History

This vibrant region has a history as long and dramatic as the Mekong River that cuts through its heart. There have been turbulent moments, there have been calm stretches. Empires have expanded in size only to come crashing down again like the mother river's waters each season. As human habitation has swollen, putting new pressures on this oldest of rivers, so too have the dramas of the region magnified. The Mekong has played host to some of the most brutal wars of the 20th century and the bloodiest revolutions. However, calmer waters lie ahead, as the region is peaceful and stable for the first time in generations. Governments are finally starting to go with the flow, no longer battling against the popular current.

The history of this great region is also the history of two great civilisations colliding. China and India may be making headlines today as the emerging giants of the 21st century, but it's old news. They have long been great powers and have historically overshadowed the Mekong region. The border between Vietnam and Cambodia is as significant a sociocultural border as the Himalaya range is a formidable physical barrier between the great rivals of China and India. It is the divide between Sino-Asia to the east and Indo-Asia to the west, with Vietnam historically under the influence of China, and Cambodia, Laos and Thailand under the influence of India. From art and architecture to language and religion, it manifests itself in many ways. See the Culture chapter (p69) for more on this fascinating phenomenon.

Southeast Asian kingdoms were not states in the modern sense, with fixed frontiers, but varied in extent depending on the power of the centre. Outlying *meuang* (principalities or city-states) might transfer their allegiance elsewhere when the centre was weak. That is why scholars prefer the term mandala, a Sanskrit word meaning 'circle of power'.

THE EARLY YEARS

Modern linguistic theory and archaeological evidence suggest that the first true agriculturalists in the world, perhaps also the first metal workers, spoke an early form of Thai and lived in what we know today as Thailand. The Mekong Valley and Khorat Plateau were inhabited as far back as 10,000 years ago, and rice was grown in northeastern Thailand as early as 4000 BC. China, by contrast, was still growing and consuming millet at the time. The Thais entered the Bronze Age earlier than 3000 BC; the Middle East didn't pass this milestone until 2800 BC and China a thousand years later.

According to Lao legend, the mythical figure Khun Borom cut open a gourd in the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu and out came seven sons who spread the Tai family from east to west. Although previous theory had placed the epicentre of Tai culture in southwestern China, recent evidence suggests it may have been in northern Vietnam and part of the Dongson culture. The Dongson culture is renowned for its elaborate bronze drums and was a powerful trading kingdom, its merchants penetrating as far south as Alor in Indonesia where the people still trade in bronze drums.

The site www.china knowledge.de /History/history.htm has in-depth coverage of China's dynasties and eras, with links to more specific information on everything from the religion to the technology to the economy of each period.

CHINA ENTERS THE RING

In 1899 peasants working in present-day Anyang unearthed pieces of polished bone and turtle shells inscribed with characters. Dating from 1500 BC, these are the earliest examples of the elaborate writing system still used in China today. As successive Chinese dynasties began to expand their territory, they pushed south and westwards towards the Mekong. The first emperor

TIMELINE

100 Indianisation begins, the religions, language and sculpture of India taking root in the region

802 Jayavarman II proclaims independence from Java, marking the start of the Khmer empire of Angkor

THE CAMBODIAN CREATION MYTH

Cambodia came into being, so the story goes, through the union of an Indian Brahman named Kaundinya and the daughter of a dragon king who ruled over a watery land. One day, as Kaundinya sailed by, the princess paddled out in a boat to greet him. Kaundinya shot an arrow from his magic bow into her boat, causing the fearful princess to agree to marriage. In need of a dowry, her father drank up the waters of his land and presented them to Kaundinya to rule over. The new kingdom was named Kambuja.

Like many legends, this one is historically opaque, but it does say something about the cultural forces that brought Cambodia into existence; in particular its relationship with its great subcontinental neighbour, India. Cambodia's religious, royal and written traditions stemmed from India and began to coalesce as a cultural entity in their own right between the 1st and 5th centuries.

of Qin (Qin Shi Huang, 221 BC) conquered and reigned by the sword. His ruling philosophy was law and punishment and a stark contrast to earlier Confucian teachings (see p79) that emphasised rights and morality. He pursued campaigns as far north as Korea and began linking city defences to create the infamous Great Wall. However, he also attacked and subdued Vietnam, conquering the Red River Delta to usher in 1000 years of Chinese cultural and political domination.

AN EARLY EMPIRE

Much of the Mekong region absorbed Indian culture through contact with seafaring merchants calling at trading settlements along the coast of present-day Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. These settlements were ports of call for boats following the trading route from the Bay of Bengal to the southern provinces of China. The largest of these nascent kingdoms was known as Funan by the Chinese, and occupied an area stretching from around present-day Phnom Penh to Oc-Eo in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. Known as Nokor Phnom to the Khmers, this kingdom was centred on the walled city of Angkor Borei, near modern-day Takeo. The Funanese constructed an elaborate system of canals both for transportation and the irrigation of rice. The principal port city of Funan was Oc-Eo in the Mekong Delta and archaeological excavations here tell us of contact between Funan and China, Indonesia, Persia and even the Mediterranean.

Archaeologists conducting excavations at Oc-Eo discovered a Roman medallion dating from AD 152, bearing the likeness of Antoninus Pius.

Funan was famous for its refined art and architecture, and its kings embraced the worship of Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu and, at the same time, Buddhism. The *linga* (phallic totem) was the focus of ritual and an emblem of kingly might, a feature that was to evolve further in the Angkorian cult of the god king.

VIETNAM UNDER OCCUPATION

The Chinese introduced Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism to Vietnam, as well as a written character system, while the Indians brought Theravada Buddhism. Monks carried with them the scientific and medical knowledge of these two great civilisations, and Vietnam was soon producing its own great doctors, botanists and scholars.

The early Vietnamese learned much from the Chinese, including the construction of dikes and irrigation works. These innovations helped make rice the 'staff of life', and paddy agriculture remains the foundation of the

938
The Chinese are kicked out of Vietnam after more than a thousand years of occupation

1010
Thanh Long, or City of the Soaring Dragon, known today as Hanoi, becomes Vietnam's capital

Vietnamese way of life to this day. As food became more plentiful the population expanded, forcing the Vietnamese to seek new lands. The ominous Truong Son Mountains prevented westward expansion, so they headed south, bringing them into conflict with first the Chams and later the Khmers.

For a closer look at China's thousand-year occupation of Vietnam, which was instrumental in shaping the country's outlook and attitude today, try *The Birth of Vietnam* by Keith Weller Taylor.

THE RISE & FALL OF CHAMPA

The Hindu kingdom of Champa emerged around present-day Danang in the late 2nd century AD. Like Funan, it adopted Sanskrit as a sacred language and borrowed heavily from Indian art and culture. By the 8th century Champa had expanded southward to include what is now Nha Trang and Phan Rang. The Cham were a feisty bunch who conducted raids along the entire coast of Indochina, and thus found themselves in a perpetual state of war with the Vietnamese to the north and the Khmers to the south. Ultimately this cost them their kingdom, as they found themselves squeezed between two great powers. Check out some brilliant Cham sculptures in the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang (p385) or travel to their former capital at My Son (p392).

THE RISE OF CHENLA

From the 6th century the Funan kingdom's importance as a port of call declined, and Cambodia's population gradually settled along the Mekong and Tonlé Sap Rivers, where the majority remains today.

This era is referred to as the Chenla period. Again, like Funan, it is a Chinese term and there is little to support the idea that Chenla was a unified kingdom that held sway over all Cambodia. Indeed, the Chinese themselves referred to 'water Chenla' (lower) and 'land Chenla' (upper). Water Chenla was located around Angkor Borei and the temple mount of Phnom Da (p246), near the present-day provincial capital of Takeo; and land Chenla in the upper reaches of the Mekong River and east of the Tonlé Sap lake, around Sambor Prei Kuk (p226), one of the first great temple cities of the Mekong region. Upper Chenla included the mountain temple of Wat Phu in southern Laos, beautifully situated under the shadow of Lingaparvata Mountain. Wat Phu had possibly been part of the Cham empire's western reaches. By the time of Chenla, it was under the control of the Khmers, who had begun to pick off western outposts of the Cham empire. Some scholars contend that by the 8th century, Lower Chenla was occupied by the Javanese and was a vassal state of the great Shailindras court based around Jogyakarta.

In AD 679 the Chinese changed the name of Vietnam to Annam, which means the 'Pacified South'. Ever since this era, the collective memory of Chinese domination has played an important role in shaping Vietnamese identity and attitudes towards their northern neighbour.

What is certain is that the people of the lower Mekong were well known to the Chinese, and gradually the region was becoming more cohesive. Before long the fractured kingdoms of Chenla would merge to become the greatest empire in Southeast Asia.

THE KHMER EMPIRE

A popular place of pilgrimage for Khmers today, the sacred mountain of Phnom Kulen (p213), to the northeast of Angkor, is home to an inscription that tells us that in 802 Jayavarman II proclaimed himself a 'universal monarch', or a *devaraja* (god king). It is believed he may have resided in the Buddhist Shailendras' court in Java as a young man. On his return to Cambodia, he set out to bring the country under his control through alliances and conquests. He was the first monarch to rule all of what we call Cambodia today.

Founded by King Isanavarman I in the early 7th century, Sambor Prei Kuk was originally known as Isanapura and was the first major temple city to be constructed in Southeast Asia.

1177
The Chams sail up the Tonlé Sap, defeat the Khmers and occupy Angkor for four years

1215
Genghis Khan conquers Běijīng, as the Mongols influence the future of events in the Mekong region

Jayavarman II was the first of a long succession of kings who presided over the rise and fall of the Southeast Asian empire that was to leave the stunning legacy of Angkor. The first records of the massive irrigation works that supported the population of Angkor date to the reign of Indravarman I (877–89). His son Yasovarman I (reigned 889–910) moved the royal court to Angkor proper, establishing a temple mountain on the summit of Phnom Bakheng (p213).

For the fuller flavour of Cambodian history, right from the humble beginnings in the prehistoric period through the glories of Angkor and right up to the present day, grab a copy of *The History of Cambodia* by David Chandler.

The Romans of Asia

Suryavarman I (reigned 1002–49) annexed the Dravati kingdom of Lopburi in Thailand and widened his control of Cambodia, stretching the empire to perhaps its greatest extent. Remnants of the Khmer empire are scattered throughout northeast Thailand and southern Laos, a testament to the might of this powerful empire. Like the Romans in Europe, the Khmers built a sophisticated network of highways to connect the outposts of their empire. Roads fanned out from Angkor connecting the capital with satellite cities such as Ayuthaya and Phimai in Thailand and as far away as Wat Phu in southern Laos.

It was not until 1112, with the accession of Suryavarman II, that the kingdom was again unified. Suryavarman II embarked on another phase of expansion, waging wars against Champa and Vietnam. He is immortalised in Cambodia as the king who, in his devotion to the Hindu deity Vishnu, gave the world the majestic temple of Angkor Wat (p208).

Suryavarman II had brought Champa to heel and reduced it to vassal status. In 1177, the Chams struck back with a naval expedition up the Mekong and into Tonlé Sap lake. They took the city of Angkor by surprise and put King Dharanindravarman II to death. A year later a cousin of Suryavarman II gathered forces about him and defeated the Chams in another naval battle. The new leader was crowned Jayavarman VII in 1181.

There are very few surviving contemporary accounts of Angkor, but Chinese emissary Chou Ta Kuan lived in the ancient Khmer capital for a year in 1296 and his observations have been republished as *The Customs of Cambodia*, a fascinating insight into life during the height of the empire.

Enter Jayavarman VII

A devout follower of Mahayana Buddhism, Jayavarman VII built the city of Angkor Thom (p208) and many other massive monuments. Indeed, many of the monuments visited by tourists around Angkor today were constructed during Jayavarman VII's reign. He is deified by many Cambodians as their greatest leader, a populist who promoted equality, a socially conscious leader who built schools and hospitals for his people. However, there was a darker legacy which sowed the seeds for the eventual collapse of the empire. His programme of temple construction and other public works was carried out in great haste, no doubt bringing enormous hardship to the labourers who provided the muscle, leading to a neglect of the all-important irrigation network upon which Angkor depended. His introduction of a new state religion sparked off several centuries of internecine rivalry and religious conflict, as successive monarchs vacillated between Hinduism and Buddhism.

VIETNAM BOOTS OUT THE CHINESE

In the early 10th century, the Tang dynasty in China collapsed. The Vietnamese seized the initiative and launched a long overdue revolt against Chinese rule in Vietnam. In AD 938, popular patriot Ngo Quyen finally vanquished the Chinese armies at a battle on the Bach Dang River, ending 1000 years of Chinese rule. However, it was not the last time the Vietnamese would tussle with their mighty northern neighbour.

From the 11th to 13th centuries, Vietnamese independence was consolidated under the enlightened emperors of the Ly dynasty, founded by Ly Thai To. During the Ly dynasty many enemies, including the Chinese, the Khmer and the Cham, launched attacks on Vietnam, but all were repelled. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese continued their expansion southwards and slowly but surely began to consolidate control of the Cham kingdom.

THE MONGOL HORDES

Genghis Khan (1167–1227) began to flex his muscles in Mongolia at the end of the 12th century. In 1211, he turned his sights on China, penetrated the Great Wall two years later and took Běijīng in 1215. Although these events were unravelling thousands of kilometres from the Mekong, the Mongols were to leave an indelible mark on the peoples of this region due to a major shift in the balance of power. Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis, reigned over all of China, at the helm of the mightiest empire the world had ever seen. Like the Vikings in Europe, the Mongols were more adept at conquest than consolidation and soon continued their pillaging ways.

For his next trick, Kublai Khan planned to attack Champa and demanded the right to cross Vietnamese territory. The Vietnamese refused, but the Mongol hordes – all 500,000 of them – pushed ahead, seemingly invulnerable. However, they met their match in the legendary general Tran Hung Dao. He defeated them in the battle of Bach Dang River, one of the most celebrated scalps among many the Vietnamese have taken.

THE THAIS MOVE SOUTH

However, Kublai Khan successfully attacked the Thai state of Nan Chao (AD 650–1250), which was located in Xīshuāngbǎnnà in the south of Yúnnán. Thais had already been migrating south for several centuries, settling in parts of Laos and northern Thailand. However, the sacking of their capital provoked a mass exodus and brought the Thais into conflict with a waning Khmer empire. The Mongol empire evaporated into the dust of history, but with the sacking of the Thai capital the die was cast: it was Thailand versus Cambodia, a conflict which has persisted in various shapes and forms through the centuries to the present day. The Mongols had left their mark on the Mekong region without even waging a war.

Thailand: A Short History (1982), by David Wyatt, offers a succinct overview from the early Thai era through to the 1980s.

SUKHOTHAI STANDS UP

Several Thai principalities in the Mekong valley united in the 13th and 14th centuries to create Sukhothai (Rising of Happiness). Thai princes wrested control of the territory from the Khmers, whose all-powerful empire at Angkor was slowly disintegrating. Sukhothai is considered by the Thais to be the first true Thai kingdom. It was annexed by Ayuthaya in 1376, by which time a national identity of sorts had been forged.

In 2006, Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej celebrated 60 years on the throne and is the longest reigning monarch in the world.

At the same time, an allied kingdom emerged in north-central Thailand known as Lan Na Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields), usually referred to as Lanna, and this included the areas of Luang Prabang and Vientiane in modern day Laos. Debate rages as to whether Lanna was essentially Lao or Thai and remains an issue of contention between the two peoples today. There is evidence that both 'Lao' and 'Thai' were used by the people of this kingdom to describe themselves.

1238 Sukhothai is born, considered the first Thai kingdom

1353 Fa Ngum establishes the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang

1431 The expansionist Thais sack Angkor, carting off most of the royal court to Ayuthaya

1516 Portuguese traders land at Danang, sparking the start of European interest in Vietnam

LAN XANG, THE BIRTH OF LAOS

As the power of Sukhothai grew, the ascendant Thais began to exert more pressure on the Khmer. The Cambodian court looked around for an ally, and found one in the form of an exiled Lao prince who was being educated at Angkor. Forced to flee after he seduced one of his own father's concubines, Fa Ngum was in direct line for the throne.

King Jayavarman VIII married Fa Ngum to a Khmer princess and offered him an army of more than 10,000 troops. He pushed north to wrest the middle Mekong from the control of Sukhothai and Lanna. The reputation of the Khmer armies carried him through the Lao and Thai kingdoms at a rapid rate and by 1353 he declared himself king of Lan Xang Hom Khao, meaning 'a million elephants and the white parasol'. This was really the last hurrah of the declining Khmer empire and quite probably served only to weaken Angkor and antagonise the Thai.

Naga Cities of Mekong (2006) by Martin Stuart-Fox provides a narrative account of the founding legends and history of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak, and a guide to their temples.

Within 20 years of its birth, Lan Xang had expanded eastwards to pick off parts of a disintegrating Champa and along the Annamite Mountains in Vietnam. Fa Ngum earned the sobriquet 'The Conqueror' because of his constant preoccupation with warfare. Therevada Buddhism became the state religion in Lan Xang when King Visounarat accepted the Pha Bang, a gold Buddha image from his Khmer sponsors, and Muang Sawa was renamed Luang Phabang.

THE COLLAPSE OF ANGKOR

Some scholars maintain that decline was hovering in the wings at the time Angkor Wat was built, when the Angkorian empire was at the height of its remarkable productivity. There are indications that the irrigation network was overworked and slowly starting to silt up due to the massive deforestation that had taken place in the heavily populated areas to the north and east of Angkor. Following the reign of Jayavarman VII, temple construction effectively ground to a halt, largely because Jayavarman VII's public works quarried local sandstone into oblivion and the population was exhausted. The state religion reverted to Hinduism for a century or more and outbreaks of iconoclasm saw Buddhist sculpture vandalised or altered.

By naming his kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, Fa Ngum was making a statement. Elephants were the battle tanks of Southeast Asian warfare, so to claim to be the kingdom of a million elephants was to issue a warning to surrounding kingdoms: 'Don't mess with the Lao!'

The Thais grew in strength and made repeated incursions into Angkor, finally sacking the city in 1431 and making off with thousands of intellectuals, artisans and dancers from the royal court. During this period, perhaps drawn by the opportunities for sea trade with China and fearful of the increasingly bellicose Thais, the Khmer elite began to migrate to the Phnom Penh area. Angkor was abandoned to pilgrims, holy men and the elements.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF SIAM

The Thai kings of Ayuthaya grew very powerful in the 14th and 15th centuries, taking over the former Khmer strongholds of U Thong and Lopburi in present-day central Thailand. Even though the Khmers had been their adversaries in battle, the Thai kings of Ayuthaya adopted many facets of Khmer culture, including court customs and rituals, language and culture. The cultural haemorrhage that took place with the sacking of Angkor in 1431 has repercussions even today and continues to strain relations between the two neighbours. The Thais rather ambitiously claim Angkor as their own, while the Khmers bemoan the loss of Khmer kick boxing, classical Khmer dance and Khmer silk to the all-powerful Thai brand.

1767
The Burmese sack the Thai capital of Ayuthaya, forcing its relocation to Thonburi, then to Bangkok

1864
The French force Cambodia into a treaty of protectorate, which prevents it being wiped off the map by Thailand and Vietnam

Angkor's loss was Ayuthaya's gain and it went on to become one of the greatest cities in Asia, a great seaport envied not only by the Burmese, but even the European traders who began to flock here. It has been said that London, at the time, was a mere village in comparison. The kingdom sustained an unbroken monarchical succession through 34 reigns from King U Thong (1350–69) to King Ekathat (1758–67). In 1690, Londoner Engelbert Campfer proclaimed: 'Among the Asian nations, the Kingdom of Siam is the greatest. The magnificence of the Ayuthaya court is incomparable'.

The website www.thaiworldview.com/art_hist.htm has thumbnail histories of the various Thai capitals.

VIETNAMESE EXPANSION

The Chinese seized control of Vietnam once more in the early 15th century, carting off the national archives and some of the country's intellectuals to China – an irreparable loss to Vietnamese civilisation. The Chinese controlled much of the country from 1407, imposing a regime of heavy taxation and slave labour. The poet Nguyen Trai (1380–1442) wrote of this period, 'Were the water of the Eastern Sea to be exhausted, the stain of their ignominy could not be washed away; all the bamboo of the Southern Mountains would not suffice to provide the paper for recording all their crimes'.

In 1418, wealthy philanthropist Le Loi rallied the people against the Chinese. Upon victory in 1428, Le Loi declared himself Emperor Le Thai To, the first in the long line of the Le dynasty. To this day, Le Loi is riding high in the Top Ten of the country's all-time national heroes.

Following Le Loi's victory over the Chinese, Nguyen Trai, a scholar and Le Loi's companion in arms, wrote his infamous *Great Proclamation* (Binh Ngo Dai Cao). Guaranteed to fan the flames of nationalism almost six centuries later, it articulated Vietnam's fierce spirit of independence:

> Our people long ago established Vietnam as an independent nation with its own civilisation. We have our own mountains and our own rivers, our own customs and traditions, and these are different from those of the foreign country to the north…We have sometimes been weak and sometimes powerful, but at no time have we suffered from a lack of heroes.

Le Loi and his successors launched a campaign to take over Cham lands to the south, wiping the kingdom of Champa from the map, and parts of eastern Laos were forced to kowtow to the might of the Vietnamese.

THE DARK AGES

The glorious years of the Khmer empire and the golden age of Ayuthaya were no guarantee of future success and the 18th century proved a time of turmoil for the region. This was the dark ages when the countries of the Mekong were convulsed by external threats and internal intrigue.

The Continuing Decline of Cambodia

From 1600 until the arrival of the French in 1863, Cambodia was ruled by a series of weak kings who were forced to seek the protection – at a price – of either Thailand or Vietnam. In the 17th century, assistance from the Nguyen lords of southern Vietnam was given on the condition that Vietnamese be allowed to settle in what is now the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, at

1883
The French impose the Treaty of Protectorate on the Vietnamese, marking the start of 70 years of colonial control

1893
France gains sovereignty over all Lao territories east of the Mekong

that time part of Cambodia and today still referred to by the Khmers as Kampuchea Krom (Lower Cambodia).

In the west, the Thais controlled the provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap from 1794; by the late 18th century they had firm control of the Cambodian royal family. That Cambodia survived through the 18th century as a distinct entity is due to the preoccupations of its neighbours: while the Thais were expending their energy and resources in fighting the Burmese, the Vietnamese were wholly absorbed by internal strife.

Saigon began life as humble Prey Nokor in the 16th century, a backwater of a Khmer village in what was then the eastern edge of Cambodia.

The Threat of Burma

Meanwhile, the so-called golden age of Ayuthaya was starting to lose its shine. The Burmese had attacked Ayuthaya on several occasions in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1765 they laid siege to the city for two years and the capital fell. Everything sacred to the Thais was destroyed, including temples, manuscripts and religious sculpture. The capital was moved first to Thonburi on the Chao Praya River and later across the river to Bangkok. The Thais vented their frustrations on their Lao neighbours. If the 17th century had been Lan Xang's very own golden age, the first Lao unified kingdom began to unravel by the end of the century. The country split into the three kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Wieng Chan (Vientiane) and Champasak. All three were subjected to repeated attacks by the Burmese and Thais, and the Thais had reduced much of Laos to vassal status by the start of the 19th century.

Bang Rajan (2000), by Thanit Jitnukul, is a cine-epic of a doomed Thai rebellion against 18th century Burmese rule.

Civil War in Vietnam

In a dress rehearsal for the tumultuous events of the 20th century, Vietnam found itself divided in half through much of the 17th and 18th centuries. The powerful Trinh Lords were later Le kings who ruled the North. To the south were the Nguyen Lords, who feigned tribute to the kings of the north but carried on like an independent kingdom. The second half of the 18th century saw the Tay Son Rebels carve up the country. It wasn't until the dawn of a new century that they were finally subdued and in 1802, Nguyen Anh proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long, thus beginning the Nguyen dynasty. When he captured Hanoi, his victory was complete and, for the first time in two centuries, Vietnam was united, with Hué as its new capital city.

THE FRENCH PROTECTORATE

Marco Polo was the first European to cross the Mekong and penetrate the east. In the following centuries many more Europeans followed in his wake, trading in ports as diverse as Ayuthaya and Faifo (Hoi An). However, it was France which was to ultimately claim much of the region as its own.

The concept of 'protectorate' was often employed as a smokescreen by European colonial powers in order to hide their exploitative agenda. However, for the weak and divided kingdoms of Cambodia and Laos, French intervention came not a moment too soon. Both were starting to feel the squeeze as expansionist Thailand and Vietnam carved up their territory. Were it not for the French, it is quite plausible that Cambodia and Laos would have gone the way of Champa, a mere footnote in history, a people without a homeland.

Vietnam Yields to the French

France's military activity in Vietnam began in 1847, when the French Navy attacked Danang harbour in response to Thieu Tri's suppression of Catholic missionaries. The Catholic Church eventually had a greater impact on Vietnam than on any country in Asia except the Philippines, which was ruled by the Spanish for 400 years. Saigon was seized in early 1859 and, in 1862, Emperor Tu Duc signed a treaty that gave the French the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina. France also went to war against China in 1858 and from 1883 to 1885, finally ending Chinese suzerainty in Indochina, at least for a time.

One of the most illustrious of the early missionaries was the brilliant French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), widely lauded for his work in devising *quoc ngu*, the Latin-based phonetic alphabet in which Vietnamese is written to this day.

Cambodia & Laos Join the Fold

Cambodia succumbed to French military might in 1864, when French gunboats intimidated King Norodom I (reigned 1860–1904) into signing a treaty of protectorate. In Laos, the same technique was employed with much success. In 1893 a French warship forced its way up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok and trained its guns on the palace. Under duress, the Siamese agreed to transfer all territory east of the Mekong to France and Laos became part of Indochina.

