

destination

● the great boat ride ● on the border ● photo destination



THE GREAT BOATRIDE



Saigon to Siem Reap overland can be done in 11 hours. But with so many great waterways close by, can the whole journey be done by boat? Nick Ross travels to Angkor Wat by way of The Mekong to find out

ANGKOR WAT AT SUNRISE AND AS WE speed through the grounds on our tuk tuk, the crowds are already there, all bustling to get that picture postcard shot of the towers of Angkor reflected in water.

I'm at the end of a four-day part boat, part land trip from Saigon with this moment defined as the final goal. But after the entrancing sunset journey the previous afternoon among the floating villages on the Tonle Sap, I'm feeling a touch let down.

The last time I was here at such an early hour was over a decade ago and was based on a travelling tip from a friend. "Get there at sunrise," he had told me. "It's magic." Except for myself and my companion the temple was empty, and making our way to the central courtyard we had climbed a stupa and watched the sky change from purple, to orange, pink and then a light but intense blue. Around us the jungle and the temples emerged from the shadows of the night and with it came the incessant sounds of the insects lurking in its midst. It was a dramatic start to the day, one of those

moments that remains etched in memory.

This time I tried to do the same but the steep, stone-chiselled steps of the stupas were now blocked off, except for one, the very place I had climbed 10 years ago. One problem, the stupa was "closed for cleaning".

"Ten dollar and you can go up," said a man in a blue shirt with a half-closed right eye. I refused and found the full weight of Angkor Wat's commerciality staring at me in the face. I even complained to a nearby security guard but he ignored me. Although the magic of the temples was still there, with all the people and this man I was encountering a not-so-endearing finale to what had otherwise been a great trip.

◦ Fire and Water

The idea had been to travel by boat along the Mekong and then through the Tonle Sap all the way from Saigon to Siem Reap. But from the very beginning I found myself hauled back. Until recently there had been an express service from the Ho Chi Minh



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City hydrofoil port to Can Tho. But it had disappeared. Enquiries en route provided some background. Apparently there had been some safety issues — in the wake of the boat a number of smaller vessels on the river had capsized. And then there was the simple difficulty of trying to make a buck. The service was losing money.

So instead I took the bus to Can Tho, stayed the night on a hard bed in one of those nondescript, three-star wannabe hotels, and started my river journey the following morning.

I had been lucky. It is possible to do the whole journey independently, but it's expensive, best done in a group and requires a bit of guile. For me a boat trip is about comfort and that disconnected feeling of being detached from the land and yet part of the river. So instead I arranged to hop onto Le Jarai, a converted wooden boat owned by Victoria Resorts in Chau Doc.

The best thing about this boat was the space. The main deck, which also doubled up as the bridge, is filled with wooden tables and chairs and an area for cooking classes, a nice touch. Upstairs was a sun deck, perfect for lounging over a cold drink, some tunes on the iPod and a trashy novel, while downstairs the lower deck holds three day beds and a massage room. Except for the sun deck I was to use the two other decks to good effect.

But in reality the trip was all about the river, a waterway that is the lifeblood for millions. These days, though, you can forget the imagery of war movies like *Apocalypse Now*. Especially around Can Tho, the river is a commercial entity. Jungle? Sorry, wrong country. From fishing and barge transport through to cement factories, floating houses that double up as fish farms, brick factories to much more, The Mekong in Vietnam is milked for everything it has. Even the once wooden and banana leaf housing on its banks have started to be replaced by the skinny, nondescript brick and mortar buildings common in the big city.

◦ Life's a River

Seven hours, a massage and two snoozes on a

the day beds later I arrived at Victoria Hotel in Chau Doc. Nestling on the banks of the river at the intersection of three waterways and surrounded in tropical flora mixed with bougainvillea, this riverfront property not only boasts the best location in town but is also the only quality hotel for miles. Like old Can Tho and Sa Dec, much of the market area in Chau Doc was built by the French, and thanks to its retro furnishings, dark wooden paneling, outdoor terraces and pagoda yellow walls, The Victoria maintains that old world feel. That it was only constructed a decade ago is a surprise. The dreamy almost lackadaisical atmosphere of the hotel screams with age.

With a day to spare, after wandering round the centre of town I decided to follow the river up north towards one of the minor border points, Long Binh. If I was going to have a day on dry land, then I was going to remain close to the water and there was also a mystical lake up there called Bung Binh Thien. It was one of those bodies of water that people seemed to know about but had never visited.

23km later I arrived at Bung Binh Thien. Populated by a mixture of Vietnamese, Khmer and Muslim Cham, except for fishing and water-borne agriculture, the lake was unexploited. It had a bucolic edge to it, too. Fisherman in reed-roofed boats were slinging nets in the water, old women in canoe boats were removing the weeds from their water spinach crops, and all around people seemed to be living an easy untroubled life. The reality is probably different — speak to the locals they will complain of poverty and tell you they are suffering. But from the outside looking in there is something Arcadian about such simple but visually appealing settings.

