

Destination Vietnam

Welcome to another world, a world where the colours are more vivid, the culture is richer, and the history more compelling. This is the world of Vietnam, the latest Asian dragon to awake from its slumber.

Nature has blessed Vietnam with a bountiful harvest. Soaring mountains, a killer coastline and radiant rice fields, Vietnam is simply stunning. Blanketed from head to toe with a patchwork of emerald-green rice paddies, timelessly tended by peasant women in conical hats, this time the brochures don't lie.

The rumble of a million motorbikes, the cries of hawkers and the buzz of business transactions are as ever-present as the tinkle of the past in the pagodas, and the swish of the scythe. Modern Asia meets medieval Asia and, in the Old Quarter of Hanoi, the two become one.

For culinary adventurers, Vietnam is a treasure trove of more than 500 different dishes. It's a wonderful world of pungent herbs and secret spices. Dip delicate spring rolls in *nuoc mam*, a fish sauce that is as compulsory as ketchup for the Vietnamese. Or play 'down-in-one' with *xeo* (rice wine), the whisky of the mountains.

'Nam to a generation, the sorrow of war weighs heavily on the consciousness of all who can remember it, but here the Viet side of the story is told at poignant sites across the country. Fiercely protective of their independence and sovereignty, the Vietnamese are graciously welcoming of foreigners who come as guests not conquerors.

Don't believe the hype. Or the propagandist party billboards that are as common as statues of 'Uncle Ho'. Believe your senses, as you discover one of the most enriching, enlivening and exotic countries on earth.



Getting Started

The Mekong is one of the world's most evocative rivers and lining its length are historic cities, blissful backwaters, beautiful landscapes, and friendly locals. Cruise the mother waters from Xīshuāngbǎnnà in Yúnnán Province to the perfect paddies of the Mekong Delta, stopping along the way to see the infamous Golden Triangle, the shimmering temples of Luang Prabang, the real life of Si Phan Don, the river dolphins of Kratie and born-again Phnom Penh. And don't forget some side trips. As well as Bangkok, the region's dynamic gateway, within touching distance of the Mekong lie the majestic temples of Angkor, the outrageous beauty of Halong Bay, pristine national parks such as Khao Yai in Thailand, and beguiling beaches in Cambodia and Vietnam.

The Mekong has all this and more, but it's also raw in places, so pack some flexibility, humour and patience. Come expecting the unexpected, be ready to go with the flow, prepare for an adventure as much as a holiday, and the Mekong region will deliver.

WHEN TO GO

When it comes to weather, it's a tough call, as the region's climate is so diverse. Think frosts and occasional snow in the mountains to the north, and temperatures soaring to 40°C in the dry season further south.

With the exception of northern Yúnnán, the Mekong region lies within the tropics. This means that regardless of when you visit, the weather is likely to be warm or even downright hot. High humidity is also common, with few areas far enough inland to enjoy thoroughly dry weather. Temperatures are much cooler in the mountains.

Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and the northern and central regions of Thailand have three seasons: hot, hotter and hottest. There is a relatively cool dry season from November to late February, followed by a hot dry season from March to May, and then a humid, rainy season that starts some time in June and peters out in September. Fortunately, even during the rainy season it seldom rains all day and travel is possible over most of the region. The monsoon brings sudden torrential downpours for an hour or so each day, but this can be a real relief from the heat. Further north towards Hanoi and Kūnmíng, the rainy season comes during the summer months (June to August) when the thermometer soars. In contrast the winters can get quite chilly, so pack some warm gear.

See Climate Charts (p485) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Bring as little as possible, as the Mekong region has pretty much anything you can find back home but at lower prices. All the soaps and smellies are cheap and plentiful, and clothing, shoes and backpacks are all manufactured in countries such as Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, and available at a snip. Tampons are available in all major towns and cities, but not in more remote areas.

A Swiss army knife or equivalent comes in handy, but you don't need 27 separate functions, just one blade and an opener. A torch (flashlight) and compass are also useful.

Other handy things to bring are business cards, as Asians deal them out like a deck of cards; earplugs to block the ever-present soundtrack; a universal plug adaptor; a rain cover for the backpack; a sweater for the highlands and air-con bus trips; and mosquito repellent to keep the bugs at bay.

Finally, the secret of successful packing: plastic bags, as not only do they keep things separate and clean, but also dry. That means a lot at the end of a long, wet day.