In 1883 the French attacked Hué and imposed the Treaty of Protectorate on the imperial court. There then began a tragicomic struggle for royal succession that was notable for its palace coups, mysteriously dead emperors and heavy-handed French diplomacy.

The Indochinese Union proclaimed by the French in 1887 may have ended the existence of an independent Vietnamese state, but active resistance continued in various parts of the country for the duration of French rule.

Territorial Losses, Territorial Gains

The French were able to pressure Thailand into returning the northwest provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon to Cambodia in 1907, in return for concessions of Lao territory to the Thais, returning Angkor to Cambodian control for the first time in more than a century. However, at the same time, they confirmed Vietnam's claims over the Mekong Delta and gifted the island of Koh Tral to Vietnam, known today as the beach paradise of Phu Quoc.

Vietnam was always the most important part of the colonial equation that was French Indochine. Economically it was the most productive and the French relied on the Vietnamese as administrators in both Cambodia and Laos in much the same way the British relied on the Indians in Burma and beyond. Vietnam developed under the French, while Cambodia and Laos languished. This was to set the pattern for power in Indochina for another century and ensured the Vietnamese were the dominant force in the nascent independence movement.

The first Frenchman to arrive in Laos was Henri Mouhot, an explorer and naturalist who died of malaria in 1861 near Luang Prabang (where his tomb can still be seen).

ANGLO-FRENCH RIVALRY

Same old, same old: the English and French have been bickering since the dawn of time. With the British positioned in Burma and the French claiming Indochina, Thailand and Yúnnán became battlegrounds in the struggle for influence.

In 1903 France started to build the railway line from Haiphong and Hanoi to Kūnmíng, a line that would soon become the province's main link to the outside world. By 1911 one million Chinese were riding the train every year.

1930 Ho Chi Minh establishes the Indochinese Communist Party

1939 Siam changes its name to Thailand

1941 Japan enters WWII and sweeps through Southeast Asia

1945 Ho Chi Minh proclaims Vietnamese independence on 2 September, but the French have other ideas

The British crept closer to Yúnnán when they occupied the Kachin state of northern Burma.

The Thais are proud of their independent history and the fact they were never colonised. Successive Thai kings courted the Europeans while maintaining their neutrality. It was an ambiguous relationship, best summed up by King Mongkut: 'Whatever they have invented or done, we should know of and do, we can imitate and learn from them, but do not wholeheartedly believe in them'. In the end, it was less a success story for Thai manoeuvring that kept the country independent, but the realisation on the part of the British and the French that a buffer zone prevented open warfare.

INDEPENDENCE ASPIRATIONS

Throughout the colonial period, a desire for independence simmered under the surface in Vietnam. Seething nationalist aspirations often erupted into open defiance of the French. Ultimately, the most successful of the anti-colonialists were the communists, who were able to tune into the frustrations and aspirations of the population – especially the peasants – and effectively channel their demands for fairer land distribution.

The Birth of Communism in Indochina

The story of communism in Indochina, which in many ways is also the political biography of Ho Chi Minh (see the boxed text, p41), is complicated. Keeping it simple, the first Marxist grouping in Indochina was the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, founded by Ho Chi Minh in Canton, China, in 1925. This was succeeded in February 1930 by the Vietnamese Communist Party, part of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). In 1941, Ho formed the League for the Independence of Vietnam, much better known as the Viet Minh, which resisted the Japanese and carried out extensive political activities during WWII. Ho was pragmatic, patriotic and populist and understood the need for national unity. Political consciousness was a rarity in Cambodia and Laos at this time and few Cambodians and Laotians rallied to the communist cause until after WWII.

Siam Becomes Thailand

Meanwhile Siam transformed itself from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in a bloodless coup in 1932. Under military leader Phibul Songkhram, the country veered off in a nationalist direction, changing its name to Thailand in 1939 and siding with the Japanese in WWII in order to seize back Cambodian and Lao territory returned to French Indochina in 1907.

The US Library of Congress maintains a Thailand Studies page (http://countrystudies.us/thailand) that covers history and societal structure.

CONVULSIONS IN CHINA

China had been through a series of convulsions in the 19th century, as the country was in the grip of the Opium Wars. The 20th century proved just as turbulent as nationalists and communists battled for the hearts and minds of the people. By 1920, the Kuomintang (KMT) had emerged as the dominant political force in China and its main opposition was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In the face of extermination campaigns by nationalist forces, the communists decided to regroup for a counterattack and thus began the Long March, actually a series of gruelling treks across thousands of kilometres

of inhospitable terrain. Of the 90,000 who set out, only 20,000 made it to Shaanxi. The Japanese took advantage of the power vacuum and invaded Manchuria in 1931, ravaging the rest of China in 1937 in one of the most brutal campaigns of a brutal era for warfare.

WWII

WWII broke out in 1939 and the Japanese entered the conflict in 1941. Japanese forces occupied much of Asia, and Indochina was no exception. However, with many in France collaborating with the occupying Germans, the Japanese were happy to let these French allies control affairs. But with the fall of Paris in 1944 and French policy in disarray, the Japanese were forced to take direct control of the territory by early 1945.

The main forces opposed to both the French and Japanese presence in Indochina were the Viet Minh and this meant Ho Chi Minh received assistance from the US government during this period. As events unfolded in Europe, the French and Japanese fell out and the Viet Minh saw their opportunity to strike.

After WWII, the French returned, making the countries 'autonomous states within the French Union', but retaining de facto control. French general Jacques Philippe Leclerc pompously declared 'We have come to reclaim our inheritance'. The end of the war had brought liberation for France, but not, it seemed, for its colonies.

As WWII drew to a close, Japanese rice requisitions, in combination with floods and breaches in the dikes, caused a horrific famine in which two million of northern Vietnam's 10 million people starved to death.

A FALSE DAWN

By the spring of 1945, the Viet Minh controlled large parts of Vietnam, particularly in the north. On 2 September 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared independence at a rally in Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square. Throughout this period, Ho wrote no fewer than eight letters to US president Harry Truman and the US State Department asking for US aid, but received no replies. Laos also briefly declared independence, but the king promptly repudiated his declaration, in the belief that Laos still needed French protection.

A footnote on the agenda of the Potsdam Conference of 1945 was the disarming of Japanese occupation forces in Indochina. It was decided that the Chinese Kuomintang would accept the Japanese surrender north of the 16th Parallel and that the British would do the same to the south.

In the north, Chinese Kuomintang troops were fleeing the Chinese communists and pillaging their way southward towards Hanoi. Ho tried to placate them, but as the months of Chinese occupation dragged on, he decided 'better the devil you know' and accepted a temporary return of the French. For the Vietnamese, even the French colonisers were better than the Chinese.

Between 1944 and 1945, the Viet Minh received funding and arms from the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the CIA today). When Ho Chi Minh declared independence in 1945, he had OSS agents at his side and borrowed liberally from the American Declaration of Independence. Such irony.

WAR WITH THE FRENCH

In the face of determined Vietnamese nationalism, the French proved unable to reassert their control. Despite massive US aid and the existence of significant indigenous anticommunist elements, it was an unwinnable war. As Ho said to the French at the time, 'You can kill 10 of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds you will lose and I will win'.

The Viet Minh carried the fight to the French in Cambodia and Laos together with a small network of local allies. Most of the fighters in Cambodia

1953 Cambodia and Laos go it alone with independence from France

1954 French forces surrender en masse to Viet Minh fighters at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, marking the end of colonial rule in Indochina

1956 Vietnam remains divided at the 17th Parallel into communist North Vietnam and 'free' South Vietnam

1964 The US begins the secret bombing of Laos; Air America takes off

and Laos were nationalists with little interest in Marxist doctrine, but the Viet Minh slowly began to expand their political influence.

The whole complexion of the First Indochina War changed with the 1949 victory of communism in China. As Chinese weapons flowed to the Viet Minh, the French were forced onto the defensive. After eight years of fighting, the Viet Minh controlled much of Vietnam and neighbouring Laos. On 7 May 1954, after a 57-day siege, more than 10,000 starving French troops surrendered to the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. This was a catastrophic defeat that brought an end to the French colonial adventure in Indochina. The following day, the Geneva Conference opened to negotiate an end to the conflict, but the French had no cards left to bring to the table.

INDEPENDENCE FOR CAMBODIA & LAOS

In 1941 Admiral Jean Decoux placed 19-year-old Prince Norodom Sihanouk on the Cambodian throne, assuming he would be naïve and pliable. As he grew in stature, this proved to be a major miscalculation. In 1953 King Sihanouk embarked on his 'royal crusade': his travelling campaign to drum up international support for his country's independence.

Independence was proclaimed on 9 November 1953 and recognised by the Geneva Conference of May 1954. In 1955 Sihanouk abdicated, afraid of being marginalised amid the pomp of royal ceremony. The 'royal crusader' became 'citizen Sihanouk' and vowed never again to return to the throne.

Laos was granted independence at the same time. The first priority for the Royal Lao Government was to reunify the country. This required a political solution to which the communist Pathet Lao would agree. The tragedy for Laos was that when, after two centuries, an independent Lao state was reborn, it was conceived in the nationalism of WWII, nourished during the agony of the First Indochina War, and born into the Cold War. From its inception, the Lao state was torn by ideological division, which the Lao tried mightily to overcome, but which was surreptitiously stoked by outside interference.

A 'SOLUTION' TO THE INDOCHINA PROBLEM

The Geneva Conference of 1954 was designed to end the conflict in Indochina, but the Vietnamese had done a good job of that with their comprehensive defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu. Resolutions included: the temporary division of Vietnam into two zones at the Ben Hai River (near the 17th Parallel); the free passage of people across the 17th Parallel for a period of 300 days; and the holding of nationwide elections on 20 July 1956. Laos and Cambodia were broadly neglected. In Laos two northeastern provinces (Huaphan and Phongsali) were set aside as regroupment areas for Pathet Lao forces. No such territory was set aside in Cambodia, so a group of 1000 Cambodian communists travelled north to Hanoi where they were to remain for the best part of two decades. This group was seen as pro-Vietnamese by the Pol Pot faction of the Khmer Rouge who rose to power in Cambodia and was eliminated in the 1970s.

The 2002 remake of *The Quiet American*, starring Michael Caine, is a must. Beautifully shot, it is a classic introduction to Vietnam in the 1950s, as the French disengaged and the Americans moved in to take their place.

TWO VIETNAMS

After the Geneva Accords were signed and sealed, South Vietnam was ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem, a fiercely anticommunist Catholic. Nationwide elections were never held, as the Americans rightly feared that Ho Chi Minh would win easily. During the first few years of his rule, Diem consolidated power effectively. During Diem's 1957 official visit to the USA, President Eisenhower called him the 'miracle man' of Asia. As time went on Diem became increasingly tyrannical in dealing with dissent. Running the government became a family affair.

In the early 1960s, the South was rocked by anti-Diem unrest led by university students and Buddhist clergy. The US decided he was a liability and threw its support behind a military coup. A group of young generals led the operation in November 1963. Diem was to go into exile, but the generals got overexcited and both Diem and his brother were killed. He was followed by a succession of military rulers who continued his erratic policies and dragged the country deeper into war.

The Geneva Accords allowed the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to return to Hanoi. The new government immediately set out to eliminate those elements of the population that threatened its power. Tens

UNCLE OF THE PEOPLE

Ho Chi Minh (Bringer of Light) is the best known of some 50 aliases assumed by Nguyen Tat Thanh (1890–1969) over the course of his long career. He was founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party and president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1946 until his death. Born the son of a fiercely nationalistic scholar-official of humble means, he was educated at the Quoc Hoc Secondary School in Hué.

In 1911 he signed up as a cook's apprentice on a French ship, sailing the seas to North America, Africa and Europe. He later moved to Paris, where he adopted the name Nguyen Ai Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot). During this period, he mastered a number of languages (including English, French, German and Mandarin) and began to promote the issue of Indochinese independence. During the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, he tried to present an independence plan for Vietnam to US President Woodrow Wilson.

Ho Chi Minh was a founding member of the French Communist Party, which was established in 1920. In 1923 he was summoned to Moscow for training by Communist International and from there to Guǎngzhōu (Canton), China, where he founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam.

In 1941 Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam for the first time in 30 years. That same year, at the age of 51, he helped found the Viet Minh, the goal of which was the independence of Vietnam from French colonial rule and Japanese occupation. As Japan prepared to surrender in August 1945, Ho Chi Minh led the August Revolution, and his forces took control of much of Vietnam.

The return of the French shortly thereafter forced Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh to flee Hanoi and take up armed resistance. Ho spent eight years conducting a guerrilla war until the Viet Minh's victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. He led North Vietnam until his death in September 1969 – he never lived to see the North's victory over the South. Ho is affectionately referred to as 'Uncle Ho' (Bac Ho) by his admirers.

The party has worked hard to preserve the image of Bac Ho. His image dominates contemporary Vietnam more than three decades after his death and no town is complete without a statue of Ho, no city complete without a museum in his name. This cult of personality is in stark contrast to the simplicity with which Ho lived his life.

Whatever the Vietnamese may make of communism in private, Ho Chi Minh remains a man for all seasons. Politics aside, he was a nationalist and patriot who delivered Vietnam its independence. Come what may to the party, Ho's place in history as a hero is assured.

of thousands of 'landlords', some with only tiny holdings, were denounced to 'security committees' by envious neighbours and arrested. Hasty 'trials' resulted in between 10,000 and 15,000 executions and the imprisonment of thousands more. In 1956 the party, faced with widespread rural unrest, recognised that things had got out of control and began a Campaign for the Rectification of Errors.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Mao Zedong and the communists had come to power in 1949 and set about creating their utopia. China grew rapidly in the 1950s, but the party embarked on a catastrophic course with its Great Leap Forward. In an effort to boost production, the population was herded into cooperatives and everyone was encouraged to produce steel in their back yards. Agricultural production slumped and by 1960 it is believed as many as 30 million Chinese had died of starvation. It was, in fact, a great leap backwards.

Similarly, there wasn't much culture in the Cultural Revolution. Mao nurtured a personality cult to rehabilitate himself after the failure of the Great Leap Forward. Mao's 'little red book' became the mantra for a young generation of zealous communists and the Red Guards began their rampage. Nothing was sacred. Schools were shut down, manuscripts destroyed, temples ransacked. Old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking were to be eliminated. Millions died as the party rooted out 'capitalist roaders'. The madness subsided by 1970, but provided a blueprint for the brutality of the Khmer Rouge when they seized power in Phnom Penh in 1975.

Most of China's middle-aged and elderly population are survivors of the Cultural Revolution; be mindful if discussing this period of history with them as few went untouched by the horrors of the time.

THE WAR IN VIETNAM

The campaign to 'liberate' the South began in 1959 with the birth of the National Liberation Front (NLF), nicknamed the Viet Cong (VC) by the Americans. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, which had been in existence for several years, was expanded. As the communists launched their campaign, the Diem government rapidly lost control of the countryside. In 1964, Hanoi began sending regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By early 1965, the Saigon government was on its last legs. The army was getting ready to evacuate Hué and Danang, and the central highlands seemed about to fall. Vietnam was the frontline in the worldwide struggle against communist expansion. It was the next domino and could not topple. It was clearly time for the Americans to 'clean up the mess'.

The Private Life of Chairman Mao, by Li Zhisui, is a fascinating and intimate (if somewhat disturbing) look into the world of this historical titan. Li was Mao's personal physician for 22 years and sheds light on everything from Mao's sexual habits to his political philosophy.

The Americans Wade Ashore

For the first years of the conflict, the American military was boldly proclaiming victory upon victory, as the communist body count mounted. However, the Tet Offensive of 1968 brought an alternate reality into the homes of the average American. On the evening of 31 January, as the country celebrated the Lunar New Year, the VC launched a series of strikes in more than 100 cities and towns, including Saigon. As the TV cameras rolled, a VC commando team took over the courtyard of the US embassy in central Saigon. The Tet Offensive killed about 1000 US soldiers and 2000 ARVN troops, but VC losses were more than 10 times higher, at around 32,000 deaths. For the VC the Tet Offensive ultimately proved a success: it made the cost of fighting the war unbearable for the Americans.

Simultaneously, stories began leaking out of Vietnam about atrocities and massacres carried out against unarmed Vietnamese civilians, including the infamous My Lai Massacre. This helped turn the tide and a coalition of the concerned emerged that threatened the establishment. Antiwar demonstrations rocked American university campuses and spilled onto the streets.

Tricky Dicky's Exit Strategy

Richard Nixon was elected president in part because of a promise that he had a 'secret plan' to end the war. The Nixon Doctrine, as it was called, was unveiled in July 1969 and it called on Asian nations to be more 'self-reliant' in defence matters. Nixon's strategy called for 'Vietnamisation', which meant making the South Vietnamese fight the war without US troops.

The 'Christmas bombing' of Hai Phong and Hanoi at the end of 1972 was meant to wrest concessions from North Vietnam at the negotiating table. Eventually, the Paris Peace Accords were signed by the US, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the VC on 27 January 1973, which provided for a cease-fire, the total withdrawal of US combat forces and the release of 590 US POWs.

In total, 3.14 million Americans served in the US armed forces in Vietnam during the war. Officially, 58,183 Americans were killed in action or are listed as missing in action (MIA). The direct cost of the war was officially put at US$165 billion, though its real cost to the economy was double that or more. A total of 223,748 South Vietnamese soldiers had been killed in action; North Vietnamese and VC fatalities have been estimated at one million. Approximately four million civilians (or 10% of the Vietnamese population) were injured or killed during the war.

The End is Nigh

In January 1975 the North Vietnamese launched a massive ground attack across the 17th Parallel using tanks and heavy artillery. Whole brigades of ARVN soldiers disintegrated and fled southward, joining hundreds of thousands of civilians clogging Hwy 1. The North Vietnamese pushed on to Saigon and on the morning of 30 April 1975 their tanks smashed through the gates of Saigon's Independence Palace (now called Reunification Palace). The long war was over, Vietnam was reunited and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Throughout the entire conflict, the US never actually declared war on North Vietnam.

For a human perspective on the North Vietnamese experience during the war, read *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh, a poignant tale of love and loss that shows the soldiers from the North had the same fears and desires as most American GIs.

Oliver Stone has never been one to shy away from political point-scoring and in the first of his famous trilogy about Vietnam, *Platoon,* he earns *dix* points. A brutal and cynical look at the conflict through the eyes of rookie Charlie Sheen, with great performances from Tom Berenger and Willem Dafoe.

Hitch a ride with Michael Herr and his seminal work *Dispatches*. A correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Herr tells it how it is, as some of the darkest events of the American War unfold around him, including the siege of Khe Sanh.

SIDESHOW: THE CIVIL WAR IN CAMBODIA

The 1950s were seen as Cambodia's golden years and Sihanouk successfully maintained Cambodia's neutrality into the 1960s. However, the American war in Vietnam was raging across the border and Cambodia was being slowly sucked into the vortex.

By 1969 the conflict between the army and leftist rebels had become more serious, as the Vietnamese sought sanctuary deeper in Cambodia. In March 1970 while Sihanouk was on a trip to France, General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, Sihanouk's cousin, deposed him as chief of state. Sihanouk took up residence in Běijīng and formed an alliance with the Cambodian communists, nicknamed the Khmer Rouge, who exploited this partnership to gain new recruits.

1970
Sihanouk is overthrown in a coup and Cambodia's bloody civil war begins

1973
All sides in the Vietnam conflict put pen to paper to sign the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973

1975
Khmer Rouge march into Phnom Penh on 17 April; North Vietnamese take Saigon on 30 April 1975, renaming it Ho Chi Minh City

1976
Mao Zedong, father of Chinese communism, dies aged 83

On 30 April 1970, US and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in an effort to flush out thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops. The Vietnamese communists withdrew deeper into Cambodia, and the ultimate humiliation came in July 1970 when the Vietnamese seized the temples of Angkor.

Neil Sheehan's account of the life of Colonel John Paul Vann, *Bright Shining Lie*, won the Pulitzer Prize and is the portrayal of one man's disenchantment with the war, mirroring America's realisation it could not be won.

The Secret Bombing

In 1969 the US had begun a secret programme of bombing suspected communist base camps in Cambodia. For the next four years, until bombing was halted by the US Congress in August 1973, huge areas of the eastern half of the country were carpet-bombed by US B-52s, killing uncounted thousands of civilians and turning hundreds of thousands more into refugees.

Despite massive US military and economic aid, Lon Nol never succeeded in gaining the initiative against the Khmer Rouge. Large parts of the countryside fell to the rebels and many provincial capitals were cut off from Phnom Penh. Lon Nol fled the country in early April 1975. On 17 April 1975 – two weeks before the fall of Saigon – Phnom Penh surrendered to the Khmer Rouge.

THE LAND OF A MILLION IRRELEVANTS

War correspondents covering the conflict in Indochina soon renamed Lan Xang the land of a million irrelevants. However, the ongoing conflict was very relevant to the Cold War and the great powers were playing out their power struggles on this most obscure of stages. The country remained divided into pro-American and communist groups after independence. The Lao politician with the task of finding a way through both ideological differences and foreign interference was Souvanna Phouma who tried to build a coalition. Successive governments came and went so fast they needed a revolving door in the national assembly.

Author and documentary filmmaker John Pilger was ripping into the establishment long before Michael Moore rode into town. Get to grips with his hard-hitting views on the American War at http://pilger.carlton.com/vietnam.

Upcountry, large areas fell under the control of communist forces. The US sent troops to Thailand, in case communist forces attempted to cross the Mekong, and it looked for a time as if the major commitment of US troops in Southeast Asia would be to Laos rather than Vietnam. Both the North Vietnamese and the Americans were jockeying for strategic advantage, and neither was going to let Lao neutrality get in the way.

A Hmong Army

The Ravens: Pilots of the Secret War of Laos (1988) by Christopher Robbins tells the story of the volunteer American pilots based in Laos who supplied the 'secret army' and identified targets for US Air Force jets.

President John F Kennedy gave the order to recruit a force of 11,000 Hmong under the command of Vang Pao. They were trained by several hundred US and Thai Special Forces advisors and supplied by Air America, all under the supervision of the CIA. The secret war had begun.

In 1964 the US began its air war over Laos. According to official figures, the US dropped 2,093,100 tons of bombs in 580,944 sorties. The total cost was US$7.2 billion, or US$2 million a day for nine years. No-one knows how many people died, but one third of the population of 2.1 million became internal refugees.

But all the bombing was unable to staunch the flow of North Vietnamese forces down the Ho Chi Minh Trail (or trails). More of southern Laos fell to the Pathet Lao. By mid-1972, when serious peace moves got underway, some four-fifths of the country was under communist control. Unlike Cambodia and Vietnam, the communists were eventually able to take power without a fight. City after city was occupied by the Pathet Lao and in August 1975 they marched into Vientiane unopposed.

THE KHMER ROUGE & YEAR ZERO

Upon taking Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge implemented one of the most radical and brutal restructurings of a society ever attempted; its goal was to transform Cambodia into a Maoist, peasant-dominated agrarian cooperative. Within days of the Khmer Rouge coming to power the entire population of the capital city and provincial towns, including the sick, elderly and infirm, was forced to march out to the countryside. Disobedience of any sort often brought immediate execution. The advent of Khmer Rouge rule was proclaimed Year Zero. Currency was abolished and postal services were halted. The country was cut off from the outside world.

The definitive war movie has to be *Apocalypse Now*. Marlon Brando plays renegade Colonel Kurtz who has gone AWOL, and native, in the wilds of northeast Cambodia. Martin Sheen is sent to bring him back and the psychotic world into which he is drawn is one of the most savage indictments of war ever seen on screen.

Counting the Cost of Genocide

It is still not known exactly how many Cambodians died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge during the three years, eight months and 21 days of their rule. Two million or one-third of the population is a realistic estimate.

Hundreds of thousands of people were executed by the Khmer Rouge leadership, while hundreds of thousands more died of famine and disease.

THE LAST OF THE GOD KINGS

Norodom Sihanouk has been a constant presence in the topsy-turvy world of Cambodian politics. A colourful character of many enthusiasms and shifting political positions, his amatory exploits dominated his early reputation. Later he became the prince who stage-managed the close of French colonialism, autocratically led an independent Cambodia, was imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge and, from privileged exile, finally returned triumphant as king, only to abdicate dramatically in 2004. He is many things to many people, a political chameleon, but whatever else he may be, he has proved himself a survivor.

Sihanouk, born in 1922, was not an obvious contender for the throne. He was crowned in 1941, at just 19 years old, with his education incomplete. By the mid-1960s Sihanouk had been calling the shots in Cambodia for more than a decade. The conventional wisdom was that 'Sihanouk is Cambodia' – his leadership was unassailable. But as the cinema took more and more of his time, Cambodia was being drawn inexorably into the American war in Vietnam. Government troops battled with a leftist insurgency in the countryside, the economy was in tatters, and Sihanouk came to be regarded as a liability. His involvement in the film industry and his announcements that Cambodia was 'an oasis of peace' suggested a man who had not only abdicated from the throne but also from reality.

On 18 March 1970 the National Assembly voted to remove Sihanouk from office. Sihanouk went into exile in Běijīng and threw in his lot with the communists. Following the Khmer Rouge victory on 17 April 1975, Sihanouk was confined to the Royal Palace as a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge. He remained there until early 1979 when, on the eve of the Vietnamese invasion, he was flown to Běijīng. It was to be more than a decade before Sihanouk finally returned to Cambodia.

Sihanouk never quite gave up wanting to be everything for Cambodia: international statesman, general, president, film director, man of the people. On 24 September 1993 after 38 years in politics, he settled once again for the role of king until his abdication in 2004. It will be a hard act to follow, matching the presence of Sihanouk – the last in a long line of Angkor's god kings.

