

WHERE

ACTION PLANS FOR THE ADVENTURES OF YOUR LIFE

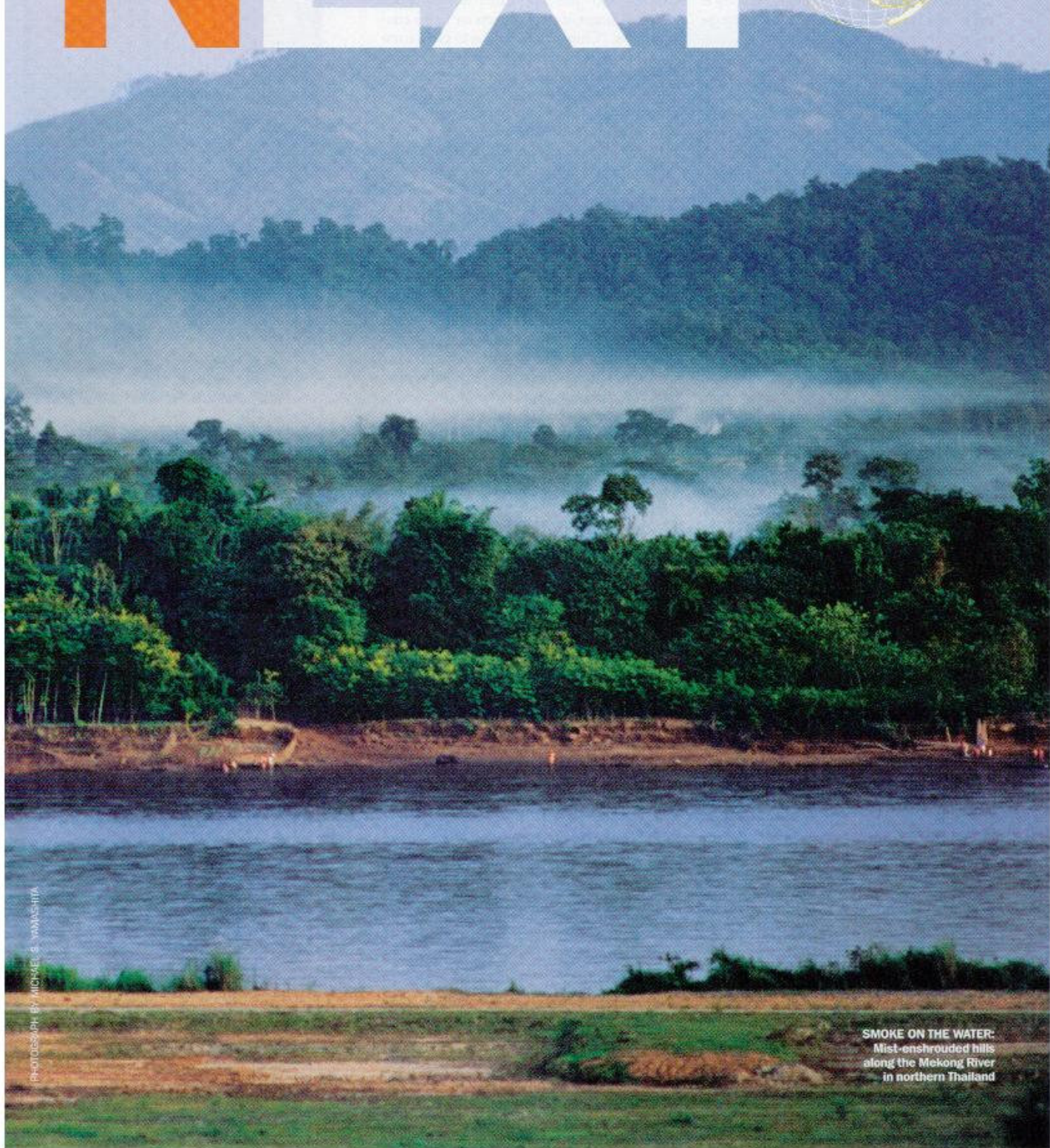
Life Along the Mekong

SOUTHEAST ASIA PULSES WITH VIBRANT CULTURES—AND ONE RIVER RUNS THROUGH THEM ALL **BY KIMBERLY BROWN SEELY**

Scott Sanderson is a veteran white-water kayaker who has logged four first descents on Mekong River tributaries and tackled the Class IV rapids that form as the river tumbles from the Tibetan plateau. But it wasn't until he embarked on a laid-back, outfitted float through Laos that Sanderson beheld the Mekong's most sacred rites.

