

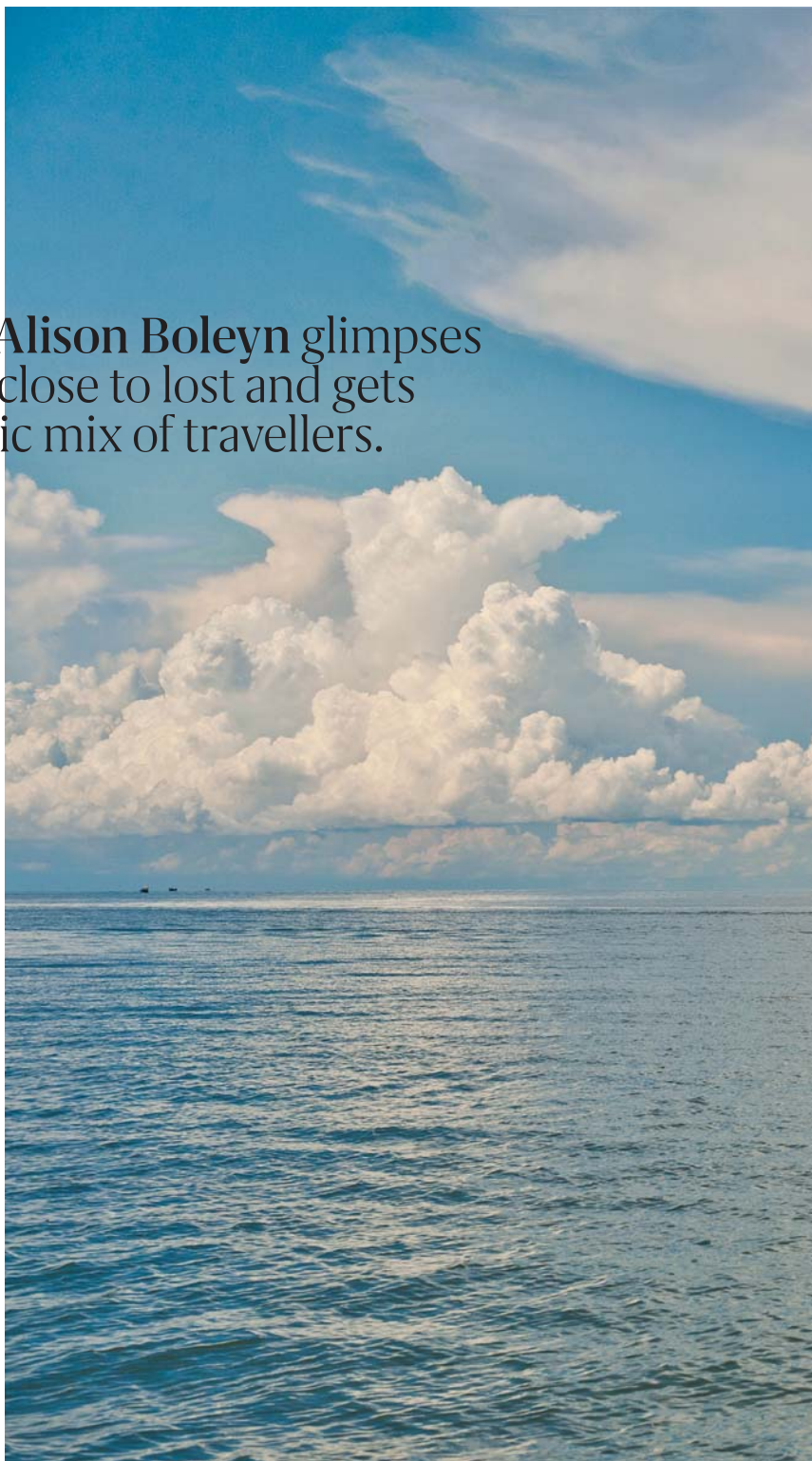
Life aquatic

On the Mekong River, **Alison Boleyn** glimpses Cambodian traditions close to lost and gets to party with an eclectic mix of travellers.

Once you've spotted the first lotus in Cambodia, you see them everywhere: painted in gold on pink and turquoise walls, gathered in baskets on temple stairs and in the gardens of Phnom Penh's Royal Palace. The lotus springs from murky waters; it thrives in mud. "It doesn't matter about the source, it flowers," says my guide, a farmer from the north-west who grows purple-skinned bananas. "Like people."

He's one of 40 staff on the *Aqua Mekong*, part of Aqua Expeditions' fleet of five-star yacht and river vessels, on which I'm cruising the Tonle Sap and Mekong River (aquaexpeditions.com). Some guests, like me, will leave after four nights, arriving and departing from Phnom Penh, while others continue on to Siem Reap (by plane in the dry season) and then sail to Vietnam.

