

Trunk Call

One of the Aqua
Mekong's skiffs
stopping at a tree-
top ranger station
in the Prek Toal
Bird Sanctuary.



The Life Aquatic

A languid cruise from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh
reveals the natural and cultural riches of
this corner of Cambodia, as well as
the pleasures of a well-appointed boat.

BY **CHRISTOPHER P. HILL**
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We make our incursion into the flooded forests of the Tonle Sap under a low, cirrus-streaked sky. At least, it feels like an incursion—threading its way through mangrove-choked channels, our aluminum skiff, equipped with muffled outboard motors and painted a green-tinged gray that mirrors the color of the lake water in the filtered morning light, has a stealthy, almost military aspect to it. The mood on board is vaguely surreptitious, too, as we scan the waterlogged wilderness for our quarry. Then comes a rapid-fire set of directions from our team leader, Visoth, that seem better suited to a commando raid: “Ten o’clock, ten o’clock in the bush!” and, “On your 12! On your 12!”

On our 12, about 20 meters up the channel, is a Chinese pond heron, its light brown plumage almost invisible against a thicket of giant mimosa. Startled by our appearance, the bird takes flight, revealing a flash of snow-white wings as it skims away across the water. “Very nice,” says Visoth, adjusting the knot in his checkered *krama* scarf. “Are you ready for more now?”

It’s the start of the dry season here in Cambodia—Visoth tells us the monsoon shifted just three days earlier—and the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary is already teeming with life. As the morning progresses, we spot more pond herons and one of their larger cousins, a purple heron. There are Oriental darters drying their wings in the sun and young cormorants flapping low over the treetops (Visoth, ever ready with a bon mot, says they hatched a month ago and that “they are now professional fliers”). A fish eagle perches on a distant branch; a little red-headed woodpecker flashes past. “We hardly see *them*!” Visoth beams. What we don’t see are any other people, save for a lone fisherman gathering water hyacinth and a young European couple out on an excursion from Chong Khneas, the nearest dock, 75 minutes by speedboat to the northeast. Prek Toal may be a mecca for birders, but getting here requires serious commitment.

Unless you happen to be a passenger on the *Aqua Mekong*, that is. The newest riverboat to cruise the waters between Siem Reap and Vietnam’s Ho

Chi Minh City—it was launched last October—the *Aqua Mekong* is also the sleekest. Sixty-two meters from stem to stern, it has an undeniably modern profile, with huge plate-glass windows punctuating its sides and a jaunty, tentlike awning shading its pool deck. It’s the third vessel in a small fleet founded by Francesco Galli Zugaro, a handsome Swiss-born Italian-American who launched his first boat, the *Aqua Amazon*, on the Peruvian Amazon in 2008. Now based in Singapore, Galli Zugaro, who just happens to be along for this cruise, says the *Aqua Mekong* is an evolution of his original concept—larger than its sister ships but still intimate, with a high crew-to-guest ratio (20 hospitality staff, all Cambodians, look after a maximum of 40 passengers) and a spare, contemporary elegance that informs everything from the boat’s lacquer-paneled dining room to its 20 streamlined cabins, which feature floor-to-ceiling windows (some of which slide open onto private balconies), bronze-hued walls covered in woven fiber, and black-tiled bathrooms where you can watch the passing scenery as you shower.

But the *Aqua Mekong*’s secret weapon is its trio of skiffs, eight-meter-long runabouts that whisk passengers into shallow channels and backwaters that other cruisers can’t reach. They come in particularly handy on the Tonle Sap, Southeast Asia’s largest lake. Barely a meter deep in the dry season, the Tonle Sap more than quadruples in size during the summer monsoon, when the water level of the rain-swollen Mekong rises so precipitously that part of the torrent is pushed upstream along the 100-kilometer-long channel (the Tonle Sap River) that connects it to the lake, reversing the tributary’s flow and flooding the Tonle Sap basin. The annual deluge reaches its peak in September, when the lake’s depth tops 10 meters, inundating thousands of square kilometers of marshland and alluvial forests. But it’s late November now and the waters are already receding, ushering in the start of the nesting season for the migratory birds that congregate in Prek Toal. Without the skiffs, we’d probably be sitting back on the deck of the *Aqua* wondering what all the fuss was about.