1978
Vietnam invades Cambodia on Christmas Day, overthrowing the Khmer Rouge government

1979
China invades northern Vietnam in February to 'punish' the Vietnamese for attacking Cambodia

1989
Vietnamese forces pull out of Cambodia and Vietnam is at peace for the first time in decades

1991
The Paris Peace Accords are signed in which all Cambodian parties agree to participate in free and fair elections supervised by the UN

Disease stalked the work camps, malaria and dysentery striking down whole families, death a relief for many from the horrors of life. Some zones were better than others, some leaders fairer than others, but life for the majority was one of unending misery and suffering. Cambodia had become a 'prison without walls'.

The Khmer Rouge detached the Cambodian people from all they held dear: their families, their food, their fields and their faith. Nobody cared for the Khmer Rouge by 1978, but nobody had an ounce of strength to do anything about it…except the Vietnamese.

The demise of the Khmer Rouge proved to be a false dawn, as the country was gripped by a disastrous famine that killed hundreds of thousands more who had struggled to survive the Khmer Rouge. Caught in the crossfire of Cold War politics, even the relief effort was about political point-scoring and organisations had to choose whether to work with the UN and the 'free world' on the Thai border or the Vietnamese and their Soviet allies in Phnom Penh.

During the 1960s Cambodia was an oasis of peace while wars raged on in neighbouring Vietnam and Laos. By 1970, that had all changed, as Cambodia was sucked into hell. For the full story on how it happened, read *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* by William Shawcross.

THE REUNIFICATION OF VIETNAM

Vietnam may have been united, but it would take a long time to heal the scars of war. Damage from the fighting extended from unmarked minefields to war-focused, dysfunctional economies; from a chemically poisoned countryside to a population who had been physically or mentally battered. Peace may have arrived, but in many ways the war was far from over.

The party decided on a rapid transition to socialism in the South, but it proved disastrous for the economy. Reunification was accompanied by widespread political repression. Despite repeated promises to the contrary, hundreds of thousands of people who had ties to the previous regime had their property confiscated and were rounded up and imprisoned without trial in forced-labour camps, euphemistically known as re-education camps.

BROTHER ENEMY

Relations with China to the north and its Khmer Rouge allies to the west were rapidly deteriorating and war-weary Vietnam seemed beset by enemies. An anticapitalist campaign was launched in March 1978, seizing private property and businesses. Most of the victims were ethnic-Chinese – hundreds of thousands soon became refugees, known to the world as boat people, and relations with China soured further.

The Documentation Centre of Cambodia is an organisation established to document the crimes of the Khmer Rouge as a record for future generations. The excellent website is a mine of information about Cambodia's darkest hour. Take your time to visit www.dccam.org.

Meanwhile, repeated attacks on Vietnamese border villages by the Khmer Rouge forced Vietnam to respond. Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978. They succeeded in driving the Khmer Rouge from power on 7 January 1979 and set up a pro-Hanoi regime in Phnom Penh. China viewed the attack on the Khmer Rouge as a serious provocation. In February 1979, Chinese forces invaded Vietnam and fought a brief, 17-day war before withdrawing.

Liberation of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge soon turned to occupation and a long civil war that drained both countries. However, Vietnam had succeeded in stamping its authority on Indochina. Promoted as the masters of the region under the French, the Vietnamese were once more dictating the political destiny of Cambodia and Laos.

1997

The region experiences an economic crisis; Cambodia is convulsed by a coup; Laos joins Asean

1998

Pol Pot passes away on 15th April 1998, forever depriving Cambodians of the chance for justice

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

The communist cooperatives in Indochina were a miserable failure and caused almost as much suffering as the war that had preceded them. Pragmatic Laos was the first to liberalise in response to the economic stagnation and private farming and enterprise was allowed as early as 1979. However, the changes came too late for the Lao royal family and the last king and queen are believed to have died of malnutrition and disease in a prison camp sometime in the late 1970s. Vietnam was slower to evolve, but the arrival of President Mikhael Gorbachev in the Soviet Union meant *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) were in, radical revolution was out. *Doi moi* (economic reforms) were experimented with in Cambodia and introduced to Vietnam. As the USSR scaled back its commitments to the communist world, the far-flung outposts were the first to feel the pinch. The Vietnamese decided to unilaterally withdraw from Cambodia in 1989, as they could no longer afford the occupation. The party in Vietnam was on its own and needed to reform to survive. Cambodia and Laos would follow its lead.

The Killing Fields is the definitive film on the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia. It tells the incredible story of American journalist Sidney Schanberg and his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran during and after the war.

A NEW BEGINNING

You may be wondering what happened to Thailand in all of this? Well, compared with the earth-shattering events unfolding in Indochina, things were rather dull. Thailand profited handsomely from the suffering of its neighbours, providing air bases and logistical support to the Americans. As the war and revolution consumed a generation in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, Thailand's economy prospered and democracy slowly took root, although coups remain common currency right up to the present day. The financial crisis of 1997 shook the country's confidence. More recently, the leadership of billionaire tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra proved very divisive, provoking the military to seize power in 2006. And the south has been gripped by an Islamic insurgency that has claimed hundreds of lives.

Francois Bizot was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge, interrogated by Comrade Duch and is believed to be the only foreigner to have been released. Later he was holed up in the French embassy in April 1975. Read his harrowing story in *The Gate*.

China reinvented itself during the 1980s, eschewing its radical past for a more pragmatic politics. Economic growth was in and state industries out. Special export zones were established near Hong Kong and Taiwan and the country began to post record growth. However, there was no political liberalisation to accompany the economic flowering. Students demonstrating for greater democracy in China were brutally dispersed from Tiananmen Square in 1989. However, the population seems content as long as there is money to be made: in 1993 Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that 'to get rich is glorious'. This is keeping the communist juggernaut on the road for now.

Several of the current crop of Cambodian leaders were previously members of the Khmer Rouge, including Prime Minister Hun Sen and Head of the Senate Chea Sim, although there is no evidence to implicate them in mass killings.

Cambodia was welcomed back to the world stage in 1991 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords which set out a UN roadmap to free and fair elections. There have been many hiccups along the way, including coups and a culture of impunity, but Cambodia has come a long way from the dark days of the Khmer Rouge. Democracy is hardly flourishing, corruption most certainly is, but life is better for many than it has been for a long time. Attempts to bring the surviving Khmer Rouge leadership to trial continue to stumble along, but in a politically charged atmosphere that hardly bodes well for a free and fair process.

Vietnam has followed the Chinese road to riches, taking the brakes off the economy while keeping a firm hand on the political steering wheel. With only two million paid-up members of the Communist Party and 80 million

1999

Cambodia finally joins Asean after a two-year delay

2001

Thaksin Shinawatra becomes prime minister of Thailand, setting the country on a divisive course

Vietnamese, it is a road they must follow carefully. However, the economy is booming and Vietnam's rehabilitation was complete when it joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2006.

And what of Laos? Still irrelevant to most, but that is wonderful news for visitors who are discovering a slice of older Asia. Hydroelectric power is a big industry and looks set to subsidise the economy in the future. On the flip side, illegal logging remains a major problem, as in Cambodia, with demand for timber in China, Thailand and Vietnam driving the destruction. Tourism has good prospects and Laos is carving a niche for itself as the ecotourism destination of Southeast Asia.

The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975 (1998) by Grant Evans provides a penetrating study of Lao political culture, including attitudes to Buddhism and the 'cult' of communist leader Kaysone.

The Mekong region is closer than it has been for some time. Most of the countries are at peace and the talk is of cooperation not conflict. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and all enjoy close ties with China. All survived the financial crisis of the late 1990s and have bounced back stronger. However, democracy is weaker than ever, with China, Laos and Vietnam one-party states, Cambodia acting like a one-party state and Thailand under the rule of military generals. Like the river that binds them, the countries of the Mekong region have a turbulent past and uncertain future. For more on the present-day politics and society in the region, see Snapshot (p27).

2004

King Sihanouk abdicates from the throne in Cambodia and is succeeded by his son King Sihamoni

2006

Vietnam's rehabilitation is complete as it plays host to the glitzy APEC summit and formally joins the WTO

Environment

David Lukas

For nature lovers, the inner heart of Southeast Asia is a mysterious and evocative paradise. Not only do deep unexplored jungles remain home to charismatic creatures like elephants, tigers, rhinos, and some of the most amazing new species discovered anywhere in the world in the past 100 years, but few places in the world remain so unknown to science and so hard to penetrate. Against this exciting backdrop, visitors to the Mekong region can't help but marvel at the fantastic assortment of colourful birds, tropical plants and diverse mammals that abound at every turn. Threading this entire region together is the mighty Mekong River which arises on the high slopes of the Tibetan Plateau and meanders more than 4000km through the gorges and floodplains of five countries.

THE LAND

Geologic Overview

Southeast Asia documents one of the most exciting geologic events in the earth's history – a story that rivets geologists and drives them crazy at the same time. Cloaked in dense forest, remote and inaccessible, and protected by wars and unfriendly regimes, much of the region's geology remains relatively unknown. Piecing the geologic story together is further complicated because the landscape is extremely complex and is fragmented into many diverse pieces by powerful structural forces.

In the simple version, Southeast Asia is a collage of continental fragments mushed together at the confluence of three great plates: Eurasia, IndoAustralia and the Philippine Sea. All of these fragments apparently broke off from a supercontinent called Gondwanaland that lay in the southern hemisphere about 500 million years ago. Over tens of millions of years these fragments rafted their way north, colliding with each other and with the growing landmass we now know as Asia.

Southeast Asia is today formed of two primary components: these rigid fragments that split off from Gondwanaland, and linear belts of rocks folded and uplifted as these fragments collided. On top of this matrix, the Mekong and other rivers flow, cutting pathways along the suture lines and depositing loads of sediment in shallow basins.

Of the major fragments important to Southeast Asia, the northernmost is called the Yangtze Platform and it forms the core of South China. The Yúnnán capital of Kūnmíng sits at the southwestern edge of the billion-year-old Yangtze Platform, while folded mountains and hills rise to the north, west and south.

To the south lies another fragment called the Indochina Block which includes Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and eastern Thailand. The Red River of northern Vietnam today follows the suture line where Indochina and South China collided about 400 million years ago.

While the Indochina Block is thought to underlie much of Southeast Asia, the ancestral core (or basement rock) is only exposed in central Vietnam where it shapes a 60,000-sq-km feature known as the Kontum Massif.

Other than the Yangtze Platform and the Kontum Massif, both of which have maintained their ancient structure, the rest of Southeast Asia consists largely of old ocean basins that were crumpled into mountains and lifted above sea level by the enormous forces of major blocks and lesser fragments colliding.

The Mekong River is known as Lancang Jiang (Turbulent River) in China; Mae Nam Khong (Mother River of All Things) in Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and Laos; Tonlé Thom (Great Water) in Cambodia and Cuu Long (Nine Dragons) in Vietnam.

DOING YOUR BIT!

What can visitors do to minimise the impact of tourism on the local environment? We recommend the following:

- Animal populations are under considerable threat from domestic consumption and illegal international trade in animal products. Though it may be 'exotic' to try wild meat such as bats, deer, and shark fins – or to buy products made from endangered plants and animals – your purchase supports this industry and creates demand for additional hunting.
- Forest products such as rattan, orchids and medicinal herbs are under threat and the majority are still collected from the region's dwindling forests. However, some of these products can be cultivated, creating an industry with potential for local people to earn additional income while protecting natural areas from exploitation. Seek out and support these enterprises rather than buying products of uncertain origin.
- In much of the region there is a low level of environmental awareness and responsibility. Many locals remain oblivious to the implications of littering, for example, and you can help by being conscious of your own litter or by organising an impromptu clean-up crew.
- When visiting coral reefs and snorkelling or diving, or simply boating, be careful not to touch live coral or anchor boats on it, as this hinders coral health. If your tour operator attempts to anchor on coral, try to convince them otherwise and indicate your willingness to swim to the coral from an adjacent sandy area. Do not buy coral souvenirs.

Although India lies a significant distance west of Southeast Asia, it has had a larger role in shaping the region than any other force. After drifting across the ocean for 100 million years, the microcontinent of India ploughed into the southern margin of Asia 50 million years ago with unbelievable force. As a consequence, two-thirds of the entire Asian region has been bent and twisted on a hardly imaginable scale. In the contact zone between India and Asia, the folding is so dramatic that it created the Himalayas and uplifted the Tibetan Plateau – the single most immense feature on the earth's surface.

So powerful is the force of India crushing into Asia that Southeast Asia is essentially squirting out sideways, cracking in long series of faults and rotating clockwise. This is dramatically illustrated in northern Yúnnán, where the east-west line of widely spaced mountains in Tibet take a sudden turn to the south and collapse into a series of high, narrow ridges and deep valleys. The characteristic S-curved mountain ranges and rivers in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are further evidence of the incredible torqueing that is taking place.

The release of tension created by this movement typically occurs along faults and is linked to the earthquakes and landslides that plague the region. River courses often follow these same fault lines, and the shifting topography frequently diverts rivers into new channels. The Mekong, for instance, has followed several different channels including one route through central Thailand that terminated at present day Bangkok. The river assumed its current route only 5000 years ago.

Yúnnán

Yúnnán is without a doubt one of the most alluring destinations in China. It's the most geographically varied of China's provinces, with terrain ranging from subtropical forests to snow-capped Tibetan peaks, and with wildlife to match (see p56). It's the place where the broad east-west trending Tibetan Plateau pinches and turns south into a realm of very narrow, parallel mountain ranges with 3000m to 4000m peaks and deep river gorges that offload their waters into a tropical paradise that stretches from Myanmar (Burma) to South China. Included here are three of South Asia's mightiest rivers: the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze.

Much of eastern Yúnnán belongs to the Yúnnán-Guizhou Plateau (the topographic name for the Yangtze Platform), a region of limestone plateaus, gorges, waterfalls and caves which are 1000m to 2000m above sea level. Turning further south and descending in elevation the landscape becomes cloaked in subtropical forests as it nears the border with Laos and Vietnam.

A major earthquake hit Lìjiāng in 1996, killing more than 300 people; another destroyed more than 10,000 homes 100km east of Dàlǐ in January 2000.

The Mekong River has a special significance in Yúnnán because it follows the fault line between the Sibumasu Block, a recent fragment from Gondwanaland that forms much of western Thailand and Myanmar, and the much older block that formed when South China and Indochina merged.

Laos

Once the Mekong exits China it enters Laos, a rugged landlocked country with mountains and plateaus covering more than 70% of the land. At 236,000 sq km, Laos is slightly larger than Great Britain. Running about half the length of Laos, parallel to the course of the Mekong River, is the Annamite Chain, a folded mountain range with peaks averaging between 1500m and 2500m in height. All the rivers and tributaries west of the Annamite Chain drain into the Mekong, while waterways east of the Annamites flow into the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam.

Roughly in the centre of the range is the Khammuan Plateau, an area of striking limestone grottoes and gorges. At the southern end of the Annamite Chain stands the 10,000-sq-km Bolaven Plateau, an important area for the cultivation of high-yield mountain rice, coffee, tea and other crops that flourish at higher altitudes.

The larger, northern half of Laos is made up almost entirely of broken, steep-sided mountain ranges that characterise the folded contact zone between the Sibumasu and Indochina blocks. The highest mountains are found in Xieng Khuang Province (p302), including Phu Bia, the country's highest peak at 2820m. Just north of Phu Bia stands the Xieng Khuang Plateau, the country's largest mountain plateau, which rises 1200m above sea level.

The Mekong so dominates Lao topography that, to a large extent, the entire length of the country parallels its course. The flattest and most tropical part of the country lies on the fertile Mekong flood plain between Sainyabuli and Champasak, where virtually all of the domestic rice consumed in Laos is grown. The Mekong and its tributaries are also the source of fish, a primary protein in the Lao diet.

Thailand

Northern Thailand ranges from high mountains in the north to the flat, sea level Chao Phraya Delta near Bangkok. For nearly 100km along the Nan River valley, evidence can be seen of the Nan-Uttaradit suture, a continuation of the important fault line that the Mekong follows through Yúnnán and Laos, which marks the contact zone between the Sibumasu and Indochina blocks.

The mountains of northwestern Thailand represent the southernmost extent of the ranges that tumble down from the Tibetan Plateau and include Doi Inthanon (2576m), the highest peak in Thailand. In contrast the area around Chao Phraya consists of lowland plains, and from the plains the southern fringe of the Khorat Plateau can be seen rising 300m above sea level to the north. This plateau is the dominant feature of eastern and northern

UNDERSTANDING KARST

Travellers to the Mekong region can hardly miss the ubiquitous presence of fantastically eroded limestone pillars and caves that characterise many parts of the region. Limestone derives from old sea floor sediments, shells, and corals that have broken down into calcium carbonate and reformed as rock. As this relatively soft sedimentary rock is folded and uplifted by the collision of adjacent land masses, it begins to dissolve slowly in the presence of rain, rivers and waves to create spectacular karst formations. The presence of limestone in Southeast Asia marks a time in the Permian (250 to 300 million years ago) when the region was inundated by seas before the land was uplifted.

Thailand (also stretching into Laos around Vientiane) and is an area known for dry, thin soils and sparse vegetation.

The Mekong runs along a broad floodplain on the northeastern and eastern border of Thailand, making this a valuable region for crops and fishing. The rivers of north and central Thailand drain into the Gulf of Thailand via the Chao Phraya Delta.

Cambodia

At 181,035 sq km, Cambodia is about half the size of Vietnam or Italy. Cambodia is dominated by water, especially the Mekong River and the Tonlé Sap lake (Great Lake). Nourishing sediments deposited during the annual wet-season flooding make for very rich agricultural land in the heart of the country. The Tonlé Sap lake is a remnant of an ancient channel that the Mekong River once followed.

Beyond this vast alluvial plain, there are three main mountainous regions. In the southwest, much of the landmass between the Gulf of Thailand and the Tonlé Sap is covered by the Cardamom Mountains (Chuor Phnom Kravanh) and the Elephant Mountains (Chuor Phnom Damrei). Along Cambodia's northern border with Thailand, the plains abut against a striking sandstone escarpment more than 300km long and 180m to 550m in height that marks the southern limit of the Dangkrek Mountains (Chuor Phnom Dangkrek, p225). In northeastern Cambodia the plains give way to the Eastern Highlands, a remote region of densely forested mountains and high plateaus that extend eastward into Vietnam's central highlands and northward into Laos. As is true elsewhere in Southeast Asia, these mountainous areas represent folds in the earth's crust related to the collision of blocks.

Vietnam

The Mekong ends on the south coast of Vietnam after making a short dash from Cambodia to the sea. Despite this short distance, Vietnam encompasses what is perhaps the most important feature on the entire river, the area of multiple river channels and incredibly productive soils that create one of the largest and most important delta systems in the world.

Vietnam is 329,566 sq km, making it slightly larger than Italy and slightly smaller than Japan. The country possesses 3451km of stunning coastline and 3818km of land borders, including remote, wild regions where new species of plants and animals are still being discovered. The country is S-shaped, broad in the north and south and a mere 50km wide in the centre.

Three-quarters of the country consists of rolling hills and mighty mountains, the highest of which is the 3143m Fansipan (p376) in the far northwest. The Truong Son Mountains, a range of folded hills, runs almost the full length of Vietnam along its border with Laos and Cambodia. The central highland region includes the Kontum Massif, the original Gondwanaland fragment that all of Southeast Asia has coalesced around. The western portion of the highlands, near Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku, is well known for its incredibly fertile, bright red volcanic soil.

The most striking geological features in Vietnam are the karst formations. Northern Vietnam is a showcase of these features, with stunning examples around Ninh Binh (p367) and the Perfume Pagoda (p366), and at Halong (p369) and Bai Tu Long (p371) Bays where an enormous limestone plateau has steadily sunk into the ocean with its old mountain tops still poking into the sky like bony vertical fingers.

WILDLIFE

The Mekong region is home to one of the richest and most abundant gatherings of animals in the world. Not only is the assortment of species unbelievably diverse and exotic, but the dry forests of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are ranked second only to the plains of Africa for numbers of large game animals. Sadly, the region's natural environment and wildlife are under extreme threat and it's not too much of a stretch to say that the vast majority of animals and habitats are highly threatened, many to the brink of extinction.

Naturalists will be fascinated to read the well-written *Vietnam: A Natural History* by Eleanor Sterling, Martha Hurley, and Le Duc Minh (2006).

The region's tremendous biodiversity is partly explained by the fact that Southeast Asia is composed of ancient continental fragments that drifted separately across the ocean for millions of years, with each fragment evolving unique flora and fauna. In addition, species from further north migrated into the northern portions of Southeast Asia, while lowering of sea levels during the Pleistocene 'ice age' connected Southeast Asia to the islands of Java, Sumatra and Borneo and allowed tropical species to expand their range northward. But perhaps the most significant reason for the region's unique species is that the forests of Southeast Asia are about 160 million years old – far older than the forests of the Amazon or equatorial Africa – and evolution has been at work a long time here.

As in all tropical areas, the plants and animals of Southeast Asia have evolved unique strategies for survival. Unlike temperate regions, where 80% of the nutrients are in the soil or at ground level, in tropical forests 80% of the nutrients are contained in the canopy. This requires that every living organism in a tropical forest find ways to access these aerial nutrients, either by living in trees themselves or by competing fiercely for the few nutrients that fall to the ground.

Dipterocarps (which are the dominant and most important group of trees found in Southeast Asia) complicate the equation by producing fruits irregularly. This strategy is called masting, and it means that trees produce no fruits for six to seven years in a row, then in a single season produce massive crops of fruits simultaneously. Masting helps to keep down the number of seed predators and ensures that more seeds survive to grow into trees, but it also has the effect that the jungle's seed-eating animals (many types of insects, birds and mammals) struggle to survive through the nonmasting years.

Biologists have only recently begun to systematically explore and document parts of the Mekong region for the first time. They are realising that this may be one of the richest troves of unknown species in the world. Not only do thousands of plants remain to be discovered but even large mammals are being found for the first time. In 1992, researchers in central Vietnam's Vu Quang Nature Reserve were shocked to run across a 95kg antelope relative that was unknown to science. It was the largest land-dwelling animal discovered

lonelyplanet.com

anywhere in the world since 1937 (when the kouprey, another large hoofed mammal, was uncovered in the region). In Vietnam alone, another three deer species, a monkey, a bat, a shrew, a rabbit and seven new birds have been discovered since 1992. This is in addition to three new turtles, 15 lizards, four snakes, 31 frogs and more than 45 fish.

Equally exciting is the fact that species long thought extinct have recently been rediscovered. This includes the finding of a recent skull of a Vietnamese warty pig (Heude's pig) first collected in 1892 and never seen in the wild. The Edwards' pheasant was likewise thought extinct until it was rediscovered in Vietnam. But at the top of the list would be one of the most incredible findings of the past century, the discovery of a remnant population of Javan rhinoceros just 130km northeast of Ho Chi Minh City. Known only from a tiny population of 50 animals in western Java, this is one of the rarest mammals in the world and long feared extinct in Southeast Asia.

Mammals

Wildlife Trade in Laos: The End of the Game (2001), by Hanneke Nooren and Gordon Claridge, is a frightening description of animal poaching in Laos.

Although Southeast Asia is home to an astounding variety of exotic mammals like tigers, leopards, bears, tapirs and elephants, seeing one is the exception rather than the rule. Visitors are far more likely to encounter creatures like monkeys, civets and squirrels (including half a dozen or more types of flying squirrels).

Among the most notable animals are pangolins, 85cm long anteater relatives covered in body armour of overlapping scales that protect the creatures when they curl into protective balls. Pangolins burrow into termite mounds and anthills that dot the Southeast Asian landscape and use their 25cm long sticky tongues to extract insects.

Of several dozen primates, the lanky limbed gibbons are best known for their loud and elaborate bouts of singing that ring through the tropical forests on a daily basis. Macaques are a group of primates known for their brash and gregarious habits, and several of the more common species are ubiquitous pests around tourist traps. Slow lorises weigh a mere 1.2kg but have huge charm with their big round eyes, thick fur and long curious gazes.

Aquatic mammals include otters, and the dugong, one of the last remaining representatives of an ancient group of animals that originated 65 million years ago. Halfway between mermaid and small whale in appearance, these ungainly 300kg mammals graze peacefully on sea plants and live in one of a few protected coastal areas like Vietnam's Con Dao National Park.

Bird-watchers are lucky to have a beautiful resource in *Birds of Southeast Asia* by Craig Robson (2005), which has stunning illustrations of all the region's birds.

One of the region's most endangered mammals is the Irrawaddy dolphin (see the boxed text, p232) that resides in the Mekong upstream of Kratie, Cambodia. Perhaps only a few hundred dolphins remain in this population. Despite their popularity with tourists, they are frequent victims of gill nets used by fishermen.

Birds

More than 1000 species of birds can be found in Southeast Asia, about 10% of the world's birds, making the region a top-notch destination for bird-watchers. Many of these species are found only in Southeast Asia and quite a number are specific to one particular country. Colourful tropical birds include showy barbets, dazzling pheasants and charismatic hornbills. If these birds somehow evade you, then you can always count on seeing the intoxicatingly blue Asian fairy bluebird if you spend time in its forested home.

Serious bird-watchers, however, travel to Southeast Asia to spot one of the many very rare birds. High on this list is the critically endangered Sarus crane, a statuesque wetland bird which is depicted on the bas-relief at Angkor and now found at only a few sites like Vietnam's Tram Chim Nature Reserve. In dense, undisturbed forest, you might find the Siamese fireback, a pheasant with bright yellow back (hence its name) and bright red facial skin. Thailand's Khao Yai National Park (p156) is one of the best places to see this species. The endangered crested argus is a 2m-long pheasant covered in tiny white spots that is one of the most highly sought-after birds in Southeast Asia.