Most of this region lies off the track of tropical cyclones (typhoons). However, typhoons do occasionally strike Vietnam. Peak typhoon season runs from June to early October, which can dampen the spirits of even the most enthusiastic traveller.

The region is pretty crowded from November to March and in July and August. Prices tend to peak over the Christmas and New Year period, and if you don't fancy sharing the sites with the masses, try to avoid these busy times.

Some travellers like to time a visit with Chinese New Year (Tet in Vietnam), which is one of the biggest festivals in the regional calendar and occurs in late January or early February. A nice idea, but not ideal, as the whole region is on the move at this time. Similarly, things get pretty chaotic during the new years of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, which fall in mid-April. Commerce grinds to a halt and the population turns its attention to staging spectacular water fights or plastering each other with talcum powder.

COSTS & MONEY

The cost of travel in the Mekong region varies from pocket change to the platinum card, depending on your level of taste and comfort. Some countries are slightly more expensive than others, but all are ludicrously cheap compared with Europe or North America. Laos is considered the cheapest country in the region, while China is probably the most expensive. Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam fall somewhere in between. Generally speaking, budget travellers can live it up on US\$20 to US\$30 a day. Midrange travellers can have a ball from US\$50 to US\$100 a day, staying in some style, eating well and travelling comfortably. At the top end, spending US\$200 or more a day, anything is possible.

Rooms start from as little as US\$3 to US\$5 in busy tourist centres. Spending US\$10 to US\$20 will boost the comforts quickly, and rooms will generally include air-con, satellite TV, fridge and hot water. Make the step up to US\$50 and three-star frills are available. At US\$100 and above, it's five-star territory. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a discount if it is low season or if numbers are down.

Dining out is where the Mekong region comes into its own. Surfing the street stalls and markets, meals can be found for between US\$0.50 and US\$1. Local restaurants are more comfortable and you can eat well for US\$1 to US\$3.50. Then there are the gourmet restaurants and international diners, where you can still only spend around US\$10 with drinks; with the right wines you could easily spend US\$50. Beer and other alcoholic drinks are pretty reasonable throughout the region, with Laos and Vietnam taking the award for cheapest beer and Cambodia for cheapest wine and spirits.

Bus travel is a real bargain. Buses between major destinations have fixed fares in all the countries, but when travelling by bus in remote areas, overcharging is the rule. Thailand has the best buses, Laos has some of the worst. Trains are a good option in China, Thailand and Vietnam, particularly night sleepers for longer journeys. For maximum flexibility, many prefer to rent a car or 4WD and go exploring with a guide. Costs run from about US\$25 around town to as much as US\$100 a day upcountry (including the driver's food and lodging). A guide costs from US\$20 to US\$40, depending on the destination.

Flights around the region vary widely in price. Where budget carriers have entered the market, prices have dropped significantly. Bangkok is the discount flight capital of the region. On other routes, there may only be one or two carriers and prices are artificially high. More and more routes are being developed to link popular tourist centres and a short hop can save considerable time and money, not to mention pain, in the long run. Compare the Luang Prabang to Hanoi run by bus and by plane and you'll soon understand what we mean.

Foreigners are frequently overcharged in the region, particularly when buying souvenirs and occasionally in restaurants. Bus and taxi drivers sometimes bump up their rates to several times the local price. China and Vietnam are notorious for overcharging, in Thailand they do it with a smile, in Cambodia they are fast learners, while Laos remains the most honest country. However, don't assume that everyone is trying to rip you off. Despite widespread poverty, many locals will only ask the local price for many goods and services.

Whatever your budget, the Mekong region will deliver. Live it up while it lasts.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Much ink has spilled in the Mekong region over the years. Seek out some of these titles before taking the plunge.

The classic is Norman Lewis' *A Dragon Apparent* (1951), an account of his 1950 foray into Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It offers a good insight into the last days of French rule, an old Indochina that was soon to be sucked into war. The book has been reissued as part of *The Norman Lewis Omnibus* (1995).

To Asia With Love: A Connoisseur's Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam (2004), an anthology edited by Kim Fay, is a delightful introduction to the Mekong region for those looking for some inspiration and adventure, written by writers who know and love their countries.

The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future (2001) by Milton Osborne is a readable history of the great river and the events that have unfolded along its vast length.

