

# Destination Greater Mekong

For centuries, the Mekong River was an impenetrable mystery, unseating empires, defying traders and baffling explorers. Times have changed and adventurous visitors can now follow its legendary waters through an Asia less-travelled.

One of the world's great rivers, the Mekong winds its way down from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea. Its dramatic journey southwards takes in towering gorges in China, immense waterfalls in Laos, traditional towns in Thailand, freshwater dolphins in Cambodia and a patchwork of emerald greens in the Mekong Delta.

Generally, the Mekong region makes the headlines for all the right reasons: monumental temples such as Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious building; natural works of art like Halong Bay and the Yuányáng rice terraces; vibrant cities that give a bigger jolt than the local firewater; walks on the wild side in steaming jungles; and some of the finest flavours in the world.

But at times it also makes the headlines for the wrong reasons. The region has been hit by a sneeze away from a bird-flu epidemic for several years, although swine flu has stolen the show of late. Democracy is but a dream in countries like China, Laos and Vietnam and hardly flourishing in Cambodia. Thailand has transformed politics into theatre and the world waits to see what the next act holds. As the global economy goes into reverse, tourism is set to take a pummelling throughout the region, so be prepared for 'attentive' treatment wherever you go.

Experience old Asia and new Asia jostling for space. One minute it's Bangkok, riding the Skytrain to a state-of-the-art shopping mall, the next it's an elephant careering through the jungle in Laos. In the cities, the pace of life runs at a dizzying speed, matched only by the endless rush of motorbikes and cry of commerce. In the countryside, life is timeless, the rural rhythms the same as they have been for centuries, with pyjama-clad peasants tending the fields and monks wandering the streets seeking alms.

Travelling in the Mekong region is as much about the journey as the destination, although it is not always as smooth as the brochures would have you believe. Float down the river by slow boat from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang, passing a land that time forgot in distant minority villages. Hitch a ride on the bamboo train around Battambang, a homemade local express with almost as many bumps as the roads. Or explore the bustling back streets of old Asia from the comfort of a cyclo. Experience some rough with the smooth for the real flavour of the Mekong region.

The people are irrepressible, the experiences unforgettable and the stories impossible to re-create, but sometime during your journey, the Mekong will enter your soul. Go with the flow and let the spirit of the river course through your veins.

# Getting Started

The Mekong river winds its way down through the region, drawing disparate nations together as neighbours, ensuring an eclectic mix of experiences along the way. Unsurprisingly, the mother river is an artery to adventure for those who like life on the water, but there are also improving road networks and plenty of regional airlines to quicken the pace.

The Mekong region caters to all budgets, but beyond the sophisticated cities, life – and the support systems for visitors – veers towards primitive. However, travel is generally a breeze thanks to bargain-basement prices, friendly and inquisitive locals and an endless flow of fantastic food. The Mekong region can be raw in places so pack some flexibility, humour and patience. Come expecting the unexpected, be ready to follow the current wherever it takes you, prepare for an adventure as much as a holiday, and the Mekong region will deliver.

## WHEN TO GO

When it comes to weather, it's a tough call, as the region's climate is so diverse. Think frosts and occasional snow in the mountains to the north, and temperatures soaring to 40°C in the dry season further south.

With the exception of northern Yúnnán province, the Mekong region lies within the tropics. This means that regardless of when you visit, the weather is likely to be warm or even downright hot. High humidity is also common, with few areas far enough inland to enjoy thoroughly dry weather. Temperatures are much cooler in the mountains.

Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and the northern and central regions of Thailand have three seasons: hot, hotter and hottest. There is a relatively cool dry season from November to late February (25°C to 30°C), followed by a hot dry season from March to May (35°C to 40°C), and then a humid, rainy season that starts some time in June and tapers out in October (30°C to 35°C). Fortunately, even during the rainy season it seldom rains all day and travel is possible throughout most of the region. The monsoon brings sudden torrential downpours for an hour or so each day, which can bring real relief from the heat.