Fish

The Mekong River is second only to the Amazon in terms of fish diversity and is considered the foremost river in the world for giant fish. A record-breaking 293kg giant catfish was netted in 2005 in Thailand. Other contenders for the world's largest freshwater fish in the Mekong include the giant freshwater stingray, dog-eating catfish, arapaima and Chinese paddlefish.

These species, and many other smaller fish, migrate fair distances along the Mekong, moving into tributaries and flooded plains during the rainy season. An increasing number of dams in Southeast Asia have an incalculable impact on these animals even though a vast majority of the people of the Mekong region depend on fish protein every day.

PLANTS

The forest cover of Southeast Asia is mainly a mix of deciduous forest (a forest type that loses its leaves during the dry season) and evergreen forest (commonly, though not always correctly, referred to as 'rainforest'). These forests occur as far north as southern Yúnnán, where they are replaced by northern temperate forests of conifers and rhododendrons on mountain slopes.

What is particularly surprising is how much of the Southeast Asian landscape is comprised of other vegetation types, including the depressingly familiar deforested landscape now planted with crops. Shrublands, grasslands and dry savanna forests are widespread throughout the Mekong region because the monsoon climate supports extensive forest cover through the dry season.

For more information on issues relating to riverine ecosystems, check with the South East Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN) at www.searin.org/indexE.htm.

The most important trees in Southeast Asia, both economically and ecologically, are an ancient group of broad-leaved trees called dipterocarps. A fully developed dipterocarp forest is a marvellous sight, a place where tall straight trunks soar 40m or more and disappear into an unbroken forest canopy. The bases of these large trees are often supported by elegantly flaring buttresses that have the appearance of fine cathedral architecture. On high quality sites, a dipterocarp forest supports some of the greatest botanical diversity in the world – up to 200 different tree species per hectare (as compared to 10 different species in the world's best temperate forests).

The most widespread forest type in tropical Southeast Asia is deciduous forest (also known as monsoon forest). Unfortunately, because it grows in lowland areas it is also the forest most readily converted to rice fields. Deciduous forests are shaped by lack of rain in the dry season and by frequent forest fires, and the dipterocarps of these forests tend to be short, gnarled trees loosely scattered among grasslands.

Highly valued teak trees are a characteristic component of these monsoon forests and are harvested everywhere, legally and illegally. In areas of heavy

logging, bamboo thickets invade the disturbed soils and are now a conspicuous sight in many parts of the region.

Forests with access to water keep their leaves throughout the year and are known as evergreen forests. These forests grow near the equator (the typical 'rainforest'), along rivers and in moist mountain environments, and for these reasons their distribution is patchy in Southeast Asia. Evergreen forests can be recognised by their incredible richness of species and lush vegetation.

Go to www.wwfchina.org/english for details of the WWF's projects for endangered and protected animals in China. You'll also find a kid's page for the budding biologists in the family.

Although strangler figs (Banyan trees) of the rainforest are renowned for their beauty their more important role is as 'keystone' species. Figs are perhaps the single most abundant food source during the years that dipterocarps don't produce crops and many birds, mammals and insects depend on figs for their survival. The fig fruit is actually a hollow capsule with flowers growing on the interior wall that are pollinated by different species of tiny wasps. Fig seeds are spread by animals that eat the fruit, and as a young fig grows it sends out a web of roots that fuse and smother the host tree it lands on, hence the common name strangler fig. Visitors to the Mekong region can see some stupendous ancient fig trees growing on the ruins at Angkor (see p212).

Montane evergreen forests of Southeast Asia are a mix of tropical trees, oaks and pines covered in dense mats of orchids, mosses, ferns and epiphytes at higher elevations. In Yúnnán, these forests are also home to 600 species of rhododendron and 650 of the world's azalea species, in addition to the tantalisingly named dragon spruce.

Conifers may surprise visitors who expect only 'rainforest' trees in Southeast Asia. Vietnam alone has 33 species of conifers and the mountains of southwestern China offer even more species. In 2002 an unusual new conifer called the golden Vietnamese cypress was discovered in the Bat Dai Son Mountains of Vietnam. Its closest relative lives in the Pacific Northwest, and shows the ancient link that existed between East Asia and North America.

Plants growing on limestone karst formations (see the boxed text, p52) tend to be markedly different to those in other forest types. Limestone soils are dry, alkaline and poor in nutrients, creating harsh conditions for survival. Despite these disadvantages, limestone formations have more species per unit area than other plant community and many of these species are endemic, often growing on a single hill and nowhere else in the world.

PARKS

The story of parks and protected areas in the Mekong region is a mixed bag. On one hand the environment is recognised as one of the most biologically diverse in the world, a fact that has not been lost on government authorities who see tremendous scientific and economic value in protecting endangered habitats. But at the same time, even highly touted parks exist as little more than lines on a map and few resources are allocated for wildlife protection or park ranger salaries.

Across much of the Mekong region, local villagers live in close proximity to the natural world, depending on plants and animals for all aspects of their lives. Furthermore, rice is notoriously fickle and nearby forests provide villagers a safety net for food and income – whether the land is protected or not – when rice crops fail.

Yúnnán

Perhaps 12 national parks and 16 national nature reserves have been listed for Yúnnán, many of them in the past 25 years, but this is a rough number because the names and designations for these sites seem nowhere near standardised or adequately documented by visitors and government officials.

Yúnnán's most famous protected areas include the 2070-sq-km Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve on the Laos and Myanmar borders. This reserve area encompasses five separate subreserves that protect about 4% of the total tropical zone in China, as well as several hundred elephants, tigers, leopards and golden-haired monkeys. In the same region is the massive Sanchahe Nature Reserve, site of the popular Banna Wild Elephant Valley, that is home to 40 or so wild elephants.

Further north is the Three Parallel Rivers of Yúnnán Protected Areas, a UN designation for 15 protected areas that encompass the remote forested upper watersheds of the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween Rivers. Many of these protected zones are poorly known and seldom visited, though the Gaoligong Mountain Nature Reserve on the Southern Silk Road is the oldest and best known of these reserves.

Laos

Laos boasts one of the youngest and most comprehensive protected area systems in the world. In 1993 the government set up 18 National Biodiversity Conservation Areas, comprising a total of 24,600 sq km, or just over 10% of the country's land mass. It did this following sound scientific advice rather than creating areas on an ad hoc basis (as most other countries have done). Two more areas were added in 1995, for a total of 20 protected areas covering 14% of Laos. Recently the Lao People's Democratic Republic government renamed these National Protected Areas (NPAs). Another 20 protected areas of varying designations have also been added.

For fuller descriptions of all Laos's National Protected Areas, see the comprehensive website www.ecotourismlaos.com.

The largest of the NPAs, Nakai-Nam Theun, covers 3710 sq km and is home to one of the two largest elephant populations in the country, as well as several species unknown to the scientific world a decade ago. The

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

The true splendour of the Mekong region is well preserved in an extensive variety of World Heritage Sites which protect some of the area's foremost environmental, cultural and historical attractions.

Included on this list is Dong Phaya Yen-Khao Yai Forest Complex of northern Thailand, a cluster of six national parks, the most famous of which is Khao Yai National Park (p156), the first national park in Thailand and home to an incredible diversity of wildlife.

Also in northern Thailand is the Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries, a group of protected lands that together constitute the largest conservation area in mainland Southeast Asia. When first established in 1991, it set aside 6222 sq km, but with the addition of other proposed reserves, it is hoped that this sanctuary will grow to 1.2 million hectares and be large enough to protect sizable populations of Southeast Asia's most endangered large mammals. Off limits without special permission, it received only 400 to 500 visitors a year through the 1990s.

Halong Bay (p369) in the Gulf of Tonkin is considered *the* natural wonder of Vietnam. Picture 3000 incredible limestone pillars rising from the emerald waters and you have a vision of greatness. These tiny islands are dotted with isolated beaches and limestone caves that beckon great numbers of tourists.

The 2000-sq-km Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park was established in 2003 and protects the oldest major karst region in all of Asia. Extending to the border of Laos, the park offers 70km of caves and underground rivers, and dozens of unclimbed peaks and unexplored valleys.

one officially declared national park in Laos, the 2000-sq-km Phu Khao Khuay NPA (p285) situated near Vientiane, has opening hours and an admission fee.

Thailand

The parks of the northern half of Thailand range from Doi Inthanon National Park, which protects Thailand's highest mountain and is home to nearly 400 species of birds, to Khao Yai National Park which is Thailand's oldest and most visited national park and is the crown jewel of the country's national park system. Khao Yai National Park protects one of the largest intact monsoon forests left in Southeast Asia and is home to 200 to 300 elephants.

Thailand's national park system was established in 1961 and has since grown to encompass 112 national parks across the country, plus thousands of 'nonhunting areas', wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves, botanical gardens and arboretums. Coastal and ocean environments are further protected in a variety of marine parks and preserves.

Cambodia

Before the civil war, Cambodia had six national parks, together covering 22,000 sq km (around 12% of the country). The war effectively destroyed this system and it wasn't reintroduced until 1993 when a royal decree designated 23 national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, protected landscapes and multiple-use areas. Three more protected forests were recently added to the list, bringing the area of protected land in Cambodia to 47,845 sq km (around 26% of the country). In principle this is fantastic news, but in practice authorities don't have the resources or the will to protect these areas on the ground.

Back in the early 1990s, Cambodia had such extensive forest cover compared with its neighbours that some environmentalists were calling for the whole country to be made a protected area.

Cambodia's most important parks include the 1400-sq-km Bokor National Park (p244), 350-sq-km Kirirom National Park (p201), 150-sq-km Ream National Park (p240) and 3325-sq-km Virachay National Park (p236). Recent additions to the park system include Cambodia's largest protected area, the 4294-sq-km Mondulkiri Protected Forest, which adjoins the 1155-sq-km Yok Don National Park in Vietnam.

Vietnam

Vietnam currently has more than 150 parks, reserves and other protected areas and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has established a goal of protecting a total area of 20,000 sq km by 2010. The majority of these protected areas are seldom visited by travellers, who tend to get stuck on the 'must-see' tourist trail. Access can be problematic for parks hidden in remote areas, but others are much easier to reach. The 738-sq-km Cat Tien National Park (see the boxed text, p402) is easily reached from Ho Chi Minh City and is very popular with bird-watchers. For those who are willing to undertake the boat ride, the 152-sq-km Cat Ba National Park (p371) preserves beautiful island habitats that are popular with foreign travellers.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Behind nearly all environmental issues and crises in Southeast Asia lies the overwhelming fact that the vast majority of the region's people depend directly on the forests and waters for their very survival. When international companies siphon off local resources, it is the people of the nation that suffer. For example, the Mekong provides for the most productive fishery in the world, feeding 73 million people who live along its banks. New dam construction funded by the UN Development Program and the Asia Development Bank has an immediate and incalculable impact on fish populations that migrate along the river and deprives countless people of their daily protein and source of income.

Humans have also had a devastating impact on the region, despite its ruggedness and remoteness. Some conservationists, for instance, consider Vietnam so highly degraded that they write it off as a lost cause. Virtually every inch of usable land has been converted from forest to rice fields, and more forests every year are being cleared for slash-and-burn agriculture. Porous, poorly guarded borders and lax enforcement means that borders are wide open for illegal trade in wildlife and forest products, much of which seems to directly profit local military.

In many areas, cut stumps outnumber living trees and during the peak logging frenzy of 1997, all of Cambodia's unprotected forests had been licensed to logging companies. Thailand banned logging in 1989 after a series of fatal landslides smothered several villages but simply shifted their logging operations to adjacent countries. Under international pressure, Cambodia temporarily froze all logging concessions in 2001. Meanwhile, Chinese companies log without oversight in neighbouring Laos in exchange for building roads, and the issue keeps shifting around the region faster than regulations can keep up.

The United States single-handedly bears a tremendous responsibility for creating some of the most intensive environmental destruction in the region. During the Vietnam-American war, the US military dumped 72 million litres of herbicides over 16% of South Vietnam, defoliating vast stretches of intact forest cover and poisoning the landscape. Another 14 million tons of bombs destroyed villages, hillsides, fields and forests; while massive bulldozers named 'Rome ploughs' were used to rip away the vegetation and topsoil in areas that had been missed. Although there has been nearly miraculous recovery in some of these areas, it is impossible to calculate how many species were thoughtlessly wiped out.

Given the importance of the Mekong, few other topics matter as much as the continued devastation to Southeast Asia's most vital resource. As new roads improve access to markets, local villages are steadily shifting from their ancient subsistence economies to cash economies, resulting in the landscape being stripped of resources as quickly as possible. Fishermen on the river have turned to using gill nets that indiscriminately sweep up nearly every living organism, including the highly endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (see the boxed text, p232). Even in cases where countries have outlawed gill netting, their neighbours on the river continue using this horrific practice and everyone suffers.

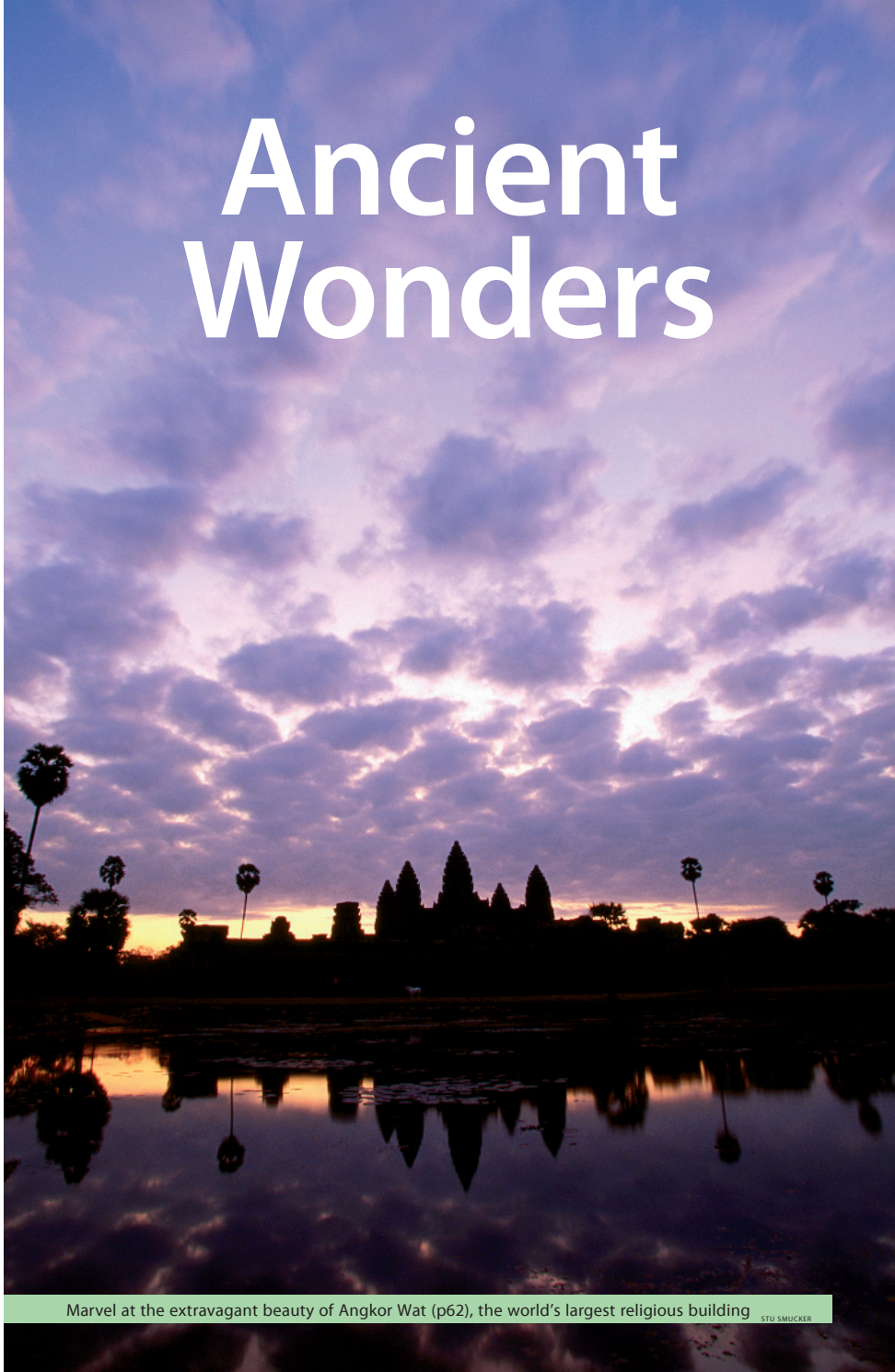
The giant Mekong catfish may grow up to 3m long and weigh almost 300kg. Due to Chinese blasting of shoals in the Upper Mekong, it now faces extinction in the wild.

It would be impossible to overstate the impact that dams have on the river environment. It's hard to say how many dams are on the table because these plans are guarded secrets, but it's safe to say that quite a few are being discussed and funded by the different countries. Recent dams in southwest China have already cut off an estimated 50% of the upper river's sediment input, and there are apparently plans to dam the entire length of the Mekong in Yúnnán. The majority of the river's fish are migratory to one degree or another and dams prevent them from reaching critical breeding areas, while also dampening the natural flooding cycle that fish depend on.

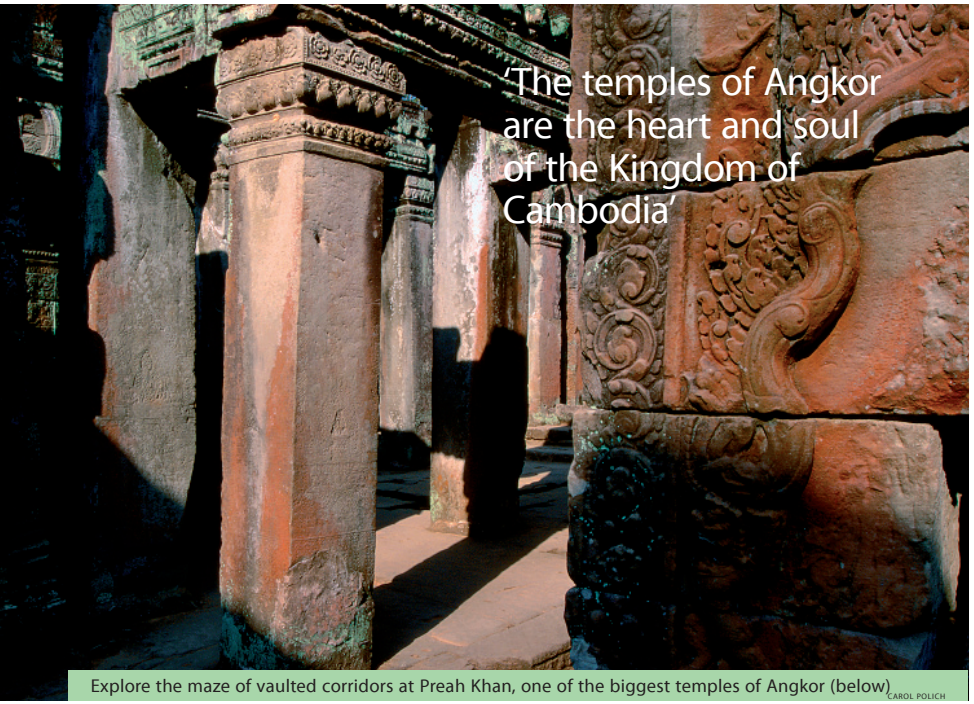
There are a few positive signs in this gloomy picture. Countless villagers are taking matters into their own hands and creating local management traditions that help protect the landscape. Encouraged by national governments, quite a number of reforestation projects are in the works, including

the 'Five Million Hectare Program' in Vietnam which has the goal of planting five million hectares of new forest by 2010. International pressure, coupled with amazing discoveries of new species by scientists, has propelled Southeast Asian biodiversity onto front page news and convinced regional governments to get more serious in their conservation efforts. It is too late for some species but we can only hope that the tide is turning in a positive direction for many others.

Ancient Wonders



Marvel at the extravagant beauty of Angkor Wat (p62), the world's largest religious building STU SMUCKER



Explore the maze of vaulted corridors at Preah Khan, one of the biggest temples of Angkor (below) CAROL POLICH

Ancient Wonders

The Mekong region is littered with the legacy of powerful empires which carved their personality and power into the landscape. Majestic temples, mysterious enigmas and living museums, the Mekong plays host to an abundance of ancient wonders.

THE TEMPLES OF ANGKOR

Prepare for divine inspiration! The temples of Angkor, capital of Cambodia's ancient Khmer empire, are the perfect fusion of creative ambition and spiritual devotion. The Cambodian god kings of old each strove to better their ancestors in size, scale and symmetry, culminating in the world's largest religious building, Angkor Wat (p208), and one of the world's weirdest, the Bayon (p209). The hundreds of temples surviving today are but the sacred skeleton of the vast political, religious and social centre of an empire that stretched from Burma to Vietnam, a city which, at its zenith, boasted a population of one million when London was a scrawny town of 50,000 inhabitants.

The temples of Angkor are the heart and soul of the Kingdom of Cambodia, a source of inspiration and national pride to all Khmers as they struggle to rebuild their lives after years of terror and trauma. Today, they are a point of pilgrimage for all Cambodians and no visitor will want to miss their extravagant beauty when passing through the region.

PRASAT PREAH VIHEAR

The imposing mountain temple of Prasat Preah Vihear (p225) has the most dramatic location of all of the Angkorian monuments, perched atop the cliff face of Cambodia's Dangkrek Mountains. The views from this most mountainous of temple mountains are breathtaking: lowland Cambodia stretching as far as the eye can see, and the holy mountain of Phnom Kulen (p213) looming in the distance. The foundation stones of the temple stretch to the edge of the cliff as it falls precipitously away to the plains below.

Known as Khao Phra Wihan by the Thais, Preah Vihear means 'Sacred Monastery' in Khmer and it was an important place of pilgrimage during the Angkorian period. The 300-year chronology of its construction also offers the visitor an insight into the metamorphosis of carving and sculpture during the Angkor period and there are some impressive touches, including a rendition of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (p208), later so perfectly mastered at Angkor Wat.

KOH KER

The history of Cambodia is riven with dynastic spats and political intrigue. One of the most memorable came in the 10th century when Jayavarman IV (r 928–42) threw his toys out of the pram, stormed off to the northeast and established the rival capital of Koh Ker (p224). Koh Ker was the capital for just 15 years, but Jayavarman IV was determined to legitimise his rule through a prolific building programme that left a legacy of 30 major temples and some gargantuan sculpture that is on display in the National Museum (p192) in Phnom Penh.

The most striking structure at Koh Ker is Prasat Thom, a seven-storey step pyramid, more Mayan than Khmer, with commanding views over the surrounding forest. Nearby is Prasat Krahom (Red Temple), named after the pinkish Banteay Srei–style stone from which it is built.

Intricate carvings decorate the third *gopura* (entrance pavilion) at Prasat Preah Vihear (above) JOHN ELK III

LUANG PRABANG

Luscious, lovely and laid back, Luang Prabang (p290) is the place to live a languid life. Dormant for decades, the town survived warfare and communism to emerge as a wonderful living example of a French-colonial town, complete with historic wats and traditional Lao houses. Laos moves at its own pace and seductive Luang Prabang is no exception. Many come for a few days but stay for a few weeks.

The sweeping roof of Wat Xieng Thong (p294) is the most striking of more than 30 ancient temples. Every morning the streets are ablaze with saffron as a stream of monks spills out of the wats seeking alms. The Mekong River is a beautiful backdrop for this World Heritage–listed town and it's the perfect way to reach the Pak Ou Caves (p300), a royal repository for thousands of precious Buddha images. Luang Prabang may not be as ancient as some, but this historic town is an absolute wonder.

PLAIN OF JARS

Among the most enigmatic sights in Laos, the Plain of Jars (p305) is proof that history remains a mystery in some parts of the Mekong region. Scattered across a plain near Phonsavan (p303) are hundreds of stone jars in many shapes and sizes. Archaeologists continue to debate their function, and theories range from sarcophagi to wine fermenters or rice storage jars.

Nobody really knows how old these mysterious jars are or where they came from, but they may be linked to the strange stone megaliths in Sam Neua Province. Locals claim they are 2000 years old and have their own explanation for their origin. In the 6th century, the Lao-Thai hero Khun Jeuam travelled to the area to overthrow the cruel despot Chao Angka. To celebrate his victory, locals believe he had hundred of jars constructed for the fermentation of rice wine. It must have been some party!

The mysterious Plain of Jars (opposite) JULIET COOMBE

HOI AN

Step back in time to the historic heart of Hoi An (p387), a centuries-old Vietnamese trading port that has played home to Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese and French merchants. The beautiful blend of architecture reveals the layers of history here, as successive powers struggled to exert their influence. Spared the ravages of war, Hoi An is now a worthy World Heritage Site and is the most popular stop on the Vietnamese coast.

The Chinese kept their culture alive in the assembly halls and temples that dot the town, reflecting the diverse make-up of the Middle Kingdom. The Japanese bequeathed a classic covered bridge which remains in use today. The French left their graceful architecture, all adding up to Hoi An specialising in fusion long before the gastronomes came to town. Many of the old houses have been preserved to offer a glimpse into the 19th-century life of merchants in old Faifo, as it was once known.