Another excellent account of life on the water is *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong* (2001) by Edward Gargan. A war-protector-turned-foreign-correspondent, Gargan sees for himself how these countries have brought themselves back from the brink.

Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos and Annam by Henri Mouhot has been reprinted in English by White Lotus and gives the inside story of the man credited with 'rediscovering' Angkor.

Jon Swain's *River of Time* (1995) takes the reader back to an old Indochina, partly lost to the madness of war, and includes first-hand accounts of the French embassy stand-off in the first days of the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Tim Page's *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden* (1995) covers this infamous photographer's quest for the truth behind the disappearance of photojournalist Sean Flynn (son of Errol) in Cambodia in 1970, and his mission to secure a monument to fallen correspondents on all sides of the Indochina conflict.

An equally legendary news cameraman, Australian Neil Davies, is the subject of Tim Bowden's book *One Crowded Hour* (1990). Davies covered Cambodia and Vietnam for many years, but was tragically killed covering a coup in Bangkok in 1985.

The Indochina Chronicles (2005) by Phil Karber is a lively travelogue taking in adventures and misadventures in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The ultimate spoof guidebook, *Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (2004) is a pastiche of Mekong countries and pokes fun at all of us. No-one is spared, not the locals, not the travellers, not even hallowed guidebook authors. An absolute must for anyone travelling through the Mekong region.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Biking Asia with Mr Pumpy (www.mrpumpy.net) The website for cyclists passing through the Mekong region, it is written with candour and humour by Mr Pumpy's best friend Felix Hude.

Golden Triangle Rider (www.GT-rider.com) The motorbiking website for the Mekong region, this is one of the most reliable sources for up-to-date road and border crossing information.

HOW MUCH?

Restaurant meal	US\$3-10
Hotel room with air-con	US\$10-20
Internet access per hour	US\$0.25-2
Bottle of beer	US\$1-3
Two-kilometre taxi ride	US\$1-5

'Whatever your budget, the Mekong region will deliver'

TOP 10



MEKONG EXPERIENCES

Travel is not just about visiting, it's about experiencing. You need to get beneath the skin of the region and this can take many shapes or forms. It could be a culinary adventure. It could be a walk on the wild side. It could be a cultural encounter. It could be spiritual enlightenment. At some stage during your journey, the Mekong will enter your soul. Embrace it.

- Count the number of locals crammed on to one motorbike in the countryside
- Get the measure of a tailor, the only time you want to be stitched up in the region
- Haggle with a cyclo driver about price before enjoying the ride
- Learn to cross the road like a local in a busy city
- Meet the minorities, a multicoloured mosaic of mountain people
- Play bottoms up with the locals in a backstreet bar
- See sunrise over the South China Sea from a beautiful beach
- Slurp a steaming bowl of noodle soup at a street stall
- Take some time out in a temple, the spiritual sanctuary for local people
- Turn down the volume and drift along the Mekong river by boat

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Filmmakers have found a rich vein of material in the turbulent tales of the Mekong region, and both foreign and local directors have tapped it well. There are some moody, atmospheric movies from a time before the madness, a whole host of films dealing with the American experience in Indochina, and some memorable contemporary moments.

- Air America* (1990) Director: Roger Spottiswoode
- Apocalypse Now* (1979) Director: Francis Ford Coppola
- The Beach* (2000) Director: Danny Boyle
- Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) Director: Ang Lee
- Iron Ladies* (2000) Director: Yongyoot Thongkongoon
- The Killing Fields* (1984) Director: Roland Joffe
- The Last Emperor* (1987) Director: Bernardo Bertolucci
- Platoon* (1986) Director: Oliver Stone
- The Quiet American* (2002) Director: Phillip Noyce
- Two Brothers* (2004) Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud

THE NATIONAL DRINK

The locals in the Mekong region love a tippie and each country has its own flavours. Seize the day and slake your thirst with a selection of drinks as you travel through the region.