Given there are just 20 suites onboard, the ship's crew-to-guest ratio works out at a luxurious 1:1 (at least). On this trip there are 15 passengers – mostly couples, mostly from the United States – and along







A floating village on the Tonle Sap

with the excursions to shore, they are the journey's unexpected gifts. Like the lotus, they open up spectacularly.

Twice a day, those of us ready for an outing buckle up our life jackets and load into aluminium skiffs to head ashore. The itinerary packs a lot of Cambodia into a short time and if someone's not at the gang at 8am or 3pm, the staff will leave them be, assuming they're sitting by the pool or snoozing (which absent guests later confirm is true).

All excursions are optional and there are options within options. We choose on the day (and when it's possible, on a whim) from itineraries posted the evening before. A group of friends from Santa Cruz cycle

at any opportunity: "May as well get credit," says one, who works for a Silicon Valley software giant, as he activates his fitness app. The rest pile into tuktuks. On two or three wheels, we travel bumpy roads past rice paddies, water buffalo and villages where jackfruit hang from the trees, big as footballs. One traveller, a Filipino MD from Hong Kong, stops his tuktuk driver when he spots the choicest fruits.

Early in the trip, our guide says he understands that those who've been to South-East Asia before might be "templered out". Many opt to browse among salted ants and tarantulas in an outdoor market but I climb the 509 stairs up Oudong Mountain. After we remove our shoes and offer a lotus

flower in the Room of 1000 Buddhas, my guide indicates the view: a lush green sprawl of rice paddies and farms on one side and factories on the other.

About half of Cambodia is forest. Onboard, I can see the subtle beauty of shifting landscapes from my daybed (some suites have balconies), from the top-level observation deck and even from the gym.

The ship is quietly elegant, with polished floors, window-walls and moody, lamp-lit rooms. The exterior deck is made from Resysta, a material of recycled rice husk and oil that looks like hardwood and has been awarded for its sustainability. Inside, the tones are earthy, with lacquer, rattan wallpaper, silk upholstery in the



Cambodia's temple monks can join from the age of six

spa and a scattering of Vietnamese and Cambodian antiques. The food, too, with menus by Australian chef David Thompson, looks to those countries, plus neighbouring Laos and Thailand, while pastries are in the French-Vietnamese tradition. The chef tells me, “You need four colours to make the food beautiful”, although nothing beats the tiny, vibrant chek pong moin (“chicken egg”) bananas.