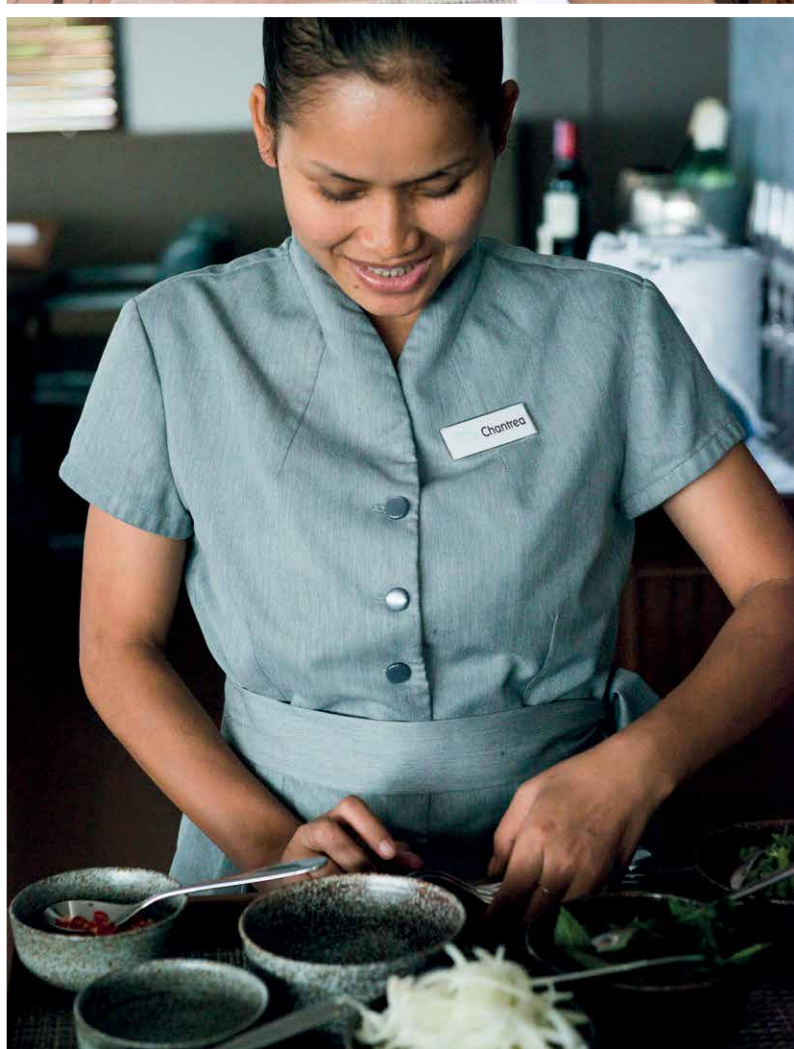
Our course through the mangroves takes us to a ranger station, where we pick up one of its crew to guide us deeper into the 31,282-hectare sanctuary. The station, such as it is, inhabits a partially submerged tree, with a bamboo landing in the fork of its trunk and, six meters above in the branches, another platform equipped with a telescope and a radio. Visoth explains that this is one of more than two dozen such stations scattered around the reserve, used by a roving band of 40 or so rangers to keep an eye out for egg poachers and bird hunters. Many of them are former poachers themselves, making them experts at their job.

We motor on through the flooded forest, past matted clumps of sea-poison blossoms and dense tangles of lianas garnished with little yellow flowers.

Making Waves

Opposite, clockwise from top left: The *Aqua Mekong*’s 20 cabins are kept shipshape throughout the cruise; dining tables on the pool deck; one of the boat’s Cambodian restaurant staff preparing condiments; the *Aqua*’s sleek lounge is outfitted with bespoke furnishings.





**Against
the Grain**

Rice fields in
the village of
Andong Russei,
a short tuk-tuk
ride inland
from Kampong
Chhnang.
Opposite: A sugar
farmer collecting
palm juice from
the top of a
nearby tree.





The Details

The **Aqua Mekong's** four-night cruise from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh costs from US\$4,420 per person and operates from July through November, the Tonle Sap's high-water season. At other times of the year the boat keeps to the Mekong, with three- and four-night itineraries between Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City (aquaexpeditions.com).