- Angkor Beer (C)** Angkor is everything to the Khmers, including the national beer
- Beer Lao (L)** The best lager in the world (if Carlsberg hadn't used the slogan first)
- Bia Hoi (V)** Surely the cheapest beer in the world, it costs about US\$0.15 a glass
- Dynasty (Y)** One of China's best-known red wines, this goes well with Yunnanese cuisine
- Lao Lao (L)** Moonshine made by the minorities in upcountry Laos
- Mekhong (T)** Hardly a whisky, but sloshed down it's a fast route to oblivion
- Singha (T)** Thailand's national beer, strong enough to make you forget the night before
- Snake wine (C, T, L, V, Y)** Infused with the beating heart of a cobra
- Wrestler Wine (C)** Like combining sherry and Red Bull, you'll be rolling on the floor
- Xeo (V)** Potent rice wine brewed by the minorities of the mountains

Jewels of the Mekong Delta (www.travelmedia.com/mekong) Features travel information and news about countries along the Mekong river.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Summaries of countries in the region, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, Haystack accommodation booking site, travel news and useful links to travel resources elsewhere on the web.

Oriental Tales (www.orientaltales.com) Short stories, articles and inspiring photos of travel throughout the Southeast Asia region.

Tales of Asia (www.talesofasia.com) This website has up-to-the-minute information on overland travel in the Mekong region, including the 'Scam Bus' from Bangkok to Siem Reap.

Things Asian (www.thingsasian.com) Bubbling with information on the culture of the Mekong region, this site has everything including architecture, literature and fashion.

Travelfish (www.travelfish.org) Crammed with opinionated articles and reviews about the region, contributed by independent travellers. Plus up-to-date border crossing info.

Responsible Travel (www.responsible-travel.org) A no-nonsense website with common-sense advice on how to travel with a conscience.

Visit Mekong (www.visit-mekong.com) The official travel website for the Mekong, it offers comprehensive information about each country including health, religion, history and maps.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

INDOCHINA EXPLORER

Three to Six Weeks

Begin in the graceful Vietnamese capital of **Hanoi** (p351), replete with grand boulevards, peaceful parks and lovely lakes. Take a junk cruise on **Halong Bay** (p369), where myriad karst islands soar from the sea. Head to **Huế** (p379), the old imperial capital and cultural hub of central Vietnam. Take the beautiful coastal road south to the historic trading point of **Hoi An** (p387). Soak up the sun on the sands of **China Beach** (p387) or continue south to the party beach town of **Nha Trang** (p392) or the rolling sand dunes of **Mui Ne** (p397).

Hit **Ho Chi Minh City** (p404), the full-throttle face of new Vietnam, head on. Go underground at the **Cu Chi Tunnels** (p418) and join the faithful at a **Cao Dai Temple** (p418) in Tay Ninh before plunging into the **Mekong Delta** (p419).

Experience the contrasts of **Phnom Penh** (p188), the tragedy of recent decades set against a glorious ancient past. Continue to **Siem Reap** (p201), home to the world's most spectacular collection of temples at **Angkor** (p208).

Board a flight to **Pakse** (p324), gateway to southern Laos, then head north to the Lao capital of **Vientiane** (p266), a world away from the modern metropolis of Bangkok. Finish up in **Luang Prabang** (p290) and see monks at dawn, caves brimming with Buddhas and an old Asia that is increasingly hard to find.

This can be run as a high-speed greatest hits trip in just three weeks, with a fistful of flights to connect the more distant cities. Those with time should slow things down, using some trains in Vietnam to meet more locals and trying the lively local buses in Cambodia and Laos.



MEKONG MEANDERS

Three to Six Weeks

Leave behind the bustle of **Bangkok** (p113) for the **Golden Triangle** (p147), where the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand converge. Step back in time into Laos and take a slow boat down the Mekong from **Huay Xai** (p313), stopping the night in **Pak Beng** (p309), to **Luang Prabang** (p290). Soak up the magic before leaving the river for some relaxation in **Vang Vieng** (p287).

Continue to **Vientiane** (p266) and reunite with the mother river. It's a sleepy place with some great cafés, restaurants and bars, which you won't be encountering for a while. Fly south to **Pakse** (p324) or wind your way down the river through **Tha Khaek** (p317) and **Savannakhet** (p320). Visit the imposing Khmer sanctuary of **Wat Phu** (p328), under the shadow of Lingparavata Mountain, explore the waterfalls and villages of the **Bolaven Plateau** (p333), or enjoy the laid-back islands of **Si Phan Don** (p329).

Cross into Cambodia and visit the mountains of **Ratanakiri** (p233), home to elephants, hill tribes and pristine nature. Back on the river, call in at **Kratie** (p230) to see the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. Continue south to the revitalised Cambodian capital **Phnom Penh** (p188). Make a diversion up the Tonlé Sap river to the boom town of **Siem Reap** (p201), your base for the majestic **temples of Angkor** (p208).