"We pulled into a village and the headman invited us to join a funeral ceremony," says Sanderson, 47, a technical writer from Oaklyn, New Jersey. "It was a big party—like a wake. Everywhere we went on the river it seemed they were either giving

NEXT



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL S. WAPLES/NTA

SMOKE ON THE WATER:
Mist-enshrouded hills
along the Mekong River
in northern Thailand

birth or burying someone. You really got a sense of the ebb and flow of life."

Stretching roughly 2,600 miles from Tibet to the South China Sea, the sinuous Mekong is the thread that connects Indochina's diverse cultures. It flows through six nations—China, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam—and with more than 1,200 species, it has the third highest diversity of fish in the world (only the Amazon and the Congo have more). For the past 800 years, explorers from Kublai Khan to Frenchman Francis Garnier have sought to conquer the river and the region that surrounds it, sending warrior hordes south toward Cambodia's Angkor Wat or dispatching parties in dugout canoes north from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). These early expeditions survived tigers, leeches, and quicksand, but never completely penetrated the Mekong Basin or reached the river's source, in Tibet.

With travel restrictions easing and British and American expatriates establishing new adventure-travel companies, more of the Mekong has opened up to travelers over the past ten years than during centuries of exploration. Remote stretches of the river in Laos as well as jagged peaks edging the river in China are now destinations for outfitted trips—inflatable-kayak tours of isolated villages, mountain bike excursions through the surrounding countryside, 4WD expeditions near the river's headwaters. From source to mouth, many of the communities along the Mekong continue to live as they have for hundreds of years. Using the river as your guide is the best way to witness these cultures in their most intact form.

But there is a more urgent reason to visit the

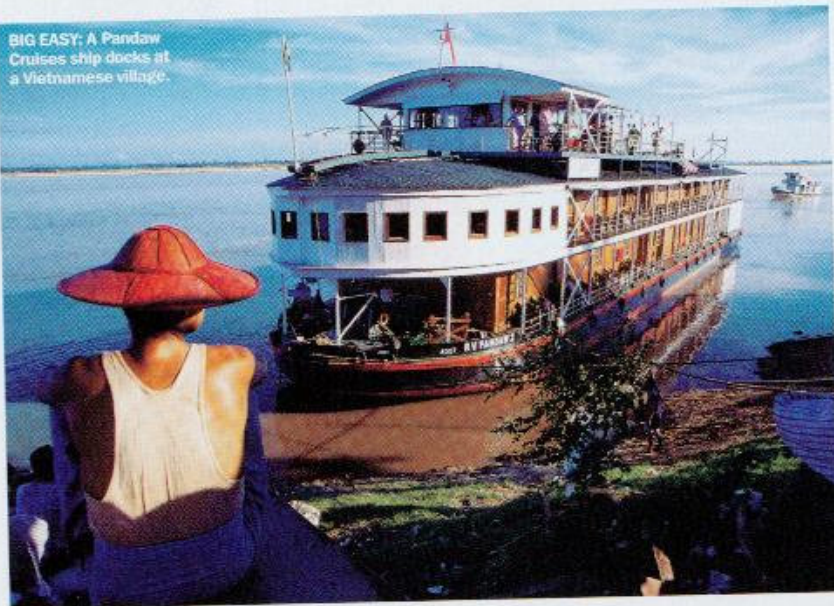
Mekong now: Life along the river is set to change rapidly. The Chinese view the Mekong as a vital energy source and have recently constructed two immense dams on its upper reaches. Dozens of other projects are under consideration. "China is impervious to pleas from Southeast Asia," says Steve Van Beek, a Peace Corps veteran who has lived in the region for 40 years and now guides kayaking trips on the Mekong. "These dams are in an earthquake zone; the possibility of a wall of water coming downriver isn't lost on Laos and Thailand."

