



# Understand the Mekong Region

## **THE MEKONG REGION TODAY.....448**

Economic highs and political lows; discover more about the turbulent course that is life in the Mekong region today.

## **MEKONG REGION HISTORY..... 451**

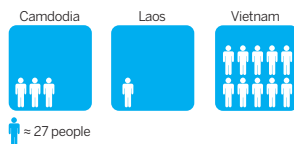
From the legacy of mighty empires to the brutality of civil wars and genocide, the Mekong region has witnessed a past as dramatic as any the world has seen.

## **MEKONG REGION CULTURE ..... 477**

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



## population per sq mile



# The Mekong Region Today

## A Remarkable Turnaround

Rewind just a generation and Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were pariah states, boycotted by much of the Western world. Scarred by decades of war and instability, the region was considered by many Western experts to be a basket case. How times change. 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.

## Economic Highs

Much of the region is closer than it has been for some time thanks to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean). With the exception of the occasional dispute between Cambodia and Thailand over their shared border (see p231), the countries of the region are at peace and the talk is of cooperation not conflict. All seem to be weathering the global financial crisis better than many of their counterparts in the Western world. Asean is moving towards a free trade area that should liberate commerce between the neighbouring countries of the Mekong region and help keep the economy on track.

Visa-free travel between Asean members and the emergence of budget airlines like Air Asia and Jetstar has kickstarted a regional tourism rush that is redefining travel patterns in the countries of the Mekong region. There are also plans to revolutionise, with China pledging to build a high-speed rail link from Kunming to Bangkok via languid Luang Prabang within the next five years.

## Top Travel Reads

### **A Dragon Apparent (1951)**

Norman Lewis' classic account of his 1950 foray into Indochine and the last days of French rule.

### **The River's Tale: A Year on**

**the Mekong (2001)** War-protester-turned-foreign-correspondent Edward Gargan

sees how this region has come back from the brink.

### **Phaic Tan: Sunstroke on a**

**Shoestring (2004)** This ultimate spoof guidebook is a pastiche of Mekong countries and pokes fun at all of us: locals, travellers and even guidebook authors.

## Top Films

### **Apocalypse Now (1979)**

Marlon Brando plays Colonel Kurtz, who has gone AWOL, and native, in the wilds of northeast Cambodia. One of the most savage indictments of war ever seen on screen.

**The Killing Fields (1984)** Iconic film about the Khmer Rouge period,