The glittering entrance to Wat Xieng Thong (above), Luang Prabang's most magnificent temple JANE SWEENEY

'Laos moves at its own pace and seductive Luang Prabang is no exception'

The ancient trading port of Hoi An (above) is set on the Thu Bon River MARK DAFFEY

MY SON

While the Chams may not have been quite the audacious architects the ancient Khmers were, they certainly knew about beautiful brickwork. Controlling an empire that covered much of south and central Vietnam, the centre of spiritual life was here in My Son (p392) when the political capital was in nearby Tra Kieu (Simhapura). Set under the shadow of Cat's Tooth Mountain, the principal temples suffered greatly at the hands of American attacks, but are slowly being restored to their former glories.

The brickwork is brilliant and was later carved and coated in stucco or plaster. Many of the temples would have been finished in gold leaf and must have been an inspiring and imposing sight for pilgrims of old. Modern pilgrims in the shape of tourists travel here by day. Arrive early in the morning or late in the afternoon for a more reflective experience.

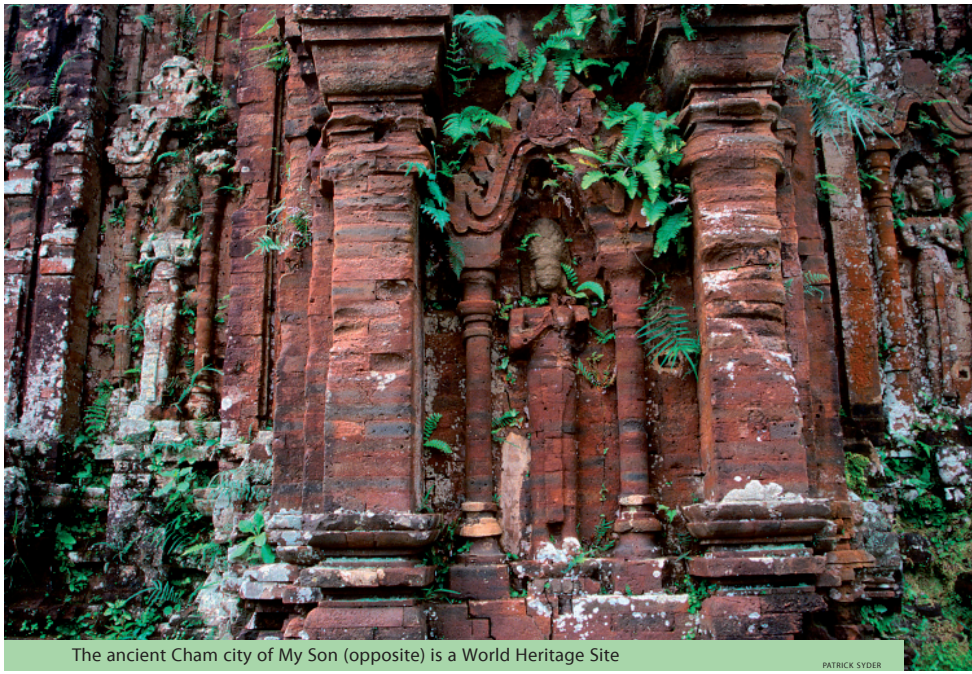
SUKHOTHAI

Thailand's first capital in the 13th century, Sukhothai (p150) symbolises the golden age of Thai civilisation and is a source of national pride. A World Heritage Site, the park includes the remains of 21 temples within the ancient walls of the *meuang kào* (old city), and the art and architecture are considered to be the most classic of Thai styles. The city flourished for 200 years and the first Thai script dates from this period.

The graceful architecture of Sukhothai (meaning Rising of Happiness) is epitomised by the classic lotus bud stupa, but there are shades of Sri Lanka and Srivijaya in some of the stupas. The largest wat is impressive Wat Mahathat (p150), but impressive Khmer temples such at Wat Si Sawai (p150) suggest this was a spiritual centre long before the Thais established their capital here.

Stately Buddha figures sit among the ruined columns at Wat Mahathat (above) NOBORU KOMINE

'Sukhothai symbolises the golden age of Thai civilisation and is a source of national pride'



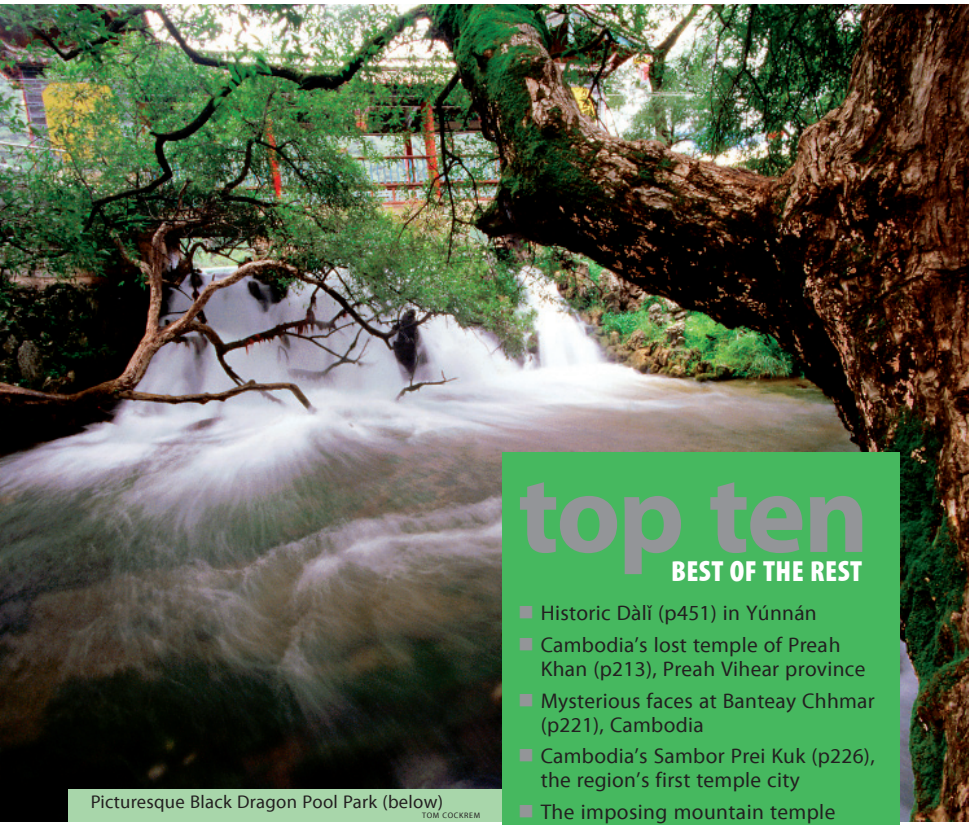
The ancient Cham city of My Son (opposite) is a World Heritage Site PATRICK SYDER

AYUTHAYA

The urban setting might be pretty ordinary in comparison with the Angkors and Sukhothais of the region, but Ayuthaya (p130) is undoubtedly on the historical A-list of the Mekong region. Eclipsing Sukhothai in the 14th century, this was the glittering capital of the Thai kingdom for more than 400 years, until the Burmese managed to finish what they had started centuries earlier and sacked the capital in 1767.

The historical park includes dozens of temples scattered throughout the town of Ayuthaya. Wat Phra Si Sanphet (p130) was once the largest temple here and has an iconic line-up of *chedi* which draw the crowds. The Burmese left little standing at Wat Phra Mahathat (p130), but this is one of the most photographed places in Thailand thanks to an ancient Buddha head caught in the embrace of a tentaclelike tree root.

Buddha head at Wat Phra Mahathat (left) ANDERS BLOMQVIST



Picturesque Black Dragon Pool Park (below) TOM COCKREM

top ten BEST OF THE REST

- Historic Dàlǐ (p451) in Yúnnán
- Cambodia's lost temple of Preah Khan (p213), Preah Vihear province
- Mysterious faces at Banteay Chhmar (p221), Cambodia
- Cambodia's Sambor Prei Kuk (p226), the region's first temple city
- The imposing mountain temple of Wat Phu Champasak (p328) in southern Laos
- Hanoi's bubbling, sizzling, pulsating Old Quarter (p357)
- The golden stupa of Pha That Luang (p270) in Vientiane, Laos
- Bangkok's dazzling Grand Palace (p115) complex
- Beautifully restored Khmer temple architecture at Phanom Rung (p156) in Thailand
- The imperial city of the old emperors, Hué (p379) in Vietnam

LÌJIĀNG

Once upon a time, all of China must have looked like this. Cobbled streets, rickety old wooden buildings and chaotic canals combine to make this the closest thing to an Ang Lee epic that you'll find in Yúnnán. Lìjiāng (p455) was rocked by an earthquake in 1996 that caused widespread damage, although most of the traditional Naxi architecture survived. The government took note of this, and is now committed to replacing cement with cobblestone and wood.

The focus of town, the Old Market Square, was once the haunt of Naxi traders, but these days the souvenir sellers hold court. The Mu Family Mansion (p457) was extensively rebuilt after the 1996 earthquake but is worth a visit for the beautiful grounds alone. Finish up at Black Dragon Pool Park (p457), which offers an incredible view of Yùlóng Xuěshān (Jade Dragon Snow Mountain; p459).

The Culture

The Mekong region is not known as Indochina for nothing. Geographically it is the land in between China and India, and culturally it has absorbed influences from both of these mighty civilisations. This is where two of the world's greatest cultures collide. China has shaped the destiny of Vietnam and Yúnnán and continues to cast a shadow over the Mekong. India exported its great religions, language, culture and sculpture to Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. The border between Vietnam and Cambodia is as significant a sociocultural border as the Himalaya range is a formidable physical barrier between the great rivals of China and India. It is the divide between Sino-Asia to the east and Indo-Asia to the west.

Cambodia was the cultural staging post to the Indianisation of the Mekong region. Indian traders brought Hinduism and Buddhism around the 2nd century and with it came the religious languages of Sanskrit and Pali; Sanskrit forming the root of modern Khmer, Lao and Thai. They also brought their art and architecture, which was redefined so effectively by the ancient Khmers before spreading into Laos and Thailand. Vietnam, meanwhile, was occupied by China for more than a thousand years and, like the Indians, the Chinese brought with them their religion, their philosophy and their culture. Confucianism and Taoism were introduced and still form the backbone of Vietnamese religion, together with Buddhism.

With a millennium or more influence from two of the world's most successful civilisations, it is hardly surprising to find such a dynamic variety of culture in the Mekong region today.

For an in-depth insight into the cultures of the Mekong region, including fashion, film and music, check out www.thingsasian.com.

PEOPLE

As empires came and went, so too did the populations, and many of the countries in the Mekong region are far less ethnically homogenous than their governments would have you believe. It wasn't only local empire building that had an impact, but colonial meddling, which left a number of people stranded beyond their borders. There are Lao and Khmer in Thailand, Khmer in Vietnam, Thai (Dai) in China and Vietnam, and Chinese everywhere. No self-respecting Mekong town would be complete without a Chinatown and in many of the major cities in the region, Chinese migrants may make up as much as half of the population.

The mountains of the Mekong region provide a home for a mosaic of minority groups, often referred to as hill tribes. Many of these groups migrated from China and Tibet and have settled in areas that lowlanders considered too much of a challenge to cultivate. Colourful costumes and unique traditions draw increasing numbers of visitors to their mountain homes. The most popular areas to visit local hill tribes include Mondulkiri (p236) and Ratanakiri (p233) provinces in Cambodia, Luang Nam Tha (p309) and Muang Sing (p312) in northern Laos, Chiang Mai (p133) and Chiang Rai (p145) in northern Thailand, Sapa (p376) in northern Vietnam and Xīshuāngbǎnnà (p463) in Yúnnán. For more on visiting hill-tribe communities, see p138.

Population growth varies throughout the Mekong region. China's much publicised one-child policy has helped to curb growth in Yúnnán province, while developed Thailand embraced family planning decades ago. Vietnam is coming around to the Chinese way of thinking and starting to promote family planning. Cambodia and Laos have the highest birth rates and large families remain the rule rather than the exception out in the countryside.

Chinese

There could be as many as 100 million Chinese in the Mekong region, concentrated in Yúnnán, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Han Chinese make up 92% of the Chinese population, but have long migrated south to the Mekong lands in search of a better life. The Han form a majority in Yúnnán, although this remains the most ethnically diverse province in China with more than 20 minorities. Coined by some the Jews of Asia, ethnic Chinese penetrated the region as merchants, establishing their own neighbourhoods and perpetuating their language and customs. Their presence down the centuries was perhaps more instrumental than the colonial experience in developing the local economies and opening up new opportunities.

Many of the great cities of the Mekong region have significant Chinese communities and in the case of capitals like Bangkok and Phnom Penh, people of at least some Chinese ancestry may make up half the population. The Chinese are much more integrated in the Mekong region than in places like Indonesia, and continue to contribute to the economic boom through investment and initiative. With one eye on history, the Vietnamese are more suspicious of the Chinese than most.

Kinh (Vietnamese)

The Mekong region is home to around 80 million Kinh, most living in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Despite the Chinese view that the Vietnamese are 'the ones that got away', the Vietnamese existed in the Red River Delta area long before the first waves of Chinese arrived some 2000 years ago. The Kinh make up about 90% of the population of Vietnam, the rest including hill tribes (or *montagnards* as they were known by the French), Cham, Chinese and Khmer. Centuries ago, the Vietnamese began to push southwards in search of cultivable land and swallowed the kingdom of Champa before pushing on into the Mekong Delta and picking off pieces of a decaying Khmer empire. As well as occupying the coastal regions of Vietnam, the lowland Kinh have begun to move into the mountains to take advantage of new opportunities in agriculture, industry and tourism. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese are incredibly industrious and think nothing of working from dawn until dusk.

There are also significant Vietnamese populations in both Cambodia and Laos, although they are not generally as well integrated (read popular) as the Chinese. There are also sizable Vietnamese communities in countries like Australia and the US, a legacy of the long war.

Most of the Vietnamese population follows the Tam Giao (Triple Religion; p80), a fusion of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. There is also a significant proportion of Catholics, the largest in Southeast Asia outside the Philippines.

Khmer (Cambodian)

Around 15 million Khmers live in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Khmer have inhabited Cambodia since the beginning of recorded history around the 2nd century AD, long before the Thais and Vietnamese arrived on the scene. During the subsequent centuries, the culture of Cambodia was influenced by contact with the civilisations of India and Java. During the glory years of Angkor, Hinduism was the predominant religion, but from the 15th century Theravada Buddhism was adopted and most Khmers remain devoutly Buddhist today, their faith an important anchor in the struggle to rebuild their lives. The Cambodian population went to hell and back during the years of Khmer Rouge rule and it is believed that as much as one-third of the population perished as a direct result of their brutal policies. This continues to impact on the Khmer psyche today and there has been a real breakdown in trust within society.

Today, government figures suggest that 96% of the population of Cambodia is Khmer, but in reality there are probably far larger numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese than this figure would suggest.

lonelyplanet.com

There are significant populations of Khmer in both northeast Thailand and the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The Mekong Delta was only formally annexed to Vietnam during the French rule in Indochina and there are still about one million or more Khmers living there today, mainly in the districts of Soc Trang and Tra Vinh. In northeast Thailand, the Khmer population lives in provinces near the Cambodian border like Buriram, Surin and Si Saket. There are also significant populations of Khmers in Australia, France and the US, a legacy of war and revolution.

Lao

There are around 15 million Lao people living across the Mekong region, in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia.

Laos is often described as less a nation state than a conglomeration of tribes and languages. And depending on who you talk with, that conglomeration consists of between 49 and 132 different ethnic groups. The lower figure is that now used by the government. The Lao traditionally divide themselves into four broad families – Lao Loum, Lao Thai, Lao Thoeng and Lao Soung – roughly defined by the altitude at which they live and their cultural proclivities. The Lao government has an alternative three-way split, in which the Lao Thai are condensed into the Lao Loum group. This triumvirate is represented on the back of every 1000 kip bill, in national costume, from left to right: Lao Soung, Lao Loum and Lao Thoeng.

The dominant ethnic group is the Lao Loum (Lowland Lao), who through superior numbers and living conditions, have for centuries ruled the smaller ethnic groups living in Laos. Their language is the national language; their religion, Buddhism, is the national religion; and many of their customs are interpreted as those of the Lao nation, including the tradition of eating sticky rice.

Although they're closely related to the Lao Loum, the Lao Thai subgroups have resisted absorption into mainstream Lao culture. Like the Lao Loum, they live along river valleys, but the Lao Thai have chosen to reside in upland valleys rather than the Mekong floodplains. The various Lao Thai groups can be identified by the predominant colour of their clothing such as Black Thai (Thai Dam) and White Thai (Thai Khao).

The Lao Thoeng (Upland Lao) are a loose affiliation of mostly Austro-Asiatic peoples who live on midaltitude mountain slopes. The largest group is the Khamu, followed by the Htin, Lamet and other Mon-Khmer groups in the south. The Lao Thoeng are also known by the pejorative term *khàa,* which means 'slave' or 'servant', as they were used as indentured labour by migrating Austro-Thai peoples in earlier centuries.

Foreign ethnographers who have carried out field research in Laos have identified anywhere from 49 to 132 different ethnic groups.

The Lao Soung (High Lao) include the hill tribes who live at the highest altitudes. They are the most recent immigrants, having come from Myanmar (Burma), Tibet and southern China within the last 150 years. The largest group is the Hmong, also called Miao or Meo, who number more than 300,000 in four main subgroups – the White Hmong, Striped Hmong, Red Hmong and Black Hmong. For years the Hmong's only cash crop was opium, which they grew and manufactured more than any other group in Laos, bringing them into conflict with the central government.

Thai

Thais make up about 75% of the population of Thailand, although this group is commonly broken down into four subgroups: Central Thais or Siamese who inhabit the Chao Praya delta, the Thai Lao of northeastern Thailand, the Thai Pak Thai of southern Thailand, and northern Thais. Each group speaks its own dialect and to a certain extent practises customs unique to its region. Politically and economically, the Central Thais are the dominant group, although they barely outnumber the Thai Lao. This helps explain

what a masterstroke it was changing the name of the country from Siam to Thailand in 1939. At a stroke, Siamese exclusivity was abolished and everyone was welcome to be a part of the new Thai family.

As well as the Thais of Thailand, there are Thai tribal peoples throughout the Mekong region. Fanning out from their original homeland in the Xīshuāngbǎnnà region of Yúnnán, they are now found in north Vietnam and northern Laos. These groups are usually classified according to their clothing, such as Black Thai and White Thai.

There are many other minorities living within the borders of Thailand. According to official estimates, as much as 11% of Thailand's population may be Chinese, although unofficially it could be even higher still. There are large numbers of ethnic Khmers in the northeast, not to mention the fact that Thais are outnumbered by the Lao in this part of the country. In the far south, there is a significant Malay population of 3.5%. In the far north, there are a number of hill tribes including the Akha, the Hmong (below) and the Karen (opposite), as well as Shan refugees from the troubles in Myanmar.

The Mekong region is home to around 35 million Thais, concentrated in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Yúnnán.

Minority Groups

There are many other important minority groups in the region, some rendered stateless by the conflicts of the past, others recent migrants to the region, including the many hill tribes.

CHAM

The Cham people originally occupied the kingdom of Champa in south-central Vietnam and their beautiful brick towers dot the landscape from Danang to Phan Rang. Victims of a historical squeeze between Cambodia and Vietnam, their territory was eventually annexed by the expansionist Vietnamese. Originally Hindu, they converted to Islam in the 16th and 17th centuries and many migrated south to Cambodia. Today there are small numbers of Cham in Vietnam and as many as half a million in Cambodia, all of whom continue to practise a flexible form of Islam. Over the centuries, there has been considerable intermarriage between Cham and Malay traders.

HMONG

The Hmong are one of the largest hill tribes in the Mekong region, spread through much of northern Laos, northern Vietnam, Thailand and Yúnnán. As some of the last to arrive in the region in the 19th century, Darwinian selection ensured that they were left with the highest and harshest lands from which to eke out their existence. They soon made the best of a bad deal and opted for opium cultivation, which brought them into conflict with mainstream governments during the 20th century. The CIA worked closely with the Hmong of Laos during the secret war in the 1960s and 1970s. The US-backed operation was kept secret from the American public until 1970. The Hmong were vehemently anticommunist and pockets of resistance continue today. The Hmong remain marginalised and distrusted by central government and remain mired in poverty.

To learn more about the hill tribes of northern Thailand and how to conduct yourself in local villages, take a look at www.hilltribe.org.

Hmong groups are usually classified by their colourful clothing, including Black Hmong, White Hmong, Red Hmong and so on. The brightest group is the Flower Hmong of northwest Vietnam, living in villages around Bac Ha (p378). The Hmong are known for their embroidered indigo-dyed clothing and their ornate silver jewellery. There may be as many as one million Hmong in the Mekong region, half of them living in the mountains of Vietnam.

JARAI

The Jarai are the most populous minority in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, northeast Cambodia and southern Laos. Villages are often named for a nearby river, stream or tribal chief, and a *nha-rong* (communal house) is usually found in the centre. Jarai women typically propose marriage to the men through a matchmaker, who delivers the prospective groom a copper bracelet. Animistic beliefs and rituals still abound, and the Jarai pay respect to their ancestors and nature through a host or *yang* (genie). The Jarai construct elaborate cemeteries for their dead, which include carved effigies of the deceased. These totems can be found in the forests around villages, but sadly many are being snapped up by culturally insensitive collectors.

DZAO

The Dzao (also known as Yao or Dao) are one of the largest and most colourful ethnic groups in Vietnam and are also found in Laos, Thailand and Yúnnán. The Dzao practise ancestor worship of spirits, or *Ban Ho* (no relation to Uncle Ho), and hold elaborate rituals with sacrifices of pigs and chickens. The Dzao are famous for their elaborate dress. Women's clothing typically features intricate weaving and silver-coloured beads and coins – the wealth of a woman is said to be in the weight of the coins she carries. Their long flowing hair, shaved above the forehead, is tied up into a large red or embroidered turban.

KAREN

The Karen are the largest hill tribe in Thailand, numbering more than 300,000. There are four distinct groups, the Skaw Karen (White Karen), Pwo Karen, Pa-O Karen (Black Karen) and Kayah Karen (Red Karen). Unmarried women wear white and kinship remains matrilineal. Most Karen live in lowland valleys and practise crop rotation.

LIFESTYLE

A typical day in the Mekong region starts early. Country folk tend to rise before the sun, woken from their slumber by the cry of cockerels and keen to get the most out of the day before the sun hots up. This habit has spilt over into the towns and cities and many urban dwellers rise at the crack of dawn for a quick jog, a game of badminton or some tai chi moves. Breakfast comes in many flavours, but Chinese *congee* (rice soup) is universally popular throughout the region, as is noodle soup in various flavours. Food is almost as important as family in this part of the world and that is saying something. The family will try to gather for lunch and dinner, but it's not always possible in the dynamic cities, particularly when it can take an hour or more to get from place to place. Long

FACE IT

Face, or more importantly the art of not making the locals lose face, is an important concept to come to grips with in Asia. Face is all in Asia, and in the Mekong region it is above all. Having 'big face' is synonymous with prestige, and prestige is particularly important in the Mekong region. All families, even poor ones, are expected to have big wedding parties and throw their money around like it is water in order to gain face. This is often ruinously expensive but far less important than 'losing face'. And it is for this reason that foreigners should never lose their tempers with the locals; this will bring unacceptable 'loss of face' to the individual involved and end any chance of a sensible solution to the dispute. Take a deep breath and keep your cool. If things aren't always going according to plan, remember that in countries like Cambodia and Laos, tourism is a relatively new industry.

TOP 10 TIPS TO EARN THE RESPECT OF THE LOCALS

Take your time to learn a little about the local culture in the Mekong region. Not only will this ensure you don't inadvertently cause offence or, worse, spark an international incident, but it will also ingratiate you to your hosts. Here are a few tips to help you go native. For more country-specific tips, see the individual chapters.

- Respect local dress standards, particularly at religious sites. Covering the upper arms and upper legs is appropriate, although some monks will be too polite to enforce this. Always remove your shoes before entering a temple, as well as any hat or head covering. Nude sunbathing is considered *totally* inappropriate, even on beaches.
- Since most temples are maintained from the donations received, please remember to make a contribution when visiting a temple.
- Learn about the local greeting in each country and use it when introducing yourself to new friends. However, be aware that among men the Western custom of shaking hands has almost completely taken over. When beckoning someone over, always wave with the palm down towards yourself, as fingers raised can be suggestive.
- Monks are not supposed to touch or be touched by women. If a woman wants to hand something to a monk, the object should be placed within reach of the monk or on the monk's 'receiving cloth'.
- No matter how high your blood pressure rises, do not raise your voice or show signs of aggression. This will lead to a loss of face (see the boxed text, p73) and cause embarrassment to the locals, ensuring the problem gets worse rather than better.
- Exchanging business cards is an important part of even the smallest transaction or business contact in the Mekong region. Get some printed before you arrive and hand them out like confetti. Always present them with two hands.
- Leaving a pair of chopsticks sitting vertically in a rice bowl looks very much like the incense sticks that are burned for the dead. This is a powerful sign and is not appreciated anywhere in Asia.
- The people of the Mekong region like to keep a clean house and it's customary to remove shoes when entering somebody's home. It's rude to point the bottom of your feet towards other people. Never, ever point your feet towards anything sacred, such as a Buddha image. See how the locals sit and fold your legs to the side with the feet pointing backwards.
- As a form of respect to elderly or other esteemed people, such as monks, take off your hat and bow your head politely when addressing them. In Asia, the head is the symbolic highest point – never pat or touch an adult on the head.
- Whilst digging out those stubborn morsels from between your teeth, it is polite to use one hand to perform the extraction and the other hand to cover your mouth so others can't see you do it.

lunch breaks are common (and common sense, as it avoids the hottest part of the day). The working day winds down for some around 5pm, although in the 24-hour world of the cities, some are just getting started at this time. The family will try to come together for dinner and trade tales about their day.