On a recent trip led by Van Beek, New York City-based psychotherapist Alan Bernstein, 65, and his wife, Anne Lesch, 55, spent the night in a roadless Laotian village that they reached after a day of paddling. "We slept on the floor of a family's bamboo hut," Bernstein recalls. "And when the family asked what we'd like for dinner, we said, 'Duck.' The next thing we knew, a boy arrived on a bike with a live duck under each arm. Talk about getting to know your dinner."

Mekong pros such as Van Beek and Sanderson suggest packing light, allowing several days to acclimate in Bangkok before embarking on your river adventure, and eating what the locals eat: fish with sticky rice; just slaughtered pig, duck, or—if you're bold—dog. Also, don't miss the Laotian Pakxong coffee, a potent variety considered one of the world's finest.

FLOAT BY RIVERBOAT • An expedition cruise between Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap allows you to see more of the region in less time than on self-powered journeys. Pandaw Cruises runs two custom-built colonial-era teak-wood steamers up and down the river. You'll

BIG EASY: A Pandaw Cruises ship docks at a Vietnamese village.



VITALS Mekong Region

WHEN TO GO: The ideal time to visit the Mekong region is during the November-to-January dry season; it's the coolest time of year in often sweltering Southeast Asia. If you are traveling to the river's headwaters, in China, the month of September is your best bet.

WHAT TO BRING: Pack as little as possible. You'll be moving around a lot as you travel on and off the river. You can buy a pair of linen pants, perfect for the tropical climate, in Bangkok for less than two dollars. Bring along some crisp, new U.S. dollars in small denominations (\$1, \$5, and \$10); vendors occasionally refuse tattered bills.

Visiting with a Buddhist monk at Angkor Wat



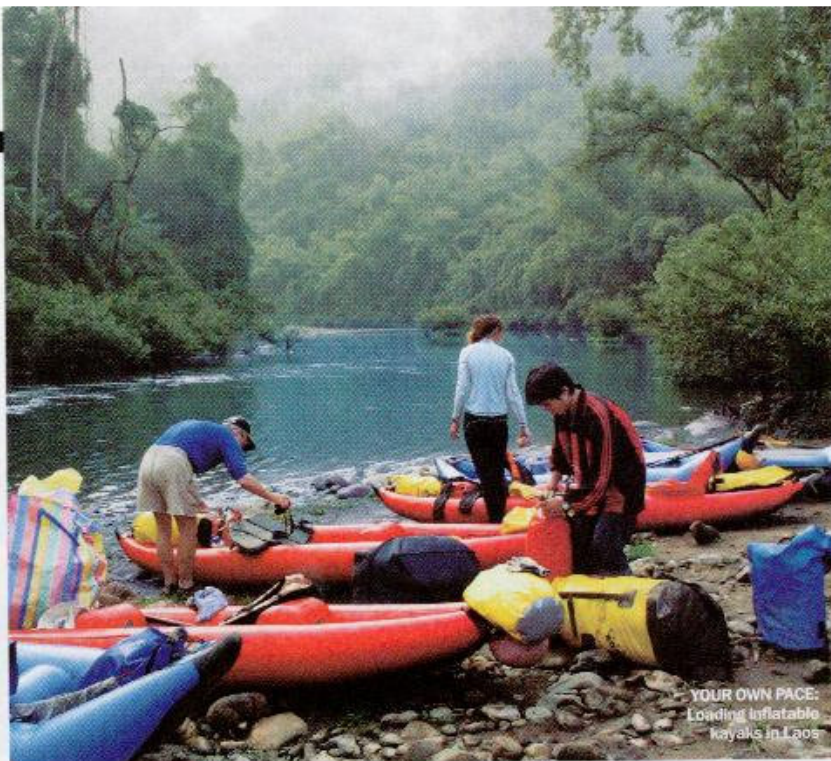
float past Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, and go ashore to hike Wat Hanchai hill, home to ancient Champa shrines. Onboard, languorous hours are spent sipping gin-and-tonics on the deck as the jungle drifts by.

TRIP DETAILS: The round-trip from Ho Chi Minh City to Siem Reap (\$1,062; www.pandaw.com) lasts eight days and travels a stretch of the Mekong that is more populated than the riverbanks in Laos. Side trips to Angkor Wat can also be arranged.

