

Understand the Mekong Region

THE MEKONG REGION TODAY.....458

As China tries to exert its muscle in the region, the ties that bind the countries of the Mekong are becoming increasingly close-knit.

HISTORY460

From the legacy of mighty empires to the brutality of civil wars and genocide, the Mekong region has witnessed a past as dramatic as any the world has seen.

PEOPLE & CULTURE475

With a population as diverse as mountain exiles from the Tibetan plateau to seafaring explorers from the Malay peninsula, the wealth of beliefs and customs in the Mekong region is no surprise.

The Mekong Region Today

Rewind just a generation and Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were pariah states, scarred by decades of war and boycotted by much of the Western world. Despite the region's communist history, its leaders proved themselves to be open to Western economic models as they balanced Eastern communism with Western capitalism. Touchdown today and the bad old days seem but a footnote in history. Like the river that runs through it, the Mekong region is well and truly going places.

Best In Print

The Quiet American (Graham Greene, 1955) Seminal anti-war novel set in the 1950s as the French empire is collapsing.

The Lover (Marguerite Duras, 1984) Semi-autobiographical tale of a young girl in love with a local scion in French colonial Vietnam.

Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a Shoestring (2004) Ultimate spoof guidebook pokes fun at locals, travelers and guidebook authors.

Best on Film

Apocalypse Now (1979) Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece is one of the most savage indictments of war ever seen on screen.

The Killing Fields (1984) Iconic film about the Khmer Rouge period, focusing on photographer Dith Pran's relationship with journalist Sidney Schanberg.

Platoon (1986) Based on the first-hand experiences of director Oliver Stone, it follows a young recruit to the Vietnam War.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010) Terminally ill Thai man explores ghosts of his past in Apichatpong Weerasethaku's Palme d'Or winner.

Spirit of Cooperation

Much of the region is closer than it has been for some time thanks to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). At the end of 2015, the Asean Economic Community (AEC) will unite the association's 10 Southeast Asian countries into a liberalised marketplace where trade moves freely. Things are moving especially fast in the Mekong region. Major cross-border highways are being built. Railroad track is being laid down or rehabilitated. New border posts are being installed and old ones upgraded. Airlines are expanding their inter-regional routes. There's even talk of a single-visa policy for foreign visitors to the region, although this appears to be some ways off.

Needless to say improved infrastructure is having a profound effect on tourism, as it makes it that much easier to get around. This may disappoint old-timers for whom the epic journey by longboat or pickup truck was an inherent part of travel in the region. Ultimately, however, improved accessibility puts more tourist dollars in remote communities and helps some locals escape poverty. Meanwhile you can still dial up those epic journeys, you just need to venture more off-the-beaten track to do so.

Big Brother

As the nations of the Mekong region draw closer together through Asean, the elephant in the room continues to be China. Beijing exerts political and economic influence on the region as it spends some of its enormous surplus in Laos and Cambodia. Apart from the obvious investment in infrastructure such as roads, dams and plantations, this has two significant effects. Firstly, Chinese aid comes with few strings attached, meaning that roads, plantations and dams are built by Chinese companies with little or no concern for local people or envi-