

## GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



# *Glorious, Chaotic Waterways of* **INDO-CHINA**



If you really hate boats, don't bother sightseeing in Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam. Sure, you can catch a glimpse from the window of an air-conditioned plane. You can see a bit more from the back seat of a tired taxi. You can even don your smelly trackshoes, walk dusty streets, climb cobbled steps and clamber over crumbling ancient temples. But if you REALLY want to get a feel for these remarkable countries, if you want to get up-close with the PEOPLE ... sorry, you're gonna have to get your feet wet!

**W**ater. We take it for granted, don't we. Turn on a kitchen tap, flick a shower-lever, fill a bath, flush a toilet – and there it is. Nothing to get excited about.

But for countless millions of our Asian neighbours, water means everything. As their ancestors did for thousands of years, they live alongside it or above it or on it or in it. It feeds their families, waters their crops, cleans their pots, takes them to town, and rocks them to sleep at night. Generation after generation, they've been born on the water, grown up on the water, worked day and night on the water, and died on the water.

You see them in the great, cluttered harbours of Hong Kong and Singapore, the 'boat people' with their motley array of sampans and junks. You see them on the murky waters of China's Grand Canal, steering their way upstream in huge, wallowing barges. You see them at sunset on the breathtaking Li River, fishing with cormorants from skinny bamboo rafts.

And as you watch you can almost feel the pulse of their cultures ...

**O**n a warm Saturday morning in November, we traversed one of these waterways. Tonlé Sap, it's called, a vast shallow lake in the heart of Cambodia. The 'speedboat' we'd been allocated was the '*Rambo Express*'

– a low-slung, ugly, submarine-like thing made by the Russians. And when given the options: either sit inside on the seats and get claustrophobic, or drape ourselves outside on the roof and get wet, we chose the latter.

(Well, wouldn't you?)

The shoreline, as Phnom Penh faded behind us in a cloud of smoke and spray, was an education all on its own. Hour after hour of ramshackle houses teetering on stilts along the water's edge, rickety fishing boats dragged up under the trees, grown-ups and kids doing their usual Saturday rural stuff.

But the fun really began on the other side of the lake, when the '*Rambo Express*' slowed down, found a gap in a wall of mangroves, and spluttered through to the 'main street' of a floating village.

I couldn't believe my eyes!

It was a fishermen's shanty-town, built of thatch and sticks and plastic and wood. Here was somebody's dwelling, anchored in the stream, pot-plants parked on the veranda. There was a Catholic church, painted blue, perched just above the waterline. Here was a one-room floating flat, tied up alongside a garden planted in the muddy bank. And there was a semi-submerged stock-pen, home to four healthy pink pigs.

Every building, boat and bit of land





Shoreline of Tonlé Sap lake

swarmed with people: women in coolie hats paddling canoes ... men fishing with bamboo poles and nets ... naked kids, laughing at us ‘round-eyes’ while they cooled off in the water ... families eating together under makeshift shade.

I’ll never forget it. One glorious, happy, watery shambles!

**T**wo Saturdays later we found ourselves on another, more famous, waterway: the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam. Some famous traveller (can’t remember who) included this on his list of “places to see before you die” ... and it didn’t take us long to discover why.

The fruit orchards, paddy-fields and swamplands of the Delta (just an hour or two south of Ho Chi Minh City) are criss-crossed by nine tributaries of the Mekong River. By the time it reaches Vietnam, the mighty Mekong has already trickled, dribbled and surged more than 4000km from its source high up on the Tibetan Plateau. Here on the flatlands, it not only waters

Vietnam’s flourishing ‘rice bowl’ – it is home to more than 25 million people, and is bursting with long-boats, sampans, ferries and floating markets.

We swapped some local currency (Vietnamese *dong*) for a ferry-ride out to one of the islands, chugging past multi-coloured fishing boats, rumpily little villages, lush vegetation and sampans loaded with produce. Families usually live on their



Fishing boats on the Mekong Delta



boats, buying fruit, rice and flowers from local farmers.

We ventured ashore on the island, only to be mobbed by school-kids, begging us to take their photos and clamouring to show us around. We checked out their village, inspected their dirt-floor homes, strolled along their garden paths, peered into their fish-farms and wobbled across their swing-bridge.

We took to the water again – this time on smaller, narrower boats. And in the care of cheerful paddlers (mostly women) we glided along cool, palm-fringed canals.

Our Vietnam adventure was drawing to an all-too-sudden close. But we Kiwis must've passed the test. Because the village adults rewarded us by seating us at a long table under a thatched roof, and serving us a most refreshing collection of yummy unfamiliar fruits – washed down with some pleasant local tea.

Ahh, what a shame we couldn't linger longer ... ❀

---

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE VIETNAM FOR YOURSELF? JOHN & ROBYN COONEY WILL BE RETURNING WITH A KIWI GROUP IN NOVEMBER 2005 – SEE ADVERTISEMENT ON PAGE 57. FOR A FREE INFORMATION PACK, PHONE TOURS DIRECT ON 0800 868 748 – OR EMAIL [INFO@TOURSDIRECT.CO.NZ](mailto:INFO@TOURSDIRECT.CO.NZ).

---

*Silk Road – continued from page 56*

(And while I'm on the subject – heaven does lack some basic facilities. Yurts don't have toilets.)

Ah yes, sad to say, even in this little patch of paradise, for all its celestial mountain remoteness, commercialism has arrived. Tourist trappings are springing up. Along with the pristine view at Heavenly Lake you'll see some newly arrived tourist kitsch.



A rack of clothes is standing all alone by the shore of the lake. I have no idea how it got here, but it's full of garments to take home as a reminder of your visit. I'm baffled. What can those clothes possibly recall of this place? But then, I don't think the stall owner has much concept of appropriateness. As far as he's concerned, tourists are here ... and tourists buy.

So hurry to see this spot. Before long Heaven may be taken over by new managers ... ❀

---

WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRAVEL THE SILK ROAD BY RAIL YOURSELF? IAN DUNWOODIE WILL BE RETURNING WITH A KIWI TOUR GROUP IN OCTOBER 2005 – SEE ADVERTISEMENT ON PAGE 57. FOR A FREE INFORMATION PACK, PHONE TOURS DIRECT ON 0800 868 748 – OR EMAIL [INFO@TOURSDIRECT.CO.NZ](mailto:INFO@TOURSDIRECT.CO.NZ).

---