

# Regional Directory

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This chapter includes general information about the Mekong region. Specific information for each country is listed in the Directory section at the back of each country chapter.

## ACCOMMODATION

The Mekong has something for everyone – from fleapits to five-star resorts – and we cover them all. Prices are quoted in the local currency or US dollars throughout this book based on the preferred currency of the particular property. Accommodation prices listed are

high-season prices for rooms with attached bathroom, unless stated otherwise. An icon is included if air-con is available; otherwise, assume that a fan will be provided.

Accommodation costs vary slightly across the region, but prices are consistently cheap compared with those found in Europe or North America. Check the Directory sections in individual chapters for the budget breakdowns used within that chapter.

Across the region when it comes to budget, we are generally talking about family-run guesthouses or minihotels where the majority of rooms cost less than US\$20. Budget rooms generally come well equipped for the money, so don't be surprised to find air-con, hot water and a TV for as little as US\$10.

Moving on to midrange, we are referring to rooms from about US\$20, which buys some pretty tasty extras in this region. At the lower end of this bracket, many of the hotels are similar to budget hotels but with bigger rooms or balconies. Splash a bit more cash and three-star touches are available, such as access to a swimming pool and a hairdryer hidden away somewhere.

At the upper end are a host of international-standard hotels and resorts that charge from US\$75 a room to US\$750 a suite. These are mostly restricted to big cities and major tourist centres. Some of these are fairly faceless business hotels, while others ooze opulence or resonate with history. There are some real bargains when compared with the Hong Kongs and Singapores of this world, so if you fancy indulging yourself, the Mekong region is a good place to do so. Most hotels at the top end levy a tax of 10% and a service charge of 5%, displayed as ++ (plus plus) on the bill.

### BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

Peak tourist demand for hotel rooms in the region comes at Christmas and New Year, when prices may rise by as much as 25%. There is also a surge in many cities during Chinese New Year (Tet in Vietnam), when half the population is on the move. Try to make a reservation at these times so as not to get caught out.

## Camping

With the exception of the national parks in Thailand, the opportunities for camping are pretty limited.

## Guesthouses & Hotels

There is an excellent range of guesthouses and hotels in the Mekong region, no matter what your budget. As tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, there are lots of newly built places that are excellent value for money.

There is some confusion over the terms 'singles', 'doubles', 'double occupancy' and 'twins', so let's set the record straight here. A single contains one bed, even if two people sleep in it. If there are two beds in the room, that is a twin, even if only one person occupies it. If two people stay in the same room, that is double occupancy. In some hotels 'doubles' means twin beds, while in others it means double occupancy.

While many of the newer hotels have lifts, older hotels often don't and the cheapest rooms are at the end of several flights of stairs. It's a win-win-win situation: cheaper rooms, a bit of exercise and better views! Bear in mind that power outages are possible in some towns and this can mean 10 flights of stairs just to get to your room.

Many hotels post a small sign warning guests not to leave cameras, passports and other valuables in the room. Most places have a safety deposit system of some kind, but if leaving cash (not recommended) or travellers cheques, be sure to seal the loot in an envelope and have it countersigned by staff.

## Homestays

Homestays are a popular option in parts of the Mekong region, but some countries are more flexible than others about the concept. Homestays are well-established in parts of Thailand, Vietnam and Yunnan, and many treks through minority areas in the far north include a night with a local family to learn

about their lifestyle. Homestays are just starting up in Cambodia and Laos. Cambodia is quite DIY and many visitors end up staying with local families when motorbiking in remote areas. Politics mean the DIY approach is more problematic in China and Laos. Communist countries are not the sort of places where you can just drop-in and hope things work out, as there are strict rules about registering foreigners who stay overnight with a local family. For more on Laos homestays, see the boxed text, p263.

## ACTIVITIES

There are plenty of activities to keep visitors busy in the Mekong region. Go on the water, go under the water, crank up the revs on a motorbike or cruise down a slope on a mountain bike, the possibilities abound. Thailand is the adventure capital of the region, with Vietnam fast catching up, but every country has something to offer.

## Boat Trips

With the Mekong cutting a swathe through the heart of the region, it is hardly surprising to find boat trips are a major drawcard here. There are opportunities to explore small jungled tributaries leading to remote minority villages in Cambodia and Laos. It is possible to explore cave systems by boat in Vietnam, as well as experience the bustle of a floating market in the Mekong Delta. Whole villages float on the waters of the Tonlé Sap lake in Cambodia. Cruising the waters of Halong Bay on a junk is one of the most iconic boat trips in the region (see the boxed text, p370).

It is also possible to make some functional boat trips that offer some beautiful scenery. The two-day boat trip from Huay Xai and the Golden Triangle down to Luang Prabang includes a stunning stretch of the Mekong. Travelling by boat from Chau Doc in the Mekong Delta to Phnom Penh offers a tantalising glimpse of rural life, or go one better with a boat cruise from Ho Chi Minh City to Siem Reap.

In time you should even be able to take the proverbial slow boat to China, as river cruise companies enter the market to connect Luang Prabang and Jinghong.

## Cycling

The Mekong region is steadily establishing itself as a cycling destination. Thailand has long been the most popular place for cycling

tourists, but Vietnam is fast catching up. Even Cambodia and Laos see their share of cyclists these days. For hardcore cyclists, the mountains of northern Vietnam, northern Laos and Yúnnán are the ultimate destination. For those who like a more gentle workout, meandering along Mekong villages is memorable, particularly in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Biking around Angkor is a great way to get around, and Thailand's northeast can be rewarding thanks to good roads and light traffic.

For some laughs, as well as the lowdown on cycling in the Mekong region, visit the website [www.mrpumpy.net](http://www.mrpumpy.net).

### Diving & Snorkelling

Compared with the rest of Southeast Asia, diving and snorkelling opportunities are limited. However, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent Cambodia, have up-and-coming dive industries. The most popular place to dive in Vietnam is Nha Trang (p394), but the island of Phu Quoc (p424) is a rising star. In Cambodia, Sihanoukville (p240) is the only place really geared up for diving and snorkelling, but the best diving is further afield and requires an overnight on a boat.

#### RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving and help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs:

- Never use anchors on the reef and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy coral or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

### Kayaking

Kayaking has taken off around Halong Bay (see the boxed text, p370) in the past few years, following in the footsteps of Krabi in Thailand. There are also kayaking trips on many rivers in Laos (particularly from Vang Vieng; see p289) and Thailand, although some of the white water is for experienced paddlers only.

### Motorbiking

For those with a thirst for adventure, motorbike trips into remote areas of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are unforgettable. The mobility of two wheels is unrivalled. Motorbikes can traverse trails that even the hardest 4WD cannot follow. Just remember to watch the road when the scenery is sublime! If you are not confident riding a motorbike, it's comparatively cheap to hire someone to drive it for you.

### Rock Climbing

When it comes to organised climbing, Thailand has the most on offer (see p136 for info on Chiang Mai), but the region is liberally peppered with karst, so there is huge potential in the future. Bring your own gear and

anything is possible from Halong Bay to Vang Vieng (see p289).

### Surfing

Most serious surfers head further south to Indonesia, but there is some surf in Vietnam. Check out China Beach (p387) for some of the biggest waves or try kite-surfing at Mui Ne (p398).

### Trekking

Trekking in the Mekong region isn't quite as high and mighty as in Nepal, but the more demure peaks are home to many minority hill-tribe villages, which host overnight trekking parties. The northern Thai cities of Chiang Mai (p136), Mae Hong Son (p144) and Chiang Rai (p146) are very popular for treks, often in combination with white-water rafting and elephant rides. For trekking tips, see p138.

Muang Sing (p312) in Laos has developed an award-winning ecotourism project for visits to local ethnic-minority villages. The mountain village of Sapa (p376) in Vietnam is another base for organised hill-tribe journeys. Trekking in northeast Cambodia is beginning to take off in the provinces of Mondulkiri (p236) and Ratanakiri (p234), and the Cardamom Mountains (see Veal Vang, p215) have huge potential for the future.

In Yúnnán, the trek at Tiger Leaping Gorge (p459) remains one of the most popular hikes in China and Xishuāngbǎnnà (see the boxed text, p467) is a great area to explore Dai (Thai) minority villages.

### BOOKS

See the Directory of each country chapter for recommended reading (fiction and nonfiction), and p19 for books covering the whole region's history and culture. There are also lots of recommended books tucked away in the sidebars of the History, Culture, Environment and Food & Drink chapters at the front of the book.

For more detailed information on a specific area or country, refer to the large range of travel guidebooks produced by Lonely Planet. Titles to look for include *China*, *Cambodia*, *Laos*, *China's Southwest*, *Thailand*, *Thailand's Islands & Beaches* and *Vietnam*. Travellers wanting to really dig beneath a city's surface should keep an eye out for *Bangkok*.

Also of interest to travellers who like to learn some of the local lingo are Lonely Planet's phrasebooks, which include the *Hill Tribes Phrasebook*, *Lao Phrasebook*, *Southeast Asia Phrasebook*, *Thai Phrasebook* and *Vietnamese Phrasebook*.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Business hours are reasonably standard across the region. Most government offices, embassies and businesses open between 8am and 9am and close around 4pm to 5pm. Government offices and some businesses break for lunch, usually just one hour in China and Thailand, often two hours in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Banks often keep shorter hours until about 3.30pm but don't close for lunch. Banks are also open on Saturday morning.

Small businesses such as shops may keep much longer hours – from 7am to 7pm or later – and don't close at weekends. Markets are usually open from dawn until dusk, although most cities have at least one night market that rumbles on all night.

Local restaurants open and close early, serving breakfast from 6am and winding down dinner before 9pm. Fancy restaurants usually stay open until about 11pm. Opening hours for bars vary dramatically depending on the country in question and the mood of the government that month. It is usually possible to drink or dance into the wee hours, although places in Laos tend to close before midnight, while places in Cambodia stagger on all night.

### CHILDREN

Children can live it up in the Mekong region, as they are always the centre of attention and almost everybody wants to play with them. However, this attention can sometimes be overwhelming, particularly for blond-haired, blue-eyed babes. Check pinching, or worse still (if rare), groin grabbing, are distinct possibilities, so keep close. For the full picture on surviving and thriving on the road, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan, with a rundown on health precautions for kids and advice on travel during pregnancy.

### Practicalities

When it comes to feeding and caring for babies, pretty much everything is available in the major centres, but supplies dry up quickly elsewhere.

## RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of the Mekong region, consider the following tips when trekking.

### Rubbish

- Carry out *all* your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: Digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

### Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

### Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if the products are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

### Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

### Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a light-weight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronise local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.

### Wildlife Conservation

- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

Cot beds are available in international-standard midrange and top-end hotels, but not elsewhere. Apart from in Thailand, there are rarely safety seats in rented cars or taxis, but some restaurants can supply a high chair when it comes to eating.

Breastfeeding in public is quite common, so there is no need to worry about crossing a cultural boundary. But there are few facilities for changing babies other than the usual bathrooms. Pack a baby bag everywhere you go. For kiddies who are too young to handle chopsticks, most restaurants also have cutlery.