Next, take a fast boat down the mighty Mekong to **Chau Doc** (p422), gateway to the Mekong Delta. Check out **Cantho** (p421), its commercial heart. Hotfoot it to **Ho Chi Minh City** (p404) for some fun, delve deeper into the delta with a homestay around **Vinh Long** (p420) or make for the tropical retreat of **Phu Quoc Island** (p423), a well-earned reward for following the mother river.

This trip trickles through an older Asia, including some of the hottest spots in the region right now, as well as some of the less-visited backwaters. Move at a slower pace like the great river and soak up the contrasts as you float from country to country.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

MINORITY REPORT

Start in **Chiang Mai** (p133), cultural capital of northern Thailand, and make sure you visit the **Tribal Museum** (p136). Take on the winding road to **Pai** (p142), a mountain retreat that proves the hippy trail is alive and well. Either continue on to **Mae Hong Son** (p143) to take a trek through the villages or head straight up to **Tha Ton** (p145), the entry point for rafting trips down to **Chiang Rai** (p145).

Cross into Laos at **Huay Xai** (p313) and head for **Luang Nam Tha** (p309) and spend a day or two trekking with the award-winning **Nam Ha Ecotourism Project** (p309). Continue to **Muang Sing** (p312), the hub for one of the most diverse minority regions in all Laos.

It's time to take on China to the north. Head up to the Thai region around **Jinghong** (p464), known as **Xishuangbanna** (p463), a great area for biking and hiking. Now you've come this far, it would be rude not to visit the highlights of Yunnan. Chill out in and around **Dali** (p451) before heading in to the historic heart of **Lijiang** (p455), then it's time to get back on the hill-tribe trail.

Travel via Kunming to the mountains of north Vietnam. **Sapa** (p376) is an old French hill station and the gateway to the minority communities of this region. Consider a side trip to **Bac Ha** (p378), home to the colourful Flower Hmong folk and great walking country. Head south to **Hanoi** (p351), happy in the knowledge that all your ethnic souvenirs were bought direct from the minority people and not in the designer boutiques of the Old Quarter.

This route covers the real Thai land, the mountainous regions of the Mekong where Thai and other tribes have long made a home. Transport is easy in Thailand, but things get a little bumpy in Laos. Up in China, the occasional flight can make life less ordinary, while in Vietnam the night train is a great option to connect Lao Cai (Sapa) and Hanoi.



Three to Six Weeks

NATURAL HIGHS

Leave **Kunming** (p443) for the ancient cobbled streets of old **Lijiang** (p455). Further north lies **Tiger Leaping Gorge** (p459), one of the deepest in the world at about 3900m from river to mountain peak. Trek its length for some memorable vistas before heading south to the incredible **Yuanyang rice terraces** (p462), where agriculture becomes art.

Cross the border and continue to **Hanoi** (p351): for adrenaline junkies or nature lovers, Vietnam has plenty to offer. Start out with a visit to **Halong Bay** (p369) for some sea kayaking among the karsts. Experienced climbers with their own gear might leave the water far below, as these limestone outcrops offer some excellent ascents, plus there is some climbing around **Cat Ba Island** (p371).

Further northeast in **Bai Tu Long Bay** (p371), take to the water by local boat to see the 'new' Halong Bay without the tourists. Boating, kayaking, even surfing, are possibilities here and there are some beautiful beaches hidden away.

Heading south to central Vietnam, **Bach Ma National Park** (p382) is well geared up for walkers and has a series of lush trails to secluded waterfalls. Down on the coast below Bach Ma is **China Beach** (p387).

Go under the waves at **Nha Trang** (p392), the dive capital of Vietnam, before heading up towards the hills of the central highlands. Wind up, or down, in **Dalat** (p400), a base for abseiling, cycling or rock climbing. Don't forget two of Vietnam's best-known national parks: the birding hot spot of **Cat Tien** (p402), with a population of rare Javan rhinos, and **Yok Don** (p402), home to elephants, elephants and more elephants.

Three to Five Weeks

Adventures take time and there are some major distances to cover in Yunnan, so consider taking some flights to avoid some travel lows in between the natural highs. Transport in Vietnam is pretty efficient and a combination of bus, train and boat will cover all bases.