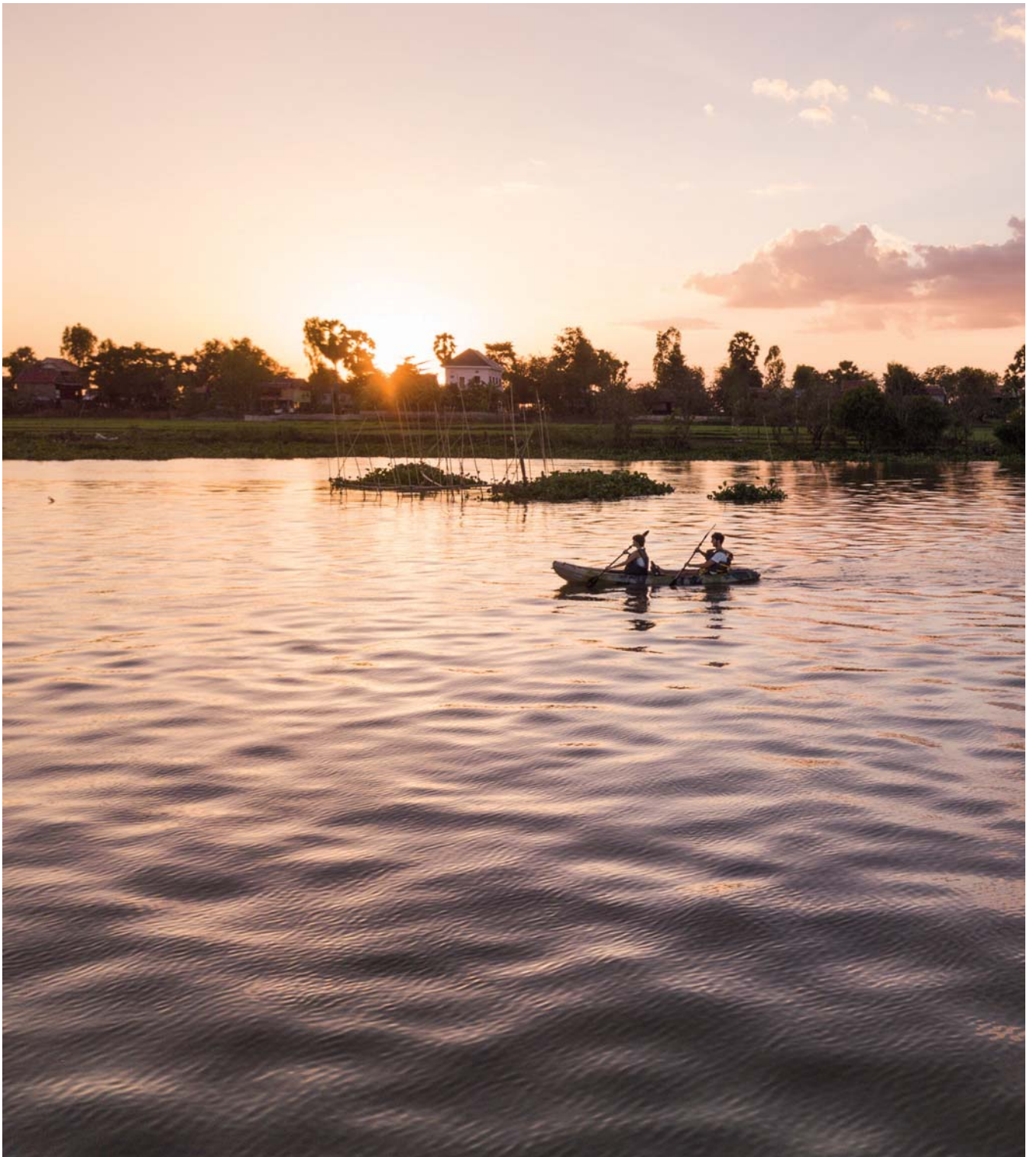
I almost always choose to kayak and spend an hour or so paddling through the floating village near our mooring. It is mostly ethnic Vietnamese occupying these stilted houses on the Mekong waterways, where they’ve lived since the Vietnam War. The children call out “Hello!” and my

guide paddles his kayak over to talk with a woman as she washes clothes. She tells him she expects to move to land next year. The Cambodian government is relocating the villages for humanitarian reasons (once documented, adults can legally work and their children can attend school) as well as environmental.

There are at least 1200 species of fish in the Mekong. The riel, small and white, is so significant to Cambodians it gives its name to their unit of currency. During one excursion on the Tonle Sap, we approach a circle of men and women – with an audience of enthusiastic children – fishing with a net from the bank. One man throws us a fish, earning big laughs from his group.

The *Aqua* team is eager to show us *barang* (foreigners) the rural areas and we’re encouraged to support local businesses via the silversmiths we visit in the village of Koh Chen, where a single ornate box takes 20 days to pound; the co-op of silk weavers in Koh Oknha Tey; and the artisans in Kampong Chhnang (*chhnang* meaning “clay pot”). These communities are rebuilding the traditional arts that were ravaged during the Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s.

When we visit the Vipassana Dhura Mandala meditation centre in Oudong – where anyone, including foreigners, can come for contemplation or even food and medicine – our guide explains





the fundamentals of his country's Buddhist beliefs. "Don't kill, lie, steal or commit adultery. And also, be flexible." At the temple in Preah Prosop, we meet a group of five young monks and are invited to ask questions, translated by our guide. Boys as young as six can enter the monastery but usually join at 10 or 11. The youngest we meet is 13 and tiny in his orange robes. He has lived at the monastery for just three months and says he came for "knowledge". It was his mother's idea; to have a son become a monk is an honour in Cambodia.

The day before I disembark, the guides promise a surprise and after racing the others to shore in kayaks, I see it on the riverbank. Some of the crew are throwing a frisbee around and those passengers already on the beach are sipping Negroni spritzes while reclining on deckchairs and blankets. When the old disco hit *Shake Your Groove Thing* comes on, a German music company founder, the widow of a 1970s rock star, starts dancing – and she's amazing. One of the Santa Cruz gang, a regular at Nevada's Burning Man festival, gets up, too, and a retired football coach from San Diego calls out, "I see you! I see you!" It feels too soon to ride back to the ship but the sky is darkening.

The next morning at 6am, as with every day, there's yoga and meditation on the pool deck, followed by cucumber-infused water and espresso. With the intolerance that characterises so many early risers, I don't understand why anyone would miss this. Lizards click, the breezes are light and longboats drift past. At some point during the class, the anchor's pulled and the *Aqua Mekong* starts moving. The sun rises orange-red. ●