Where To Stay

Should accommodations be required before or after the cruise, the best lodgings in Siem Reap include upscale boutique hotel **Shinta Mani Club** (Oum Khun St.; 855-63/761-998; shintamani.com; doubles from US\$150) and the well-located **Park Hyatt Siem Reap** (Sivutha Blvd.; 855-63/211-234; siemreap.park.hyatt.com; doubles from US\$410), known as the Hôtel de la Paix before its 2013 rebranding and renovation.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the **InterContinental Asiana Saigon** (Hai Ba Trung; 84-8/3520-9999; ihg.com; doubles from US\$224) is among the town's newer five-star addresses.



From time to time, drowned branches scrape menacingly along the skiff's hull, and in one brief moment of alarm, our canvas canopy catches on a low-hanging bough and rips open. But soon enough the channel widens and we glide to a stop about 100 meters from a pair of treetops that have been colonized by hundreds of Asian openbills, a type of snail-eating stork. The ranger informs us—with Visoth translating—that the birds arrived from the swamps of northern Cambodia two weeks ago, and that here they will stay until April, raising chicks and stuffing themselves on mollusks. It's an impressive sight, as is the spectacle that greets on the way back to the *Aqua Mekong* half an hour later: a sky peppered with spot-billed pelicans, dozens of them, wheeling against the clouds on wings spanning two meters. I'm mesmerized, until the spell is broken by a series of plops just off our bow. Visoth doesn't miss a beat. "Pooping, pooping," he says gleefully. "This must be their WC!"

Of course, the Tonle Sap isn't just for the birds. It's among the richest freshwater fisheries in the world, one that nurtured the Khmer empire in ancient times, to judge by the abundance of fish (including enormous, deer-swallowing catfish) depicted in the 12th-century bas-reliefs at Bayon Temple in nearby Angkor. Today, more than three million people live on the lake's floodplain, and a good many on the lake itself—Tonle Sap is home to 173 floating villages, off-the-grid fishing communities that drift with the lake's seasonal ebb and swell.

Needless to say, village visits are written into the



cruise's script, and after lunch we're back in the skiffs and heading to Moat Khla, home to 190 families as well as a rudimentary Buddhist temple buoyed up by oil drums. We moor alongside the latter for a blessing ceremony with an orange-robed monk and his novices, who chant their mantras under a tin roof festooned with parti-colored cotton bunting. I get the sense that we're not the first tourists to come this way, but we could well be at our next stop, Kong Meas, which we reach via a labyrinth of backwater channels. Home to just 75 families, it's literally off the map; Visoth says this is the first time he or his fellow guides have ventured there. One household, a family of ethnic Vietnamese (a minority that has shared the lake with the Khmer for countless generations), is



Still Waters

The *Aqua Mekong* on its namesake river just outside Phnom Penh, above. Opposite: The boat's Vietnamese captain, Nguyen Ngoc Thu.

kind enough to invite us into their home. About 25 of us—two skiff-loads full—crowd into the floating house and crouch down on its creaking floorboards. It's a rustic affair, with walls of grass matting, a small TV hooked up to a car battery, and rafters packed with fishing gear; the sole concessions to decor are framed pictures of the Madonna and Christ hung behind a cat's cradle of tinsel Christmas garlands. As our guides question the head of the household about life on the lake—"We live in peace, it is good," he says—the water below us thrashes and churns. I briefly wonder if we're being attacked by one of those monstrous Bayon catfish. But no, it's a convulsing mass of snakehead, thousands of dollars worth, that the man raises in a fish pen under his house.

By the time we leave it's getting dark, but we have one more stop. In a patch of open water, the skiffs tie up against each other and the crew begin shaking cocktails—caipiroskas of some sort, muddled with palm sugar. We down them to the beat of a boom box that has appeared as magically as the drinks. "Welcome to Tonle Sap's floating bar!" Visoth shouts over the music.

More drinks await back in the *Aqua Mekong's* lounge, which takes up half the upper deck and doubles as the venue for our morning briefings and midday lectures about Cambodian culture and economy. It's a convivial space and passengers mingle over glasses of wine and Angkor beer, recounting the day's highlights or sharing stories from their



An impressive spectacle greets on the way back to the *Aqua Mekong*: a sky peppered with spot-billed pelicans, dozens of them, wheeling against the clouds on wings spanning two meters

other travels. They're a cosmopolitan and worldly bunch: a German couple from Hong Kong, retirees from Chicago and Boca Raton, a pair of Muscovites, a group of friends from L.A., and two ladies from New York, Debbie and Jocelyn, who tell me they have both sailed on one of the *Aqua*'s sister ships on the Amazon, and who, like most on this boat, are "seven-nighters," doing the full cruise from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City. I'm only aboard for the Cambodian leg, finishing the trip at Phnom Penh, which makes me a four-nighter. But no one holds that against me. And Debbie is great. Having visited plenty of other poor countries in her time, she's taken to toting around a little Polaroid camera and asking villagers if she might take their picture, leaving them with the digital print. "When you visit these places as a tourist, it's all very one-sided. I thought it would be nice to leave something behind," she says. That might sound a bit patronizing, but the villagers we meet don't seem to think so: they giggle and grin as they watch their images slowly materialize on film.