Further north towards Hanoi and Kūnmíng, the rainy season comes during the summer months (June to August) when the thermometer soars. In contrast the winters can get quite chilly here, so pack some warm gear.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Bring as little as possible – the Mekong region has pretty much anything you can find back home but often at better prices. Soaps and smellies are cheap and plentiful. Clothing, shoes and backpacks are all manufactured in the region and available at a snip. Tampons are available in all major towns and cities, but not in very remote areas. Things to consider bringing:

- A Swiss army knife (or equivalent). You don't need 27 separate functions, just one blade and an opener.
- A torch (flashlight) and compass.
- Business cards – Asians deal them out like a deck of cards.
- Earplugs to block the ever-present soundtrack.
- Universal plug adaptor; a rain cover for your backpack; a sweater for the highlands and air-con bus trips; and mosquito repellent to keep the bugs at bay.
- Plastic bags – the secret to successful packing. Not only do they keep things separate and clean, but also dry. That means a lot at the end of a long, wet day.

Most of this region lies off the track of tropical cyclones (typhoons). However, typhoons do occasionally strike Vietnam. Peak typhoon season runs from June to early October, which can dampen the spirits of even the most enthusiastic traveller.

The region is pretty crowded from November to March and in July and August. Prices tend to peak over the Christmas and New Year period, and if you don't fancy sharing the sites with the masses, try to avoid these busy times.

Some travellers like to time a visit with Chinese New Year (Tet in Vietnam), which is one of the biggest festivals in the regional calendar and occurs in late January or early February. A nice idea, but far from ideal, as the whole region is on the move at this time. Transport is booked out and a lot of restaurants, shops and businesses are closed. Similarly, things get pretty chaotic during the new years of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, which fall in mid-April. Commerce grinds to a halt and the population turns its attention to staging spectacular water fights or plastering each other with talcum powder.

See Climate Charts (p496) for more information.

## COSTS & MONEY

The cost of travel in the Mekong region varies from pocket change to the platinum card, depending on your level of taste and comfort. Some countries are slightly more expensive than others, but all are very good value when compared with Europe or North America. Laos is considered the cheapest country in the region, while China is probably the most expensive. Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam fall somewhere in between. Generally speaking, budget travellers can live it up on US\$20 to US\$40 a day. Midrange travellers can have a ball for US\$50 to US\$150 a day, staying in some style, eating well and travelling comfortably. At the top end, spending US\$200 or more a day, anything is possible.

Rooms start from US\$5 and under in busy tourist centres. Spending US\$10 to US\$20 will boost the comforts quickly, and rooms will generally include air-con, satellite TV, fridge and hot water. Make the step up to US\$50 and three-star frills are available. At US\$100 and above, it's often five-star territory. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a discount if it is low season or if numbers are down.

Dining out is where the Mekong region comes into its own. At street stalls and markets, meals are around US\$1. Local restaurants are more comfortable and you can eat well for US\$2 to US\$5. Then there are the gourmet restaurants where you can spend US\$10 to US\$20 with drinks; with the right wines you could easily spend US\$50 or more. Beer and other alcoholic drinks are pretty reasonable throughout the region, with Laos and Vietnam the cheapest for beer and Cambodia the cheapest for wine and spirits.

Bus travel is a real bargain. Buses between major destinations have fixed fares in all the countries, but when travelling by bus in remote areas, overcharging is common. Trains are a good option in China, Thailand and Vietnam, particularly night sleepers for longer journeys. For maximum flexibility, many travellers prefer to rent a car or 4WD and go exploring with a guide.

Flights around the region vary widely in price. Bangkok is the discount flight capital of the region. More and more routes are being developed to link popular tourist centres, and a short hop can save considerable time and money.

Foreigners are frequently overcharged in the region, particularly when buying souvenirs and occasionally in restaurants. Bus and taxi drivers sometimes bump up their rates to several times the local price. China and Vietnam are notorious for overcharging; in Thailand they do it with a smile; in Cambodia they are fast learners; while Laos remains the most honest country. However, don't assume that everyone is trying to rip you off. Despite widespread poverty, many locals will only ask the local price for many goods and services.

