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# rolling on the river

The Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam has attained almost legendary status and, for its people, it's a way of life like no other, reports David Latta.



**The mighty Mekong**, one of the world's greatest and most fabled rivers, will never win any beauty contests. For much of its course, the swiftness of its flow gives it a roiling, mud-brown appearance. But what it lacks in scenic appeal, it makes up for in hidden wealth. By the time it enters the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, it is liquid gold, spreading its nutrients across the flat floodplains, fertilising a wide range of crops.

Within the Delta, the famous river is prosaic; the Mekong is home and heart, source of its fortunes and the integral backdrop to millions of people's lives. Its branches, known as the Nine Dragons, its tributaries, canals and inlets provide a safe haven for its residents, a place to build their homes and businesses, to be born, live and die.

The Mekong governs their very existence. During the monsoon

season, the rains come down with an Old-Testament ferocity and floods alter the landscape almost daily. With most of the Delta barely two metres above sea level, water transport is the preferred way of getting around – hence, the waterways are frantic, day and night, with shallow-drafted boats able to traverse the remotest and narrowest of channels.

River traffic is a microcosm of life on the Delta, rather more than transport is on land. The bigger wooden boats, chugging placidly under a diesel stench, transport cargo and serve as homes for their operators. The smaller, swifter vessels, similar to the long-tail boats of Thailand, dart across the fast-flowing water, ferrying passengers from point to point.

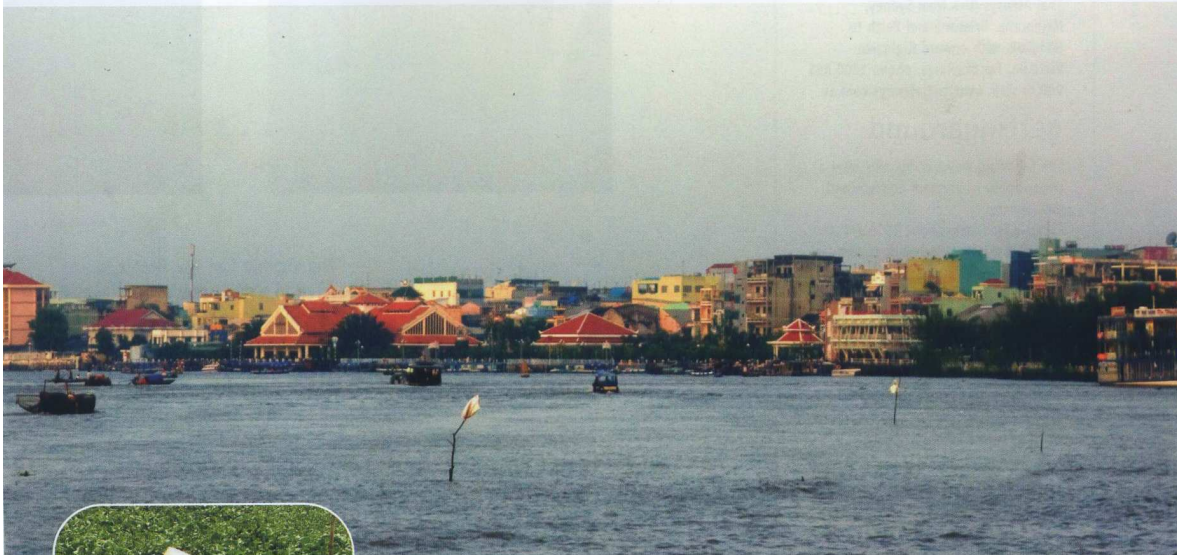
The best way to experience the Mekong Delta is by utilising land and water. The area's few main roads are narrow and crowded with motorcycles

that are often loaded high with cargo or family members, and clogged with minibuses and bicycles. Horns blare continually to warn off approaching and overtaking traffic. The scenery passes quickly: long stretches of rice paddies and sugar-cane fields, stilt houses of bamboo and wood sheltering under coconut palms, hundreds of ducks governing wide ponds, expansive fish farms, and the occasional rocky outcrop.

Everywhere, there are children – swimming in the rivers; walking along the roadsides in their scout-like blue-and-white uniforms on the way to school; riding pillion with their parents on mopeds; peering curiously into the bus as it idles in traffic. Tourism is relatively new to the Delta and foreigners remain something of a curiosity, yet the welcoming spirit of the children is infectious. They smile and wave as the bus drives on.



