

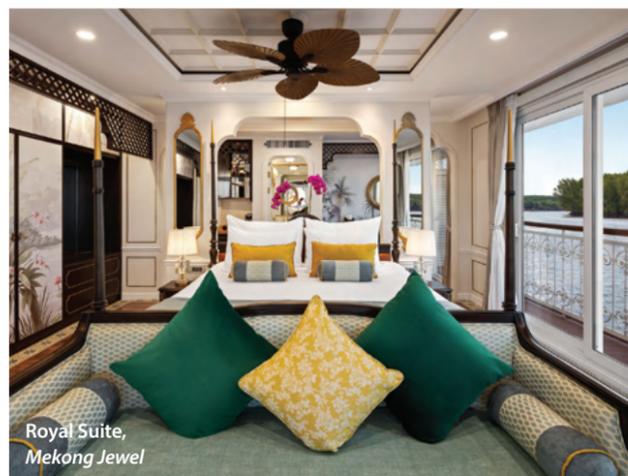


Angkor Wat,  
Cambodia

# Mysteries of the MAGICAL MEKONG



Cambodian traditional  
dancers



Royal Suite,  
Mekong Jewel

**SIT HIGH ABOVE THE STREETS** of Ho Chi Minh City in the downtown Saigon-Saigon bar, where press correspondents and CIA operatives hung out in the waning hours of the Vietnam conflict. In the twilight, the lights of surrounding skyscrapers blink colorfully like I am on Broadway, while motorbikes flit around the roads like fireflies, in a chaotic dance that never stops. Saigon (as it is still known) is a wondrous and charming city, offering a heady mixture of old and new. It also represents the end of my 15-day journey following the magical Mekong River with Uniworld Boutique River Cruises, and I am sad it has come to an end.

The Mekong is one of the world's great rivers. This magical pathway winds its way from its source on the Tibetan Plateau, through China, Laos, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, before draining into Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The river is an essential lifeline to those who reside along its banks, bringing life and trade to millions of people. Traveling the majestic waterway is the best way to experience this fascinating part of the world.

Our journey began in Siem Reap, where we toured the largest religious complex ever constructed. The 12th-century UNESCO-designated Angkor Wat is not just a temple, but a ruined city, with many of its structures pitted over time by weather or lost in a tangle of vines. From Siem Reap, we bused to Kampong, on the west bank of the Mekong, and boarded Uniworld's *Mekong Jewel*, a floating boutique hotel with a distinctive French colonial feel. Orate, white wrought iron railings surround each level on this all-suite river ship that debuted in 2020. With its elaborate woodwork and elegant fittings, the 68-guest ship features a sundeck pool, spa, sauna, steam room, gym, two lounges, and a library, offering all-inclusive, luxury cruising for discerning guests.

The nostalgic atmosphere on board does not disappoint, nor does the cuisine, a mixture of local dishes and international fare



Indoor lounge,  
Mekong Jewel

served in the two dining venues. At 260 feet in length by 39 feet wide, and with my suite measuring 330 square feet, it is perhaps the most spacious river ship I have experienced (there are no river locks to squeeze into on the route). Evening entertainment included traditional Vietnamese music, a Cambodian dance show, a cooking demonstration, and illuminating lectures by local guides.

I had decided on September for my cruise, when the landscapes of Vietnam and Cambodia were at their most vibrant. The tropical wet season brings short, refreshing afternoon showers that breathe life into the region. Rice paddies shimmer, jungles flourish, and riverbanks bloom with wildflowers. Attractions and the ship itself are also not busy. Our 68-guest ship is about half full, with an attentive staff of 51 on board.

Both Cambodia and Vietnam possess their own unique charms and social traditions, as well as a rich history, and a sometimes-complex past. Our Mekong journey was a window into the contrasts, from the awe-inspiring ancient temples and palaces to the haunting remnants of soldier's tunnels and the solemnity of the killing fields, and from gentle, quiet fishing villages to the frenetic, chaotic pace of the cities. The disparities are profound, offering us a deeper understanding of the resilience and spirit of the people living along the river.

Our included Uniworld tours allowed us inside this humble and wondrous world. In Cambodia, at Wat Hatchey, we climbed to a hilltop Buddhist Temple to partake in a water blessing. At Angkor Ban, a traditional village, we explored wooden houses built high on stilts to avoid flooding from the river. A heart-warming highlight occurred at a children's school, where we donated school supplies brought from home and were paired with excited youngsters eager to learn English.

In the bustling capital of Phnom Penh we took a tuk-tuk tour to

visit such architectural marvels as the Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda, and the National Museum with its imposing collection of Angkor treasures. These splendid structures contrasted with the sombre Tuel Sleng Genocide Museum and the Killing Fields – both reminders that during the late 1970's, Cambodia was in the grip of the Khmer Rouge and the tyrant Pol Pot.

Once we crossed the border into Vietnam the rhythm of the river changed. Here, our ship anchored in the river, and we boarded traditional sampans to access the narrow waterways of the villages, visiting a family of weavers, traditional Vietnamese hat makers, and a sampan boat builder. We learned how to make rice paper, sweet, popped rice squares, and rice wine. Returning to the ship, I loved sitting on the top deck in the refreshing breeze, watching the passing life in the floating fishing villages.

In Saigon, we visited Independence Palace, where a North Vietnamese tank crashed through the gates on April 30th, 1975, ending the Vietnam war, and toured the war tunnels in Cu Chi, where a network of Viet Cong underground passageways stretched all the way to the Cambodian border. It was hard to imagine the life of the 10,000 soldiers living underground, especially after I crawled through a short 70-foot tunnel that was nevertheless dark, hot and disorienting.

Fifty years after the end of the Vietnam War and forty-six years after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam and Cambodia have rebounded into two of the world's most vibrant destinations, whose traditions, colorful cultures, diverse histories, and amazing tapestry of ever-changing sights are best experienced on an extraordinary journey with Uniworld down the Mekong. ■

*If a voyage on the Mekong appeals to you, be sure to ask your local Expedia Cruises® Vacation Consultant for more information on this fascinating part of the world.*

PHOTOS: ADOBESTOCK (TEMPLE, DANCERS); COURTESY OF UNIWORLD BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISES (LOUNGE, ROOM)