The main worry throughout the region is keeping an eye on what strange things infants are putting in their mouths. Their natural curiosity can be a lot more costly in countries where dysentery, typhoid and hepatitis are commonplace. Keeping their hydration levels up and insisting they use sunscreen, despite their protests, is also important. For more on health, see p503.

On a similar note, encourage children to take a cautious approach to animals in the region, as rabies is present. Monkeys are some of the biggest offenders when it comes to bites, so be extra vigilant when they are around.

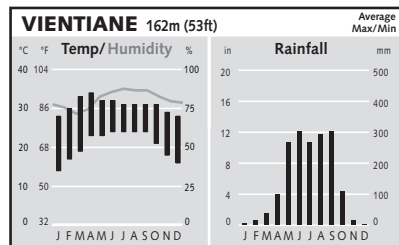
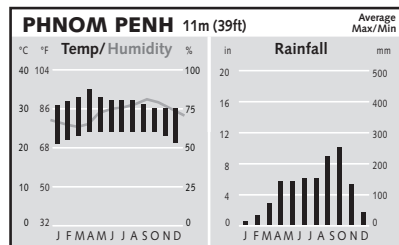
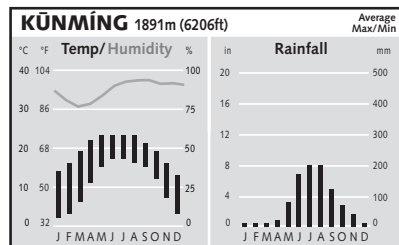
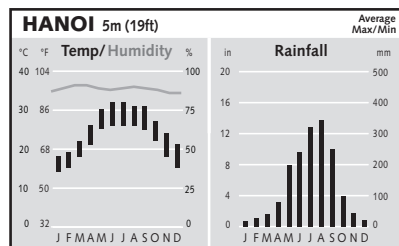
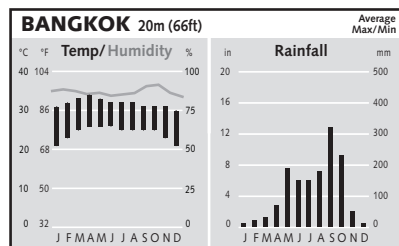
Most urban areas are pretty straightforward these days, although be very aware of the chaotic traffic conditions – better to restrict your child's movements than have them wander into danger. Parts of rural Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are not such good travel destinations for children, as there are land mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) littering the countryside. No matter how many warnings a child is given, can you be certain they won't stray from the path?

## CLIMATE CHARTS

For more details on the climate in the region and best time to travel, see p17.

## COURSES

There are a variety of courses available throughout the Mekong region, from language, meditation and massage to *muay thai* (Thai boxing) and cooking, and from formal programmes sponsored by international agencies to informal classrooms run in homes. The **Council on International Educational Exchange** (☎ 888-268-6245; [www.ciee.org/study](http://www.ciee.org/study)) arranges study-abroad programmes in language, art and culture in Thailand and Vietnam,



**YABA DABA DO? YABA DABA DON'T!**

Watch out for *yaba*, the 'crazy' drug from Thailand, known as *yama* in Cambodia, also, rather ominously, the Hindu god of death. Known as ice or crystal meth back home, it's not just any old diet pill from the pharmacist, but homemade meta-amphetamines produced in labs in Myanmar (Burma) and the region beyond. The pills are often laced with toxic substances, such as mercury, lithium or whatever else the maker can find. *Yaba* is a dirty drug and more addictive than users would like to admit, provoking powerful hallucinations, sleep deprivation and psychosis. Steer clear of the stuff unless you plan on an indefinite extension to your trip in the Mekong region.

hosted in local universities. The University of Texas at Austin maintains a useful website, **Study Abroad Asia** (<http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/stdyabrd/StdyabrdAsia.html>), which lists universities that sponsor overseas study programmes in the Mekong region. Also visit Lonely Planet's **Travel Links** ([www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_links](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_links)), and see the individual country Courses sections for more information.

**CUSTOMS**

Customs regulations vary little around the region. Drugs and arms are strictly prohibited – a lengthy stay in prison is a common sentence. Check the Customs sections in the Directory of the country chapters for details on duty-free allowances.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**  
**Commissions**

It could be the taxi driver, it might be the bus driver or even the friendly tout who latches on to you at the train station. Commission is part and parcel of life in Asia and the Mekong region is no exception. Thailand is getting better, while Cambodia and Vietnam are arguably getting worse. Laos doesn't have much of a problem, while in Yunnan, it is more about friendly strangers 'helping' foreign visitors buy a bus or train ticket at an inflated price. Many places in the region refuse to pay commissions and hence you might be told a certain hotel or guesthouse is closed. Don't believe it unless you have seen it with your own eyes.

**Drugs**

The risks associated with recreational drug use and distribution have grown to the point where all visitors should exercise extreme caution even in places with illicit reputations. A spell in a local prison is true Third World torture. With heightened airline security after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, customs officials are zealous in their screening of both luggage and passengers. See the boxed text, left, for the dangers of *yaba*.

**Pollution & Noise**

Pollution is a growing problem in the major cities of the region. Bangkok has long been famous as a place to chew the air rather than inhale. However, Ho Chi Minh City, Kunming and Phnom Penh also have problems of their own. Laos remains blissfully pollution-free for the most part.

Remember Spinal Tap? The soundtrack of the cities in this region is permanently cranked up to 11! Not just any noise, but a whole lot of noises that just never seem to stop. At night there is most often a competing cacophony from motorbikes, discos, cafés, video arcades, karaoke lounges and restaurants; if your hotel is near any or all of these, it may be difficult to sleep. Fortunately most noise subsides around 10pm or 11pm, as few places stay open much later than that. Unfortunately, however, locals are up and about from around 5am onwards.

One last thing... Don't forget the earplugs!

**Queues**

What queues? Most locals in the Mekong region don't queue, they mass in a rugby

**YOU WANT MASSAGE?**

Karaoke clubs and massage parlours are ubiquitous throughout the region. Sometimes this may mean an 'orchestra without instruments', or a healthy massage to ease a stiff body. However, more often than not, both of these terms are euphemisms for some sort of prostitution. There may be some singing or a bit of shoulder tweaking going on, but ultimately it is just a polite introduction to something naughtier. Legitimate karaoke and legitimate massage do exist in the bigger cities, but as a general rule of thumb, if the place looks sleazy, it probably is.

scrum, pushing towards the counter. When in Rome... This is first-seen, first-served, so take a deep breath, muscle your way to the front and wave your passport, papers or whatever as close to the counter as you can.

**Scams**

Every year we get hundreds of letters and emails from hapless travellers reporting that they've been scammed in this region. In almost all cases there are two culprits involved: a shrewd scam artist and the traveller's own greed.

Two perennial scams involve card games and gemstones. If someone asks you to join a card game be extremely wary. If the game involves money, walk away – it's almost certainly rigged. As for gemstones, if there really were vast amounts of money to be made by selling gems back home, more savvy businesspeople than yourself would have a monopoly on the market already. Don't believe the people who say that they support their global wanderings by re-selling gemstones; in reality they support themselves by tricking unsuspecting foreigners.

Other common scams include losing money on black market exchange deals, having your rented bicycle or motorbike 'stolen' by someone with a duplicate key and dodgy drug deals that involve police extortion. There are many more so it pays to keep your antennae up during a trip through the Mekong region.

See Dangers & Annoyances in the individual country chapters for local scams.

**Theft**

Theft in this part of the world is usually by stealth rather than by force. Keep your money and valuables in a money belt worn underneath your clothes. Be alert to the possible presence of snatch thieves, who will whisk a camera or a bag off your shoulder. Don't store valuables in easily accessible places such as packs that are stored in the luggage compartment of buses, or the front pocket of daypacks.

Violent theft is very rare but occurs from time to time – usually late at night and after the victim has been drinking. Be careful walking alone late at night and don't fall asleep in taxis.

Always be diplomatically suspicious of overfriendly locals. Don't accept gifts of food

**HAPPINESS IS A STATE OF MIND**

'Don't worry, be happy' could be the motto for the Mekong region, but in some backpacker centres the term 'happy' has taken on a wholly different connotation. Seeing the word 'happy' in front of 'shake', 'pizza' or anything else does not, as one traveller was told, mean it comes with extra pineapple. The extra is usually marijuana, added in whatever quantity the shake-maker deems fit. For many travellers 'happy' is a well-understood alias, but there are others who innocently quaff down their shake or pizza only to spend the next 24 hours floating in a world of their own.

or drinks from someone you don't know. In Thailand, thieves have been known to drug travellers for easier pickings.

Finally, don't let paranoia ruin your trip. With just a few sensible precautions most travellers make their way across the region without incident.

**Unexploded Ordnance & Landmines**

The legacy of war lingers on in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Laos suffers the fate of being the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world, while all three countries were on the receiving end of more bombs than were dropped by all sides during WWII. There are still many undetonated bombs and explosives out there, so be careful walking off the trail in areas near the Laos-Vietnam border or around the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). Cambodia suffers the additional affliction of land mines, some four to six million of them according to surveys. Many of these are located in border areas with Thailand in the north and west of the country, but it pays to stick to marked paths anywhere in Cambodia.

**Violence**

Violence against foreigners is pretty rare and is not something you should waste much time worrying about, but if you do get into a flare up with some locals, swallow your pride and back down. You are the outsider. You don't know how many friends they have nearby, how many weapons they are carrying or how many years they have studied kick boxing.

**TRAVEL ADVISORY WEBSITES**

Travel advisories are government-run websites that update nationals on the latest security situation in any given country, including the countries of the Mekong region. They are useful to check out for dangerous countries or dangerous times, but they tend to be pretty conservative, stressing dangers where they don't always exist...otherwise known as covering your back or 'I told you so'.

**Australia** ([www.dfat.gov.au/travel](http://www.dfat.gov.au/travel))

**Canada** ([www.voyage.gc.ca/dest/index.asp](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/dest/index.asp))

**New Zealand** ([www.mft.govt.nz/travel/](http://www.mft.govt.nz/travel/))

**UK** ([www.fco.gov.uk/travel/](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel/))

**USA** ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov))

**DISCOUNT CARDS**

The International Student Identity Card (ISIC) is the official student card, but is of limited use in the Mekong region. Some domestic and international airlines provide discounts to ISIC cardholders, but because knock-offs are so readily available the cards carry little bargaining power.

**ELECTRICITY**

Most countries work on a voltage of 220V to 240V at 50Hz (cycles); note that 240V appliances will happily run on 220V. You should be able to pick up adaptors in electrical shops in most of the main towns and cities.

**EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**

It's important to realise what your own embassy – the embassy of the country of which you are a citizen – can and can't do to help you if you get into trouble.

Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in. Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket home is exceedingly unlikely – the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might

assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

Most travellers should have no need to contact their embassy while in the Mekong region, although if you're really going off the trail, it may be worth letting your embassy know. However, be sure to let them know when you return. In this way valuable time, effort and money won't be wasted looking for you while you're relaxing on the beach somewhere in a different country.