Main: The Mekong town of Can Tho  
Below left: A village boat on the river at Can Tho



The Mekong Delta supports some 18 million of Vietnam's 84 million people and produces much of its export rice. In the fertile soil, three rice crops a year can be harvested, with each 1000-square-metre area yielding four to five tonnes.

In the chaotic swarm of the numerous marketplaces, in towns large and small, on land and water, the bounty of the Mekong is plentiful – and eagerly traded. Fish, squid and shrimps are popular, especially *basa*,

a stout species of catfish that's a favourite of the fish farms – most still fresh enough to be swimming in buckets. There are fruits and vegetables of all types, colours and shapes on display; the tiny, super-sweet pineapples, called *dau* in Vietnamese but known locally as *trai thom* or "fragrant fruit", make a delicious snack. Vendors peel and slice them for you, selling the mini-pineapples, wrapped in plastic bags, from street-side stalls. Everywhere, small family-run cafés provide welcome breaks from the monotony of long bus journeys. Vietnamese coffee is nerve-janglingly strong, filtered from small aluminium pots that sit atop narrow glasses. Coffee connoisseurs note: it is best served black with a small teaspoon of sugar, or with sweet, thick condensed milk.

Chau Doc is a pleasant little town of just over 115,000 people. It lies along the Bassac River close to the

Cambodian border; from here, passengers ferries make regular excursions upriver to Phnom Penh. The town supports a lively cultural mix of Vietnamese, Khmer people from Cambodia, Chinese and ethnic Cham, most of whom are Muslim.

There's a pleasant colonial feel here and the best hotel in town, the Victoria Chau Doc Hotel, continues the theme. Located on the waterfront with rooms that overlook the teeming river traffic from wide verandahs, it offers a level of style and comfort that's well suited to Australian tourists. The hotel's Bassac Restaurant serves up regional dishes in an elegant setting and the pool terrace is a great place from which to watch the passing parade.

Just outside town is Sam Mountain, which is not so much a mountain as a very steep hill. Its slopes are dotted with temples and pagodas, and the climb can be

## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Vietnam Airlines operates flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Vietnam. For bookings, phone 1300 888 028 or visit [www.vietnamairlines.com](http://www.vietnamairlines.com)

Thai Airways flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth to Bangkok, with onward flights to Vietnam. For bookings, phone 1300 651 960 or visit [www.thairways.com.au](http://www.thairways.com.au)

### gettingaround

The following travel companies offer a wide variety of Vietnam holidays and experiences:

Creative Holidays, phone 1300 747 400 or visit [www.creativeholidays.com.au](http://www.creativeholidays.com.au)  
Essence of Asia, phone 1300 365 355 or visit [www.essenceofasia.com](http://www.essenceofasia.com)

Explore Holidays, phone 02 9423 8080 or visit [www.exploreholidays.com.au](http://www.exploreholidays.com.au)  
GAP Adventures, phone 1300 796 618 or visit [www.gapadventures.com/v&t](http://www.gapadventures.com/v&t)

InterAsia Tours, phone 1300 133 001 or visit [www.interasia.com.au](http://www.interasia.com.au)  
Intrepid Travel, phone 1300 364 512 or visit [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)

Jetstar Holidays, phone 13 1538 or visit [www.jetstar.com/holidays](http://www.jetstar.com/holidays)  
Qantas Holidays, phone 13 1415 or visit [www.qantas.com/holidays](http://www.qantas.com/holidays)

Royal Orchid Holidays, phone 1300 369 750 or visit [www.thairways.com.au](http://www.thairways.com.au)  
Travel Indochina, phone 1300 138 755 or visit [www.travelindochina.com.au](http://www.travelindochina.com.au)

### wheretostay

Victoria Can Tho Resort, phone +84 71 810 111 or visit [www.victoriahotels-asia.com](http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com)

Victoria Chau Doc Hotel, phone +84 76 865 010 or visit [www.victoriahotels-asia.com](http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com)

### wheretoeat

The elegant Bassac restaurant at the Victoria Chau Doc Hotel is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serving up local and regional delicacies. For bookings, phone +84 76 865 010 or visit [www.victoriahotels-asia.com](http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com)

### tips

- At the time of writing, AU\$1 = 11,170 Vietnamese Dong (VND).