TAILORED TRIP

THE KHMER EMPIRE

Following in the footsteps of the Khmer empire is a relatively straightforward proposition: like the Romans before them, the ancient Khmers built a network of roads connecting the outposts of their empire. First, escape **Bangkok** (p113) for the roads less travelled in Northeast Thailand. Call in on **Ayuthaya** (p130), an outpost of the Khmer empire before it became a glorious Thai capital. Forget the Khmer theme for a day or two with a visit to the lush jungle and lovely waterfalls of **Khao Yai National Park** (p156). Continue east to the ancient city of **Phimai** (p155), one of the most important regional capitals during the time of Angkor. See the wonderfully restored temple of **Phanom Rung** (p156), set atop an extinct volcano, and the nearby temple of **Meuang Tam** (p157).

Dip your toe into Cambodia by crossing the border to visit the spectacular mountaintop temple of **Preah Vihear** (Khao Praa Vihaan in Thai; p225). Take in the dramatic views as you'll be down below on the plains of Cambodia in a couple more weeks!

Enter Laos and crisscross the Mekong to visit the Khmer sanctuary of **Wat Phu** (p328), one of the oldest sacred sites in the region.

Cross into Cambodia and call in at **Kompong Cham** (p228) before swinging northwest again to the pre-Angkorian capital of **Sambor Prei Kuk** (p226), the first great temple city in the region.

The climax of the pilgrimage is approaching, the incredible **temples of Angkor** (p208). See the Mother of all Temples, **Angkor Wat** (p208), the world's largest religious building; the **Bayon** (p209), one of the world's weirdest with its enigmatic faces; and the jungle-clad **Ta Prohm** (p212). But venture further to encounter the usurper capital of **Koh Ker** (p224) and the River of a Thousand Lingas at **Kbal Spean** (p213) before taking a well-earned massage in **Siem Reap** (p201).



Snapshot

Life for many in the Mekong region has undergone a profound transition in the space of a generation, even if the politics hasn't always come along for the ride. Checking the pulse of democracy along the banks of the Mekong reveals it's just about alive, if not particularly well. China, Laos and Vietnam are one-party states which tolerate no opposition. But communism, the mantra for a generation, has taken a back seat to capitalism and the rush to embrace the market. Following the Chinese road to riches espoused by Deng Xiaoping, Laos and Vietnam have taken the brakes off the economy while keeping a firm hand on the steering wheel. The result is a contradictory blend of ultraliberal economics and ultraconservative politics that has left many inhabitants confused about the country in which they live. Like the Chinese, they have the freedom to make money but not the basic freedom to voice a political opinion. And the more the average person engages with the outside world – through business, tourism, the internet – the harder this paradox is to swallow.

Cambodia and Thailand are the 'democracies' of the region, but even here the diagnosis is depressing. Thailand was long the shining light in the region, but events in recent years have dimmed the torch. First came the CEO-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his take-no-prisoners approach to criticism, his shoot-first ask-questions-later war on drugs, and his hard-nosed handling of the separatist south. Then came the coup in September 2006, a throwback to the topsy-turvy politics of an earlier era. Despite the best intentions, a coup is hardly the sign of a healthy democracy. Over the border in Cambodia, the veneer of democracy wears ever thinner. Elections come around every five years, but the Cambodian People's Party continues to control the military, the police, the civil service and the judiciary. There is no separation between party and state and woe betide those who cross the line and criticise the head honchos.

Corruption remains a cancer throughout the Mekong region. Despite the best intentions of a small minority, the worst intentions of many a minister and their underlings continue to cost the Mekong countries hundreds of millions of dollars in lost assets. China and Vietnam have started tackling corruption head on with high-profile executions and prison sentences. Senior party officials have even been put away, but cronyism and nepotism remain alive and well in an undemocratic system. Laos suffers from corruption, but the small size of the economy has kept enrichment to a minimum for now.

In Cambodia, corruption has been elevated to an art form. Democracy has been supplanted by kleptocracy, governance by theft, and millions of dollars have been syphoned away in recent years. National service is dead; it's all about self-service and Cambodian politicians are as self-serving as they come. An anticorruption law has been on the table for more than a decade, but international donors seem to suffer a bout of collective amnesia every time it comes around to signing the cheque books. Thailand has long suffered from corruption, but Thaksin Shinawatra created a new blend by mixing business and politics to turn the country into Shinawatra Plc. Ultimately it backfired and he was overthrown, but it remains to be seen if his successors are serious about tackling this age-old curse.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) includes Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, but is far from unified. Their policy of non-interference in domestic affairs has rendered them toothless when it comes to the Burma question and age-old animosities and suspicions continue to

HOW MUCH?