For details of embassies in the Mekong region see the Directory sections in the individual country chapters.

**FESTIVALS & EVENTS**

Most holidays in the region revolve around religious events and typically provide an excellent display of the country's culture, food and music. Businesses are usually closed and travelling is difficult, so plan ahead.

**Chinese New Year & Vietnamese Tet** Probably one of the loudest festivals on the planet; it is celebrated country-wide in Vietnam and in Chinese communities throughout the region in late January or February, with fireworks, temple visits and all-night drumming.

**Thai, Lao & Cambodian New Year** The lunar New Year begins in mid-April, and in addition to religious devotion, locals take to the streets dousing one another with water, particularly in Thailand.

**Buddhist Lent** At the start of the monsoonal rains in June or July, the Buddhist monks retreat into monasteries in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. This is the traditional time for young men to visit the monasteries.

**Ramadan** Observed in southern Thailand and the Cham areas of Cambodia and Vietnam during October, November or December, the Muslim fasting month requires that Muslims abstain from food, drink, cigarettes and sex between sunrise and sunset.

**Christmas** This holiday needs no introduction and is celebrated by Vietnamese Catholics, but has also been adopted as an honorary holiday throughout the region.

**FOOD & DRINK**

This is arguably the best region in the world when it comes to sampling the local cuisine. The food of China, Thailand and Vietnam needs no introduction, but Laotian and Khmer cuisine is also a rewarding experience. See the Food & Drink chapter (p86) for the full story and check out the signature dishes in the boxed text, opposite. For drinkers, there is plenty to get excited about from divine fruit shakes and coffee with a kick to microbrewed beers and homemade hooch.

**THE NATIONAL DISH**

If there's just one dish you try, make it one of these. These are the dishes that capture the cuisine of the country in a single serving. Enjoy.

**Cambodia** *Amoc* (baked fish in a banana leaf)

**Laos** *Laap* (spicy salad with meat or fish)

**Thailand** *tôm yam kung* (hot and sour soup with shrimp)

**Vietnam** *Pho bo* (rice noodle soup with beef)

**Yúnnán** *Guoqiao mixian* (across-the-bridge noodles)

Food is fantastic value throughout the region. Street snacks start from as little as US\$0.25, meals in local restaurants start from US\$1 to US\$2 and even a serious spread at a decent restaurant will only be in the US\$5 to US\$10 range.

**GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS**

Cambodia, Thailand and Laos have the most progressive attitudes towards homosexuality. While same-sex displays of affection are part of most Asian cultures, be discreet and respectful of the local culture. Extra vigilance should be practised in Vietnam, where authorities have arrested people on charges of suspected homosexual activities. In 2001, the Chinese Psychiatric Association stopped classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder, but it pays to be discreet in more conservative parts of Yúnnán. There is not usually a problem with same-sex couples checking into rooms throughout the region, as it is so common among travellers.

Check out **Utopia Asian Gay & Lesbian Resources** ([www.utopia-asia.com](http://www.utopia-asia.com)) for more information on gay and lesbian travel in Asia. Other links with useful pointers for gay travellers include [www.gayguide.net](http://www.gayguide.net) and [www.outandabout.com](http://www.outandabout.com).

**HOLIDAYS**

For full details on public holidays in each of the Mekong-region countries, see the individual country Directory sections. Allegedly, Cambodia has the most public holidays in the world. Chinese New Year (or Tet in Vietnam) is the one holiday common to all countries and can have a big impact on travel plans, as businesses close and all forms of transport are booked out.

**INSURANCE**

A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is essential. There's a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print. For more information about the ins and outs of travel insurance, contact a travel agent or travel insurer.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies. Check that the policy covers ambulance rides, emergency flights home and repatriation of a body.

Also see p503 for further information on health insurance and p501 for more information on car and motorcycle insurance.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

You can access email and internet services in all countries of the region. Access points in the Mekong region vary from internet cafés to post offices and hotels. The cost is generally low and the connection speeds pretty reasonable. Wi-fi access is increasingly common in major cities and is often free in cafés and bars. Many hotels in urban Vietnam now offer free internet access as standard. See the Internet Access sections in the country chapters for further details.

**LEGAL MATTERS**

Be sure to know the national laws before unwittingly committing a crime. In all of the Mekong-region countries, using or trafficking drugs carries stiff punishments that are enforced, even if you're a foreigner. See p486 for more on the risks associated with drugs in the region.

**INSURANCE ALERT!**

Do not visit the Mekong region without medical insurance. Hospitals are often basic, particularly in remote areas. Anyone who has a serious injury or illness may require emergency evacuation to Bangkok or Hong Kong. With an insurance policy costing no more than the equivalent of a bottle of beer a day, this evacuation is free. Without an insurance policy, it will cost US\$10,000 to US\$20,000. Don't gamble with your health in the Mekong region or you may end up another statistic!

If you are the victim of a crime, contact the tourist police, if available; they are usually better trained to deal with foreigners and foreign languages than the regular police force.

## MAPS

Country-specific maps are usually sold in English bookstores in capital cities. Local tourist offices and guesthouses can also provide maps of smaller cities and towns. There aren't many maps that cover the Mekong region as a whole. There are some good maps of Indochina that include Bangkok and Northeast Thailand: check out *Nelles Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia* map at a scale of 1:1,500,000.

## MONEY

Most experienced travellers will carry their money in a combination of travellers cheques, credit/bank cards and cash. You'll always find situations in which one of these cannot be used, so it pays to carry all three. For information on bargaining, see p492.

## ATMs

In most large cities ATMs are widespread, but before banking on this option review the individual country's Money section for specifics; Laos is still almost ATM-free.

Some banks back home charge for withdrawals overseas, others don't. Consider shopping around for an account that offers free withdrawals. Similarly, some local banks in the region charge for withdrawals, particularly in Vietnam, although the sums are small.

## Black Market

There is still something of a black market in money changing in Laos and Yunnan. However, given the tiny differences and rates and the huge chance that you'll be ripped off, it is not really worth pursuing this path.

## Credit Cards

Credit cards are quite widely accepted in the region. Thailand leads the way, where almost anything can be paid for with plastic. However, things dry up beyond major tourist centres or bigger towns, so don't rely exclusively on credit cards. It is quite common for the business to pass on the credit card commission (usually 3%) to the customer in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, so check if there is an additional charge before putting it on the plastic.

## Exchanging Money

The US dollar is the currency of choice in the Mekong region. It is widely accepted as cash in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and can be easily exchanged in Thailand and Yunnan. Other major currencies are also widely accepted by banks and exchange bureaus, but the rates get worse the further you get from a major city. The Thai baht is also accepted throughout Laos and in parts of western Cambodia.

## Tippling

Tippling is not a standard practice but is greatly appreciated, particularly in the poorer countries of the region where salaries remain low. Locals often don't tip, but tourism has introduced the concept to hotels and restaurants, as well as to tour guides and drivers.

## Travellers Cheques

Travelling with a stash of travellers cheques can help if you hit an ATM-free zone, like most of Laos. Get your cheques in US dollars and in large denominations, say US\$100 or US\$50, to avoid heavy per-cheque commission fees. Keep careful records of which cheques you've cashed and keep this information separate from your money, so you can file a claim if any cheques are lost or stolen.

## PHOTOGRAPHY Airport Security

X-ray machines that claim to be film-safe generally are. You are advised to have very sensitive film (1000 ISO and above) checked by hand. *Never* put your film in your checked baggage – the X-ray machines used to check this luggage will fog your film.

## Film & Equipment

Print film is readily available in cities and larger towns throughout the region. The best places to buy camera equipment or have repairs done are Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Kunming or Phnom Penh.

For those travelling with a digital camera, most internet cafés in well-developed areas let customers transfer images from the camera to an online email account or storage site. Flash memory is also widely available and most internet cafés can burn shots on to a DVD if you are running out of storage space. Before leaving home, find out if your battery charger will require a power adapter by visiting the website of the **World Electric Guide** ([www.kropla.com/electric.htm](http://www.kropla.com/electric.htm)).

If you're after some tips, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures*, written by travel photographer, Richard T'Anson.

## Photographing People

You should always ask permission before taking a person's photograph. Many hill-tribe villagers seriously object to being photographed, or they may ask for money in exchange; if you want the photo, you should honour the price.

## POST

Postal services are generally reliable across the region. Of course, it's always better to leave important mail and parcels for the big centres such as Bangkok, Kunming or Hanoi.

There's always an element of risk in sending parcels home by sea, though as a rule they eventually reach their destination. If it's something of value, it's worth considering air freight – better still, register the parcel or send it by courier. Don't send cash or valuables through government-run postal systems.

Poste restante is widely available throughout the region and is the best way of receiving mail. When getting people to write to you, ask them to leave plenty of time for mail to arrive and to print your name very clearly.

## RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The Mekong region continues to experience unprecedented growth in tourism and this inevitably brings the bad along with the good. With a little bit of thought, visitors can help

to minimise the negatives and maximise the positives.

Child-sex tourism and the abuse of minors remains a problem in the Mekong region. For more on this ugly phenomenon, see the boxed text, below.

Many parts of the region remain mired in poverty. Support local businesses by buying locally made products. Eat in local restaurants when possible and dine in villages rather than taking picnics from town. Use local guides for remote regions, including indigenous minority peoples. Consider the option of homestays where they are available and support national park programmes by visiting one of the many protected areas in the region.

When bargaining for goods or transport, remember the aim is not to get the lowest possible price, but one that's acceptable to both you and the seller. Coming on too strong or arguing over a few cents does nothing to foster positive feelings towards foreign visitors.

Begging is common in many countries of the region and the tug on the shirt sleeve can become tiresome for visitors after a time. However, try to remember that many of these countries have little in the way of a social-security net to catch the fallen. It is best to keep denominations small to avoid foreigners becoming even more of a target than they already are. Avoid giving money to children, as it is likely going straight to a 'begging pimp' or family member. Food is an option, but better still is to make a donation to one of the many local organisations trying to assist in the battle against poverty.

## THE ABUSE OF INNOCENCE

The sexual abuse of children by foreign paedophiles is a serious problem in some parts of the Mekong region, particularly Cambodia and Vietnam. Many child prostitutes are actually sold into the business by relatives. These sex slaves are either trafficked overseas or forced to cater to domestic demand and local sex-tourism operators.

Fear of contracting HIV/AIDS from mature sex workers has led to increasing exploitation of (supposedly as yet uninfected) children. Unicef estimates that there are close to one million child prostitutes in Asia – one of the highest figures in the world.

Paedophiles are treated as criminals in the region and several have served or are serving jail sentences as a result. Many Western countries have introduced much-needed legislation that sees nationals prosecuted in their home country for having underage sex abroad. Visitors can do their bit to fight this menace by keeping an eye out for suspicious behaviour on the part of foreigners. Don't ignore it. Try to pass on any relevant information such as the name and nationality of the individual to the embassy concerned. **End Child Prostitution & Trafficking** (Ecpat; [www.ecpat.org](http://www.ecpat.org)) is a global network aimed at stopping child prostitution, child pornography and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes, and has affiliates in most Western countries.