### furtherinformation

Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, visit [www.vietnamtourism.com](http://www.vietnamtourism.com)



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arduous. The Cave Pagoda is especially rewarding, with an expansive view across a flat countryside, patchworked with startlingly green rice paddies. Inside, the pagoda is an oasis of calm, its air cool and heavily scented with incense, filtered light falling on reverent worshippers.

A few hours' drive south-east is Can Tho, the western capital of Vietnam. With a thriving, high-rise downtown area that swirls with the roar of traffic and commerce, it lies along the Hau River, one of the Mekong's major tributaries.

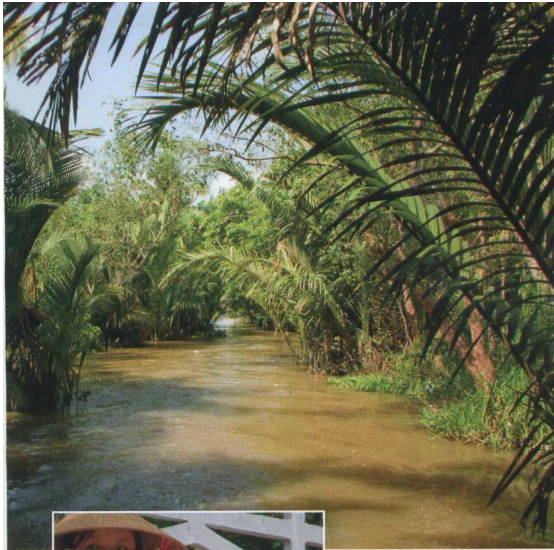
The Victoria Can Tho Resort is located in a quiet section of the city, on a bend of the river that brings it close to the downtown area while retaining a certain, necessary serenity. As with the Chau Doc property, it is fashioned with a nod towards the country's colonial past. The accommodation wing wraps around a large, central swimming pool and tropical gardens that lead to the river and the hotel's dock. The hotel operates a restored rice barge, the *Lady Hau*, available for charters and dinner cruises. Guestrooms are burnished with polished teak floors and a décor that encourages guests to break out their white linen suits and pith helmets.

The highlight of a visit to Can Tho is the early-morning floating market, reputedly the biggest in the Mekong. The 30-minute journey downriver gives visitors a fragrant sense of southern Vietnamese life. Long before the heat of the day sets in, the river is awash with colour and movement and, along every inch of its banks, there is something to see.

Families carry out daily chores aboard their floating homes; boats in dry dock go under repair; ferries criss-cross the rivers; long-nose water taxis sprint in all directions; children jump off deserted piers and peer shyly from screened windows. Life on the river just keeps rolling.

Eventually, in the distance, a log-jam of vessels threatens to block our passage downriver. We are at Cai





Above: A canal at Can Tho  
Left: Lunch time on the streets of Chau Doc  
Top left: A quiet moment for a local resident's pet bird

Rang, and the floating markets known locally as *cho noi* loom into view. A network of boats selling all manner of fruits and vegetables stretches for a kilometre. Most sell only one product, advertised by tying a sample of it to a long pole and hoisting it like a flag above the boat.

Local women wearing conical-shaped straw hats barter with the proprietors for the best produce and the lowest prices. They know exactly what they want for their evening meals and are discerning to the point of single-mindedness, piloting their small water craft from one barge to the next, seeking out the best, freshest, cheapest produce.

We watch, enthralled, for what seems like hours, entranced by this unique glimpse into everyday life. Too soon, it's time to return to shore. It's only 170 kilometres to Ho Chi Minh City but the journey along the crowded, narrow National Highway will take several hours.

We take on board bottled water, and sliced pineapple purchased from an elderly vendor in a small boat, who has brought her infant granddaughter along for company.

Seventies band Creedence Clearwater Revival once sang that "people on the river are happy to give" but, on the Mekong, everything has its price. Yet when everything's ridiculously cheap, and is offered with such beguiling charm, it is the tourist who is happy – to be donating to such a worthy cause. •

Photography by David Latta and Arthur Georgeson

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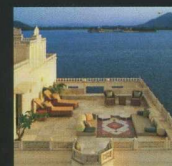
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