Thailand

Banana chips 10B
1L bottle of water 15B
Bottle of Singha beer 30B
Souvenir T-shirt 199B
Hotel room with air-con
from 300B

Cambodia

Sait ko che-kuh (barbecued beef skewers)
500-4000r
1L bottle of water
1000-4000r
Bottle of Angkor Beer
US\$1
Souvenir T-shirt US\$2
Hotel room with air-con
from US\$8

Laos

Bowl of *fôe* (rice noodles)
US\$0.60
1L bottle of water
US\$0.25
660mL bottle of Beerlao
US\$0.60-1
Souvenir T-shirt US\$3
Hotel room with air-con
US\$6-15

HOW MUCH?

Vietnam

Bowl of *pho* (noodle soup) US\$0.50-1.50

1L bottle of water US\$0.35-0.70

Big B&G beer US\$1

Souvenir T-shirt US\$2

Hotel room with air-con US\$10-25

Yúnnán

Steamed bun ¥0.50

500ml bottle of water at a shop ¥2-4

Dali beer at a shop ¥3-5, at a café ¥10

Souvenir T-shirt ¥20-40

Hotel room with air-con ¥80-140

derail integration. As much as they fear, sometimes loathe, each other, many of the members are even more worried about China. Bèijīng long sought tribute from the Mekong kingdoms in centuries past and China is once again seeking to stamp its authority on the region through aid and trade. Historically, China has been close to Cambodia, but relations are warming up throughout the region, as Bèijīng seeks to outmanoeuvre Japan in the battle for hearts and minds, or more realistically, wallets.

Returning to neighbourly relations for a moment, tensions still boil away under the surface. The Cambodians would be hard pushed to decide who they dislike more, the Thais or the Vietnamese. The Laotians fear the Thais and their cultural pollution, although they don't seem to mind political subservience to Vietnam. The Vietnamese inherited the French theory that they are the natural leaders of Indochina and have long aimed for hegemony over Cambodia and Laos. They still fear the Chinese, who occupied their lands for a thousand years or more and went to war as recently as 1979. The Thais for their part look down on their lowly neighbours of Cambodia and Laos, blissfully ignorant (or wilfully negligent) of the historic cultural debt they owe to the Khmers and the ethnic similarities they share with the Lao. Finally, what of the Chinese? Well, the truth be told, they probably think Southeast Asia is rightfully theirs. But the days of Genghis Khan are long gone and they have to play by the rules. This means engaging rather than invading and they are on good, if unequal, terms with all their little neighbours.

The Mekong River could be the spark for future conflict. The Mekong is the world's 12th-longest river and 10th largest in terms of volume and has long been seen as a potentially lucrative source of hydroelectricity. The power-hungry Chinese have already started damming the river like eager beavers and Laos looks set to follow suit. No-one really knows what impact this will have downstream, although any significant changes to river activity could be disastrous for the Tonlé Sap Lake in Cambodia or the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. The Mekong River Commission is supposed to monitor all developments on the river, but China refuses to join the club. Bèijīng is adamant that as long as the river flows through its territory, it has the right to harness its power in any way it sees fit, regardless of the consequences downstream.

But it's not all bad news in the Mekong region. Of course not, as this is one of the most dynamic, creative and vibrant regions of Asia. Democratic credentials aside, life in the Mekong region today has improved immeasurably since the dark days of the 1960s and 1970s when most of these countries were embroiled in brutal civil wars or self-destructive revolutions, often both. These days politics is history for all but the powerful parties in charge. The people are living life, in many cases loving life, for the first time in several generations. Political freedoms may be strictly censored across the region, but economic freedom is proving infectious and slowly but surely seeping into artistic and cultural freedom. It is not only business that is booming, not only tourism that is racing forward, but the arts are also enjoying a renaissance. Traditions are experiencing a rebirth, the classics are fusing with the contemporary, and whether you are in Bangkok, Hanoi or Phnom Penh, you can be sure there will be some unexpected performance playing at a theatre or opera house near you.