For information on responsible trekking, see p484 and p138. For advice on responsible diving, see p482. Also check each country's Directory for more information of responsible travel.

## SHOPPING

Recovering shopaholics beware... the Mekong region offers some incredible opportunities to shop 'til you drop. Bangkok is the gateway to the region and also one of the world's best-known shopping destinations. Everything that is produced in the Mekong region, from textiles to handicrafts, state-of-the-art electronics to suspect antiques, ends up in Bangkok's malls and markets. Browse Chatuchak Weekend Market (p127) for the best range in the region.

Cambodia is famous for its superb silk, as are Laos and Thailand. There is good quality silver throughout the region, but purity can be a problem. There are fine handicrafts, including excellent woodcarving, intricate lacquerware and striking stone carving, in all the countries of the region. The ethnic minorities of the region are also in on the act and produce a range of handicrafts and colourful clothing that make popular keepsakes. Art is increasingly popular, with Thailand, Vietnam and Yúnnán leading the way. Antiques are a popular purchase, but be aware that there are a lot of fakes about. If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Precious stones is another area where it's almost always too good to be true. Bangkok is the gem scam capital of Asia, but buying precious stones anywhere in the region is a risk unless you really know what you are doing.

There are some great clothing and electronic stores in the region. Bangkok is the fashion capital of the Mekong region, offering everything from Prada to Kevin Klein (yes there are lots of fakes!). Cambodia and Vietnam both produce a lot of textiles for export, so it's easy to pick up high-street names for a fraction of the price back home. Most of China's production is geared for export, but the stores in Kùnmíng are brimming with the latest trends. When it comes to electronics, Bangkok is the most reliable place, but Cambodia is sometimes a cheaper option thanks to a lack of tax and duty.

## Bargaining

Most of the countries in the Mekong region have inherited the art of bargaining from ancient Indian traders and Chinese émigrés. Re-

member that it is an art not a test of wills, and the trick is to find a price that keeps everyone happy. Bargaining is acceptable in markets and souvenir shops, where fixed prices aren't displayed. Ask the price and then ask if the seller can offer a discount. If the discounted price isn't acceptable give a counter offer but be willing to accept something in the middle. Once you counter you can't name a lower price. Don't ask the price unless you're interested in actually buying it. If you become angry or visibly frustrated then you've lost the bargaining game.

## TELEPHONE

Phone systems vary widely across the Mekong region. For international calls, most countries have calling centres (usually in post offices) or public phone booths that accept international phonecards. Each country's system is different, so check the Telephone sections in each country's Directory before making a call.

These days, the cheapest and most popular option is to use an internet-based phone system to make calls. Anyone with a Skype or Messenger account can simply sign in and start talking to friends if there's a headset available. Many of the internet cafés in Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Yúnnán have headsets and webcams, but this is not so common in Laos. Otherwise you can pay a small charge to make a call, often as little as US\$0.10 a minute to countries in the West. Many of the budget and midrange hotels in Vietnam have switched over to internet-based telephone systems for their guests and it seems the rest of the region will soon follow. Cheap calls, good news for everyone!

You can take your mobile phone on the road with you and get respectable coverage in major population centres. Not all mobile phones, especially those from the USA, are outfitted for international use. Check with your service provider for global-roaming fees and other particulars. Double-check the rates before you start calling, or even texting away, as prices can be prohibitively high. Consider buying a local sim card for a local network if you plan to make a lot of local telephone calls. Some phones are 'locked' by the issuing company back home, but most telephone shops in the Mekong region can 'unlock' them in seconds for a small charge.

Fax services are available in most countries across the region. Try to avoid the business centres in upmarket hotels – tariffs of 30% and upwards are often levied on faxes and international calls.

## TIME

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are seven hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time or Universal Time Coordinated (GMT/UTC). When it is midday in Bangkok or Hanoi, it is 10pm the previous evening in San Francisco, 1am in New York, 5am in London, 6am in Paris and 3pm in Sydney. Yúnnán operates on Běijíng time, which is one hour ahead of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, eight hours ahead of GMT/UTC. See also the World Time Zones map (pp546–7).

## TOILETS

As tourism continues to grow in the region, sit-down toilets are increasingly common. Apart from the very cheapest guesthouses, most rooms include a sit-down toilet, as do restaurants and other businesses catering to foreigners. However, in rural areas, it is another story and squat toilets are common.

Even in places where sit-down toilets are installed, the plumbing may not be designed to take toilet paper. In such cases, the usual washing bucket will be standing nearby or there will be a waste basket in which you place used toilet paper.

Public toilets are common in department stores, bus and train stations and large hotels. Elsewhere you'll have to make do; while on the road between towns and villages it's acceptable to go discreetly behind a tree or bush. In land mine- and UXO-affected countries such as Cambodia and Laos, stay on the roadside and do the deed, or grin and bear it until the next town.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

All the countries in the Mekong region have government-funded tourist offices with varying degrees of usefulness. Thailand offers by far the most efficient tourism information service. When it comes to the rest, better information is often available from dedicated internet sites, guesthouses and travel cafés, or your fellow travellers, rather than through the state-run tourist offices. See the Tourist Information section in each country's Directory for more information.

## TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Travellers with serious disabilities will likely find the Mekong region a challenging place to travel. Even the more modern cities are very difficult to navigate for the mobility- or

vision-impaired. In general, care of a person with a disability is left to close family members throughout the region and it's unrealistic to expect much in the way of public amenities.

International organisations that can provide information on mobility-impaired travel include the following:

**Mobility International USA** (☎ 541-343-1284; www.miusa.org; PO Box 10767, Eugene, OR 97440, USA)

**Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation** (Radar; ☎ 020-7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk; 12 City Forum, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF, UK)

**Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality** (SATH; ☎ 212-447-7284; www.sath.org; 347 Fifth Ave, Suite 610, New York, NY 10016, USA)

## VISAS

Visas are available to people of most nationalities on arrival in most countries of the Mekong region, but rules vary depending on the point of entry. Many nationalities do not require a visa for Thailand and are given 30 days on arrival. For Cambodia and Laos, a visa is required, but is issued on arrival at airports and most land borders. For China and Vietnam, it is necessary to arrange a visa in advance. For more details, see the Visas section in each country's Directory.

Get your visas as you go rather than all at once before you leave home; they are often easier and cheaper to get in neighbouring countries and visas are only valid within a certain time period, which could interfere with an extended trip.

Procedures for extending a visa vary from country to country. In some cases, extensions are quite complicated, in others they're a mere formality. See the Visas section in each country's Directory for further information. And remember the most important rule: treat visits to embassies, consulates and borders as formal occasions and look smart for them.

In some countries in the Mekong region, you are required to have an onward ticket out of the country before you can obtain a visa to enter. In practice, however, as long as you look fairly respectable, it's unlikely that your tickets will be checked.

## VOLUNTEERING

There are fewer opportunities for volunteering than one might imagine there would be in a region that remains predominantly poor. This is partly due to the sheer number of professional

development-workers based here, and development is a pretty lucrative industry these days. For details on local volunteer projects in the region, see the Directory of individual country chapters.

The other avenue is professional volunteering through an organisation back home that offers one- or two-year placements in the region. One of the largest is **Voluntary Service Overseas** (VSO; [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)) in the UK, but other countries have their own organisations, including the **US Peace Corps** (☎ 800-424-8580; [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)), **VSO Canada** (☎ 613-234 1364; [www.vsocan.org](http://www.vsocan.org)), **Australian Volunteers International** (AVI; [www.australianvolunteers.com](http://www.australianvolunteers.com)) and **Volunteer Service Abroad** (VSA; [www.vsa.org.nz](http://www.vsa.org.nz)). The UN also operates its own volunteer programme; details are available at [www.unv.org](http://www.unv.org). Other general volunteer sites with links all over the place include [www.worldvolunteerweb.com](http://www.worldvolunteerweb.com) and [www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com).

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

While travel in the Mekong region for women is generally safe, there are several things visitors can do to make it safer still.

Keep in mind that modesty in dress is culturally important across all Southeast Asia. Causes for commotion include wearing the ever-popular midriff T-shirts that inadvertently send the message that you're a prostitute. At the beach, save the topless sunbathing for home rather than this conservative region of the world. This is particularly important when travelling from Thailand to Cambodia or Laos. Thailand may be very Westernised with an 'anything goes' atmosphere, but Cambodia and Laos are much more traditional. Walking around Angkor dressed like you are going to a full moon party won't impress the locals.

Solo women should be on guard especially when returning home late at night or arriving in a new town at night. While physical assault is rare, local men often consider foreign women as being exempt from their own society's rules of conduct regarding members of the opposite sex.

Use common sense about venturing into dangerous-looking areas, particularly alone or at night. If you do find yourself in a tricky situation, try to extricate yourself as quickly as possible – hopping into a taxi or entering a business establishment and asking them to call a cab is often the best solution.

Treat overly friendly strangers, both male and female, with a good deal of caution.

Many travellers have reported small peep-holes in the walls and doors of cheap hotels, some of which operate as boarding houses or brothels (often identified by their advertising 'day use' rates). If you can, move to another hotel or guesthouse.

## WORK

The range of jobs available in the region is quite staggering, but many of the better jobs such as working with the UN or for international corporations are appointments from overseas or from a pool of well-qualified locals. The main opportunities for people passing through the region are teaching English (or another European language), landing a job in tourism or starting a small business such as a bar or restaurant.

Teaching English is the easiest way to support yourself in the Mekong region. For short-term gigs, the large cities such as Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Kunming and Phnom Penh have a lot of language schools and a high turnover. **Payaway** ([www.payaway.co.uk](http://www.payaway.co.uk)) provides a handy online list of language schools and volunteer groups looking for recruits for its regional programmes.

With tourism booming, there are plenty of jobs in tourism. Most of these deservedly go to locals, but there are opportunities for wannabe guesthouse or hotel managers, bartenders, chefs and so on. This can be a pretty memorable way to pass a few months in a different culture.

Starting up a business is a possibility, but tread with caution. Many a foreigner has been burned in the region. Sometimes it's an unscrupulous partner, other times it's the local girlfriend, or boyfriend, who changes their mind and goes it alone. Sometimes the owners burn out themselves, drinking the profits of the bar or dabbling in drugs. Do your homework regarding ownership laws and legal recourse in the event of a dispute. That said, there are many success stories in the region, where people came for a holiday and built an empire.

**Transitions Abroad** ([www.transitionsabroad.com](http://www.transitionsabroad.com)) and its namesake magazine covers all aspects of overseas life, including landing a job in a variety of fields. The website also provides links to other useful sites and publications for those living abroad.



# Transport in the Region

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This chapter gives an overview of the transport options for getting to the Mekong region, and getting around once you're there. For more specific information about getting to (and around) each country, see the relevant Transport sections in each chapter. For general details of the region's border crossings, see p99.

Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### ENTERING THE REGION

All the countries in the region have international airports, but Bangkok is by far and away the most important hub. There are long-haul flights linking Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to Europe and North America, but Kūnmíng, Phnom Penh and Vientiane are only accessible via a regional gateway such as Bangkok, Hong Kong or Singapore.

