



Cruise through the beauty of Asia

Prior to the pandemic, more and more cruisers were being drawn to the Mekong's fascinating network of waterways, offering entry to its astounding natural beauty and its rich cultural heritage. Elly Earls talks to AmaWaterways president **Rudi Schreiner** and Aqua Expeditions CEO **Francesco Galli Zugaro**, to find out about the evolution of river cruising in the region, and why the Mekong continues to entice adventurous travellers through a diverse array of itineraries.

Speak to any river cruising aficionado about the world's best waterways and the Mekong River will invariably crop up. A snaking river network that runs all the way from the Tibetan plateau through China and the infamous golden triangle to Cambodia and Vietnam, this ancient resource remains a major trade route and the gateway to South East Asia's fascinating blend of idiosyncratic cultures.

The sprawling river basin has had a break from cruise ships over the past two and a half years. While European river cruises were able to resume relatively quickly after the outbreak of Covid-19, travel to South East Asia has been almost entirely cut off until very recently. But operators in the region believe that from early Autumn 2022, it will be a case of picking up where they left off.

In 2019, there would generally be around ten boats exploring the Mekong at any one time. Some operators

run year-round cruises and others have breaks during the sweltering summer season. AmaWaterways has been cruising on the Mekong since 2009. Its 124-passenger *AmaDara*, which launched in 2015, features two restaurants, a fitness room, massage facilities and a sun deck swimming pool. Meanwhile, Aqua Expeditions has been operating in the region since 2014 with its smaller and more luxurious all-suite vessel, the *Aqua Mekong*.

But 2019 also saw some new additions to the Mekong's regular crowd, including the custom-built *Emerald Harmony*, which sailed a sold-out maiden season before the pandemic brought tourism on the river to a grinding halt.

An eye-opening experience

Pre-pandemic, the most adventurous of the cruise industry's rapidly increasing demographic were



Above: Speedboats allow visitors a closer look at life up and down the river.

Opposite: The *Aqua Mekong* makes its way through scenic South East Asian waters.

attracted to the Mekong by a combination of scenic beauty, diverse cultural heritage and, when their adventure was over, the growing portfolio of luxury properties in which to relax.

“Angkor Wat has always been a focus of tourists, but what makes the Mekong so special is its concentration of interesting highlights,” says Rudi Schreiner, co-founder and president of AmaWaterways. “You can start in Ho Chi Minh City and end up in Angkor Wat, and in between you have Phnom Penh, which is an absolutely fascinating city, as well as beautiful, charming little towns on the Vietnamese Delta side and floating villages. Excursions on AmaWaterways’ 12-day itinerary include blessings at a Buddhist temple, visits to local markets and villages, and rides in sampan boats and ox-drawn carts.

“Every member of staff that works at AmaWaterways is entitled to one river cruise a year as part of their employment package, and the Mekong itinerary has always been a favourite. “It’s an incredibly rich itinerary and there’s a huge cultural difference,” Schreiner says. “For them, it’s an eye-opening learning experience to see a totally different culture. It’s the same for our customers; it is very different than being on a European river.”

Exploring life on the river

At Aqua Expeditions, which offers three, four and seven-day itineraries departing from Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, and Siem Reap, the focus is on the remote experiences. Most cruise operators in the region stay 24 hours in Phnom Penh. There are good reasons for this, including a wide variety of activities for guests, and the opportunity to save on fuel and give the crew a few hours of rest. But the *Aqua Mekong* arrives in the morning and leaves at 5pm.

While other cruise companies are limited by the availability of ship-to-shore services, Aqua Expeditions has a private fleet of speedboats, as well as ten bikes for its guests to use. “We can stop, drop off the bikes, disembark the guests in the speedboats and go and explore life on the river, rather than always getting ashore and walking around,” explains CEO and founder Francesco Galli Zugaro.