Cultural vibrancy, economic expansion and a people keen to embrace new opportunity – this is the new face of the Mekong. The future looks very bright for the next generation. Let's hope the governments of the region seize the chance to drive their countries forward, improving the lives of all their people and not just a small elite in the urban centres. If the regional leadership begins to show half the initiative that the population has shown in surviving the trials and tribulations of life in the turbulent Mekong region, then watch this space. The Mekong is going to be very, very big.

The Authors



NICK RAY

Coordinating author, Vietnam

A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been floating around the Mekong region for more than a decade now, first as a traveller, later leading people astray as a tour leader for adventure travel companies and more recently as a location scout for film and TV. Living in Phnom Penh, the Mekong is his backyard of sorts and he has written several editions of the *Cambodia* book for Lonely Planet, as well as coauthoring the *Vietnam* book and *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*. Nick has covered almost every corner of the Mekong region, including taking dips in the mother river in Laos and Cambodia. He chickened out in the heavily populated (polluted?) Mekong Delta.



TIM BEWER

Bangkok & Northern Thailand

While growing up, Tim didn't travel much except for the obligatory pilgrimage to Disney World and an annual summer week at the lake. He's spent most of his adult life making up for this, and has since visited over 50 countries, including most in Southeast Asia. He has made multiple trips to Thailand for work and pleasure. When not shouldering a backpack, he lives in Minneapolis, USA.



ANDREW BURKE

Laos

Andrew has lived in Asia since 2001 and in that time he's spent more than six months travelling around Laos. It's the laid-back, simple approach to life that repeatedly draws him back, but he finds the thousands of kilometres of roads less travelled and fascinating photographic subjects just as appealing. This is Andrew's 11th book for Lonely Planet, with titles including *The Asia Book*, *China* and *Hong Kong Cityscape*. When he's not travelling, Andrew works as a journalist and photographer and calls Bangkok home.

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THOMAS HUHTI

Yúnnán province (China)

Thomas hails from Wisconsin, USA, and still calls it home when not barreling around the world with a backpack. A linguistics major at university, he happily chanced upon Mandarin while fleeing the pesky grammar of Indo-European languages. A semester abroad was followed by two years in Taiwan and the PRC on a study and research (and, naturally, travel) fellowship. Among other books, Thomas has completed five tours of duty on Lonely Planet's *China*. He would always rather be playing ice hockey or hiking the forests of Wisconsin with his better half Yuki and bigheaded lab Bobo.



SIRADETH SENG

Cambodia

After catching the travel bug and then eloping with it seven years ago, Siradeth is still drifting with no permanent address – where she spills her backpack is home. Born in Cambodia but raised in Australia, she jumped at the chance to return to dig up her roots, which she did, along with half the countryside every time she skidded off a moto. Now with London calling, Paris beckoning and Asia luring her back, she has no choice but to keep floating around the world.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Dr Trish Batchelor wrote the Health chapter (p503). Trish is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia and particularly loves high-altitude trekking in the Himalayas.

Austin Bush wrote the Food & Drink chapter (p86). After graduating from the University of Oregon with a degree in linguistics, Austin received a scholarship to study Thai at Chiang Mai University, and has remained in Thailand ever since. After working several years at a stable job, he made the questionable decision to pursue a career as a freelance photographer/writer. This choice has since taken him as far as northern Pakistan, and as near as Bangkok's Or Tor Kor Market. He enjoys writing about and taking photos of food most of all, because it's a great way to connect with people.

David Lukas wrote the Environment chapter (p49). David is a professional naturalist whose many adventures afield include a year spent studying the tropical rainforests of Borneo. He has contributed environment chapters to more than a dozen Lonely Planet titles ranging from the Dominican Republic to Nova Scotia.

Steven Schipani wrote the Ecotourism in Laos boxed text (p265). Steven was born in New York City and raised on the Atlantic coast of Long Island, New York. He first went to Asia as a United States Peace Corps volunteer, serving in Thailand from 1994 to 1996. He has worked as a professional guide, fisherman, and Thai and Lao language interpreter, and has travelled extensively in Southeast Asia. Since 1999 Steven has been employed by Unesco, the Asian Development Bank, and a number of other international organisations advising on sustainable ecotourism development and heritage management in Laos. His interests include fishing, forest trekking, indigenous knowledge and Lao food. He has one son named Michael.

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