When it comes to land borders, Thailand is linked to Malaysia for those visiting more of Southeast Asia. Myanmar (Burma) looks a tantalising option for overland travel to India, but this is not currently permitted. China is

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

connected to a host of countries, including North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, India, Nepal, Bhutan and several of the Central Asian republics, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, it's a major undertaking to do an overland journey from Europe to the Mekong region unless you opt for the *Trans-Manchurian* or *Trans-Mongolian Express*.

### Passport

To enter the Mekong region countries, your passport must be valid for at least six months from your date of entry, even if you're only staying for a few days. You may be refused entry if your passport doesn't have enough blank pages available for a visa. When checking into hotels in Vietnam, staff will request a copy of your passport. In China, it is necessary to carry your passport with you at all times.

### AIR

For specific information on airports and airlines operating to (and around) each country in the Mekong region, see the Transport section of the relevant chapter.

### Tickets

The major Asian gateways for cheap flights are Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore. Bangkok is the best place to shop for onward tickets and tickets around the region.

To research and buy a ticket on the internet, try these services:

**Cheapflights** ([www.cheapflights.com](http://www.cheapflights.com)) No-frills website with a number of locations.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Use the Trip-Planner service to book multistop trips.

**OneTravel** ([www.onetravel.com](http://www.onetravel.com)) Another with a number of locations.

**Travel.com** ([www.travel.com.au](http://www.travel.com.au)) There is also a New Zealand version at [www.travel.co.nz](http://www.travel.co.nz).

## ROUND-THE-WORLD & CIRCLE ASIA TICKETS

Bucket shops, consolidators and online search engines offer cheap tickets to the region. If Asia is one of many stops on a global tour, consider a round-the-world (RTW) ticket, which allows a certain number of stops within a set time period as long as you don't backtrack; for more information, talk to a travel agent.

Circle Asia fares are offered by various airline alliances for a circular route originating in the USA, Europe or Australia and travelling to two destinations in Asia, including Southeast and east Asia. Prices usually start around US\$2000. Before committing, check out the fares offered by the budget regional carriers to see if the circle pass provides enough of a saving. Contact individual airlines or a travel agent for more info.

## Asia

Bangkok is easily the best-connected city in the region, with flights to the Indian sub-continent, the Far East, Central Asia and the

Middle East. Japan is well connected to the region, with flights to many of the larger cities, as is South Korea.

Reliable travel agents in Hong Kong:

**Four Seas Tours** (☎ 2200 7760; [www.fourseastravel.com](http://www.fourseastravel.com))  
**STA Travel** (☎ 2736 1618; [www.statravel.com.hk](http://www.statravel.com.hk))

Recommended travel agents in Japan:

**No 1 Travel** (☎ 03-3205 6073; [www.no1-travel.com](http://www.no1-travel.com))  
**STA Travel** (☎ 03-5391 2922; [www.statravel.co.jp](http://www.statravel.co.jp))

## Australia

The best place to look for cheap fares is in the travel sections of weekend newspapers, such as the *Age* in Melbourne and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There are good connections between major Australian cities and both Thailand and Vietnam. Elsewhere, you'll need to connect through a regional hub.

Two well-known agencies for cheap fares:  
**Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; [www.flightcentre.com.au](http://www.flightcentre.com.au))  
 Dozens of offices throughout Australia.

**STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; [www.statravel.com.au](http://www.statravel.com.au))  
 Offices in all major cities and on many university campuses.

## Canada

It is cheaper to fly from the west coast than it is to fly from the east coast. Canadian air fares tend to be higher than those sold in the USA. The *Globe & Mail*, the *Toronto*

## CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO<sub>2</sub> (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com).

*Star*, the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Vancouver Sun* carry travel-agency ads and are good places to look for good-value fares. **Travel CUTS** ([www.travelcuts.com](http://www.travelcuts.com)) is Canada's national student travel agency and has offices in all major cities.

## Continental Europe

Although London is considered the discount travel capital of Europe, the major airlines and big travel agents will usually have offers available from all of the major cities on the continent.

### FRANCE

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; [www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr](http://www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr))

**OTU Voyages** ([www.otu.fr](http://www.otu.fr)) This agency specialises in student and youth travel.

**Voyageurs du Monde** (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; [www.vdm.com](http://www.vdm.com))

### GERMANY

**Just Travel** (☎ 089-747 33 30; [www.justtravel.de](http://www.justtravel.de))

**STA Travel** (☎ 0180-545 64 22; [www.statravel.de](http://www.statravel.de))

### ITALY

**CTS Viaggi** (☎ 064 62 04 31; [www.cts.it](http://www.cts.it))

### NETHERLANDS

**Airfair** (☎ 0206-20 51 21; [www.airfair.nl](http://www.airfair.nl))

**NBBS Reizen** (☎ 0900 1020 300; [www.nbbs.nl](http://www.nbbs.nl))

### SPAIN

**Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 11 62 26; [www.barceloviajes.com](http://www.barceloviajes.com))

**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 902 17 09 79; [www.nouvelles-frontieres.es](http://www.nouvelles-frontieres.es))

### SWITZERLAND

**SSR Voyages** (☎ 058 450 4020; [www.ssr.ch](http://www.ssr.ch))

## New Zealand

The *New Zealand Herald* has a helpful travel section. **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; [www.flightcentre.co.nz](http://www.flightcentre.co.nz)) has a large central office in Auckland and many branches throughout the country. **STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; [www.statravel.co.nz](http://www.statravel.co.nz)) has offices in Auckland and other major centres.

## UK

Advertisements for many travel agencies appear in the travel pages of the weekend broadsheets, such as the *Independent* and the *Sunday Times*.

Popular travel agencies in the UK:  
**Flightbookers** (☎ 087-0010 7000; [www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com))  
**North-South Travel** (☎ 01245-608291; [www.northsouthtravel.co.uk](http://www.northsouthtravel.co.uk)) North-South Travel donates part of its profit to projects in the developing world.  
**STA Travel** (☎ 087-0160 0599; [www.statravel.co.uk](http://www.statravel.co.uk))  
**Trailfinders** (☎ 084-5050 5891; [www.trailfinders.co.uk](http://www.trailfinders.co.uk))  
**Travel Bag** (☎ 087-0890 1456; [www.travelbag.co.uk](http://www.travelbag.co.uk))

## USA

Ticket promotions frequently connect Asia to San Francisco and Los Angeles, New York and other big cities. The *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *San Francisco Examiner* all produce weekly travel sections in which you will find a number of travel-agency ads and fare promos.

Useful online options in the USA:

[www.cheaptickets.com](http://www.cheaptickets.com)  
[www.itn.net](http://www.itn.net)  
[www.lowestfare.com](http://www.lowestfare.com)  
[www.sta.com](http://www.sta.com)  
[www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com)

## LAND

The land borders between the Mekong region and the rest of Asia include the Yunnanese provincial boundary with the rest of China and the frontier that Thailand shares with Malaysia and Myanmar. China itself shares borders with, take a deep breath, Myanmar, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, and North Korea.

See p99 for general details of the region's border crossings.

## SEA

Apart from a few cruises that call at ports in Thailand, Vietnam and occasionally Cambodia, there are no real options for travelling to the Mekong region by sea.

## TOURS

Tours through the Mekong region are offered by travel agencies worldwide. Tours come in every shape and size from budget trips to ultimate indulgences. Tours are not bad value when you tally everything up (flights, hotels, transport), but then again it's a cheap region in which to travel.

It's easy enough to fly into Bangkok or another major city in the region and make travel arrangements from there. See individual

country chapters for recommended local travel agents. The main saving through booking before arrival is time, and if time is more precious than money, a prebooked tour is probably right for you.

For a rewarding trip through the Mekong region, consider contacting the following.

### Australia

**Adventure World** (☎ 02-8913 0755; www.adventureworld.com.au) Adventure tours throughout the region.

**Intrepid Travel** (☎ 1300 360 667; www.intrepidtravel.com.au) Small-group tours for all budgets with an environmental, social and cultural edge.

**Peregrine** (☎ 02-9290 2770, www.peregrine.net.au) Small-group and tailor-made tours supporting responsible tourism.

### France

**Compagnie des Indes & Oriens** (☎ 01 53 63 33 40; www.compagniesdumonde.com)

**Intermedes** (☎ 01 45 61 90 90; www.intermedes.com)

**La Route des Indes** (☎ 01 42 60 60 90; www.laroutedesindes.com)

### New Zealand

**Adventure World** (☎ 09-524 5118; www.adventureworld.co.nz) A wide range of adventure tours covering the region.

**Pacific Cycle Tours** (☎ 03-972 9913; www.bike-nz.com) Mountain-bike tours through Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, plus hiking trips to off-the-beaten-path destinations.

### UK

**Audley Travel** (☎ 01604-234855; www.audleytravel.com) Popular tailor-made specialist covering all of Vietnam.

**Cox & Kings** (☎ 020-7873 5000; www.coxandkings.co.uk) Well-established high-end company, strong on cultural tours.

**Exodus** (☎ 020-8675 5550; www.exodus.co.uk) Popular adventure company with affordable overland trips.

**Hands Up Holidays** (☎ 0776-501 3631; www.handsupholidays.com) A new company bringing guests closer to the people of the Mekong through its responsible holidays with a spot of volunteering.

**Mekong Travel** (☎ 01494-674456; www.mekong-travel.com) A name to inspire confidence in the Mekong region.

**Selective Asia** (☎ 0845-370 3344; www.selectiveasia.com) New company that cherry-picks the best trips from leading local agents.

**Symbiosis** (☎ 020-7924 5906; www.symbiosis-travel.com) Small travel company with an emphasis on cycling and diving.

**Wild Frontiers** (☎ 020-7376 3968; www.wildfrontiers.co.uk) Adventure specialist with themed tours and innovative adventures.

### USA

**Asia Transpacific Journeys** (☎ 800-642 2742; www.asiatranspacific.com) Group tours and tailor-made trips across the Asia-Pacific region.

**Distant Horizons** (☎ 800-333 1240; www.distanthorizons.com) Educational tours for discerning travellers.

**Geographic Expeditions** (☎ 800-777 8183; www.geoex.com) Well-established high-end adventure-travel company.

**Global Adrenaline** (☎ 800-825 1680) Luxury adventures for the experienced traveller.

## GETTING AROUND

See p99 for general details of the region's border crossings.