◦ Clearer Waters

The next morning I was off again, this time on a speed boat to Phnom Penh courtesy of Victoria. It's not the only boat service available to Cambodia in Chau Doc, but it's certainly the most upmarket.

Leaving the urbanisation around Chau Doc, within minutes the river took on a



shen more reminiscent of the past. There were no factories here, none of the ugliness that can often blight the Vietnamese countryside. Instead farms crept down to the water's edge, fishing boats laid moored on the river's banks and birds were scanning the waterway in search of fish. Everywhere I looked I could see trees and where there were houses they were shaded and clustered together on stilts in tiny hamlets. Finally I was feeling that sense of freedom that comes with river travel, that serene, disconnected feeling that makes a long journey seem to only take minutes.

The people on the river also seemed to possess that same sense of freedom. As we closed in on the border a wooden vessel passed us and on its bridge lay its smiling captain, on his stomach, guiding the rudder with his feet. A few hundred metres on a teenager was washing himself in the river, soap and all, while a woman, leaning out of a wooden canoe, was working on crops at the side of the river. Such is life on the Mekong.

Suddenly we emerged on a huge confluence of rivers and the body of water that is this great waterway widened to over 2km. We were now on The Mekong proper before it gradually splits into its various strands. I began to sense that the border was near.

As with travelling to Phnom Penh by land, there is a sharp distinction between

the Cambodian and Vietnamese sides of the river. In Vietnam there are people, houses, construction and activity, and most noticeably a tangible sense of human energy. With a relatively large population crammed into a small slither of land, it's crowded, too. At first sight, Cambodia was quite the opposite. There were few fishing boats, no industry and besides men with wooden carts on the side of the river pumping up water to help irrigate their crops, the place seemed to be abandoned.

As we travelled towards Phnom Penh, though, it became clear that life was abundant. The organisation was different, that's all. Cambodia's economy is agricultural, with the rivers being used as a source of water for their crops and livestock rather than as something to be exploited to its fullest. So, instead of the stilt houses being located directly on the river, here they are set back, with corn plantations and fruit farms instead going right up to the water's edge. When it comes to natural irrigation based on water levels, it's more convenient.

◦ That Floating Feeling

Reaching Phnom Penh my first stop was to the boat port for a speed boat ticket to Siem Reap. But once again I was foiled, this time by the dry season. The boat doesn't run from April to September because the water levels are too low. So, after a night in the Cambodian capital and entertaining,





however briefly, the thought of trying to hitch a ride with a fisherman, I took a bus for my next stretch of the trip.

Determined to at least get a sense of the water close to Angkor Wat, within an hour of my arrival I was out on a tuk tuk to the floating village on Tonle Sap, the lake that serves as a water and crop irrigation source for almost a third of Cambodia.

With my experience of trying to get a boat in Phnom Penh, I was not surprised to find the water levels in the Tonle Sap low, but so low were they that the boat we took out to the lake was at periods scraping the river bed. Scrapes and close shaves with other boats aside, the trip to the lake proved to be the best moment of my trip.

Majestic and stretching as far as the eye can see, the Tonle Sap is truly an amazing body of water. Even more fascinating is the mainly Vietnamese-populated floating village on its surface. With everything from a pool hall, a village stall and a barber's shop, through to two schools, a floating market and a couple of tourist restaurants, the village is a self-sustaining entity in its own right. Just that rather than walking or cycling from place to place, here you do it in a boat, and if you are small enough you can even hop into one of those metal buckets used for washing dishes.

But I couldn't help feel the irony of the place. Here, like hundreds of other people, I was in Cambodia and yet going

to a tourist attraction that consisted mainly of Vietnamese. And then there was that human, zoo animal feeling. Imagine living somewhere and having hordes of people from elsewhere coming in to look at your habitat and take photos of you. It would feel rather strange, no matter how much of an income it provides you.

◦ The End of Angkor

Getting back on my *tuk tuk* and with Angkor Wat fast receding behind me, for a moment I regretted not having time to visit some of the other temples. It was only 7am and surely I could spare another hour or two, even if I had already visited the site twice before.

But as I got back into my hotel, without doubt the most magnificent of the Victoria properties that run throughout Cambodia and Vietnam, I realised instantly why I had returned. Awaiting me was a five-star buffet breakfast out on the terrace by the infinity pool. And back in my room was space, comfort, colonial elegance and a great shower.

After so much travelling and so much time spent on the water, nothing can substitute for a bit of luxury. And, as I packed my bags and prepared for two hours of relaxation before flying back to Saigon, I reminisced on what had actually been a great trip. I hadn't done the whole journey by boat, but I might as well have done. 