

The Riches of the *Mekong*

Lauren Price takes us on a majestic adventure to Vietnam and Cambodia with AMA Waterways

Hanoi is undeniably beautiful, a unique mixture of ancient temples and the Old Quarter's narrow back streets, lined with merchants, outdoor food markets and mostly shabby eateries, all seemingly framed by an endless stream of motorbike riders ignoring traffic stops.

I was travelling from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), as AMA Waterways' 16-day sojourn included land-based stays at top-rated hotels, a night aboard a luxury junk on Ha Long Bay and a week-long cruise on the 92-passenger *La Marguerite*.

Starting out in Hanoi, I checked into the Sofitel Legend Metropolis Hotel a day before the tour's

official start and was immediately struck by the city's helter-skelter profile.

My free day allowed for visits not on AMA's itinerary, such as the wreckage of a B-52 shot down in 1972 at the southern portion of the West Lake, and the Opera House built by the French more than a century ago. I also booked the Metropole's complimentary Path of History tour, which included a wartime bunker discovered, after decades of searching, during a 2010 renovation, where actress Jane Fonda and folk singer Joan Baez stayed during the Christmas bombings of 1972.

And So It Begins

Our first official group tour took in the city by bus, foot and rickshaw, including a drop-in at the "Hanoi Hilton" prison where US prisoners were held from 1964-1972, including senator and 2008 presidential nominee John McCain, who was imprisoned for more than five years. Though what remains is now a museum, we also viewed the guillotine room's original equipment used during the French colonial period, the interrogation room for American prisoners and McCain's flight suit and parachute.

The day continued with a walk around Hoan Kym Lake, gazing at ancient pagodas and bridges,

visits to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, Bad Dinah Square (where Ho Chi Minh read the Proclamation of Independence in 1945), One Pillar Pagoda (built by Emperor Lee Nan Tong, who ruled from 1028-54) and the Temple of Literature (home of Confucius and Vietnam's first national university, the Imperial Academy) erected in 1070.

The afternoon ended with a water puppet performance. Water puppetry dates back a thousand years, expressing folktales by puppeteers in waist-high water. Many of us found this one-hour show a bit touristy, and a better idea might well have been the afternoon chocolate and tea service back at the hotel's Club Bar, where a glorious buffet of French and Belgian chocolates are found in every imaginable shape and form.

Bay Watch

After a four-hour bus ride, we arrived at **Ha Long Bay**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and now one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. Made up of 3,000 islets, its famous labyrinth of sugar loaf-

like limestone outcrops was the perfect backdrop for an overnight junk cruise.

We sailed past fisherman casting nets and tending to pearl farms and floating villages and, next morning, visited the colourful, two-chamber **Sung Sot Caves**. Considered the most famous and largest in the Bay, it boasts impressive arrays of huge stalactites, the occasional monkey in search of fruit – and an extraordinary garden surrounded by a pond and lush mountain landscapes.

Back on dry land, we transferred to Hanoi airport (with a stop for lunch) for the two-hour flight to **Siem Reap** in Cambodia, where we checked into the gorgeous Sofitel Angkor Hotel and had time to sightsee, shop and dine on our own for the remainder of the day.

Temples, Shopping – And Food!

Given that we would spend most of the next day at the **Angkor Archeological Park**, most of us hopped on a tuk-tuk (motorcycles or bicycles attached to a covered cabin that cost about \$2 a ride) and headed for the **Old Market**, where we shopped on the cheap amid a kaleidoscope of colourful stalls. Items ranged from fans, hats, handbags, silky-soft pashminas and beautiful bracelets to carvings, woven baskets and one-size-fits-all Cambodian wrap pants. Best of all, most vendors accept credit cards.

There were plenty of food stalls – especially inviting for those with a propensity for more adventurous nourishments, be it barbecued snake, deep-friend tarantulas or octopus soups. ►





BE PREPARED

Given the amount of motorbikes and non-existent traffic stops, look for even the slightest break to cross a street and never stop or jump back so as to avoid collisions or worse.

Don't head out without a hat or sun umbrella, sunglasses and sunscreen.

Steps at temples are precariously narrow and often without handrails and there's a lot of walking through muddy and slippery streets.

Street vendors readily sell bottled water and soda, which is fine if they're securely sealed.

Though crime is minimal, make sure valuables are not easy to grab.

Shopping is practically a national sport (particularly when it comes to haggling) and prices are superb. Cash (dollars or Euros) is preferred, but many vendors accept credit cards.

Beware of crocodile items; they are illegal to bring back and disregard a store's offer of proper documentation to alleviate the problem.

Ask permission to take photographs of locals. Most will happily pose, but they expect to see the photo before you move on.

If sailing on *La Marguerite*, be aware the two suites ONLY have a King bed each – a big problem if you need single beds.



Given my preference for tamer snacks, I looked for the merchants hustling deep-fried banana kabobs, roasted corn on the cob or plump pancakes stuffed with bananas and chocolate.

For sit-down repasts, we generally headed for Pub Street Alley/Le Passage at the back of the market. Our little group choose Khmer BBQ for platters of Cambodian-style barbeque and spring rolls that first day, but returned that evening for *amok*, considered Cambodia's national dish – a steamed fish curry drizzled with coconut milk, ginger and spices served in a banana leaf, and *lok lak*, which are tasty platefuls of fried beef cubes with tomatoes and onions served with a salt-and-peppery lime-based dipping sauce.