Whatever your budget, the Mekong region will deliver. Live it up while it lasts.

**ECOTOURISM 101**

Ecotourism has really taken off in the Mekong region. Thailand has long pioneered ecotourism initiatives with a venerable old tourism industry. Laos is the new darling of the ecotourism scene, while Cambodia, Vietnam and Yúnnán province have fledgling ecotourism operators. Here are a few things to consider before making a booking, courtesy of Ecotourism Laos ([www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)):

- Does my trip financially benefit local people, help to protect biodiversity and support the continuation of traditional culture? Is my guide local?
- What will I learn on this trip, and what opportunities will local people have to learn from me?
- Are facilities designed in local style? Do they use local, natural construction materials, and conserve energy and water? Is there local food on the menu?
- Is there a permit, entrance fee or other fee included in the price that is directed towards conservation activities?
- Are there sensible limits in place concerning group size and the frequency of departures to minimize negative impacts?

**TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY**

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and experience the rewards of independent travel. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Much of the Mekong region experienced turbulent times in the 20th century, including war, genocide and famine, and there are many ways to put a little back into the countries you visit. Staying longer, travelling further and spreading the wealth is obvious advice, but even for those on a short stay, it is possible to engage with locals in markets and spend money in restaurants and outlets that assist disadvantaged locals.

For more on sustainable tourism and some tips on responsible travel while still having the trip of a lifetime, see p83, and try the following websites:

**Mekong Tourism** ([www.mekongtourism.org](http://www.mekongtourism.org)) The official site of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, promoting responsible and poverty-alleviating tourism in the region.

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsible-travel.org](http://www.responsible-travel.org)) A no-nonsense website with common-sense advice on how to travel with a conscience.

**Stay Another Day** ([www.stay-another-day.org](http://www.stay-another-day.org)) A great website dedicated to tempting tourists into staying another day in Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam, packed with ideas on day trips, project visits and alternative things to see and do.

**TRAVEL LITERATURE**

Much ink has spilled in the Mekong region over the years. Seek out some of these titles before taking the plunge.

The classic is Norman Lewis' *A Dragon Apparent* (1951), an account of his 1950 foray into Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It offers a good insight into the last days of French rule, an old Indochina that was soon to be sucked into war. The book has been reissued as part of *The Norman Lewis Omnibus* (1995).

*To Asia With Love: A Connoisseur's Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam* (2004), an anthology edited by Kim Fay, is a delightful introduction to the Mekong region for those looking for some inspiration and adventure, written by writers who know and love their countries.

# TOP 10

Andaman  
& Nicobar

Bangkok  
VIETNAM  
CAMBODIA  
Phnom Penh  
South China

## NATIONAL DRINKS

The locals in the Mekong region love a tippie and each country has its own flavours. Seize the day and slake your thirst with a selection of drinks as you travel through the region.

- 1 Angkor Beer** (C) Angkor is everything to the Khmers, including the national beer
- 2 Beer Lao** (L, C) Probably the best lager in the world (if Carlsberg hadn't used the slogan first)
- 3 Bia Hoi** (V) Surely the cheapest beer in the world, it costs about US\$0.15 a glass
- 4 Dynasty** (Y) One of China's best-known red wines, this goes well with Yúnnánese cuisine
- 5 Lao Lao** (L) Moonshine made by the minorities in upcountry Laos
- 6 Mekhong** (T) Hardly a whisky, but sloshed down it's a fast route to oblivion
- 7 Ruau** (V) A potent rice wine brewed by the minorities of the mountains
- 8 Singha** (T, L, C) Thailand's national beer, strong enough to make you forget the night before
- 9 Snake wine** (C, T, L, V, Y) Infused with the beating heart of a snake
- 10 Wrestler Wine** (C) Like combining sherry and Red Bull; you'll be rolling on the floor

## MUST-SEE MOVIES

Film-makers have found a rich vein of material in the turbulent tales of the Mekong region. There are some moody movies from a time before the madness, a host of films dealing with the American experience in Indochina, and some memorable contemporary moments.