Traditionally, life in the Mekong region has revolved around family, fields and faith, the rhythm of rural existence continuing for centuries at the same pace. For the majority of the population still living in the countryside, these constants have remained unchanged, with several generations sharing the same roof, the same rice and the same religion. But in recent decades these rhythms have been jarred by war and ideology, as the peasants were dragged from all they held dear to fight in civil wars, or were herded into cooperatives as communism tried to assert itself as the moral and social beacon in the

lives of the people. Thailand may have had it easier without the great wars and ideological conflicts that ravaged its neighbours, but many rural families have still found it a struggle to adjust to the pace of modern life.

Traditionally rural agrarian societies, the race is on for the move to the cities. Thailand experienced the growing pains first, and now Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are witnessing a tremendous shift in the balance of population, as increasing numbers of young people desert the fields in search of those mythical streets paved with gold. Until recently, China kept a lid on urban migration by restricting residential permits, but it too has yielded to the inevitable human wave of people seeking a better life. This urban population explosion has the potential to be a social time-bomb if the governments of the region fail to provide opportunities for these new migrants.

Shadows and Wind by journalist Robert Templer (1999) is a snappily written exploration of contemporary Vietnam, from Ho Chi Minh personality cults to Vietnam's rock-and-roll youth.

Like China and Thailand before them, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are experiencing their very own '60s swing, as the younger generation stand up for a different lifestyle to that of their parents. This is creating plenty of feisty friction in the cities, as sons and daughters dress as they like, date who they want and hit the town until all hours. But few live on their own and they still come home to mum and dad at the end of the day, where arguments might arise, particularly when it comes to marriage and settling down.

It is not only the young and old who are living a life apart, but also the urban and rural populations, and the rich and poor. Communism is all but dead in China, Laos and Vietnam; long live the one-party capitalist dictatorship, where survival of the fittest is the name of the game. Some have survived the transition better than others, and this has created strains in the shape of rural revolts and political backlash. One of the great ironies of the revolutions in Asia is they have striven to impose a communist system on a people seemingly born with a commercial gene, a competitive instinct to do business and to do it at any hour of the day or night. To the Chinese and Vietnamese, business, work, commerce – call it what you like – is life.

Extended family is important throughout the Mekong region and that includes second or third cousins, the sort of family that many Westerners may not even realise they have. The extended family comes together during times of trouble and times of joy, celebrating festivals and successes and mourning deaths or disappointments. This is a source of strength for many of the older generation, while for the younger generation it's likely to be friends, girlfriends, boyfriends or gangs who play the role of anchor.

With so many family members under one roof, locals in the Mekong region don't share Western concepts of privacy and personal space. Don't be surprised if people walk into your hotel room without knocking. You may be sitting starkers in your hotel room when the maid unlocks the door and walks in unannounced.

The position of women in the Mekong region is a mixed one, with some countries more enlightened than others. As in many parts of Asia, women in the Mekong region take a lot of pain for little gain, with plenty of hard work to do and little authority at the decision-making level. Thailand is the most progressive society in the region, with women well represented across the spectrum. The communist countries profess an interest in equality, but gender equality hasn't really taken off yet when you do the maths. Generally speaking, the lot of women is fast improving in dynamic urban centres, but remains very difficult in rural areas. Women do get to control the purse strings throughout the region, but that depends on how much of the income the husband 'declares' in the first place. Many men in the Mekong region have 'junior' wives or visit prostitutes and spend much of their time squirrelling away money on extracurricular activities. The sex industry of Thailand needs no introduction, but prostitution is big business in all the

IT'S ALL IN THE FENG SHUI

One tradition that remains central to the Chinese and Vietnamese is geomancy, or feng shui as most of us know it today. This is the art (or science) of living in tune with the environment. The orientation of houses, tombs and pagodas is determined by geomancers. The location of an ancestor's grave is an especially serious matter: if the grave is in the wrong spot or facing the wrong way, there's no telling what trouble the spirits might cause. The same goes for the location of the family altar, which can be found in nearly every Chinese or Vietnamese home. Westerners planning to go into business with a local partner will need to budget for a geomancer to ensure the venture is successful.

countries of the region. Contrary to the international image, most of the demand is domestic, but it remains a dangerous line of work thanks to the lurking threat of HIV infection.

Most women in the Mekong region consider pale skin to be beautiful. On sunny days, young women can often be seen strolling under the shade of an umbrella in order to keep from tanning. Women who work in the fields will go to great lengths to preserve their pale skin by wrapping their faces in towels and wearing long-sleeved shirts, elbow-length silk gloves and conical hats. To tell an Asian woman that she has white skin is a great compliment; telling her that she has a 'lovely suntan' is a bit of an insult.

SPORT

Football (soccer) is the number one spectator sport in the Mekong region and most people are mad for it. During the World Cup, the European Champions League or other major clashes, people stay up all night to watch live games in different time zones around the world. Sadly, the national teams have not kept pace with this obsession. China is the strongest team in the Mekong region and qualified for the World Cup in 2002. Thailand and Vietnam are two of the stronger teams in Southeast Asia, while Cambodia and Laos remain mere minnows of world football.

Check out www.muaythai.com for arguably the most comprehensive website on traditional Thai kick boxing, also popular in Cambodia and Laos.

Kick boxing has been nationalised as *muay thai* in Bangkok, but in fact it has a history throughout the region and can even be seen on the bas-reliefs of the Bayon (p209) in Cambodia. It is a massively popular spectator sport in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and many a bet has been won and lost on the outcome of a match. For the uninitiated, it's pretty violent, with feet entering the fray as well as arms, and legal moves include a knee to the face. Ouch!

Badminton is very popular in all the Mekong countries and locals turn streets and parks throughout the region into public courts to hone their skills. Often they are jostling for space with the legion of tai chi practitioners who are up at the crack of dawn to master their moves.

Tennis has considerable snob appeal these days and rich Asians like to both watch and play. Similarly, golf has taken off as a way to earn brownie points with international investors or local movers and shakers. Golf courses have been developed all over the region, although membership fees ensure it remains a game for the elite.

A legacy of the colonial period, the French game of *pétanque,* or *boules,* is pretty popular in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and it is possible to see games in small towns throughout old Indochina.

RELIGION

The dominant religions of Southeast Asia have absorbed many traditional animistic beliefs of spirits, ancestor worship and the power of the celestial planets in bringing about good fortune. Southeast Asia's spiritual connection

to the realm of magic and miracles commands more respect, even among intellectual circles, than the remnants of paganism in Western Christianity. Locals erect spirit houses in front of their homes, while ethnic Chinese set out daily offerings to their ancestors, and almost everyone visits the fortune teller.

Although the majority of the population has only a vague notion of Buddhist doctrines, they invite monks to participate in life-cycle ceremonies, such as funerals and weddings. Buddhist pagodas are seen by many as a physical and spiritual refuge from an uncertain world.

To find out about the Lao ritual known as the *bąasïi* ceremony, see p298.

Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship dates from long before the arrival of Confucianism or Buddhism. Ancestor worship is based on the belief that the soul lives on after death and becomes the protector of its descendants. Because of the influence the spirits of one's ancestors exert on the living, it is considered not only shameful for them to be upset or restless, but downright dangerous.

Many of the people in the Mekong region worship and honour the spirits of their ancestors on a regular basis, especially on the anniversary of their death. To request help for success in business or on behalf of a sick child, sacrifices and prayers are offered to the ancestral spirits. Important worship elements are the family altar and a plot of land whose income is set aside for the support of the ancestors.

Animism

Both Hinduism and Buddhism fused with the animist beliefs already present in the Mekong region before Indianisation. Local beliefs didn't simply fade away, but were incorporated into the new religions. Just look at the number of spirit houses throughout the region and you'll soon realise the continuing importance of animism in everyday life.

The purest form of animism is practised among the ethnic minorities or hill tribes of the region. Some have converted to Buddhism or Christianity,

THE LUNAR CALENDAR

Astrology has a long history in China and Vietnam, and is intricately linked to religious beliefs. There are 12 zodiacal animals, each of which represents one year in a 12-year cycle. If you want to know your sign, look up your year of birth in the following chart. Don't forget that the Chinese/Vietnamese New Year falls in late January or early February. If your birthday is in the first half of January it will be included in the zodiac year before the calendar year of your birth. To check the Gregorian (solar) date corresponding to a lunar date, pick up any Vietnamese or Chinese calendar.

Rat (generous, social, insecure, idle) 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, 2008
Cow (stubborn, conservative, patient) 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, 2009
Tiger (creative, brave, overbearing) 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998, 2010
Rabbit (timid, affectionate, amicable) 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011
Dragon (egotistical, strong, intelligent); 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000, 2012
Snake (luxury seeking, secretive, friendly) 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001
Horse (emotional, clever, quick thinker) 1930, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1978, 1990, 2002
Goat (charming, good with money, indecisive) 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, 2003
Monkey (confident, humorous, fickle) 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004
Rooster (diligent, imaginative, needs attention) 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993, 2005
Dog (humble, responsible, patient) 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994, 2006
Pig (materialistic, loyal, honest) 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, 2007

but the majority continue to worship spirits of the earth and skies, and the spirits of their forefathers.

Buddhism

The sedate smile of the Buddhist statues decorating the landscapes and temples summarise the nature of the religion in Southeast Asia. Religious devotion within the Buddhist countries is highly individualistic, omnipresent and nonaggressive, with many daily rituals rooted in the indigenous religions of animism and ancestor worship.

Buddhism, like all great religions, has been through a messy divorce, and arrived in the Mekong region in two flavours. Mahayana Buddhism (northern school) proceeded north into Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam and Japan, while Theravada Buddhism (southern school) took the southern route through India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia.

Mahayana Buddhists believe in Bodhisattvas, which are Buddhas that attain nirvana but postpone their enlightenment to stay on earth to save their fellow beings.

The Theravada school of Buddhism is an earlier and, according to its followers, less corrupted form of Buddhism than the Mahayana school found around East Asia and the Himalaya regions. As Theravada followers tried to preserve and limit the Buddhist doctrines to only those canons codified in the early Buddhist era, the Mahayana school gave Theravada Buddhism the pejorative name 'Hinayana' (meaning 'Lesser Vehicle'). They considered themselves 'Greater Vehicle' because they built upon the earlier teachings.

Theravada doctrine stresses the three principal aspects of existence: *dukkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness, disease), *anicca* (impermanency, transience of all things) and *anatta* (no permanent 'soul'). These concepts, when 'discovered' by Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BC, were in direct contrast to the Hindu belief in an eternal, blissful self.

Gautama, an Indian prince turned ascetic, subjected himself to many years of severe austerities to arrive at this vision of the world and was given the title Buddha (the Enlightened or the Awakened). Gautama Buddha spoke of four noble truths, which had the power to liberate any human being who could realise them:

The truth of suffering Existence is suffering.
The truth of the cause of suffering Suffering is caused by desire.
The truth of the cessation of suffering Eliminate the cause of suffering (desire) and suffering will cease to arise.
The truth of the path The eightfold path is the way to eliminate desire/extinguish suffering.

The eightfold path consists of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right bodily conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right attentiveness and right concentration.

The ultimate goal of Theravada Buddhism is nirvana or 'extinction' of all desire and suffering to reach the final stage of reincarnation. By feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local wat, Buddhists hope to improve their lot, acquiring enough merit to reduce the number of rebirths.

Every Buddhist male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life, optimally between the time he finishes school and starts a career or marries. Men or boys under 20 years of age may enter the Sangha (the monkhood or the monastic community) as novices. Nowadays, men may spend less than one month to accrue merit as monks.

Christianity

Catholicism was introduced to the region in the 16th century by missionaries. Vietnam has the highest percentage of Catholics (8% to 10% of the population) in Southeast Asia outside the Philippines.

Confucianism

More a philosophy than an organised religion, Confucianism has been an important force in shaping the social system in China and Vietnam, and the lives and beliefs of the people.

Confucius was born in China around 550 BC. He saw people as social beings formed by society yet also capable of shaping their society. He believed that the individual exists in and for society and drew up a code of ethics to guide the individual in social interactions. This code laid down a person's obligations to family, society and the state, and remains the pillar of society in China and Vietnam today.

The extensive Chinese community in the region keeps the spirit of Confucius alive in other regional capitals including Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

Hinduism

Hinduism ruled the spiritual lives of Southeast Asians more than 1500 years ago, and the great Hindu empire of Angkor built grand monuments to their pantheon of gods. The primary representations of the one omnipresent god include Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer and reproducer). During the time of Angkor, Shiva was the deity most in favour with the royal family, although in the 12th century he was superseded by Vishnu.

The forgotten kingdom of Champa was profoundly influenced by Hinduism and many of the Cham towers, built as Hindu sanctuaries, contain *lingas* that are still worshipped by ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese alike.

Today some elements of Hinduism are still incorporated into important ceremonies involving birth, marriage and death.

Islam

Southeast Asians converted to Islam to join a brotherhood of spice traders and to escape the inflexible caste system of earlier Hindu empires. The Chams may be Muslims, but in practice they follow a localised adaptation of Islamic theology and law. Though Muslims usually pray five times a day, the Chams pray only on Fridays and celebrate Ramadan (a month of dawn-to-dusk fasting) for only three days. In addition, their Islam-based religious rituals co-exist with animism and the worship of Hindu deities. Circumcision is symbolically performed on boys at age 15, when a religious leader makes the gestures of circumcision with a wooden knife.

Taoism

Taoism originated in China and is based on the philosophy of Laotse (The Old One), who lived in the 6th century BC. Little is known about Laotse and there is some debate as to whether or not he actually existed. He is believed

THE RAMAYANA

The literary epic of the *Ramayana* serves as the cultural fodder for traditional art, dance and shadow puppetry throughout the region. In this epic Hindu legend, Prince Rama (an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu) falls in love with beautiful Sita and wins her hand in marriage by successfully stringing a magic bow. Before the couple settle down to marital bliss, Rama is banished from his kingdom and his wife is kidnapped by the demon king, Ravana, and taken to the island of Lanka. With the help of the Monkey King, Hanuman, Sita is rescued, but a great battle ensues. Rama and his allies defeat Ravana and restore peace and goodness to the land. The *Ramayana* is known as the *Reamker* in Cambodia or the *Ramakien* in Laos and Thailand.

CAO DAISM

A fascinating fusion of East and West, Cao Daism (Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do) is a syncretic religion born in 20th-century Vietnam that contains elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, native Vietnamese spiritualism, Christianity and Islam – as well as a dash of secular enlightenment thrown in for good measure. The term Cao Dai (meaning high tower or palace) is a euphemism for God. There are an estimated two to three million followers of Cao Daism worldwide.

Cao Daism was founded by the mystic Ngo Minh Chieu (also known as Ngo Van Chieu; born 1878), who began receiving revelations in which the tenets of Cao Dai were set forth.

All Cao Dai temples observe four daily ceremonies: at 6am, noon, 6pm and midnight. If all this sounds like just what you've been waiting for, you can always join up. Read more on the official Cao Dai site: www.caodai.org. If you just want to visit a Cao Dai temple, head to Tay Ninh (p418), near Ho Chi Minh City.

to have been the custodian of the imperial archives for the Chinese government, and Confucius is supposed to have consulted him.

Understanding Taoism is not easy. The philosophy emphasises contemplation and simplicity. Its ideal is returning to the Tao (the Way, or the essence of which all things are made), and it emphasises the importance of Yin and Yang. Much of Taoist ritualism has been absorbed into Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism, including, most commonly, the use of dragons and demons to decorate temple rooftops.

Tam Giao

Over the centuries, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have fused with popular Chinese beliefs and ancient Vietnamese animism to create Tam Giao (Triple Religion). When discussing religion, most Vietnamese people are likely to say that they are Buddhist, but when it comes to family or civic duties they are likely to follow the moral and social code of Confucianism, but will turn to Taoist concepts to understand the nature of the cosmos.

ARTS

The Laos Cultural Profile (www.culturalprofiles.net/Laos) is a new website established by Visiting Arts and the Ministry of Information and Culture of Laos covering a broad range of cultural aspects, from architecture to music. It's an easy entry point to Lao culture.

The Mekong region's most notable artistic endeavours are religious in nature and depict the deities of Hinduism and Buddhism. Artistic and architectural wonders, the temples of Angkor in Cambodia defined much of the region's artistic interpretation of Hinduism and Buddhism. The temples' elaborate sculptured murals pay homage to the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva, while also recording historical events and creation myths. Statues of Buddha reflect the individual countries' artistic interpretations of an art form governed by highly symbolic strictures. The Buddha is depicted sitting, standing and reclining – all representations of moments in his life. In Vietnam, representations of the Buddha are more reminiscent of Chinese religious art.

Sadly, many of the region's ancient art treasures have been damaged in times of civil war, destroyed during violent revolution or dispersed by invasion. The riches that remain are a testament to the devotion, creativity and wealth of the ancient Mekong kingdoms.

Architecture

There is some masterful architecture in the Mekong region, blending the best of India and China. No civilisation was more expressive than the ancient Khmers and the architecture of Cambodia reached its peak during the Angkorian era (the 9th to 14th centuries AD). Some of the finest examples of architecture from this period are Angkor Wat (p208) and the structures of Angkor Thom (p208).

Temple architecture remains an art form in the Mekong region and each country has its own distinctive style. Wats or Buddhist temples contain a *sim*, where monastic ordinations are held, and a *vihara*, where important Buddha images are stored. Temples in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand have elaborate layered roofs, including the elegant Luang Prabang style, which sweeps almost to the ground beneath. Many temple complexes also include stupas or *chedi*, some of which are said to contain relics (eyelash, hair or something similar) of the Buddha.

For a virtual tour of Thai Buddhist architecture around the region, visit www.orientalarchitecture.com/directory.htm.

China's architectural history stretches back 3000 years, making it one of the longest of any civilisation. It may be the Great Wall that pulls the punters, but Yúnnán is not short of architectural highlights, including the traditional Naxi architecture of Lìjiāng. Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian temples are built on a north–south axis and can be distinguished by their levels of decoration. Taoist temples are usually the brightest, Buddhist temples are a little more understated and Confucian temples are rather plain by comparison.

Many rural houses in Cambodia and Laos are built on high wood pilings and have thatch roofs, walls made of palm mats and floors of woven bamboo strips resting on bamboo joists. The shady space underneath is used for storage and for people to relax at midday. Wealthier families have houses with wooden walls and tiled roofs, but the basic design remains the same. Concrete has already taken over in much of Thailand and is steadily conquering China and Vietnam. However, Thailand has also found a niche developing boutique residences blending the best of traditional and modern lines.

The French left their mark in Indochina in the form of handsome villas and government buildings built in neoclassical style – pillars and all. Some of the best examples are in Hanoi, but most provincial capitals have at least one or two examples of architecture from the colonial period.

Vietnamese Painting – From Tradition to Modernity, by Corinne de Ménonville, is a lush look at Vietnamese contemporary painting. For the contribution of women to the art scene, check out *Vietnamese Women Artists* (2004).

Painting

China and Vietnam lead the way in the region in the world of painting. Painting on frame-mounted silk dates from the 13th century and was at one time the preserve of scholar-calligraphers, who painted grand scenes from nature. During the austere communist era, painting became overtly political and most artists dedicated their skills to producing propaganda posters, which have become quite collectable in recent years. Religious murals are an important feature of temples throughout Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, although the modern renditions are fairly garish by comparison with the beautiful 19th-century panels. There is a booming contemporary art scene in China, Thailand and Vietnam, but beware of spending big bucks unless you know what you are doing, as there are a lot of fakes about.

For an in-depth look at the beauty of Angkorian-era sculpture and its religious, cultural and social context, seek out a copy of *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory*.

Sculpture

The people of Cambodia produced masterfully sensuous sculpture that was more than a mere copy of the Indian forms from which it drew inspiration. Some scholars maintain that the Cambodian forms are unrivalled in India itself. The earliest surviving Cambodian sculpture dates from the 6th century. The Banteay Srei–style of the late 10th century is commonly regarded as a high point in the evolution of Southeast Asian art. The National Museum (p192) in Phnom Penh has a splendid piece from this period: a sandstone statue of Shiva holding Uma, his wife, on his knee. Anyone passing through Paris should also check out the Musée Guimet, home to the finest Khmer collection beyond Cambodian shores.

The Chams produced spectacular carved sandstone figures for their Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries. Cham sculpture was profoundly influenced by Indian art, but over the centuries it managed to also incorporate

Indonesian and Vietnamese elements. The largest single collection of Cham sculpture in the world is found at the Museum of Cham Sculpture (p385) in Danang.

Thailand's most famous sculptures are its beautiful bronze Buddhas, coveted the world over for their originality and grace. However, the only place you will see them these days is in a temple or a museum. Lao sculpture reached its zenith between the 16th and 18th centuries, the heyday of the kingdom of Lan Xang. The finest examples of Lao sculpture are found in Vientiane's Haw Pha Kaew (p270) and Wat Si Saket (p270) or the Royal Palace Museum (p293) in Luang Prabang.

Chinese sculpture needs no introduction thanks to the Terracotta Warriors of Xian. There is some beautiful Buddhist sculpture in China and this includes some of the temples of Yúnnán. There is also a rich tradition of bronze and jade sculpture.

Textiles

There is a rich tradition of silk weaving in the Mekong region and a beautiful scarf or throw is that much easier to cart home than a large sculpture. Cambodia, Laos and Thailand produce some exceptional hand-woven silk, including both traditional and contemporary designs finished in natural dyes. Check out Carol Cassidy Lao Textiles (p276) in Vientiane, Artisans d'Angkor (p202) in Siem Reap or Jim Thompson House (p122) in Bangkok.

Music

TRADITIONAL

Chinese music has a different scale to Western music. Tone is considered more important than melody. The Chinese once considered music to have a cosmological significance and if a musician played in the wrong tone it could indicate the fall of a dynasty. Popular Chinese instruments include the two-stringed fiddle *(èrhú),* four-stringed banjo *(yuè qín),* horizontal flute *(dízi),* zither *(gǔzhēng)* and ceremonial trumpet *(suǒnà).*

Cambodia's great musical tradition was almost lost during the darkness of the Khmer Rouge years, but the Cambodian Master Performers Program (www.cambodianmasters.org) is dedicated to reviving the country's musical tradition.

Heavily influenced by the Chinese to the north and Indian-influenced Khmer and Cham musical traditions to the south, Vietnamese music has produced an original style and instrumentation. Traditional music is played on a wide array of indigenous instruments dating back to the ancient *do son* drums. The best-known traditional instrument in use is the *dan bau,* a single-stringed lute that generates an astounding array of tones.

Some of the bas-reliefs at Angkor (p208) show musical instruments that are remarkably similar to those seen in Cambodia today, suggesting a long musical heritage. Most travellers will hear wedding music *(areak ka)* at some stage during their visit, as well as the percussive sounds that accompany classical dance. The *chapaye* is a popular instrument in Cambodia, a sort of two-stringed bass guitar for playing the Cambodian blues.

THE INSIDE STORY OF LACQUER

Lacquerware is a popular decorative form in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as Myanmar and China. Lacquer is made from resin extracted from the rhus tree. It is creamy white in raw form, but is darkened with pigments in an iron container for 40 hours. After the object has been treated with glue, the requisite 10 coats of lacquer are applied. Each coat must be dried for a week and then thoroughly sanded with pumice and cuttlebone before the next layer can be applied. A specially refined lacquer is used for the 11th and final coat, which is sanded with a fine coal powder and lime wash before the object is decorated. Designs include engraving in low relief, or inlaying mother-of-pearl, egg shell or precious metals.

Thai music features a dazzling array of textures and subtleties, as a classical orchestra *(pìi-phâat)* can feature as many as 20 players. Drums and gongs lend classical Thai music a certain hypnotic quality, as it was originally devised to accompany classical dance. The *pìi* is a common woodwind instrument that features prominently at Thai boxing matches.

Lao classical music was originally developed as court music for royal ceremonies and classical dance-drama during the 19th-century reign of Vientiane's Chao Anou, who had been educated in the Siamese court in Bangkok.

Most ethno-linguistic minorities of the Mekong region have their own musical traditions that often include distinctive costumes and instruments, such as reed flutes, lithophones (similar to xylophones), bamboo whistles, gongs and stringed instruments made from gourds.

The informative *Traditional Music of the Lao,* by Terry Miller (1985), although mainly focused on northeast Thailand, is the only book-length work yet to appear on Lao music.

CONTEMPORARY/POP

China and Thailand lead the way in contemporary music and have exported their stars around the region. However, all the countries of the Mekong region have a lively scene. Thailand has the most developed alternative music with indie rock, hip-hop and jazz.

Hong Kong paved the road for Chinese pop, which started out as starry-eyed love songs. More recently rock and punk bands have taken off, although the only place in the region big enough to have an underground scene in Yúnnán is Kūnmíng.

Cambodia had a thriving pop industry in the 1960s, but the Khmer Rouge destroyed it like the rest of Cambodia, targeting famous artists such as Sin Sisamuth. Cambodian pop music has experienced a resurgence in the past decade and free concerts are often staged in Phnom Penh. Look out for anything by Cambodian-American fusion band, Dengue Fever.

The governments of Laos and Vietnam tended to frown on pop music for a long time, but the liberalisation of recent years has spilt over into the musical arena. Phuong Thanh is the Britney Spears of Vietnam, while Lam Truong takes on the Robbie Williams role. 'Modern' music was virtually outlawed in Laos until 2003 when the government realised foreign music was flooding the country. The first 'star' was Thidavanh Bounxouay, a Lao-Bulgarian singer more popularly known as Alexandra. But it's rap group LOG which has been most successful, including a chart-topping hit over the border in Thailand in 2006.