### AIR

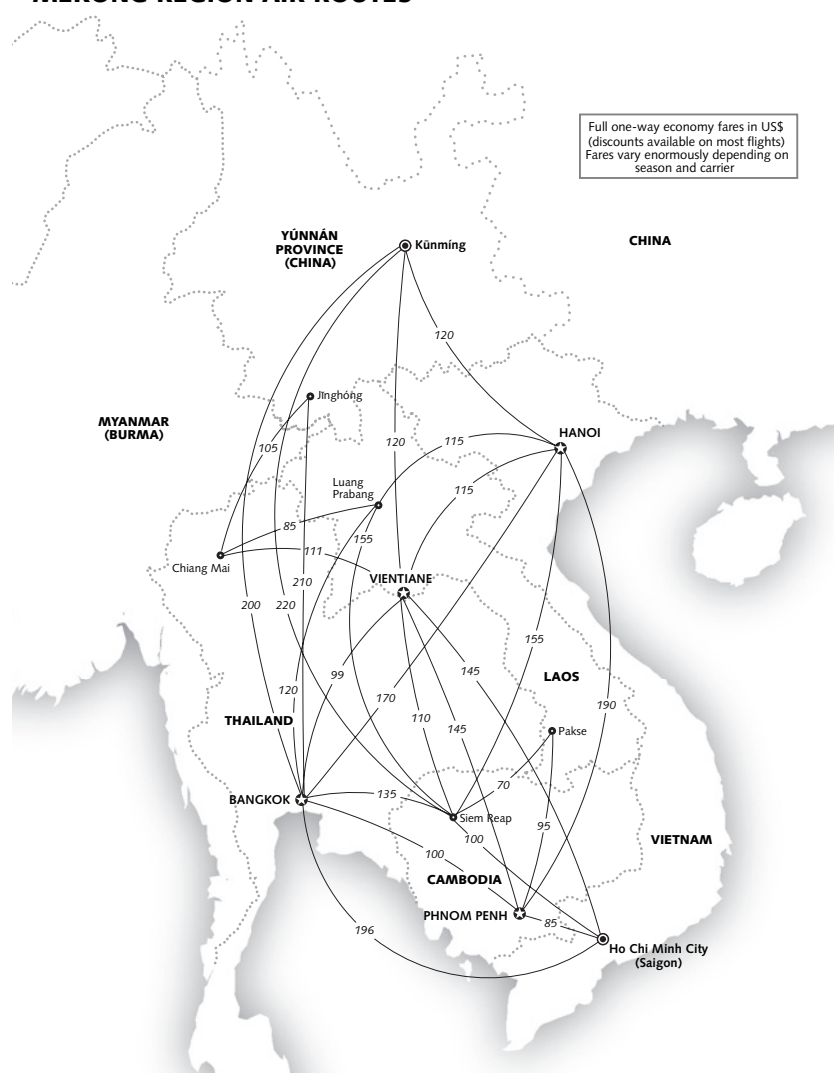
Air travel is a mixed bag in the Mekong region. Some routes are now a real bargain, as no-frills regional carriers such as **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) offer heavily discounted fares out of Bangkok. However, on many other routes, there may only be one carrier and prices are artificially high.

One of the best airlines in the region is **Bangkok Airways** (www.bangkokairways.com), billing itself Asia's boutique airline. It links some of the most popular places in the Mekong region and offers a high level of service. At the other end of the spectrum, there are several no-frills budget carriers operating out of Thailand, such as Air Asia. Among the national carriers, **Thai Airways** (www.thaiair.com) has the best reputation, but **Vietnam Airlines** (www.vietnamairlines.com.vn) has upped the level of its game in recent years.

For a quick look at the most popular routes in the region, see the Mekong Region Air Routes map (p499). More detailed air routes are listed in the Transport sections of each country chapter.

A little caution is necessary when buying tickets from travel agents. Carefully check the tickets to make sure that the dates meet your specifications and confirm with the airline as soon as possible.

## MEKONG REGION AIR ROUTES



Most airports in Southeast Asia charge a departure tax, so make sure you keep some local currency in reserve.

### Air Passes

The national airlines of Southeast Asian countries frequently run promotional deals from select Western cities or for regional travel.

**Airtimetable.com** (www.airtimetable.com) posts seasonal passes and promotions.

An ongoing deal is the Asean Air Pass, offered through cooperating airlines for travel in Southeast Asia; coupons cost US\$130. Check with Thai Airways for more details. An even better deal is the Bangkok Airways Discovery pass which offers domestic coupons for US\$60

and international coupons from US\$90 per sector.

## BICYCLE

Touring Southeast Asia on a bicycle has been steadily growing in popularity. Many long-distance cyclists start in Thailand and head into Indochina for some challenging adventures.

Vietnam is a great place to take a bicycle – traffic is relatively light, buses take bicycles and the entire coastal route is feasible, give or take a few hills. In Cambodia and Laos, road conditions can impede two-wheeling, but light traffic, especially in Laos, makes pedalling more pleasant than elsewhere.

Top-quality bicycles and components can be bought in Bangkok, but most serious cyclists bring their own. Bicycles can travel by air; check with the airline about extra charges and shipment specifications.

## BOAT

Boats are a major feature of the Mekong region, both on the Mother River itself and up and down the smaller rivers of the region. River cruising is becoming increasingly popular and there are several options to idle away some time on the Mekong. In the far north, there are now boat connections between Jinghóng in Yúnnán (see the boxed text, p467) and Chiang Saen in Thailand (see the boxed text, p148). The leisurely Luangsay cruise is a fine way to link Huay Xai and Luang Prabang with a night in the Pakbeng Lodge. See p314 for details. For those on

a budget, there are plenty of public boats running this way.

There are two companies that offer luxury boat cruises between Ho Chi Minh City and Siem Reap via Phnom Penh: the international player **Pandaw Cruises** ([www.pandaw.com](http://www.pandaw.com)) and the Cambodian company **Toum Teav Cruises** ([www.cf-mekong.com](http://www.cf-mekong.com)). Pandaw is an expensive option favoured by high-end tour companies, while Toum Teav is smaller and is well regarded for its personal service and excellent food. There are also fast boats plying the Mekong between Chau Doc and Phnom Penh for those who want to explore the Mekong Delta without backtracking to Ho Chi Minh City. For more details see the border crossing boxed text, p424.

## BUS

Bus travel has become a much better way of getting around with improved roads throughout the region. Thailand offers by far the most comfortable buses. Cambodia and Vietnam have a pretty impressive network of buses connecting major cities, although these dry up in remote areas. Buses in Laos are reasonable on the busiest routes, but pretty poor elsewhere. In Yúnnán, long-distance sleeper buses are the norm, and are comfortable as long as your fellow passengers aren't singing or snoring.

In most cases, land borders are crossed via bus; these either travel straight through the two countries with a stop for border formalities or require a change of buses at the appropriate border towns.

Be aware that theft does occur on some long-distance buses; keep all valuables on your person, not in a stowed, locked bag.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Motorcycles are a great way to get up close and personal with the region, although drive carefully to ensure you don't get too up close and personal. Motorcycles are available for hire or purchase, but require a lot more investment and safety precautions than many visitors realise.

It is advisable to hire a car or motorcycle in a certain locality rather than depend upon it for regional travel. You could cover Thailand by car pretty easily and enjoy well-signposted, well-paved roads. Vietnam has decent roads these days, but self-drive is not possible. Road conditions in Laos and Cambodia vary, al-

though sealed roads are slowly becoming the norm. Both countries offer brilliant motorbiking for experienced riders. In Yúnnán, the distances are just too great to really opt for driving.

## Driving Licence

Self-drive car hire is only really possible in Thailand. If you are planning to do any driving, get an International Driving Permit (IDP) from your local automobile association before you leave your home country; IDPs are inexpensive and valid for one year. There are some fantastic motorbiking opportunities in the region, but it is usually a case of no licence required.

## Hire

Thailand is the only place with Western car-hire chains and self-drive. However, vehicles with driver are available at very reasonable rates in the other countries of the region. For rural areas of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, 4WDs are necessary. Guesthouses and families rent motorcycles cheaply throughout the region, usually for around US\$5 a day. In Cambodia and Laos, 250cc dirt bikes are available and are a lot of fun if you know how to handle them. In Thailand, motorbikes of every shape and size are available, but to rent a bigger bike you will need to show a licence.

## Insurance

Get insurance with a motorcycle if at all possible. The more reputable motorcycle-hire places insure all their motorcycles; some will do it for an extra charge. Without insurance you're responsible for anything that happens to the bike. To be absolutely clear about your liability, ask for a written estimate of the replacement cost for a similar bike.

Insurance for a hired car is also necessary. Be sure to ask the car-hire agent about liability and damage coverage.

## Motorcycle Tours

Specialised motorbike tours through Indochina are growing in popularity. It is a great way to get off the trail and explore remote regions. Two wheels can reach the parts that four wheels sometimes can't, traversing small trails and traffic-free backroads.

For specialised companies in each country, see the individual country chapters. One company that runs adventurous trips covering all

## SURVIVING THE STREETS

Wherever you roam in the region, you'll have to cross some busy streets eventually, so go armed with this survival tip: step into the street and walk *slowly* across so that drivers can see you and drive around you. If you lack the nerve, look for locals crossing the street and walk alongside.

three countries is **Explore Indochina** (☎ 0913-524 658; [www.exploreindochina.com](http://www.exploreindochina.com)).

## Road Rules

Basically, there aren't many, arguably any. Drive cautiously. An incredible number of lives are lost on roads in this region every year, particularly around major holidays. Size matters and the biggest vehicle wins by default, regardless of circumstances – might makes right on the road. The middle of the road is typically used as an invisible third lane, even if there is oncoming traffic. And the horn is used to notify other vehicles that you intend to pass them. Be particularly careful about children on the road. It's common to find kids playing hopscotch in the middle of a major highway. Livestock on the road is also a menace; hit a cow on a motorbike and you'll both be hamburger.

## Safety

Always check a vehicle thoroughly before you take it out. Look at the tyres for treads, check for oil leaks, test the brakes. You may be held liable for any problems that weren't duly noted before your departure. When driving a motorcycle, wear protective clothing and a helmet. Long trousers, long-sleeved shirts and shoes are highly recommended as protection against sunburn and as a second skin if you fall. If your helmet doesn't have a visor, then wear goggles, glasses or sunglasses to keep bugs, dust and other debris out of your eyes.

## HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world and is not recommended. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go.

## MOTORCYCLE TIPS

Most Asians are so adept at driving and riding on motorcycles that they can balance the whole family on the front bumper, or even take a quick nap as a passenger. Foreigners unaccustomed to motorcycles are not as graceful. If you're riding on the back of a motorcycle remember to relax. For balance hold on to the back bar, not the driver's waist. Tall people should keep their long legs tucked in as most drivers are used to shorter passengers. Women (or men) wearing skirts should always ride side-saddle and collect longer skirts so that they don't catch in the wheel or drive chain. Enjoy the ride.

Locals do flag down private and public vehicles for a lift, but some sort of payment is usually expected.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

Beyond Thailand, personal ownership of cars in the region is not that common, so local transport in towns and cities is a roaring trade. Anything motorised is often modified to carry passengers – from Thailand's obnoxious three-wheeled chariots, known as *túk-túk*, to the Cambodian motorbike and trailer (*remorque-moto*). Metered taxis are now common in Thailand, Vietnam and Yúnnán, but are still few and far between in Cambodia and Laos. Motorcycle taxis are another popular way to get around, but watch out for the hot exhaust – many a visitor has returned from the region with a souvenir burn on their leg.

In large cities, extensive public bus systems either travel fixed routes or do informal loops around the city picking up passengers along the way. Bangkok, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Kūnmíng have efficient bus networks, but there is no such thing in Phnom Penh or Vientiane.