- 1 *Air America*** (1990) Director: Roger Spottiswoode
- 2 *Apocalypse Now*** (1979) Director: Francis Ford Coppola
- 3 *The Beach*** (2000) Director: Danny Boyle
- 4 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** (2000) Director: Ang Lee
- 5 *Iron Ladies*** (2000) Director: Yongyoot Thongkoon
- 6 *The Killing Fields*** (1984) Director: Roland Joffe
- 7 *The Last Emperor*** (1987) Director: Bernardo Bertolucci
- 8 *Platoon*** (1986) Director: Oliver Stone
- 9 *The Quiet American*** (2002) Director: Phillip Noyce
- 10 *Two Brothers*** (2004) Director: Jean-Jacques Annaud

## MEKONG EXPERIENCES

Travel is not just about visiting, it's about experiencing. You need to get beneath the skin of the region and this can take many shapes or forms. It could be a walk on the wild side. It could be a cultural encounter. At some stage during your journey, the Mekong will enter your soul. Embrace it.

- 1** Count the number of locals crammed on to one motorbike in the countryside
- 2** Get the measure of a tailor, the only time you want to be stitched up in the region
- 3** Haggle with a cyclo driver about price before enjoying the ride
- 4** Learn to cross the road like a local in a busy city
- 5** Meet the minorities, a multicoloured mosaic of mountain people
- 6** Play bottoms-up with the locals in a backstreet bar
- 7** See sunrise over the South China Sea from a beautiful beach
- 8** Slurp a steaming bowl of noodle soup at a street stall
- 9** Take some time out in a temple, the spiritual sanctuary for local people
- 10** Turn down the volume and drift along the Mekong River by boat

*The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* (2001) by Milton Osborne is a readable history of the great river and the events that have unfolded along its vast length.

Another excellent account of life on the water is *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong* (2001) by Edward Gargan. A war-protester-turned-foreign-correspondent, Gargan sees for himself how these countries have brought themselves back from the brink.

*Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos and Annam* (1864) by Henri Mouhot has been reprinted in English and gives the inside story of the man credited with 'rediscovering' Angkor.

Jon Swain's *River of Time* (1995) takes the reader back to an old Indochina, partly lost to the madness of war, and includes firsthand accounts of the French embassy stand-off in the first days of the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Tim Page's *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden* (1995) covers this legendary photographer's quest for the truth behind the disappearance of photojournalist Sean Flynn (son of Errol) in Cambodia in 1970, and his mission to secure a monument to fallen correspondents on all sides of the Indochina conflict.

An equally legendary news cameraman, Australian Neil Davies, is the subject of Tim Bowden's book *One Crowded Hour* (1990). Davies covered Cambodia and Vietnam for many years, but was tragically killed covering a coup in Bangkok in 1985.

*The Indochina Chronicles* (2005) by Phil Karber is a lively travelogue taking in adventures and misadventures in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

The ultimate spoof guidebook, *Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring* (2004) is a pastiche of Mekong countries and pokes fun at all of us. No one is spared, not the locals, not the travellers, not even hallowed guidebook authors. An absolute must for anyone travelling through the Mekong region.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Biking Asia with Mr Pumpy** ([www.mrpumpy.net](http://www.mrpumpy.net)) The website for cyclists passing through the Mekong region, it is written with candour and humour by Mr Pumpy's best friend Felix Hude. Dated but fun.

**Golden Triangle Rider** ([www.GT-rider.com](http://www.GT-rider.com)) The motorbiking website for the Mekong region, this is one of the most reliable sources for up-to-date road and border-crossing information.

**Jewels of the Mekong Delta** ([www.travelmedia.com/mekong](http://www.travelmedia.com/mekong)) Features travel information and news about countries along the Mekong River.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Summaries of countries in the region, the Thorn Tree bulletin board, accommodation booking site, travel news and useful links to travel resources elsewhere on the web.

**Mouth to Source** (<http://mouthtosource.net/rivers/mekong/mekong-panoramas/>) Follow the Mekong's journey from mouth to source with some incredible panoramic 360° photos.