Speaking of Thailand, *lûuk thûng* is its answer to country and western, while *maw lam* is the northeastern blues. *Phleng phêua chii-wít* (songs for life) emerged in the 1970s in a new wave of politically conscious music, led by local band Caravan. Teen pop is a big industry, nicknamed T-pop, but for something with a bit more bite, check out some *klawng sěhrii* (free drum) or *phleng tâi din* (underground music). Modern Dog was the first Brit pop–style band to make it big.

For insight into China's contemporary rock scene and information on the latest bands go to www.rockinchina.com.

Dance

Indian dance has had a big impact on the Mekong region, the origins of classical dance in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand all found in the subcontinent. In Cambodia, the royal ballet remains a tangible link with the glory of Angkor. Many dancers were killed during the terrible years of the Khmer Rouge, but classical dance has bounced back and it is easy to catch a performance in Phnom Penh (p199) or Siem Reap. Thai classical dance is cut from the same cloth and both have the same stylised hand movements, striking costume, elaborate crowns and feature tales from the *Ramayana* (p79). Masked dance, known as *lákhon,* is also popular in Cambodia and Thailand.

lonelyplanet.com

The Conical Hat Dance is one of the most visually stunning dances in Vietnam. A group of women wearing *ao dai* (the national dress of Vietnam) shake their stuff and spin around, whirling their classic conical hats like Fred Astaire with his cane.

Folk dances are popular throughout the region, symbolising the harvest cycle and other scenes from daily life. The ethnic minorities have their own dance traditions that have their roots in spirit worship and it is often possible to catch a performance when experiencing a homestay somewhere in the region.

Theatre & Puppetry

Classical Vietnamese theatre is very formal, employing fixed gestures and scenery similar to classic Chinese opera. There are more than 300 types of opera in China, but Běijīng opera is the medium best known to the western world. Often, the audience has a drum so it can pass judgement on the on-stage action. Red face paint represents courage, loyalty and faithfulness, while traitors and cruel people have white faces. A male character expresses emotions (pensiveness, worry, anger) by fingering his beard in different ways.

To learn more about the unique art of water puppetry or 'Punch and Judy in a pool', visit www.thanglongwaterpuppet.org.

The uniquely Vietnamese art form of water puppetry *(roi nuoc)* draws its plots from the same legendary and historical sources as other forms of traditional theatre. It is believed that water puppetry developed when determined puppeteers in the Red River Delta managed to continue performances despite annual flooding. Hanoi (p363) is the best place to see water puppetry performances.

Shadow puppetry is a popular art form in Cambodia and Thailand. Traditionally the light for the performance comes from a bonfire of coconut husks and the leather puppets are set against a giant backdrop.

Cinema

China dominates the cinema scene in the Mekong region, although Thailand is fast catching up. Cambodia's film industry is slowly getting back on its feet, while in Laos and Vietnam the situation is a little stale due to government interference.

For a culture clash of sorts, check out *Tomb Raider,* the action movie starring Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft. The temples of Angkor are culture personified, as for the movie…well there's the clash.

Mainland Chinese cinema was shackled by politics and ideology for many years. After the death of Mao, things slowly warmed up and the 1990s saw a spate of successful films that made a splash in the West, such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *To Live* (1994), both starring Gong Li. Hong Kong created its own genre of kung-fu-fighting cop films and several directors have gone on to international fame, including Ang Lee and John Woo. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) enjoyed far more success overseas than in China.

The Thai film industry experienced a golden age in the 1960s, but by the 1980s it was almost extinct as Hollywood blockbusters flooded the market. Lately, it has experienced a resurgence and critics are talking about a 'new wave'. *Iron Ladies* (2000) tells the tale of a transvestite/transsexual volleyball team from Lampang and became the second most successful film in the history of Thai cinema. *Blissfully Yours* (2002) picked up a commendation in Cannes, completing the rehabilitation of the industry.

Like Thailand, Cambodia had a golden age of filmmaking in the 1960s, but karaoke and VCDs nearly killed it off. Cinemas have recently reopened throughout the country and a new generation of movie makers is churning out low-budget love stories, horror films and comedies, sometimes unintentionally all in one.

One of Vietnam's earliest cinematic efforts was a newsreel of Ho Chi Minh's Proclamation of Independence in 1945. Propaganda set the tone until the 1990s when a new generation of filmmakers emerged. Tran Anh Hung is Vietnam's best known filmmaker thanks to the touching *Scent of a Green Papaya* (1992) and the gritty underworld violence of *Cyclo* (1995).

Sihanouk's CV, as well as including the jobs of king, prime minister and head of state, has also included the title of Cambodia's most prolific filmmaker. For more on the films of Sihanouk, visit the website www.norodomsihanouk.org.

Literature

China has a rich literary tradition, but much of it is inaccessible to Western readers as it hasn't been translated into English. Poetry is particularly popular in China and its origins can be traced back as far as the time of Confucius. *The Water Margin* by Shi Nai'an is an epic tale of outlaws fighting against corruption, while *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong is a lively historical novel about the legendary battles during the latter half of the Han dynasty. More recently, writers have been cautiously exploring the traumatic events of the 20th century. *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang (1991) is the gripping story of three generations of Chinese women struggling to survive war and revolution. It is banned in China.

The *Ramayana* (p79) is the most pervasive and influential story in the Indianised countries of the Mekong region. The Indian epic first came to Cambodia and spread throughout the region via the stone reliefs of the great Khmer temples. Oral and written versions were also likely to have been distributed.

Of the 547 *jataka* tales in the *Pali Tipitaka* (tripartite Buddhist canon) – each chronicling a different past life of the Buddha – most appear in Laos and Thailand almost word-for-word as they were first written down in Sri Lanka. The most popular *jataka* is an old *Pali* original known as the *Mahajati* or *Mahavessandara,* the story of the Buddha's penultimate life. Interior murals in many Lao and Thai wats typically depict this *jataka* as well as others.

The oldest-surviving printed book in the world is a Chinese Buddhist text dating from AD 868.

There are very few contemporary works from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, although translations of anything from Harry Potter to Graham Greene are opening up a whole new world to non-English speakers. Thailand has a lively contemporary literature scene. Piri Sudham writes in English about rural life in *Monsoon Country* and other works.

Food & Drink

Austin Bush

It's amazing what four simple flavours can do. Simply put, sweet, sour, salty and spicy are the parameters that define the cuisines of the Mekong region. From Yúnnán to the Mekong Delta, virtually every dish is a balance of these four tastes. In Laos this might be obtained by a combination of the tartness of lime juice and the saltiness of *pạa dàek*, a thick fish paste. In China salty flavours will undoubtedly come from soy sauce, and might be countered by a few dried chillies and strategic splashes of vinegar. Regardless of the methods used, the goal is the same: a favourable balance of four strong, clear flavours.

If there is any other element that is responsible for uniting the cuisines of the region, it is undoubtedly the Mekong River. The Mekong and its tributaries provide fish, by far the region's most essential protein, and water for rice, the area's most important grain. These two staples form the backbone of the region's cooking, and appear in countless forms along the course of the river.

Authored by the confessed 'pimp of Khmer cuisine', Phil Lees, www.phnomenon.com is possibly the only blog on the net to focus exclusively on food and drink in Cambodia.

Along with the Mekong River, the Chinese have probably had the most significant impact on the food of the region, and culinary legacies such as the wok, tea and noodles can be found all the way to the Mekong Delta. China's Yúnnán province, located just south of the Mekong's origin in Tibet, is as diverse in its cuisine as it is in people. And although much of the province's food exhibits strong Han and Sichuanese influences, the cuisines of the various ethnic groups such as the Dai, Bai and Hui are also prevalent. Being one of China's few tropical areas, Yúnnán is also home to a variety of fruit and produce not found elsewhere in the country.

Following the Mekong southwards, the cuisines of northeastern Thailand and Laos are among the most conservative of the region. Earthy grilled dishes, soups and salads rule here, with sticky rice being the preferred carb in both regions. In Laos, wild game and other forms of 'jungle food' make up a large part of the local diet, while Thailand's *ìsăan* (northeastern) school of cooking is often associated with simple yet transcendent dishes such *sôm tam*, a tart 'salad' made from shredded green papaya, fish sauce and lime juice.

For many, Cambodian cuisine is the regional mystery. Often accused of being 'like Thai but less spicy', Khmer cooking has a soul of its own, and makes particularly creative use of the country's freshwater fish and indigenous roots and herbs. Although Cambodian cuisine is often associated with dishes such as deep-fried spiders, much of the protein travellers will come across will be, at most, four-legged – although don't let this stop you from trying!

South Vietnam is the end of the road for the mighty Mekong, and the rich silt left by the river before it flows into the South China Sea has made this area Vietnam's rice basket. As a result, rice and fresh herbs are the hallmark of south Vietnamese cooking, not to mention the famous fish sauce made from anchovies found just offshore. The tropical climate of the Mekong Delta also makes this the only region where coconut milk plays a significant role in the local cuisine.

Add to these elements the culinary remnants of colonialism and foreign influences, such as beer and baguettes, and the Mekong area is without a doubt among the world's most diverse and delicious places to eat.

TASTES THAT DEFINE A NATION

If there's one thing in each country you shouldn't miss, we suggest:

- Beerlao – the unofficial national beverage of Laos and the best brew in the region.
- *Xuanwei huotui* – this Yunnanese salt-cured ham rivals prosciutto in flavour, and is a whole lot cheaper.
- *Amoc* – a Cambodian dish of fish, coconut and fresh herbs wrapped in banana leaf and steamed or grilled; a perfect introduction to the subtleties of Khmer cooking.
- *Khâo soi* – a curry noodle dish of Shan origin that came to northern Thailand via Muslim traders from Yúnnán; a true example of Southeast Asian fusion cuisine.
- *Banh xeo* – southern Vietnamese stuffed crepes served with copious fresh herbs and a fish sauce–based dipping sauce; Vietnam on a plate.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

No matter what part of the world you come from, if you travel much in the Mekong region you are going to encounter food that might seem unusual. The fiercely omnivorous locals find nothing strange in eating insects, algae, offal or fish bladders. They'll feast on the flesh of dogs, they'll eat a crocodile, or they'll devour a dish of cock's testicles. They'll kill a venomous snake before your eyes, cut out its still-beating heart, feed it to you with a cup of the serpent's blood to wash it down, and say it increases your potency. They'll slay a monkey and then barbecue it at your table.

For Mekong dwellers there is nothing strange about anything that will sustain the body. They'll try anything once, even KFC.

We Dare You! The Top Five

- crickets
- dog
- duck embryo
- spider
- king cobra

STAPLES

Like the people who populate the region, the cuisines of the Mekong area are incredibly diverse, but there are certain ingredients that can be found across all borders.

Rice

Written and photographed by the author of this chapter, RealThai, (http://realthai.blogspot.com/) is one of the few blogs that details food and dining in Thailand.

Rice is so central to Asian culture that the most common term for 'eat' in nearly every regional language translates as 'consume rice'. The grain is thought to have been cultivated here for as many as 7000 years and takes various forms depending on where one is along the Mekong. In Yúnnán, the rice of choice for most people is the long-grained variety that is prepared by being boiled directly in water. As one moves south, the inhabitants of Laos and northeastern Thailand prefer sticky rice, the short stocky grains that are steamed in bamboo baskets. And finally as one nears the Mekong Delta, the people of Vietnam and Cambodia again opt for the lighter long-grained rice that is also boiled.

Noodles

Although strands of rice- or wheat-based dough are probably Chinese in origin, there is hardly a corner of the Mekong region where you won't be able to find noodles. In China, egg noodles are combined with a spicy broth in the Sichuān-influenced soups of Yúnnán. In the rest of the Mekong region rice is the preferred grain, and takes various forms ranging from the flat, translucent noodles of Thailand and Vietnam to the round threads of fermented rice found in Laos and northeastern Thailand.

Perhaps the region's greatest noodle dish is *pho*, the Vietnamese soup usually made with beef and rice noodles (and in the south, copious fresh

herbs). Lagging not far behind is *khâo soi,* a curry noodle soup found in northern Thailand that is served with egg noodles and sides of sliced lime, crispy pickled veggies and sliced shallots.

Fish

For the vast majority of the population of the Mekong region, fish represents more than just the occasional catch. Fish is the most common source of protein, and has been so for millennia. Oft-quoted inscriptions from northern Thailand that date back nearly 1000 years declare, 'There are fish in the water and rice in the fields', implying that these are really the only two elements one needed to survive.

Fish means freshwater fish from the region's lakes and rivers. These range from the giant Mekong catfish – among the world's largest freshwater fish – to tiny whitebait that are consumed head and all. One of the most significant sources of piscine protein is Cambodia's Tonlé Sap, an immense lake formed by water from the Mekong River that is considered one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world.

For the residents of southern Cambodia and Vietnam, seafood plays an important role in the local cuisine. In particular, anchovies, which are made into fish sauce (see the boxed text, below), provide a salty condiment for people of the region and, indeed, across all of Southeast Asia.

Meat & Game

In rural areas of the Mekong region, wild animals – especially deer, wild pigs, squirrels, civets, jungle fowl/pheasants, dhole (wild dogs), rats and birds – provide much of the protein in local diets. In part this practice is due to the expense involved in animal husbandry, as well as the Southeast Asian preference for the taste of wild game. During your travels, avoid eating endangered species, as this will only further endanger them.

Other fun forms of protein include the various grubs, larvae and insects that, unfortunately, you'll be hard-pressed to find on the menu of your local Thai joint at home.

Herbs

As Indian cooking is associated with the use of dried spices, Southeast Asian cooking is equally synonymous with the use of fresh herbs. These range from varieties found across the region, such as mint and Thai basil, to more obscure regional herbs such as pennywort or sawtooth coriander. In particular, southern Vietnamese cooking makes good use of fresh herbs, and a platter of several different green leafy things is a typical accompaniment to many dishes.

One of the most highly regarded herbs of the Mekong region is southern Cambodia's pepper which, when combined with the local seafood in the form of stir fries and dips, is one of the region's culinary highlights.

SOMETHING'S FISHY

Westerners might scoff at the all-too-literal name of this condiment, but for many of the cuisines in the Mekong area, fish sauce is more than just another ingredient, it is *the* ingredient.

Fish sauce, essentially the liquid obtained from fermented fish, takes various guises depending on the region. In Laos, Cambodia and northeastern Thailand, discerning diners prefer a thick, pasty mash of fermented freshwater fish and sometimes rice. Elsewhere, where people have access to the sea, fish sauce takes the form of a thin liquid extracted from salted anchovies. In both cases, the result is a highly pungent, but generally salty (rather than fishy) tasting sauce that is used in much the same way as the salt shaker in the West.

MERCI, OBRIGADO, GRACIAS, DANKE

Try *to* imagine Thai or Yunnanese food without the chillies, Vietnamese cooking without lettuce or peanuts, or Lao papaya salad without the papaya. Many of the ingredients used on a daily basis in the Mekong area are in fact relatively recent introductions courtesy of European traders and missionaries. During the early 16th century, while Spanish and Portuguese explorers were first reaching the shores of Southeast Asia, there was also subsequent expansion and discovery in the Americas. The Portuguese in particular were quick to seize the products coming from the New World and market them in the East, thus introducing modern-day Asian staples such as tomatoes, potatoes, corn, lettuce, cabbage, chillies, papaya, guava, pineapples, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, peanuts and tobacco.

Chillies in particular seem to have struck a chord with the natives of Southeast Asia, and are thought to have first arrived in Thailand via the Portuguese. Before their arrival, the natives of the Mekong region got their heat from bitter-hot herbs and roots such as ginger and pepper.

In more recent times, European colonialism has been responsible for several more introductions to the cuisines of the region, such as baguettes and coffee in former French Indochina, beer in Thailand and China, and in Laos, a thick, meat-based stew served at weddings and festivals known as *lagoo*; that's right, none other than the French ragout.

Fruit

Southeast Asia is a veritable greenhouse and the selection of fruits at even the most basic morning market will make the produce section of your local supermarket back home look pretty shabby. In addition to the standard fruits, many of which actually originate in South America, make an effort to try some of the several varieties native to the Mekong region such as longan, lychee, rambutan, langsat, mangosteen or the infamous durian. The last, a member of the aptly named *Bombacaceae* family, is a heavy, spiked orb that resembles an ancient piece of medieval weaponry. Inside the thick shell lie five sections of plump, buttery and pungent flesh that excite the natives and more often than not, repel the visitors.

Sweets

Although it is difficult to generalise about the vast variety of sweet foods found in the Mekong region, several elements such as coconut milk, palm sugar and sticky rice unite this genre. Many sweets also contain corn, sugar palm kernels, lotus seeds, beans and water chestnuts for added texture and crunch. Due to the region's hot weather, sweets are generally meant to be cooling and are usually taken as snacks (as opposed to postprandial desserts), and are typically served with chipped or shaved ice.

A southern Vietnamese speciality that combines nearly all of the above is *chè,* a glass of sweetened coconut milk or syrup supplemented with beans and, if the weather is hot, ice.

COOKING METHODS

It's not only the ingredients that make the meal. The methods employed in turning a fresh catch into a delicious grilled treat, or handful of greens into a salty stir-fry, are also indicative of the cuisines of the Mekong region.

If you're keen to try your hand at whipping up some local dishes, cooking courses are available in Bangkok (p122), Chiang Mai (p137), Vientiane (p271) and Hanoi (p357). There are also courses offered in Cambodia at Smokin' Pot (p218) in Battambang and ACCB (p208), near Siem Reap.

Grilling

Possibly the oldest cooking method known to man, grilling is still an important cooking method in Southeast Asia. Grilling meat or fish over red-hot

TOP FIVE COOKBOOKS

- *Thai Food* by David Thompson – the unofficial Bible of Thai food, this massive tome incorporates culture, history, beautiful photos and authentic recipes.
- *La Cuisine du Cambodge Avec Les Apprentis de Sala Bai* by Joannes Riviere – the most authoritative book on Khmer cooking is unfortunately only available in French.
- *Traditional Recipes of Laos, Phia Sing* edited by Alan and Jennifer Davidson – one of the few books in English on Lao cooking, this book contains the compiled recipes of Phia Sing, a former cook in the royal palace of Luang Prabang.
- *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen* by Andrea Nguyen – written by a well-known proponent of Vietnamese cooking in the US, this book just might inspire you to make your first *pho* (noodle soup).
- *Swallowing Clouds* by A Zee – this book weaves together knowledge on Chinese cooking, culture and language in an insightful, educational and humorous way. You'll find recipes and folk tales and may even come away with the ability to decipher Chinese menus.

coals is particularly prevalent in Laos, where *pîng kai* (grilled chicken) is the unofficial national dish. Another grilled highlight is the street-side grill stalls that pop up every evening in the cities of Yúnnán. Simply point to the skewered ingredients you fancy and they will be brushed with a spicy oil sauce and grilled to perfection before your eyes.

Boiling

Soups, and their thicker, spicier cousins, curries, are essential to Southeast Asian cooking. Particular to the region are the various sour, often fish-based, soups, such as northeastern Thailand's *tôm khlóng* (a spicy/tart soup similar to the central Thai *tôm yam*) and Vietnam's *lau ca* (fish hotpot). Other soupy specialities include the thick bamboo-based stews of northeastern Thailand and Laos, and the root, fruit and herb-laden *samlors* of Cambodia. Due to the relative scarcity of coconut palms in most of the Mekong area, coconut milk–based curries are less of a tradition here, although southern Vietnamese cooking makes keen use of the immense nut.

For expert information on Vietnamese cooking from author Andrea Nguyen, check out Viet World Kitchen (http://vietworldkitchen.com).

Frying

The Chinese art of stir-frying is almost as widespread as noodles, and Laos is the only country in the region where a simple steel or aluminium wok is not part of the kitchen arsenal of every household. Perhaps because it is their invention, the Chinese are particularly adept at taking a few simple ingredients, usually leafy green vegetables, and turning them into a delicious stir-fry. A particularly prevalent stir-fried speciality throughout the region is morning glory, a green aquatic vegetable that stays crispy even after being stir-fried.

Deep-frying food in oil is also widespread and is the preferred method for making savoury snacks such as the legendary spring rolls of southern Vietnam and the infamous deep-fried spiders of rural Cambodia.

Hot & Tangy Salads

Known in various forms as *yam* in Thailand, *làap* in Laos and *nhoam* in Cambodia, these are not 'salads' in the Western sense, but rather main dishes that typically take the form of bite-sized bits of meat or seafood mixed with fresh herbs and a salty and sour (and sometimes sweet and spicy) dressing. In northeastern Thailand and Laos, this typically takes the form of minced pork or fish (either raw or cooked) mixed with chilli and a blast of lime juice and fish sauce. In Yúnnán, the sour element is typically vinegar, and evidence of the Sichuān influence can be seen in the use of bright-red chilli-infused oil.

Perhaps the zenith of this style of cooking is northeastern Thailand's *sôm tam*, a blend of crispy unripe papaya, tomatoes, chillies, garlic, lime juice and *plaa ráa* (thick fish sauce).

DRINKS

Tea & Coffee

Tea, the leaves of which come from a plant native to Yúnnán province, is the most widespread beverage in the Mekong area. The art of brewing and drinking tea has been popular in China since the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907), but probably didn't become widespread in Southeast Asia until as late as the 18th century. Today, an on-the-house pot of weak jasmine or green tea is found in most restaurants across the region. Other than simply being drunk, tea is also grown in the Mekong region, and northern Yúnnán is home to some of China's highest quality teas.

Making inroads to China's beloved tea is coffee. Originally introduced to the Mekong region by the French, coffee is now widely grown (particularly in Vietnam and Laos) and consumed in the region. Although the beans are generally roasted the same way as in the West, the traditional filtering system in Southeast Asia is a narrow cloth bag attached to a steel handle. Hot water is poured through the bag and grounds into a short glass, typically containing a thin layer of sweetened condensed milk.

An old Chinese saying identifies tea as one of the seven basic necessities of life, along with fuel, oil, rice, salt, soy sauce and vinegar. Tea-drinking in China was documented as early as 50 BC.

Fruit Drinks

One of the greatest simple pleasures of the region is the availability of both fresh and blended fruit drinks. Freshly squeezed juices typically include the old standbys of orange and lime, but for pure refreshment there is nothing more thirst-quenching on a hot day than chilled baby coconut or sugar cane juice. The latter is the ultimate pick-me-up in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Blended drinks can be made from virtually any fruit and often include a cavity-inducing ladleful of syrup and, in some cases, tinned milk. Visitors to Cambodia wary about consuming raw eggs are forewarned: keep a close eye on juice blenders.

Beer

Perhaps no foreign culinary introduction, bar chillies, has become so widespread in the Mekong area as beer. Modern brewing facilities can be found in every country in the region, and the amber liquid is quickly overtaking the indigenous rice- and toddy-based alcohols as the tipple of choice. Two must-drink brews are Beerlao, in our opinion, the region's finest brew, and Vietnam's equivalent to homebrew, *bia hoi,* by all accounts the cheapest beer in the world.

Rice Whisky

Before beer became the regional booze of choice, an evening out in the Mekong often meant downing powerful shots of typically homemade rice- or sugar-derived alcohols. Rice whisky is still common in many rural areas, and is often associated with ceremony and celebration. For a slightly smoother drink, the most famous commercial brands of rice whisky are the Thai labels Mekong and Sang Som, which are available across the entire region.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

It's hard to go hungry anywhere in Southeast Asia as just about everywhere you go there will be myriad food options to suit most budgets. Dining options in the Mekong region range from simple street stalls, complete with minuscule plastic stools and complimentary auto exhaust, to restaurants featuring such modern amenities as air-conditioning and service charges.

For an entertaining and informative view on the 'scoff and swill' scene in Vietnam, check out Englishman Graham Holliday's acclaimed blog at www.noodlepie.com.

Although many visitors rave rhapsodic about street stalls, in our opinion small restaurants are generally a stronger choice for full meals, and offer slightly more refined (and often significantly more sanitary) cuisine. In any case, the best way to find good food is to look for noisy, crowded places; the noisier the better. Such restaurants may not have English menus but it's OK to look at what other people are having and indicate to the wait staff what you want by pointing.

Tourist-friendly restaurants can be found around popular sights and often have English signs and menus. On the downside, the food is usually overpriced and geared towards foreign tastes.

Hotels in larger cities often serve high-end regional dishes and international food, featuring everything from Indian to French cuisine.

Those travelling with children will be delighted by the attention the little ones receive, but may find that feeding kids in this part of the world is something of a challenge. If the spices are a problem, do as the natives do and stick with relatively bland dishes such as rice soup, noodles and breads.

Street Stalls

Because so much of life in Southeast Asia is lived outside the home, street food is an important part of everyday life. The people of the Mekong are inveterate snackers, and can be found at impromptu stalls at any time of the day or night, delving into a range of snacky things such as deep-fried battered bananas or grilled skewers of meat.

Night Markets

One of the most pleasurable venues for dining out in the Mekong region is the night market, which can vary from a small cluster of metal tables and chairs at the side of a road to more elaborate affairs that take up entire city blocks.

In general there are two types of night market. Firstly the evening market, which sets up just before sunset and stays open until around 9pm or 10pm (sometimes later in large cities). Often some of the best regional food is available at these markets, but it is usually only sold to go. If this is the case and you want to 'dine in', we suggest asking your guesthouse/hotel if it's OK to use their dishes in exchange for buying drinks from them. More often than not they'll be happy to oblige.

The second type is the all-night market, which begins doing business around 11pm and keeps going until sunrise. These markets are like informal open-air restaurants, and typically specialise in grilled or fried dishes or noodles. Typical places to look for them include in front of day markets, next to bus or train stations and at busy intersections.