Bangkok boasts a state-of-the-art light-rail and underground system that make zipping around town feel like time travel. At the other end of the scale, the bicycle rickshaw still survives in the region, assuming such aliases as *sáamláw* in Laos and Thailand and *cyclo* in Cambodia and Vietnam.

## TRAIN

China, Thailand and Vietnam have efficient railway networks, including the option of comfortable air-con sleeper berths. Cambodia's railways are in a severely dilapidated state and passenger services have been suspended, while poor old Laos has no railways at all. Partly due to these missing links, there aren't many international trains in the region. Thai trains serve the Thai border towns of Nong Khai (for crossing into Laos) and Aranya Prathet (for crossing into Cambodia). In Vietnam, there are local trains to the Chinese border towns of Lang Son and Lao Cai. There is also a twice-weekly international service between Hanoi and Běijíng. There is a rail line connecting Hanoi and Kūnmíng, but there are no services currently operating.

# Health

Dr Trish Batchelor

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Health issues and quality of medical facilities vary enormously depending on where and how you travel in the Mekong region. Many major cities are now very well developed, although travel to rural areas can expose you to a variety of health risks and inadequate medical care.

Travellers tend to worry about contracting infectious diseases when in the tropics, but infections are a rare cause of serious illness or death in travellers. Pre-existing medical conditions such as heart disease, and accidental injury (especially traffic accidents), account for most life-threatening problems. Becoming ill in some way, however, is relatively common. Fortunately, most common illnesses can either be prevented with some common-sense behaviour or be treated easily with a well-stocked traveller's medical kit.

The following advice is a general guide and does not replace the advice of a doctor trained in travel medicine.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed, dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is a good idea. If carrying syringes or

needles, be sure to have a physician's letter stating their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition, bring a copy of your ECG taken just before travelling.

If you take any regular medication, bring a double supply in case of loss or theft. In most Mekong region countries, you can buy many medications over the counter without a doctor's prescription, but it can be difficult to find some of the newer drugs, particularly the latest antidepressants, blood-pressure medications and contraceptive pills.

## INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents do happen. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check if your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing. If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting extra insurance. If you're uninsured, emergency evacuation is expensive – bills of more than US\$100,000 are not uncommon.

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (In many countries doctors expect payment in cash.) Some policies offer a range of medical-expense options; the higher ones are chiefly for countries that have extremely high medical costs, such as the USA. You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call (reverse charges) a centre in your home country, where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

## VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your trip. The doctors will take into account factors

such as past vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received.

### Recommended Vaccinations

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to the Mekong region:

**Adult diphtheria and tetanus** Single booster recommended if you haven't had one in the previous 10 years. Side effects include a sore arm and fever.

**Hepatitis A** Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side effects such as headache and a sore arm occur in 5% to 10% of people.

**Hepatitis B** Now considered routine for most travellers. Given as three shots over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually headache and a sore arm. Lifetime protection occurs in 95% of people.

**Measles, mumps and rubella (MMR)** Two doses of MMR are required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flu-like illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.

**Polio** In 2002, no countries in the Mekong region reported a single case of polio. Only one booster is required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.

**Typhoid** Recommended unless your trip is less than a week long and only to developed cities. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available, but the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. A sore arm and fever may occur.

**Varicella** If you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

The following immunisations are recommended for long-term travellers (more than one month) or those at special risk:

**Japanese B Encephalitis** Three injections in all. A booster is recommended after two years. A sore arm and headache are the most common side effects. A rare allergic reaction comprising hives and swelling can occur up to 10 days after any of the three doses.

**Meningitis** Single injection. There are two types of vaccination: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years' protection; the meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years' protection. Recommended for long-term travellers aged under 25.

**Rabies** Three injections in all. A booster after one year will then provide 10 years' protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally a headache and a sore arm.

**Tuberculosis (TB)** A complex issue. Long-term adult travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than vaccination. Only one vaccine is given in a lifetime.

### Required Vaccinations

The only vaccine required by international regulations is for yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will only be required if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days before entering the Mekong region. If you are travelling to the Mekong region from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

### MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- antibacterial cream, eg Muciprocin
- antibiotic for skin infections, eg amoxicillin/Clavulanate or Cephalexin
- antibiotics for diarrhoea, such as Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin; for bacterial diarrhoea Azithromycin; for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery Tinidazole
- antifungal cream, eg Clotrimazole
- antihistamine – there are many options, eg Cetirizine for daytime and Promethazine for night
- anti-inflammatory such as Ibuprofen
- antiseptic, eg Betadine
- antispasmodic for stomach cramps, eg Buscopan
- contraceptives
- decongestant, eg Pseudoephedrine
- DEET-based insect repellent
- diarrhoea treatment – consider an oral rehydration solution (eg Gastrolyte), diarrhoea 'stopper' (eg Loperamide) and anti-nausea medication (eg Prochlorperazine)
- first-aid items such as scissors, plasters, bandages, gauze, thermometer (but not one with mercury), sterile needles and syringes, safety pins and tweezers
- indigestion medication, eg Quickeze or Mylanta

- iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify water
- laxative, eg Coloxyl
- migraine medication – sufferers should take personal medicine
- paracetamol
- Permethrin to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets
- steroid cream for allergic or itchy rashes, eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone
- sunscreen and hat
- throat lozenges
- thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment, eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet
- Ural or equivalent if you're prone to urine infections

### ONLINE RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. For further information, **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** ([www.who.int/ith](http://www.who.int/ith)) publishes a superb book called *International Travel & Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (CDC; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) website also has good general information.

### FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket-size book that is packed with useful information, including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood and *Travelling Well* by Dr Deborah Mills – check out [www.travellingwell.com.au](http://www.travellingwell.com.au).

## IN TRANSIT

### DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Although most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off

and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

### JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it causes insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of (nonalcoholic) fluids and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert or Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. The main side effect of antihistamines is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

## IN THE MEKONG REGION

### AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

Most capital cities in the Mekong region now have clinics that cater specifically to travellers and expats. These clinics are usually more expensive than local medical facilities, but are worth utilising, as they will offer a superior standard of care. Additionally, they understand the local system and are aware of the safest local hospitals and best specialists. They can also liaise with insurance companies should you require evacuation. Recommended clinics are listed under Information in the capital city sections of country chapters in this book.

It is difficult to find reliable medical care in rural areas. Your embassy and insurance company are good contacts.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg traveller's diarrhoea), you are carrying the appropriate medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common.

The standard of care in the Mekong region varies from country to country:

**Cambodia** There are a couple of international clinics in Phnom Penh, and one in Siem Reap, that provide primary care and emergency stabilisation.

**Laos** There are no good facilities in Laos; the nearest acceptable facilities are in northern Thailand. The Australian Embassy Clinic treats citizens of Commonwealth countries.

**Thailand** There are some very good facilities in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok. This is the city of choice for expats living in the Mekong region who require specialised care.

**Vietnam** Government hospitals are overcrowded and basic. In order to treat foreigners, a facility needs to obtain a special licence, and so far only a few have been provided. The private clinics in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City should be your first port of call. They are familiar with the local resources and can organise evacuations if necessary.

**Yúnnán** (China) Kúnníng has international-standard facilities, but elsewhere options are more limited. Smaller cities have good clinics, but limited options in the event of a serious problem.

## INFECTIOUS DISEASES

### Cutaneous Larva Migrans

**Risk** All countries.

This disease, caused by dog hookworm, is common on the beaches of Thailand. The rash starts as a small lump, then slowly spreads in a linear fashion. It is intensely itchy, especially at night. It is easily treated with medications and should not be cut out or frozen.

### Dengue

**Risk** All countries.

This mosquito-borne disease is becoming increasingly problematic throughout the Mekong region, especially in the cities. As there is no vaccine available it can only be prevented by avoiding mosquito bites. The mosquito that carries dengue bites day and night, so use insect-avoidance measures at all times. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache and body ache (dengue used to be known as

breakbone fever). Some people develop a rash and experience diarrhoea. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol – do not take aspirin as it increases the likelihood of haemorrhaging. See a doctor to be diagnosed and monitored.

### Filariasis

**Risk** All countries.

This mosquito-borne disease is very common in the local population, yet very rare in travellers. Mosquito-avoidance measures are the best way to prevent this disease.

### Hepatitis A

**Risk** All countries.

A problem throughout the region, this food- and water-borne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A; you just need to allow time for the liver to heal. All travellers to the Mekong region should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

### Hepatitis B

**Risk** All countries.

The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by body fluids, including sexual contact. In some parts of the Mekong region, up to 20% of the population carry hepatitis B, and usually are unaware of this. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

### Hepatitis E

**Risk** All countries.

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has similar symptoms to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women and can result in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine, and prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

### HIV

**Risk** All countries.

HIV is now one of the most common causes of death in people under the age of 50 in Thailand. The country in the region with the worst and most rapidly increasing HIV problem is Vietnam, plus Yúnnán province. Heterosexual sex is now the main method of transmission in these countries.

## Influenza

**Risk** All countries.

Present year-round in the tropics, influenza (flu) symptoms include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these individuals. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

## Japanese B Encephalitis

**Risk** All countries.

While rare in travellers, this viral disease, transmitted by mosquitoes, infects at least 50,000 locals each year. Most cases occur in rural areas and vaccination is recommended for travellers spending more than one month outside of cities. There is no treatment, and a third of infected people will die while another third will suffer permanent brain damage. Highest-risk areas include Thailand and Vietnam.

## Malaria

**Risk** All countries.

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice about whether your trip will actually put you at risk. Many parts of the Mekong region, particularly city and resort areas, have minimal to no risk of malaria, and the risk of side effects from the prevention tablets may outweigh the risk of actually getting the disease. For most rural areas in the region, however, the risk of contracting the disease far outweighs the risk of any tablet side effects. Remember that malaria can be fatal. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

### SCORCHED OUEF POLICY

There have been periodic outbreaks of avian influenza (bird flu) in the Mekong region in the past few years. Dozens of people have died and the threat of human-to-human transmission remains very real. Now the H5-N1 strain has gone global, Asia is no longer in the spotlight, but this remains a region with the greatest concentration of cases. When outbreaks occur, eggs and poultry are usually banished from the menu in hotels and restaurants in parts of Thailand and Vietnam. Even where eggs are available, we recommend a 'scorched ouef' policy. Ensure they are well cooked in whatever shape or form they come. No runny omelettes, no sunny side up. Don't take risks or you might end up with egg on your face.

Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be made by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance and antimalarial medications. Most people who catch malaria are taking inadequate or no antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking the following steps:

- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Wash this off at night, as long as you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.
- Sleep under a mosquito net that is impregnated with Permethrin.
- Choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned).
- Impregnate clothing with Permethrin in high-risk areas.
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.
- Use mosquito coils.
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.

There are a variety of medications available. Derivatives of Artesunate are not suitable as a preventive medication. They are useful treatments under medical supervision.

The effectiveness of the Chloroquine and Paludrine combination is now limited in most of the Mekong region. Common side effects include nausea (40% of people) and mouth ulcers. Generally not recommended.