**Oriental Tales** ([www.orientaltales.com](http://www.orientaltales.com)) Short stories, articles and inspiring photos of travel throughout the Southeast Asia region.

**Tales of Asia** ([www.talesofasia.com](http://www.talesofasia.com)) This website has up-to-the-minute information on overland travel in the region, including the overland route from Bangkok to Siem Reap.

**Things Asian** ([www.thingsasian.com](http://www.thingsasian.com)) Bubbling with information on the culture of the Mekong region, including architecture, literature and fashion.

**Travelfish** ([www.travelfish.org](http://www.travelfish.org)) Crammed with opinionated articles and reviews about the region, contributed by independent travellers. Also has up-to-date border-crossing info.

**Visit Mekong** ([www.visit-mekong.com](http://www.visit-mekong.com)) The official travel website for the Mekong, it offers comprehensive information about each country including health, religion, history and maps.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### INDOCHINA EXPLORER **Three to Six Weeks / Hanoi to Luang Prabang**

Begin in the Vietnamese capital of **Hanoi** (p358), replete with boulevards, parks and lakes. Take a junk cruise on **Halong Bay** (p378), where spectacular karst islands soar from the sea. Head to **Huế** (p387), the old imperial capital and cultural hub of central Vietnam. Take the beautiful coastal road south to the historic trading point of **Hoi An** (p395). Head to **China Beach** (p395) or continue south to party at the beach town of **Nha Trang** (p400) or the sand dunes of **Mui Ne** (p405).

Hit **Ho Chi Minh City** (p412), the full-throttle face of new Vietnam, head on. Go underground at the **Cu Chi Tunnels** (p426), then join the faithful at the **Cao Dai Great Temple** (p426) before plunging into the **Mekong Delta** (p427).

Experience the contrasts of **Phnom Penh** (p189), the tragedy of recent decades set against an ancient past. Loop around the lake to the old town of **Battambang** (p219). Continue to **Siem Reap** (p201), home to the world's most spectacular collection of temples at **Angkor** (p210).

Board a flight to **Pakse** (p329), gateway to southern Laos, then head north to the Lao capital of **Vientiane** (p277). Finish up in **Luang Prabang** (p294) and see monks at dawn, caves brimming with Buddhas and an old Asia that is becoming increasingly hard to find.



This can be run as a high-speed 'greatest hits' trip in three weeks, with a fistful of flights to connect the more distant cities. Those with time should slow things down, using some trains in Vietnam, and trying the local buses in Cambodia and Laos.

**MEKONG MEANDERS** Three to Six Weeks / Bangkok to Phu Quoc Island

Leave behind the bustle of **Bangkok** (p116) for the **Golden Triangle** (p150), where the borders of Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand converge. Step back in time into Laos and take a slow boat down the Mekong from **Huay Xai** (p318), stopping the night in **Pak Beng** (p313), to **Luang Prabang** (p294). Soak up the magic before leaving the river for some relaxation in **Vang Vieng** (p290).

Continue to **Vientiane** (p277) and reunite with the mother river. It's a sleepy place with some great cafes, restaurants and bars, which you won't be encountering for a while. Fly south to **Pakse** (p329) or wind your way down the river through **Tha Khaek** (p323) and **Savannakhet** (p326). Visit the imposing Khmer sanctuary of **Wat Phu** (p334), in the shadow of Lingaparvata Mountain; explore the waterfalls and villages of the **Bolaven Plateau** (p340); or enjoy the laid-back islands of **Si Phan Don** (p335).

Cross into Cambodia and visit the mountains of **Ratanakiri** (p233), home to elephants, hill tribes and pristine nature. Back on the river, call in at **Kratie** (p231) to see the rare Irrawaddy dolphin. Continue south to the revitalised Cambodian capital **Phnom Penh** (p189). Make a diversion by speedboat up the Tonlé Sap river to the boom town of **Siem Reap** (p201), your base for the majestic **Temples of Angkor** (p210),

Next, take a fast boat down the mighty Mekong to **Chau Doc** (p430), gateway to the Mekong Delta. Check out **Cantho** (p429), its commercial heart. Hotfoot it to **Ho Chi Minh City** (p412) for some fun; delve deeper into the delta with a homestay around **Vinh Long** (p429); or make for the tropical retreat of **Phu Quoc Island** (p433), a well-earned reward for following the mother river.