BIKE HIDDEN TRAILS • The Ho Chi Minh Trail isn't a single trail but a network of interconnected roads and paths that, by the end of the Vietnam War, extended more than 12,000 miles in cumulative length. Many of these routes wind through Laos's rugged jungles and craggy hills east of the Mekong; the dirt roads themselves are rough and bumpy, making them just right for mountain bikes. Daily rides range from intermediate to expert and run past difficult-to-access villages where the residents rarely encounter Westerners. More than a hundred ethnic minority groups live in the surrounding area.

TRIP DETAILS: North by North East Travel Services, a small tour company that focuses on rural Laos and Cambodia, runs ten-day mountain-biking trips along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (\$2,200 per person; www.north-by-north-east.com). Participants spend nights in hotels, guest houses, and, while biking the trail, in the huts of village elders. The package includes bikes, accommodations, meals, and massages on riding days.

PADDLE THE 4,000 ISLANDS • Kayak through one of Southeast Asia's most remarkable landscapes—the limestone karsts of the Khammoune Range—and then explore the 4,000 islands formed near where the Mekong, pouring over a fault line, creates the Khone Falls, a seven-mile stretch of rapids and cataracts—the widest in the world. Trip leader



YOUR OWN PACE: Loading inflatable kayaks in Laos

Steve Van Beek has lived in Southeast Asia since leaving the United States in 1966 and is very knowledgeable about the region's history, politics, cultures, and religions. With him as your guide, you'll paddle inflatable kayaks into remote parts of Laos not reachable by road, visit Buddhist monasteries, explore caves by underground rivers, and spend nights with the locals in their village houses.

TRIP DETAILS: Van Beek's 15-day 4,000 Islands Adventure (\$3,150 per person; www.stevanbeek.com) is designed for novices and includes Class II kayaking, hiking, and cave exploring.

VISIT THE FORGOTTEN CITY • Mekong port Luang Prabang, the former royal and spiritual capital of Laos, is fast emerging as an off-the-beaten-track alternative to pulsing Southeast Asian cities such as Bangkok and

Phnom Penh. More than 40 temples (replete with swooping roofs, inlaid-gold doors, and stupendous Buddhas) and the town's long history as a Buddhist learning center earned it UNESCO World Heritage status in 1995. Boutiques, bistros, and a few high-end hotels have followed the designation. Inexpensive bike rentals (about a dollar a day) make it easy to explore.

TRIP DETAILS: Luang Prabang is accessible via daily two-hour flights out of Bangkok, but the best way to get there is by a delightfully sleepy two-day boat trip down the Mekong from Houei Sai, Laos, with Viengchampa Tour Company (\$394 one way; www.viengchampatour.com). The city's luxurious Grand Luang Prabang Hotel (\$80; www.grandluangprabang.com) rests on the grounds of Xiengkeo Palace, onetime home to Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, the founder of Laotian independence. ▲

SEE IT ALL Exploring the river from mouth to source

THE DELTA After crossing from Cambodia to Vietnam, the Mekong fans out into a 15,444-square-mile delta known as Cuu Long, or "nine dragons," in Vietnamese. The delta's backwaters and canals are home to hundreds of floating markets, as well as riverbanks boasting snake farms, water buffalo, and ancient Khmer temples. You can explore these exotic waterways with **Discover Mekong** on a one-day boat trip from Ho Chi Minh City (\$58; www.discovermekong.com).

EASY RIDER The Golden Triangle (where Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand meet along the Mekong) was once a major opium-producing area. Now mostly cleaned up, it has been rebranded by travelers as a place to see pristine, premodern Southeast Asia. A network of motor-cycling roads runs through the region, much of it engineered during crusades against the drug lords. **Asian Motorcycle Adventures** leads a five-day ride (\$1,395; www.asianbiketour.com) on these precarious routes.

THE BUDDHA TREK In China's Yunnan Province and at the southeastern tip of the Tibetan plateau, the upper Mekong carves dramatic gorges. You can trace the edges of these chasms with outfitter **Forbidden Frontier**, owned by Kesang Tashi, a Tibetan-American entrepreneur who grew up in the region. Tashi's nine-day trips (\$2,380; www.forbiddenfrontier.com) circumambulate 22,112-foot Mount Kawakpo, or "snow white mountain," one of the most important pilgrimage sites in all of Tibet. —K.B.S.