“A lot of our experiences are water-based. I wanted to build a product that allows guests to have soft adventures – biking, kayaking and speedboating up and down the river. They can basically choose their own adventure and that’s the beauty of it. They can wake up and say, ‘I don’t feel like going kayaking this morning, I actually want to go on a speedboat ride’. Our largest group is four couples to a guide. That flexibility is our strength.”

Keeping things fresh

At present, Aqua’s most popular itineraries are the Ho Chi Minh to Phnom Penh or Siem Reap tours. “It fits the flow of guests arriving in Vietnam and working their way up to Cambodia,” Galli Zugaro explains. However, the group is now heavily promoting its Cambodia-only itineraries.

“In the last few years, Cambodia has had incredible product development. You’ve got new hotels in Siem Reap, the island resorts of Sihanoukville and other properties outside of Song Saa, as well as Shinta Mani Wild. You’ve got an incredible product that can develop Cambodia as a one-stop shop for multiple types of guests.”

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The worry for Schreiner is that some of the cities that drew him to the region before it became so popular are losing their charm. Alongside the wonderful restaurants and hotels in Siem Reap, he laments, are more and more tourist bars and massage parlours, the cost of the country’s rapid recent development.

He, too, is always trying to find new itineraries to keep things fresh for his guests, even if the areas that are most soaked in culture and tradition sometimes bring up challenges. The *AmaDara* used to cruise

River cruising

Right: The *Aqua Mekong*'s design suite interior, with riverbanks just outside.

Below: The *AmaDara*'s luxury suite, offering views of the river from one's bed.



all the way through Tonle Sap lake up to Siem Reap, for example. The lake, which is a designated Unesco biosphere that hosts a significant number of rare bird breeds, enlarges significantly during the rainy season. The water level rises by up to 8m and its many stilt villages appear to float on the water. The flip side is that when it empties, water levels fall to as low as 50cm.

"There were always some incidents where fishermen's nets got tangled up with propellers and so on. In the end, we gave it up; it was too complicated," Schreiner says. Now guests are disembarked and bussed around the lake, with a stop at a market, before continuing to Siem Reap. "But we also go up to Kampong Cham on the Mekong. We're always trying to find new and interesting places."

Anticipation to explore

It's been a tough two and a half years for tourism operators of all kinds in South East Asia, but with countries slowly starting to open their borders to travellers, Galli Zugaro is finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel. "There were many dark days and I'm not going to claim it was easy," he says. "We had to make

some very difficult decisions without having clarity on the way out. But we always knew we were committed to the industry, our staff and maintaining our ships in good standing. We [knew we] had the resources to pull through it."

In fact, Aqua Expeditions is coming out of the pause enacted by the pandemic with five ships, where it went in with three. The third launched in Indonesia just three months before the cruise industry shut down in March 2020. "We've got a lot more inventory to generate revenue to reap our benefits much faster," Galli Zugaro says. "We've got 2020 bookings that were postponed and 2021 bookings that were postponed, as well as new 2022 bookings."

The *Aqua Mekong* will resume sailing at the beginning of the high season, with a launch planned for 2 September 2022. "We've got great business on the books for the upper Mekong thanks to an incredible group of loyal guests who have booked, and as long as we can deliver and they can arrive, we've got a great book of business," Galli Zugaro says.

As for AmaWaterways, it is around 45% booked for its 2022 season, which will start in October, and 25–28% for 2023. Ships are being readied and staff prepared to redeploy back to South East Asia. This has all been achieved without any promotion for the Mekong, which Schreiner is cautious about starting until restrictions are fully lifted.

The delayed second season for Emerald is also looking healthy for the second half of 2022 and into 2023. Over the past couple of years, the most viewed video on its website told the story of its Mekong River cruise. Now, due to requests to book for 2023 and even 2024 sailings, Emerald has put departures up to May 2024 on sale early.

After more than two years of enforced stillness, holidaymakers are keener than ever to tick experiences off their travel bucket lists. It is little wonder that for many, the Mekong's intriguing network of waterways has found its way to the top of that list. ●