This trip trickles through an older Asia and includes some of the hottest spots in the region, as well as some of the less-visited backwaters. Move at a slower pace like the great river and soak up the contrasts as you float from country to country.





## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### MINORITY REPORT

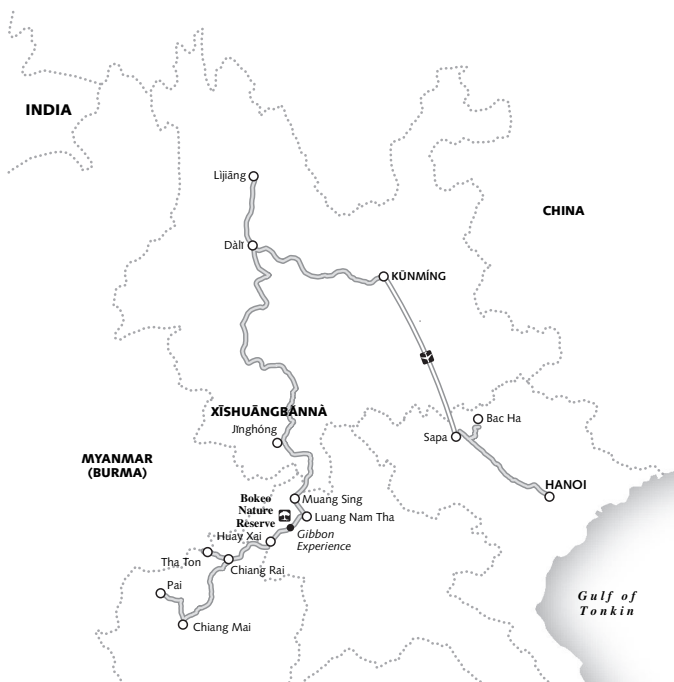
Three to Six Weeks / Chiang Mai to Hanoi

Start in **Chiang Mai** (p138), cultural capital of northern Thailand, and make sure you visit the **Tribal Museum** (p141). Take the winding road to **Pai** (p146), a mountain retreat that proves the hippie trail is alive and well. Then head on to **Tha Ton** (p150), the entry point for rafting trips down to **Chiang Rai** (p148), itself a good base for responsible trekking.

Cross into Laos at **Huay Xai** (p318) and check out the **Gibbon Experience** (p318) at Bokeo Nature Reserve before heading for **Luang Nam Tha** (p314). Spend a day or two trekking with the award-winning **Nam Ha Ecotourism Project** (p313), before continuing to **Muang Sing** (p317), the hub for one of the most diverse minority regions in all Laos.

It's time to take on China to the north. Head up to the Thai region of **Xishuāngbǎnnà** (p458), a great area for biking and hiking. Now you've come this far, it would be rude not to visit the highlights of Yúnnán. Chill out in and around **Dàlǐ** (p467) before heading to the historic heart of **Lijiang** (p473), then it's time to get back on the hill-tribe trail.

Travel via **Kūnmíng** (p452) to the mountains of north Vietnam. **Sapa** (p384), an old French hill station, is the gateway to the minority communities of this region. Consider a side trip to **Bac Ha** (p386), home to the colourful Flower Hmong folk and great walking country. Head south to **Hanoi** (p358), happy in the knowledge that all your ethnic souvenirs were bought direct from the minority people and not in the designer boutiques of the Old Quarter.



This route covers the real Thai land, the mountainous regions of the Mekong where hill tribes have long made a home. Transport is easy in Thailand, but things get a little bumpy in Laos. In Vietnam the night train is a great option to connect Lao Cai (Sapa) and Hanoi.