There are some great stores along Pub Street Alley, too. I loved the jewellery at the Garden of Desire, while, for those short of time, there was also an outpost across the street from the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Temple touring began early the next morning, with a walk just outside Angkor's UNESCO World Heritage site, past the Bayon Temple's more than 200 gigantic carved stone faces. We also stopped at the Baphuon Temple, the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King, the carved Banteay Srei Temple, featured in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and Ta Prohm, which served as a backdrop for *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*.

Although everything was breathtaking, the most spectacular was Angkor Wat, where most of us climbed its three levels to see the Hall of a Thousand Buddhas and the nearly 2,000 heavenly maidens carved into its walls.

Mekong Adventures

Because we had booked during the dry season, it required a six-hour bus ride to **Prek Kdam** to begin the cruise portion. Reaching the ship and seeing one bus directly in front of the gangway, policemen for some reason stopped our bus and forced us to disembark on the side of the road, where our tour



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guide instructed us to carry our own luggage across a huge, dusty field under a scorching sun. Not the ideal start.

Happily, the food on board was good. Cambodian cuisine is customarily steamed or stir-fried and, more often than not, paired with silky broths laden with copious amounts of lemongrass, ginger, fish sauces, daikon radishes and aromatic flavourings from the likes of tangy kaffir lime leaves, taro root and star anise.

Le Marguerite competently delivered regional dishes during the day. Breakfast and lunch were served buffet style, while dinner began and ended with buffet-style starters and desserts, with main courses served by ultra-friendly – if language-challenged – wait staff. With no reserved seating, passengers were free to dine where – and with whom – they pleased.

Basic soft drinks and water are complimentary, but there is a charge for espressos, cappuccinos, premium liquor, wine and speciality drinks. In-cabin mini-bars are filled with chargeable snacks. Not quite a smoke-free ship, smoking is allowed in a rather large designated area on the Sun Deck.

However, the reception area was tiny, poorly equipped and rarely staffed throughout the day. Overseen by a hotel manager and her non-English-speaking but incredibly kind assistant, it was difficult to request wake-up calls, or anything else, for that matter.

Our shore excursions continued to prove worthwhile, though, and included **Kampong Tralach**, ►

TIP FROM THE TOP

Some gratuities are added to your riverboat bill, but get ready for the daily tour's white envelope.

Methodically passed from guest to guest as you make your way back to the ship, it marks the end of each day's sightseeing.

Tour guides (all of whom were passionately knowledgeable) explain exactly how much to tip him and the driver.



via ox-carts trips through the rural village's rice paddies, **Oudong**, for a monastery tour, and the silk-weaving village of **Chong Koh**, where we leisurely walked among the locals and visited the workshops to understand how old-time techniques are still used before browsing (and buying) magnificent goods.

One of our most extraordinary stops was **Phnom Penh**, where we were lucky enough to dock overnight. Our morning began with a walking tour around the bustling city and visits to the city's Royal Palace, which is once again occupied by the royal family and the National Museum.

But the most memorable stop, symbolising Cambodia's tragic past, was Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge party's Killing Fields. When Pot's reign of terror finally ended in 1979, mass graves with the remains of nearly 9,000 people were uncovered.

Today, a glass memorial filled with skulls and empty excavated graves evoke powerful emotions. Prior to visiting the Killing Fields, we toured the Genocide Museum. Originally a detention and interrogation centre overseen by the secretive S-21 department, it is now filled with photos of the detainees, paintings and official documents.

When we were on our own, visits to the Silver Pagoda (named for its silver-tiled floor) and the Central Market topped our list before getting back on board to dress for an evening out on the town. Our group dined at Topez on Norodom Boulevard, where we feasted on some pretty fabulous French-infused cuisine. After dinner, our tuk-tuk driver drove through the neon-lit city, past the most important monuments and buildings, before taking us back to the ship.


As we closed in on our final sailing days, we visited **Tan Chum Xeo Quyt, Cai Be** and **Sa Dec**, each offering a myriad of

things to see. I loved the leisurely walks past local markets hawking everything from snakes to bamboo-wrapped sticky rice concoctions. Also on tap is a technicolour line-up of locally grown fruit, with local hucksters in every direction selling hard-to-resist bagfuls of intricately carved stacks of fruity snacks.

After checking us into **Saigon's** Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Tower, AMA arranged a morning tour of the former Presidential Palace, Central Post Office and Thien Hau pagoda. We also visited the War Remnants Museum, where most rooms focus on both the French occupation and the American war. The most chilling of all was the room dedicated to the effects of Agent Orange – on both the Vietnamese and American forces.



With the afternoon off and AMA's participation at an end, many of us spent time at the Ben Thanh Markets before arranging dinner on our own, while I signed up for the Cu Chi Tunnels tour – an elaborate underground system built by the North Vietnamese outside Saigon – through the hotel.

But despite the mis-steps and mishaps, both on land and sea, AMA did ensure a lifetime experience for all its guests. The local guides were top-drawer and they gladly shared their own narratives and even their family's beleaguered trials and tribulations under Pol Pot's regime. Though I understand sailing on the *AmaLotus* provides a more luxurious experience, sailing on *La Marguerite* never diminished this immensely gratifying journey. 



LA MARGUERITE FACTFILE

Maiden Voyage: 2009
Tonnage: 5,000
Length: 235ft
Beam: 41ft
Draft: 32ft
Passengers: 92
Crew: 38
Passenger decks: 4
Registry: Vietnam

ITINERARIES: the 16-night cruise-tour voyage is operated Jan-Apr and Jul-Dec by the 4-star *La Marguerite* and 5-star *AmaLotus*, which was new in 2011.

MORE INFO: in the UK call 0808 223 5009 or visit www.amawaterways.co.uk; in the US, 1800 626 0126 or www.amawaterways.com.