After dinner, I snoop around some of the *Aqua*'s other facilities—there's a library stocked with Kerouac and Steinbeck and a crystal-and-teak foosball table; a movie room outfitted with Eames lounge chairs; a small spa—before retiring to my cabin, where I step onto my balcony and lean against the railing. Dark water races against the hull a meter below me. In the inky distance, fluorescent tubes mark the locations of myriad fishing nets—the lights attract insects, and insects attract small fish. They glow like stars, and for a moment it seems that the water has become the sky, and the sky the water.

Zippering about in skiffs is all very fine, but a cruise boat is a bad place to be if the food isn't good. Thankfully, the *Aqua Mekong*'s is very good, with a menu overseen by Australian chef David Thompson of Nahm, the much-ballyhooed Thai restaurant at Bangkok's Metropolitan hotel. Thompson, who is also aboard for this cruise, is no ambassador for Cambodian cuisine ("Thai food is so much better," he tells passengers while introducing the lunch selection on day three), so we generally eat the sorts of things he might cook back in Bangkok: mud crab with hot basil, chilies, and peppercorns; fish in sour-orange curry; chicken with wild-ginger sauce. It's all delicious. A green Cambodian fish curry does make it onto the menu one day ("vastly gentrified, I assure you," Thompson smirks), as do pizzas, pasta, and a Vietnamese *pho*,

providing ample fuel for our further excursions.

Our last skiff foray on the Tonle Sap takes us to the village of Chnok Tru, a sizeable community near the lake's southern end. On its busy main channel, we pass all manner of floating facilities—a *poste de la police*, a two-pump gas station, a church, a karaoke bar—before visiting a factory barge that produces huge blocks of ice used to keep fish fresh for the markets in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and beyond. It's a busy place. The ice-making process is explained by the owner, a man who sports two gold teeth, but my attention wanders somewhere between "ammonia" and "expansion coils." Across the channel, a pair of women are batting at a net with badminton rackets, sending a shower of tiny *riel* fish (a key ingredient in the fermented fish paste known as *prahok*) onto the deck. Young men race past on their longtail boats; children play catch at the lake's edge, jumping gamely from one porch to another. It's a water world, complete, self-sustaining, and entirely captivating.

It's lunchtime back on the *Aqua Mekong* when we enter the Tonle Sap River. The flat, shimmering expanse of the lake is soon behind us and the countryside closes in, with the hint of rolling mountains in the hazy distance. We drift on downstream, past high banks studded with sugar palms and stubby fields that slowly give way to embankments and other signs of settlement. At the town of Kampong Chhnang, we go ashore—our first steps on dry land since the start of the cruise—and hop into waiting tuk-tuks for a drive through golden rice fields to a pottery workshop. The next day we visit an elementary school and a community of silversmiths called Koh Chen, trailed by a posse of village kids. Debbie can't snap her Polaroid fast enough.

Then, almost without warning, we're passing through Phnom Penh, returned once more to a world of office buildings and honking traffic. Beyond the bustle of Sisowath Quay the *Aqua* motors into the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers, anchoring upstream for the final night of this leg of its cruise. Tomorrow I'll disembark, but not before enjoying one last dinner—a barbecue buffet served *en plein air* under the awning of the boat's pool deck. In keeping with the evening's alfresco theme, dinner will be followed by a movie on the aft sundeck, which has been converted into an outdoor cinema. And the name of this film? "It's the Grand *Buddha*-pest Hotel!" a crewmember announces with exquisite mirth. ●

Water World
Opposite, clockwise from top left: Spot-billed pelicans above Prek Toal; the skiffs returning to the *Aqua Mekong* after a visit to the floating village of Kong Meas; a potter in Andong Russei sifting dry clay powder; the floating church in Chnok Tru.