**NATURAL HIGHS** **Three to Five Weeks / Kūnmíng to Ho Chi Minh City**  
 Leave **Kūnmíng** (p452) for the ancient, cobbled streets of old **Lijāng** (p473). Further north lies **Tiger Leaping Gorge** (p478), one of the deepest gorges in the world at about 3900m from river to mountain peak. Trek its length for some memorable vistas before heading south to the incredible **Yuányāng rice terraces** (p457), where agriculture becomes art.

Cross the border and continue to **Hanoi** (p358): for adrenalin junkies, and for nature lovers, Vietnam has plenty to offer. Start out with a visit to **Halong Bay** (p376) for some sea kayaking among the karsts. Experienced climbers with their own gear can leave the water far below, as the limestone outcrops around **Cat Ba Island** (p378) offer some excellent ascents. Take to the waters of **Lan Ha Bay** (p378) by local boat to see the 'new' Halong Bay without the tourists. Boating, kayaking and Robinson Crusoe-style camping are possible here, and there are some beautiful hidden coves.

Heading south to central Vietnam, **Bach Ma National Park** (p392) is well geared up for walkers and has a series of lush trails to secluded waterfalls. Down on the coast below Bach Ma is **China Beach** (p395).

Go under the waves at **Nha Trang** (p400), the dive capital of Vietnam, before heading up towards the hills of the Central Highlands. Wind up, or down, in **Dalat** (p407), a base for abseiling, cycling and rock climbing. Don't forget two of Vietnam's best-known national parks: the birding hot spot of **Cat Tien National Park** (p408), with a population of rare Javan rhinos, and **Yok Don National Park** (p408), home to elephants, elephants and more elephants.

Adventures take time and there are some major distances to cover in Yúnnán, so consider taking a flight to avoid any travel lows in between the natural highs. Transport in Vietnam is pretty efficient and a combination of bus, train and boat will cover all bases.



## TAILORED TRIP

### THE KHMER EMPIRE

Following in the footsteps of the Khmer empire is a relatively straightforward proposition: like the Romans before them, the ancient Khmers built a network of roads connecting the outposts of their empire. First, escape **Bangkok** (p116) for the seldom-visited region of northeast Thailand. Call in on **Ayuthaya** (p132), an outpost of the Khmer empire before it became a glorious Thai capital. Forget the Khmer theme for a day or two with a visit to the lush jungle and lovely waterfalls of **Khao Yai National Park** (p157). Continue east to the ancient city of **Phimai** (p156), one of the most important regional capitals during the time of Angkor. See the wonderfully restored temple of **Phanom Rung** (p158), set atop an extinct volcano, and the nearby temple of **Meuang Tam** (p158).

Dip your toe into Cambodia by crossing the border to visit the spectacular mountaintop temple of **Preah Vihear** (Khao Praa Wihaan in Thai; p227). Take in the dramatic views as you'll be down below on the plains of Cambodia in a couple more weeks. If politics means the border is closed, you may have to attempt this from the other side at the end of the trip.

Enter Laos and crisscross the Mekong to visit the Khmer sanctuary of **Wat Phu** (p334), one of the oldest sacred sites in the region.

Cross into Cambodia and call in at **Kompong Cham** (p229) before swinging northwest again to the pre-Angkorian capital of **Sambor Prei Kuk** (p228), the first great temple city in the region.

The climax of the pilgrimage is approaching: the incredible temples of **Angkor** (p210). See the mother of all temples, **Angkor Wat** (p210), the world's largest religious building; the **Bayon** (p214), one of the world's weirdest temples with its enigmatic faces; and the jungle-clad **Ta Prohm** (p215). Venture further to encounter the usurper capital of **Koh Ker** (p226), and the River of a Thousand Lingas at **Kbal Spean** (p215) before taking a well-earned massage in **Siem Reap** (p204).



