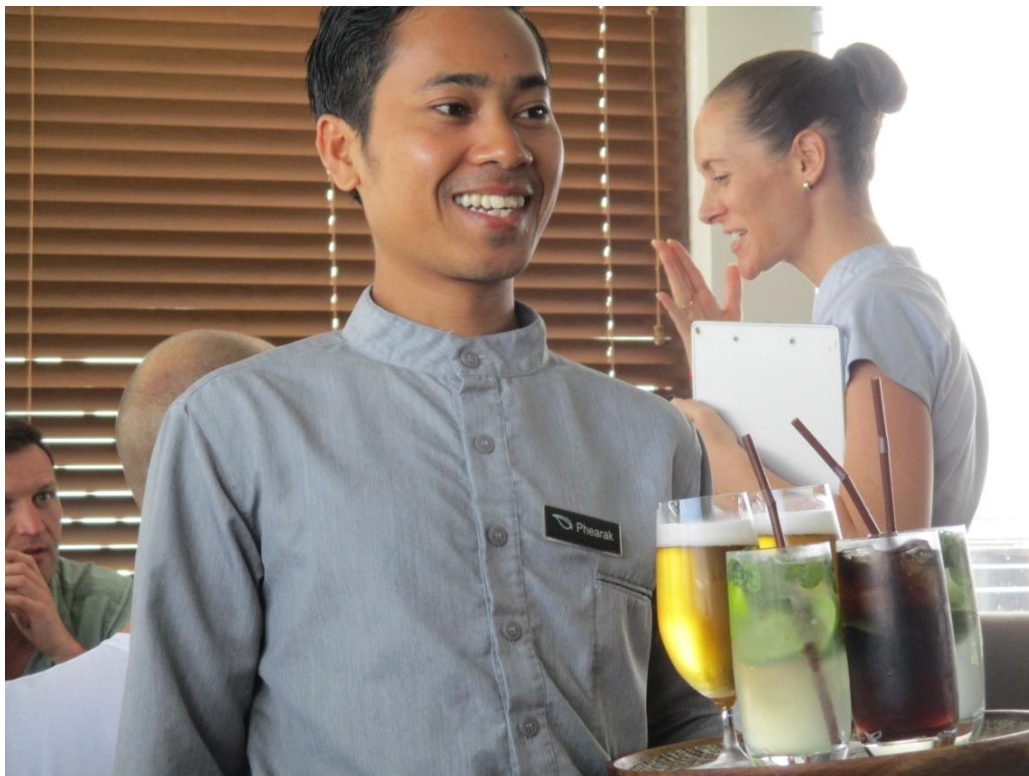


One of 2 survivors, an engineer who could fix the Khmer Rouge typewriters, the other was an artist.

Gratuities

Gratuities are expected, although not automatically charged. At the end of our voyage 2 envelopes are placed in your room; one for crew, one for guides into which you can place US\$ cash, or you can authorise the Cruise Director to charge your credit card a suggested amount for your voyage, this is then divided fairly amongst everyone. We took the credit card option for the maximum suggested amount of USD\$150 per person for the 4 night voyage. (As a guide expect to pay US\$30 pp per day)

The crew are wonderful – instantly they all knew our names, and our favourite drinks ☺



Drinks

House wine & beer & non-alcoholic drinks, including freshly squeezed juices are free all day. Cocktails, Whiskey's etc are all at reasonable prices (US\$8 aprox).

Social areas on board

The main lounge on Observation Deck:



and the outside forward facing shaded bar and pool area, were the main hang out areas we enjoyed.



Ship also offers 2 Spa treatment rooms, indoor exercise room, private movie lounge, rear facing sun deck with BBQ, yoga classes in the mornings, plus a library & games room.



AMAZING FOOD ☺

The culinary experience on board is an absolute treat!



I love South East Asian food, Australian chef David Thompson drawn on all the cultures along the river to produce fresh and vibrant dishes. Fellow Australian, Adrian – Aqua's Food & Beverage Manager was also on board our voyage, so we were lucky enough to get extra explanations of dishes and score a few recipe's off him. There was also a cooking demonstration on board.



Don't you love the entrée bowls – they get them made especially in Indonesia.

Zucchini Salad Entrée Recipe (quite simple & the combo of flavours is wonderful)

Serves:10

2 large Zucchini
12 Tablespoons Olive Oil
6 Tablespoons red wine vinegar
300gm Golden Raisins
Salt and Black pepper
Parmesan or Grana Padano
2 Red Onions – sliced thinly
100g Capers – rinsed and drained
Julienned lemon zest
Fresh Basil leaves

Slice the zucchini's in lengths and set aside.

Thinly slice red onion and then marinate them with the capers, salt, pepper, red wine vinegar and olive oil. Leave for around 10mins until the onions have collapsed.

When serving mix together the zucchini, onion mix, basil leaves which you have torn and the raisins.

Marinate for about 1-2 mins till the zucchini is breaking down.

Taste seasoning before serving, should be a sharp acid/sour flavour balanced by the saltiness of cheese and sugar from the raisins.

Scatter on the plate with thinly sliced or shaved parmesan cheese.

Enjoy!

In summary – Amazing 😊



The ship - unique & the people – just beautiful 😊

Make sure this one is on your bucket list!