

4 Days in Heaven on the Mekong River with Aqua Expeditions.....

Arriving into the hustle and bustle of Phnom Penh airport, I was full of excitement and anticipation to see our luxurious home for the next 4 nights. Waiting for us outside the terminal was our transfer which had been arranged by the ship in advance and it was the perfect way to arrive. We loaded up the BMW with our bags and headed toward the river. The traffic was crazy, so I would definitely recommend allowing more time when traversing the city.

Upon arrival at the port, we headed to the Titanic Restaurant to relax before check in at 3pm. It is a great place to sit back, get a bite to eat and gaze longingly at the ship in the distance.



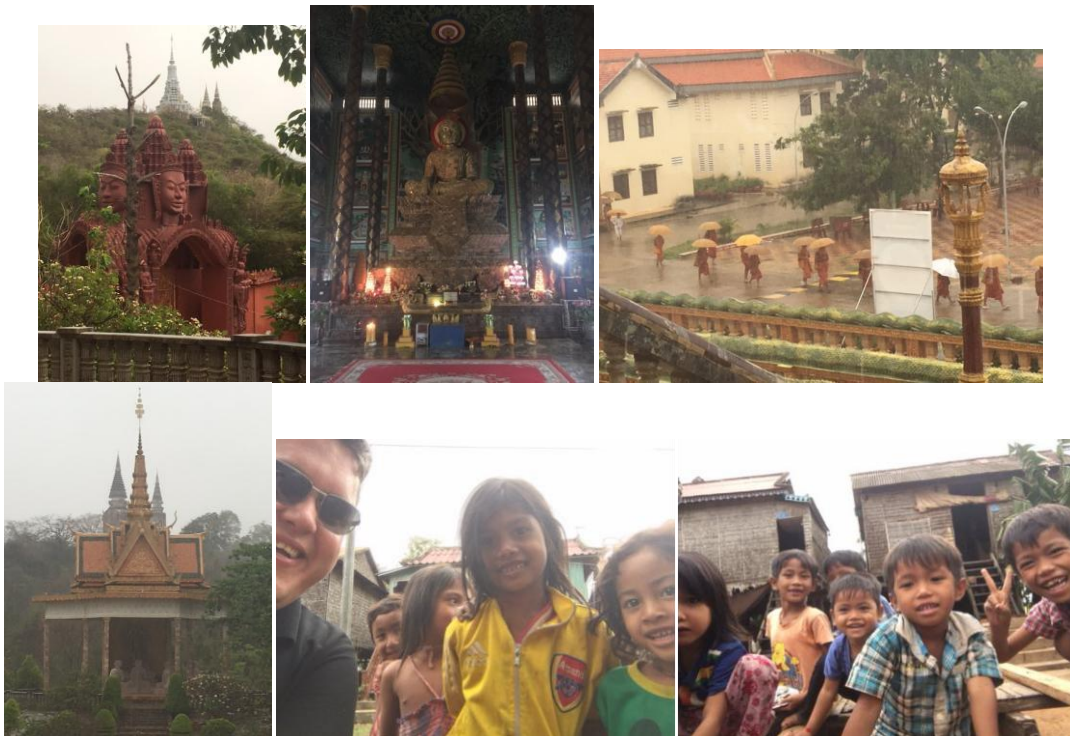
We were greeted and taken to the skiff (small tender boat used to get between the ship and land) with our bags. Stepping on to our new home for the next four nights, I had no idea what to expect but as soon as I stepped onboard, I was greeted by around 20 staff members with big smiles, a cold drink and towel... I knew I was in for a truly amazing experience.

We were lead to our rooms by the Kiwi cruise director Joni and shown through the ins and outs. A really unique part of the experience is that they have NO room keys. They want the experience to feel like a home away from home. At first I was a little dubious with the usual safety concerns popping to mind but decided to go with the flow and never questioned it again. They are happy to provide keys if you feel uncomfortable but if you use the safe for valuables; there really is no need for them.