# The Authors



## NICK RAY

**Coordinating Author, Vietnam**

A Londoner of sorts, Nick comes from Watford, the sort of town that makes you want to travel. He has been floating around the Mekong region for more than a decade, first as a traveller, later leading people astray as a tour leader for adventure travel companies, and more recently as a location scout for film and TV. Living in Phnom Penh, the Mekong is his backyard of sorts and he has authored several editions of Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guide as well as co-authoring *Vietnam* and *Cycling Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia*. Nick has covered almost every corner of the Mekong region, including taking dips in the mother river in Laos and Cambodia. He chickened out in the heavily populated (polluted?) Mekong Delta. Nick also wrote the Destination Greater Mekong, Getting Started, Itineraries, History, The Culture, Border Crossings in the Greater Mekong, Regional Directory and Transport in the Region chapters.



## JOSHUA SAMUEL BROWN

**Yúnnán Province (China)**

Hailing from the Isle of Staten, Joshua Samuel Brown has lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China on and off since 1994. A prolific traveller and writer, his features have appeared in an eclectic variety of publications around the globe, including the *South China Morning Post*, *Beijing Scene* and *Cat Fancy*. His debut solo book *Vignettes of Taiwan* offers tales of betel-nut beauties and how to avoid jail time by impersonating a Mormon. Usually erudite, occasionally opinionated, and sometimes bizarre, his blog Snarky Tofu <http://josambro.blogspot.com/> is an essay-and-video filled scratch-pad from a life spent largely on the road. This is Joshua's fourth book for Lonely Planet.



## DANIEL ROBINSON

**Cambodia**

Daniel Robinson researched the award-winning first edition of Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guide back in 1989, when the ageing Soviet turboprops on the Phnom Penh–Siem Reap run stayed over the middle of the Tonlé Sap to avoid ground fire, and he was Angkor's sole foreign visitor for three days. (The story of his misadventures in a mined temple appears in Lonely Planet's *Unpacked Again*.) These days Daniel prefers more sedate pursuits, such as rambling in the wild Cardamoms, river boating in Ratanakiri and testing the limits of motorbike traction around Prasat Preah Vihear. His favourite spot for chilling is the (for now) pristine west coast of Koh Kong Island. Daniel is based in Los Angeles and Tel Aviv.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).



## RICHARD WATERS

Laos

Richard began his travelling as a land-lubbing schoolboy vicariously living through the adventures of Tintin comics. Since then he's travelled extensively through Europe, Latin America, the Far and Middle East, and northern America, believing those Xanadus and Shangri Las are still out there – you just have to hunt for them. He was first drawn to Laos by accident and has been a sucker for its languid easy charm ever since. When not working for Lonely Planet and British newspapers and magazines, he lives with his girlfriend and children in Brighton.



## CHINA WILLIAMS

Bangkok & Northern Thailand

More than a decade ago, China first met the Mekong River on a soggy, rainy day after an overnight bus ride from Surin where she was teaching English. Months later she took the slow boat downriver from Luang Prabang and the local ladies on board shared their betel nut with her (better tasting than it looks). Since then, she's gazed at the Mekong when it is swollen in the wet season and withered in the dry season – usually from the perspective of a guidebook writer on various Thailand books for Lonely Planet. Nowadays she runs a small household in Baltimore, Maryland (USA) with her son, Felix, and husband, Matt.

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Dr Trish Batchelor** wrote the Health chapter (p515). Trish is a general practitioner and travel-medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as being a medical advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics.

**Robert Carmack and Morrison Polkinghorne** wrote the Food & Drink chapter (p69). They organise and host gastronomic tours through their website [asianfoodtours.com](http://asianfoodtours.com). Their quest: learn about a country's culture through its foods and get out of the hotel/tourist restaurant trap! Robert is author of *Thai Cooking* and *Vietnamese Cooking*. Morrison is a textile authority, specialising in Asian weaving techniques as well as classical French tassels, and co-edits a quarterly food and travel column for website the Globetrotting Gourmet ([www.globetrottinggourmet.com/](http://www.globetrottinggourmet.com/)).

**David Lukas** wrote the Environment chapter (p82). David is a professional naturalist whose many adventures afield include a year spent studying the tropical rainforests of Borneo. He has contributed environment chapters to more than a dozen Lonely Planet titles ranging from the *Dominican Republic* to *Nova Scotia*.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'