The daily Doxycycline tablet is a broad-spectrum antibiotic that has the added benefit of helping to prevent a variety of tropical diseases, including leptospirosis, tick-borne disease, typhus and melioidosis. The potential side effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), thrush in women, indigestion, heartburn, nausea and interference with the contraceptive pill. More serious side effects include ulceration of the oesophagus – you can help prevent this by taking your tablet with a meal and a large glass of water, and never lying down within half an hour of taking it. It must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Lariam (Mefloquine) has received much bad press, some of it justified, some not. This weekly tablet suits many people. Serious side effects are rare but include depression, anxiety, psychosis and seizures. Anyone with a history of depression, anxiety, other psychological disorders, or epilepsy should not take Lariam. It is considered safe in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. It is around 90% effective in most parts of the Mekong region, but there is significant resistance in parts of northern Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Tablets must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Malarone is a combination of Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headache. It is the best tablet for scuba divers and for those on short trips to high-risk areas. It must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

A final option is to take no preventive medication but to have a supply of emergency medication should you develop the symptoms of malaria. This is less than ideal, and you'll need to get to a good medical facility within 24 hours of developing a fever. If you choose this option the most effective and safest treatment is Malarone (four tablets once daily for three days). Other options include Mefloquine and Quinine, but the side effects of these drugs at treatment doses make them less desirable. Fansidar is no longer recommended.

## Measles

**Risk** All countries.

Measles remains a problem in some parts of the Mekong region. This highly contagious bacterial infection is spread via coughing and sneezing. Most people born before 1966 are

immune as they had the disease in childhood. Measles starts with a high fever and rash and can be complicated by pneumonia and brain disease. There is no specific treatment.

## Melioidosis

**Risk** Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

This infection is contracted by skin contact with soil. It is rare in travellers, but in some parts of northeast Thailand up to 30% of the local population is infected. The symptoms are very similar to those experienced by tuberculosis sufferers. There is no vaccine but it can be treated with medications.

## Rabies

**Risk** All countries.

Still a common problem in most parts of the Mekong region, this uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. You should seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence postexposure treatment. Having pretravel vaccination means the postbite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not pre-vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

## Schistosomiasis

**Risk** All countries.

Schistosomiasis is a tiny parasite that enters your skin after you've been swimming in contaminated water – travellers usually only get a light infection and hence have no symptoms. If you are concerned, you can be tested three months after exposure. On rare occasions, travellers may develop 'Katayama fever'. This occurs some weeks after exposure, as the parasite passes through the lungs and causes an allergic reaction – symptoms are coughing and fever. Schistosomiasis is easily treated with medications.

## Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

**Risk** All countries.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) most common in the Mekong region include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you

develop any rash, lumps, discharge, or pain when passing urine, seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels, have an STD check on your return home.

## Strongyloides

**Risk** Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

This parasite, transmitted by skin contact with soil, is common in travellers but rarely affects them. It is characterised by an unusual skin rash called *larva currens* – a linear rash on the trunk that comes and goes. Most people don't have other symptoms until their immune system becomes severely suppressed, when the parasite can cause an overwhelming infection. It can be treated with medications.

## Tuberculosis

**Risk** All countries.

While rare in travellers, medical and aid workers and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions. Vaccination is usually only given to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended to have pre- and post-travel TB testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

## Typhoid

**Risk** All countries.

This serious bacterial infection is spread via food and water. It gives a high and slowly progressive fever, headache and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. Typhoid is diagnosed by blood tests and treated with antibiotics. Vaccination is recommended for all travellers spending more than one week in the Mekong region, or travelling outside of the major cities. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful with what you eat and drink.

## Typhus

**Risk** All countries.

Murine typhus is spread by the bite of a flea, whereas scrub typhus is spread via a mite. These diseases are rare in travellers. Symptoms include fever, muscle pains and a rash. You can avoid these diseases by following general insect-avoidance measures. Doxycycline will also prevent them.

## TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Traveller's diarrhoea is by far the most common problem that affects travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. In over 80% of cases, traveller's diarrhoea is caused by bacteria (there are numerous potential culprits), and therefore responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics. Treatment will depend on your situation – how sick you are, how quickly you need to get better, where you are etc.

Traveller's diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel-actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell.

Treatment consists of staying well hydrated; rehydration solutions such as Gastrolyte are the best for this. Antibiotics such as Norfloxacin, Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin will kill the bacteria quickly.

Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example, if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take Loperamide if you have a fever, or blood in your stools. Seek medical attention quickly if you do not respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

## Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor quality labs in the Mekong region. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut and then a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated, complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

## Giardiasis

*Giardia lamblia* is a relatively common parasite in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardiasis, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to this infection. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole, with Metronidazole being a second option.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Air Pollution

Air pollution, particularly vehicle pollution, is an increasing problem in most of the Mekong region's major cities. If you have severe respiratory problems speak with your doctor before travelling to any heavily polluted urban centres. This pollution also causes minor respiratory problems such as sinusitis, dry throat and irritated eyes. If troubled by the pollution, leave the city for a few days and get some fresh air.

### Diving

Divers and surfers should seek specialised advice before they travel, to ensure their medical kit contains treatment for coral cuts and tropical ear infections, as well as the standard problems. Divers should ensure their insurance covers them for decompression illness – get specialised dive insurance through an organisation such as **Divers Alert Network (DAN)** ([www.danseap.org](http://www.danseap.org)). Have a dive medical before you leave your home country; there are certain medical conditions that are incompatible with diving, and economic considerations may override health considerations for some dive operators in Cambodia and Vietnam.

### Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways to avoid diarrhoea include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants where there is a high turnover of customers.

### Heat

Many parts of the Mekong region are hot and humid throughout the year. For most people it takes at least two weeks to adapt to the hot climate. Swelling of the feet and ankles is common, as are muscle cramps caused by excessive sweating. Prevent these by avoiding dehydration and excessive activity in the heat. Take it easy when you first arrive. Don't eat salt tablets (they aggravate the gut), but drinking rehydration solution or eating salty food helps. Treat cramps by stopping activity, resting, rehydrating with double-strength rehydration solution and gently stretching.

### DRINKING WATER

- Never drink tap water.
- Bottled water is generally safe – check the seal is intact at purchase.
- Avoid fresh juices – they may have been watered down.
- Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it.
- The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or those people who suffer with thyroid problems.
- Water filters should filter out viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size, ie less than four microns.

Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include weakness, headache, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin, a fast, weak pulse, and a normal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun, fanning the person and applying cool wet cloths to the skin, laying the person flat with their legs raised, and rehydrating them with water containing a quarter of a teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid and it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.

Heat stroke is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include weakness, nausea, a hot, dry body with a body temperature of more than 41°C, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, seizures and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and commence cooling by getting the person out of the heat, removing their clothes, fanning them and applying cool, wet cloths or ice to their body, especially to the groin and armpits.

Prickly heat is a common skin rash in the tropics, caused by sweat being trapped under the skin. The result is an itchy rash of tiny lumps. Treat by moving out of the heat and into an air-conditioned area for a few hours and by having cool showers. Creams and ointments clog the skin so they should be avoided. Locally bought prickly-heat powder can be helpful.

Tropical fatigue is common in long-term expats based in the tropics. It's rarely due to disease and is caused by the climate, inadequate mental rest, excessive alcohol intake and the demands of daily work in a different culture.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine.

Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person. Lice can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an antilice shampoo such as Permethrin. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks are contracted after walking in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash at the site of the bite or elsewhere, or fever or muscle aches, you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Leeches are found in humid rainforest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others, pain is the main problem – apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

Most jellyfish in the waters of Cambodia and Vietnam are not dangerous, just irritating. First aid for jellyfish stings involves pouring vinegar onto the affected area to neutralise the poison. Do not rub sand or water onto the stings. Take painkillers, and if you feel ill in any way after being stung seek medical advice. Take local advice if there are dangerous jellyfish around and keep out of the water.

### Parasites

Numerous parasites are common in local populations in the Mekong region; however, most of these are rare in travellers. The two rules for avoiding parasitic infections are to wear

shoes and to avoid eating raw food, especially fish, pork and vegetables. A number of parasites are transmitted via the skin by walking barefoot, including strongyloides, hookworm and cutaneous *larva migrans*.

### Skin Problems

Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. There are two common fungal rashes that affect travellers. The first occurs in moist areas that get less air, such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. It starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil. *Tinea versicolor* is also common – this fungus causes small, light-coloured patches, most commonly on the back, chest and shoulders. Consult a doctor.

Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness), see a doctor. Divers and snorkellers should be particularly careful with coral cuts as they can be easily infected.

### Snakes

The Mekong region is home to many species of both poisonous and harmless snakes. Assume that all snakes are poisonous and never try to catch one. Always wear boots and long pants if walking in an area that may have snakes. First aid in the event of a snakebite involves pressure immobilisation via an elastic bandage firmly wrapped around the affected limb, starting at the bite site and working up towards the chest. The bandage should not be so tight that the circulation is cut off, and the fingers or toes should be kept free so the circulation can be checked. Immobilise the limb with a splint and carry the victim to medical attention. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out. Antivenin is available for most species.

### Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), making sure to reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying

in the sun during the hottest part of the day (10am to 2pm). If you become sunburnt, stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort. One percent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

## WOMEN'S HEALTH

Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), when the risk of pregnancy-related problems is at its lowest and pregnant women generally feel at their best. During the first trimester there is a risk of miscarriage and in the third trimester complications such as premature labour and high blood pressure are possible. It's wise to travel with a companion. Always carry a list of quality medical facilities available at your destination and ensure you continue your standard antenatal care at these facilities. Avoid rural travel in areas with poor transportation and medical facilities. Most of all, ensure travel insurance covers all pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.

Malaria is a high-risk disease during pregnancy. WHO recommends that pregnant women do *not* travel to areas where there is Chloroquine-resistant malaria. None of the more effective antimalarial drugs is completely safe in pregnancy.

Traveller's diarrhoea can quickly lead to dehydration and result in inadequate blood flow to the placenta. Many of the drugs used to treat various diarrhoea bugs are not recommended in pregnancy. Azithromycin is considered safe.

In the urban areas of the Mekong region, supplies of sanitary products are readily avail-

able. Birth control options may be limited so bring adequate supplies of your own form of contraception. Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of Fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

## TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Throughout the Mekong region, the traditional medical systems are widely practised. There is a big difference between these traditional healing systems and 'folk' medicine. Folk remedies should be avoided, as they often involve rather dubious procedures with potential complications. In contrast, traditional healing systems such as traditional Chinese medicine are well respected, and aspects of them are being increasingly utilised by Western medical practitioners.

All traditional Asian medical systems identify a vital life force, and see blockage or imbalance as causing disease. Techniques such as herbal medicines, massage and acupuncture are used to bring this vital force back into balance, or to maintain balance. These therapies are best used for treating chronic disease such as chronic fatigue, arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome and some chronic skin conditions. Traditional medicines should be avoided for treating serious acute infections such as malaria.

Be aware that 'natural' doesn't always mean 'safe', and there can be drug interactions between herbal medicines and Western medicines. If you are using both systems ensure you inform each practitioner what the other has prescribed.