After we settled in, we headed upstairs to the top deck lounge to get a drink – Beer, Wine & Non Alcoholics included (YAY!). Full of lush couches, a bar, games room at the front with a foosball table and to the right was a beautiful screening room to watch movies. A few of us from the group decided to watch a movie one afternoon and they even make you fresh popcorn!!

Every night includes a presentation by the guides around the History & Culture of the area or performances of traditional dancing followed by your schedule for the next day. Day one is more of an introduction followed by a traditional dance troupe.

Each day includes a morning and afternoon shore excursion with cycling and kayaking options for the fitness enthusiasts. It works perfectly as you can change your mind on a daily basis if you want to tuk tuk or cycle to the next experience. I am not the fittest person and I even did a 12km cycle! It was so much fun and I was exhausted at the end of it but I am so glad I got to have that experience. Biking through villages and working fields, it gave me a whole new unique perspective. Another great extra is that the ship will clean your shoes every time you return from an excursion. You take them off upon arrival and they are waiting outside your door after lunch.



Shore Excursions ranged from Temples & Monasteries to Villages, Silver-working, Silk farm & Pottery demonstrations, to kayaking through floating villages. One highlight was the Oxen cart ride through the village. I have never seen so many smiling children. A lot just waved from a distance as we rode by but about halfway, I had a lovely little girl walk with me and we had a great time discussing her schooling and what she wanted to be when she grew up. She was learning English, so we practiced some words and even sang a song. It really hit home that even though they didn't have much, they were genuinely happy.





I also loved the experience of being taken to a local school. We were advised that if we had any presents for the kids i.e. pens, stickers & books etc, that we should bring them today to ensure they are used to encourage education rather than begging. We went round giving out stickers to the class and they performed a few songs for us. They were so happy to see us and I felt genuinely grateful to be able to have this time with the kids and see the amazing work that these schools do.



One of the other highlights of this cruise is THE FOOD!

I can say this without a doubt – you will never go hungry when travelling with Aqua Expeditions. Starting with a beautiful daily breakfast with ala carte hot options ranging from Ricotta Pancakes, Corn Fritters and the usual breakfast staples (bacon, hashbrowns etc), along with a full cold continental buffet with a cook to order egg/omelette station. You were truly spoiled for choice. We even had freshly pressed juices made on a daily basis for us.

Lunch & Dinner are served family style and I think this is such a good idea as the menu is so varied, you want to try a bit of everything. A few favourites were the crunchy oyster mushrooms, a cauliflower and hazelnut dish and one of the best Raviolis I have ever had. Don't worry; you will never go hungry as they will keep bringing the food until you are full. In the Mekong, it is a very Asian inspired menu, so if you feel like something a little more European, you can preorder a different option for lunch and dinner. They have everything from Burgers and Toasted Sandwiches to Pasta and Salads.



One of my favourite things about the dining experience was that you could ask for any recipes you wanted and they would type them up and bring them to you at the next meal. I was even able to convince Adrian (F+B manager) to include by favourite Crunch Oyster Mushroom starter in the Cooking Demonstration on the second to last day.



Last but certainly not least, I have to give a shout out to the staff. Joni our Kiwi cruise director was outstanding. She always had a smile on her face and was a true delight to deal with. We were also lucky enough to have Adrian the Food & Beverage Manager on the cruise, who gave us insights into the food and the inspiration behind the dishes. The local staff were amazing too. Pharak the Bartender/Dining staff was forever bending over backwards to make sure we were happy and we even taught him a few kiwi phrases which was hilarious. The guides were outstanding and enhanced the excursions with their rich knowledge of the culture and history. Each cruise includes two from Cambodia and two from Vietnam, so you get the explanations from a local guide that gives you a great insight into the ways these unique countries operate.



The Aqua Expeditions Mekong Cruise is a truly luxurious, culturally rich and rewarding experience. I would not hesitate in recommending it to any client that wants to see the real Cambodia but still enjoys the finer things in life. The fact they have their own Skiffs is a huge selling point as the other operators we saw, had to utilize the local boats and would not have the same flexibility as Aqua. I give it 5 Stars and want to go back to do the Amazon or the 7 night cruise into Vietnam ASAP!

Craig Martin