BETEL NUT

One thing you'll undoubtedly see for sale at street stalls in many parts of the Mekong region is betel nut. This is not a food – swallow it and you'll be sorry! The betel nut is the seed of the betel palm (a beautiful tree, by the way) and is meant to be chewed. The seed usually has a slit in it and is mixed with lime and wrapped in a leaf. Like tobacco, it's strong stuff that you can barely tolerate at first, but eventually you'll be hooked.

The first time you bite into a betel nut, your whole face gets hot – chewers say it gives them a buzz. Like chewing tobacco, betel nut causes excessive salivation and betel chewers must constantly spit. The reddish-brown stains you see on footpaths are not blood, but betel-saliva juice. Years of constant chewing causes the user's teeth to become stained progressively browner, eventually becoming nearly black.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do wait for your host to sit first.
- Don't turn down food placed in your bowl by your host.
- Do learn to use chopsticks in China and Vietnam.
- Do tip about 10% in restaurants, as wages are low.
- Don't tip if there is already a service charge on the bill.
- Do drink every time someone offers a toast.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

The good news is that there is now more choice than ever before when it comes to vegetarian dining in Southeast Asia. The bad news is that you have not landed in Veg Heaven, for the people of the Mekong area are voracious omnivores. While they love their veggies, they also dearly love anything that crawls on the ground, swims in the water or flies in the air.

China is the only country in the region with a genuine vegetarian tradition, and certain restaurants offer meat-free menus, especially during Buddhist holidays. Another good, though much less common, venue for vegetarian meals in the region are Indian restaurants, which usually feature a vegetarian section on the menu.

Ant Egg Soup by Natacha du Pont de Bie (2004) is a well-written account of the author's encounters with food while travelling through Laos, and is garnished with recipes and line drawings.

Menus at tourist restaurants in larger towns and cities will often have a small list of vegetarian dishes available. Outside of tourist areas, vegetarians and vegans will have to make an effort to speak enough of the local language to convey their culinary needs. And vegetarians should be aware that across the Mekong region, even the most innocuous-looking dishes will probably contain fish sauce, and most stocks, including those used in noodle soup, are often made with meat.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

As odd as it seems to Westerners, eating alone is something that many people in the Mekong region consider unusual. This is due to the fact that in Asia eating is generally a communal activity and meals are usually served 'family-style', from common serving platters. Traditionally, a group orders one of each kind of dish, perhaps a fish, a stir-fry, a salad, a vegetable dish and a soup, taking care to balance cool and hot, sour and sweet, salty and plain.

When ordering from a restaurant menu, don't worry about the proper succession of courses. All dishes are placed in the centre of the table as soon as they are ready. Diners help themselves to whatever appeals to them, regardless of who ordered what. Additionally, most people don't concern themselves with whether dishes are served piping hot, so no one minds if the dishes sit in the kitchen or on the table for a few minutes before anyone digs in.

When serving yourself from a common platter, it's polite to put no more than one spoonful onto your plate at a time. Sometimes serving spoons are provided. If not, you simply dig in with your own spoon or chopsticks.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines see p513.

Useful Words & Phrases

To help make yourself understood in the kitchens and restaurants of the Greater Mekong region, we've put together some essential words and phrases that should smooth the way to dinner.

I'd like ...

Chinese	*Wǒ xiǎng yáo ...*	我想要...
Khmer	*sohm ...*	សុំ...
Lao	*khǎw ...*	ຂໍ...
Thai	*khǎw ...*	ขอ...
Vietnamese	*sin jo doy ...*	Xin cho tôi ...

I'm allergic to ...

Chinese	*Wǒ duì ... guòmǐn.*	我对...过敏
Khmer	*kohm dak ...*	ខ្ញុំជាក់...
Lao	*khàwy phâe ...*	ຂອຍແພ້ ...
Thai	*phǒm/dì·chǎn pháe ...*	ผม/ดิฉันแพ้...
Vietnamese	*doy bẹe zẹe úhrng ver-eé ...*	Tôi bị dị ứng với ...

I'm a vegetarian.

Chinese	*Wǒ chī sù.*	我吃素
Khmer	*kh'nyohm tawm sait*	ខ្ញុំតមសាច់
Lao	*khàwy kịn tae phák*	ຂ້ອຍກິນແຕ່ຜັກ
Thai	*phǒm/dì-chǎn kin néua sàt mâi dâi*	ผม/ดิฉันกินเนื้อสัตว์ไม่ได้
Vietnamese	*doy uhn jay*	Tôi ăn chay.

I don't eat ...

Chinese	*Wǒ bùchī ...*	我不吃...
Khmer	*kh'nyohm min nham ...*	ខ្ញុំមិនញ៉ាំ...
Lao	*khàwy baw kịn ...*	ຂ້ອຍບໍ່ກິນ...
Thai	*phǒm/dì-chǎn kin ... mâi dâi*	ผม/ดิฉันกิน...ไม่ได้
Vietnamese	*doy kawm duhr-ẹrk uhn ...*	Tôi không được ăn ...

How much is it?

Chinese	*Duōshǎo qián?*	多少钱?
Khmer	*nih th'lay pohnmaan?*	នេះថ្លៃប៉ុន្មាន?
Lao	*thao dại?*	ເທ່າໃດ
Thai	*thâo rai?*	เท่าไร
Vietnamese	*bow nyee-oo*	Bao nhiêu?

(Thank you) That was delicious.

Chinese	*Chīde zhēn xiāng!*	吃的真香!
Khmer	*aw kohn, nih ch'ngain nah*	អរគុណ នេះឆ្ងាញ់ណាស់
Lao	*sâep*	ແຊບ
Thai	*aa-hăan níi aràwy*	อาหารนี้อร่อย
Vietnamese	*gảảm ern, ngon lúhm*	Cám ơn, ngon lắm.

Fried

Chinese	*chǎo*	炒
Khmer	*jien, chaa*	ចៀន, ឆា
Lao	*khùa (phát)*	ຂົ້ວ (ຜັດ)
Thai	*phàt*	ผัด
Vietnamese	*jee-uhn*	chiên

Boiled

Chinese	*zhǔ*	煮
Khmer	*sngor*	ស្ងោរ
Lao	*tôm*	ຕົ້ມ
Thai	*tôm*	ต้ม
Vietnamese	*loo-ụhk*	luộc

Grilled

Chinese	*tiěbǎn kǎo*	铁板烤 (grilled on a hotplate)
Khmer	*ahng*	អាំង
Lao	*pĩing*	ປີ້ງ
Thai	*yâang*	ย่าง
Vietnamese	*nuhr-érng veẻ*	nướng vỉ

Steamed

Chinese	*zhēng*	蒸
Khmer	*jamhoi*	ចំហុយ
Lao	*nèung*	ໜຶ້ງ
Thai	*nêung*	นึ่ง
Vietnamese	*húhp*	hấp

Meat

Chinese	*ròu*	肉 (also means 'pork')
Khmer	*sait*	សាច់
Lao	*sĩn*	ຊີ້ນ
Thai	*néua sàt*	เนื้อสัตว์
Vietnamese	*tịt*	thịt

Chicken

Chinese	*jīròu*	鸡肉
Khmer	*sait moan*	សាច់មាន់

Lao	*kai*	ໄກ່
Thai	*kài*	ไก่
Vietnamese	*thịt gaà*	thịt gà

Fish

Chinese	*yú*	鱼
Khmer	*trey*	ត្រី
Lao	*pąa*	ປາ
Thai	*plaa*	ปลา
Vietnamese	*ğaá*	cá

Pork

Chinese	*ròu*	肉
Khmer	*sait j'ruuk*	សាច់ជ្រូក
Lao	*sĭn mŭu*	ຊີ້ນໝູ
Thai	*mŭu*	หมู
Vietnamese	*hay-oo*	heo

Beef

Chinese	*niúròu*	牛肉
Khmer	*sait kow*	សាច់គោ
Lao	*sĭn ngúa*	ຊີ້ນງົວ
Thai	*néua*	เนื้อ
Vietnamese	*thịt bò*	thịt bò

Vegetables

Chinese	*shūcài/qīngcài*	蔬菜/青菜 (green, leafy)
Khmer	*buhn lai*	បន្លែ
Lao	*phák*	ຜັກ
Thai	*phàk*	ผัก
Vietnamese	*zoh sáwm*	rau sống

Rice

Chinese	*fàn*	饭
Khmer	*bai*	បាយ
Lao	*khào*	ເຂົ້າ
Thai	*khâo*	ข้าว
Vietnamese	*ğerm*	cơm

Water

Chinese	*(kāi) shuĭ*	(开) 水 (Boiled)
Khmer	*teuk*	ទឹក
Lao	*nâm (tôm/deum)*	ນ້ຳ(ຕົ້ມ/ດື່ມ) water (boiled/drinking)
Thai	*náam dèum*	น้ำดื่ม (drinking water)
Vietnamese	*nuhr-érk*	nước
	nuhr-érk sóo-ee	nước suối (mineral water)

lonelyplanet.com FOOD & DRINK •• Eat Your Words

'Must Eat' Regional Specialities

CAMBODIA

aa-mokh	អាម៉ុក	fish in coconut milk curry, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed
lohk-lahk	ឡុកឡាក់	stir-fried, marinated beef served with onions, tomatoes and a fried egg
samlor k'tih ma-noas	សម្លខ្ទិះម្នាស់	pork rib, coconut and pineapple soup
suhm-law muh-joo	សម្លម្ជូរ	sour, tamarind-based soup, generally including chicken or fish, tomato and herbs
kyteow	គុយទាវ	Cambodian noodle soup
baay sait jruuk	បាយសាច់ជ្រូក	rice served with barbecued pork
baw baw	បបរ	Cambodian-style congee, typically served with pork or dried fish
bohk luh-hohng	បុកល្ហុង	Cambodian-style papaya salad
sngao ma-reah	ស្ងោរម្រះ	bitter melon stuffed with minced pork and boiled in pork stock
nom banh chok	នំបញ្ចុក	cold rice noodles served with a yellow fish curry, fresh veggies and herbs

LAOS

khào nĭaw	ເຂົ້າໜຽວ	sticky rice
tąm màak-hung	ຕຳໝາກຫຸ່ງ	spicy green papaya salad
làap pąa	ລາບປາ	a spicy 'salad' of minced fish, roasted rice, lime juice and fresh herbs
pĭng kai	ປີ້ງໄກ່	grilled chicken
jąew bąwng	ແຈ່ວບອງ	a chilli-based 'dip' that includes buffalo skin; a speciality of Luang Prabang
khái phâen	ໄຄແຜ່ນ	sheets of deep-fried Mekong River weed; a speciality of Luang Prabang
fŏe	ເຝີ	Vietnamese-style noodle soup
pąa dàek	ປາແດກ	unfiltered, unpasteurised fish sauce; an essential ingredient in Lao cooking
kąa-féh nóm hâwn	ກາເຟນົມຮ້ອນ	Lao-style coffee

NORTHEAST THAILAND

khâo nĭaw	ข้าวเหนียว	sticky rice
sôm tam puu	ส้มตำปู	spicy green papaya salad with salted field crabs
súp nàw mái	ซุปหน่อไม้	a spicy 'salad' of pickled bamboo
tam sùa	ตำสั่ว	papaya salad with the addition of *khànŏm jeen*, fermented rice noodles
lâap mŭu	ลาบหมู	a spicy/sour 'salad' of minced pork

plaa dùk yâang	ปลาดุกย่าง	grilled catfish
khaw mŭu yâang	คอหมูย่าง	grilled pork collar
kaeng laao	แกงลาว	a dark, thick, bamboo-based stew
tôm sâep	ต้มแซบ	a spicy/sour soup similar to *tôm yam*
plaa ráa	ปลาร้า	unfiltered, unpasteurised fish sauce; an essential seasoning in *ìsăan* cooking

VIETNAM

baáng say-òo	*Bánh xèo*	rice crepes filled with pork, shrimp, bean sprouts, straw mushroom and ground mung bean, and eaten with lettuce and herbs and enjoyed with *nước chấm*, Vietnam's ubiquitous tangy-savoury-sweet dipping sauce
bò bảy món	*Bò bảy món*	beef prepared seven ways, from grilled morsels to creamy rice soup
ğaang joo·uh ğaá	*Canh chua cá*	a sour fish soup with tamarind, pineapple, taro stem, okra and tomato
jaả zò	*Chả giò*	spring rolls wrapped in lettuce and herbs and enjoyed with *nước chấm*
ğaá ko dạw	*Cá kho tộ*	fish simmered in a claypot with a sweet and salty sauce
ğaá nuhr-érng choo-ee	*Cá nướng trui*	a whole fish (typically snakehead, *cá lóc*), grilled and served with rice paper, dipping sauce, lettuce and herbs for making hand-rolls
hoả dee-oó naam vaang	*Hủ tiếu nam vang*	a noodle soup with sliced pork, pork liver, shrimp, fried shallots, scallions and Chinese celery

YÚNNÁN

rŭbĭng	乳饼	goat milk cheese, a speciality of the Bai minority
bōluò fàn	菠萝饭	pineapple rice, a speciality of the Dai people of Xīshuāngbǎnnà
guòqiáo mĭxiàn	过桥米线	'across-the-bridge' noodles, a do-it-yourself meal of raw ingredients dipped in a boiling broth
pŭ'ĕr chá	普洱茶	a highly regarded tea grown in Yúnnán that is sometimes aged as many as 50 years
shípíng dòufu	石屏豆腐	cakes of fermented bean curd that are sometimes smoked
xuānwēi huŏtuĭ	宣威火腿	cured ham produced in the city of Xuanwei that makes its way into countless dishes in Yúnnán
qìguōjī	气锅鸡	chicken steamed with herbs in a specially designed ceramic pot

Border Crossings in the Greater Mekong

During the bad old days of communism and the Cold War, there were pretty much no land borders open to foreigners. Times have changed and there are now more than 20 borders connecting the neighbouring countries of the Mekong region. For a quick visual reference covering the border crossings in the region see the border crossings map (p100).

In this book we give detailed instructions for every crossing open to foreigners. Before making a long-distance trip, be aware of border closing times, visa regulations and any transport scams by referring to the relevant country's Transport section and the specific entries on border towns located in boxed texts in each chapter. Border details change regularly, so ask around or check the **Thorntree** (http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com).

Visas are available at some borders and not at others. As a general rule of thumb, visas are available at the land borders of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand and are not available at Vietnamese and Chinese border crossings. However, there are a few exceptions in the case of Cambodia and Laos.

There are few legal money-changing facilities at some of the more remote border crossings, so be sure to have some small-denomination US dollars handy. The black market is also an option for local currencies, but remember that black marketeers have a well-deserved reputation for short-changing and outright theft.

Some of the immigration police at land border crossings, especially at the Cambodian and Vietnamese borders, have a bad reputation for petty extortion. Crossing between Cambodia and Thailand can be a pain in the neck, but it's nothing compared with crossing between Laos and Vietnam, which hands down has the most remote borders in the region with terrible transport and little room for leeway. Most travellers find it's much easier to exit overland than it is to enter. Travellers at remote border crossings are occasionally asked for an 'immigration fee' of some kind, although this is less common than it used to be.

For detailed coverage of these border crossings, including transport options, see the individual boxed texts in the destination chapters.

CAMBODIA

Cambodia shares border with Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Cambodian visas are available at all land borders with Laos and Thailand, but only two of the land borders with Vietnam. They are not currently available at Phnom Den.

From Laos

The only border crossing with Cambodia is at Voen Kham (L), which connects Si Phan Don in southern Laos to Stung Treng (C). Minibuses ply the new road to Stung Treng (Dom Kralor; see p333). There was once a river route (Koh Chheuteal Thom), but Cambodia has closed its border and so the route is no longer possible.

From Thailand

There are now as many as six land crossings between Thailand and Cambodia, but only two are popular with travellers. The border at Aranya Prathet (T) to Poipet (C) is frequently used to travel between Bangkok

(T) and Siem Reap (C). See p158 for more information. Try to avoid the 'Scam Bus' (see the boxed text, p219) if possible. Down on the coast, crossings can be made from Hat Lek (T) to Cham Yeam (C) by road (see p158), which connects to Koh Kong (C) and on to Sihanoukville (C) or Phnom Penh (C).

There are also three more remote crossings, which see little traffic. There's a crossing at Chong Jom (T) in Surin Province to O Smach (C), connecting with Samraong (C); see p158. Another crossing is at Choam Sa-Ngam (T) to

MEKONG REGION BORDERS AT A GLANCE

Countries	Border crossing	Connecting towns	Visa on arrival	More details
Cambodia/ Vietnam	Bavet (C)/ Moc Bai (V)	Phnom Penh/ Ho Chi Minh City	Cambodia (Y)/ Vietnam (N)	p227/ p417
Cambodia/ Vietnam	Kaam Samnor (C)/ Vinh Xuong (V)	Phnom Penh/ Chau Doc	Cambodia (Y)/ Vietnam (N)	p228/ p424
Cambodia/ Vietnam	Phnom Den (C)/ Tinh Bien(V)	Takeo/ Chau Doc	Cambodia (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p247/ p424
Cambodia/ Laos	Dom Kralor (C)/ Voen Kham (L)	Stung Treng/ Si Phan Don	Cambodia (Y)/ Laos (N)	p233/ p333
Cambodia/ Thailand	Poipet (C)/ Aranya Prathet (T)	Siem Reap/ Bangkok	Cambodia (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p222/ p158
Cambodia/ Thailand	Cham Yeam (C)/ Hat Lek (T)	Koh Kong/ Trat	Cambodia (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p249/ p158
Cambodia/ Thailand	O Smach (C)/ Chong Jom (T)	Samraong/ Surin	Cambodia (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p222/ p158
Cambodia/ Thailand	Choam (C)/ Choam Sa-Ngam (T)	Anlong Veng/ Sangkha	Cambodia (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p223
Cambodia/ Thailand	Psar Prohm (C)/ Ban Pakard (T)	Pailin/ Chanthaburi	Cambodia (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p220
China (Yúnnán)/ Laos	Móhān (Yúnnán)/ Boten (L)	Měnglà/ Luang Nam Tha	China (N)/ Laos (Y)	p470/ p312
China (Yúnnán)/ Vietnam	Hékǒu (Yúnnán)/ Lao Cai (V)	Künming/ Hanoi	China (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p449/ p376
China/ Vietnam	Youyi Guan (China)/ Huu Nghi Quan (Friendship Pass) (V)	Pingxiang/ Lang Son	China (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p374
China/ Vietnam	Dongxing (China)/ Mong Cai (V)	Dongxing/ Mong Cai	China (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p374
Laos/ Thailand	Vientiane (L)/ Nong Khai (T)	Vientiane/ Nong Khai	Laos (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p285/ p167
Laos/ Thailand	Paksan (L)/ Beung Kan (T)	Paksan/ Beung Kan	Laos (N)/ Thailand (N)	p317/ p178
Laos/ Thailand	Huay Xai (L)/ Chiang Khong (T)	Huay Xai/ Chiang Rai	Laos (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p314/ p148
Laos/ Thailand	Tha Khaek (L)/ Nakhon Phanom (T)	Tha Khaek/ Nakhon Phanom	Laos (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p320/ p165
Laos/ Thailand	Savannakhet (L)/ Mukdahan (T)	Savannakhet/ Mukdahan	Laos (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p323/ p163
Laos/ Thailand	Vang Tao (L)/ Chong Mek (T)	Pakse/ Ubon Ratchathani	Laos (Y)/ Thailand (Y)	p327/ p162
Laos/ Vietnam	Dansavanh (L)/ Lao Bao (V)	Savannakhet/ Dong Ha	Laos (Y)/ Vietnam (N)	p324/ p384
Laos/ Vietnam	Attapeu (L)/ Bo Y (V)	Attapeu/ Pleiku	Laos (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p334/ p403
Laos/ Vietnam	Na Phao (L)/ Cha Lo (V)	Tha Khaek/ Dong Hoi	Laos (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p321/ p366
Laos/ Vietnam	Nong Haet (L)/ Nam Can (V)	Phonsovan/ Vinh	Laos (maybe)/ Vietnam (N)	p305/ p366
Laos/ Vietnam	Nam Phao (L)/ Cau Treo (V)	Tha Khaek/ Vinh	Laos (Y)/ Vietnam (N)	p318/ p366
Laos/ Vietnam	Na Maew (L)/ Nam Xoi (V)	Sam Neua/ Thanh Hoa	Laos (N)/ Vietnam (N)	p308/ p366

Choam (C), leading to the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng (C); see p223. The third is at Ban Pakard (T) to Psar Prohm (C) leading to Pailin (C); see p220. Bear in mind that road conditions on the Cambodian side are pretty poor.

There is also a border at Prasat Preah Vihear (C), the stunning Cambodian temple perched atop Phnom Dangkrek mountain range. This is currently just a day crossing for tourists wanting to visit the temple from the Thai side, but may open up as a full international border during the lifetime of this book. See the boxed text, p159, for more information.

From Vietnam

There are three border-crossing options, two by road and a romantic river trip. The most popular option is the road border linking Moc Bai (V) and Bavet (C) for quick passage between Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh (see p417). The most evocative route is the river crossing linking Chau Doc (V) to Phnom Penh (C) via the Mekong border at Vinh Xuong (V) and Kaam Samnor (C); see p424. Finally there is the rarely used option of Tinh Bien (V) to Phnom Den (C) that connects Chau Doc (V) and Takeo (C); see p424.

CHINA

China shares borders with Laos and Vietnam. It is also possible to travel from China to Thailand, through Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, by passenger boat; see p148 for details. China visas are now available on arrival at the Móhān border, but not at any of the borders with Vietnam. Be aware that some travellers, as they enter China, have had their Lonely Planet guides to China confiscated by officials – primarily at the Vietnam–China border. We recommend you copy any essential details before you cross and put a cover on your guide.

From Laos

There is only one international border crossing connecting Boten (L) with Móhān (Yúnnán, China), in a fairly remote region. This crossing links Luang Nam Tha Province in Laos to Yúnnán province in China. From Móhān, on the Chinese side it's a two-hour minibus ride to Měnglà, the nearest large town. See p312 for more information.

From Vietnam

There are currently three border checkpoints where foreigners are permitted to cross between Vietnam and China. Lao Cai (V) to Hékǒu in Yúnnán province is convenient for travellers going between Hanoi (V) and Kūnmíng (Yúnnán); see p376.

The other two borders are outside of Yúnnán province. The Friendship Pass (Huu Nghi Quan on the Vietnamese side, Youyi Guan on the Chinese side), connects Lang Son (V) to Pinxiang in China; see p374. The seldom-used Mong Cai (V) to Dongxing (Yúnnán) is in the far northeast of Vietnam; see p374.

The Vietnam–China border-crossing hours vary a little but are generally between 7am to 5pm (Vietnam time). Set your watch when you cross the border as the time in China is one hour ahead.

LAOS

Laos shares border with all the Mekong region countries. Lao visas are available on arrival at all land borders with Thailand and the land border with China, but not at the border with Cambodia. The border with Vietnam is more complicated; visas are available at Dansavanh and Nam Phao, but not at the other borders.

From Cambodia

Voen Kham (L) is the only international border post with Cambodia; see p233. Dom Kralor (C), on the new road to Stung Treng (C), services Voen Kham and links Cambodia with southern Laos' Si Phan Don area. There used to be a river crossing at Koh Chheuteal Thom (C), but Cambodia has closed its side of the border and so the route is no longer possible.

From China

There is only one international border crossing between Móhān (Yúnnán) and Boten (L), but it's in quite a remote area of both countries; see p470 for more information. It links Yúnnán province in China to Luang Nam Tha Province in Laos. From Boten, it's a two-hour journey to Luang Nam Tha, the nearest large town.

From Thailand

The most popular crossing is from Nong Khai (T) across the Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge to Vientiane (L). See p167 for more information. There is also a river crossing between Beung Kan (T) and Paksan (L), about 120km from Vientiane, but it is rarely used by travellers; see p178.

From northern Thailand, cross the border by boat at Chiang Khong (T) to Huay Xai (L) and continue downriver to Luang Prabang (L); see p148. A new crossing connecting Muang Ngoen (T) and Huay Kon (L), which links Nan Province (T) with Sainyabuli Province (L), may soon be open to foreigners.

MY TOP FIVE BORDER CROSSING EXPERIENCES *Nick Ray*

I've been crossing the borders in this region for more than a decade now. Here are my top five experiences on the overland trail.

- Cambodia–Laos (2001) The new border had just opened up, although even the government didn't seem to realise for a couple of years. Our boat got stuck on a sandbar, we reached the border after dark and the Lao immigration team weren't too impressed by the large motorbike. It led to a negotiated settlement.
- Cambodia–Thailand (1995) The land borders were officially closed, but rumour had it that travellers were making it out via Koh Kong. It was the bad old days and we were nervous, but it was nothing a happy milk shake wouldn't cure. The trip was foggy, but I ended up in Thailand via speedboat and received a tongue-lashing from the Immigration Office in Bangkok.
- China–Laos (1998) We left Kūnmíng 24 hours after Carlos, the Guinea-Bissauan DJ with the 90kg suitcase. After an arduous bus trip of 36 hours we met him at the Boten border. He had got on the wrong bus and gone to the Burmese border at Mong La. Crossing into Laos, he hoped to hit Vientiane in one day, but couldn't fly due to excess baggage charges. We met him in the capital four days later: he'd just arrived!
- China–Vietnam (1995) The bus driver lied to me! There was more than one Friendship Gate and I arrived at a locals-only border in the dark. I hitched a motorbike ride around the mountains to the official border only to be sent back to Pingxiang, as it had closed for the night. Penniless, I met a Vietnamese–Australian trader who arranged me board and lodging for the night.
- Vietnam–Cambodia (1995) There was one rattletrap bus connecting Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh back in the bad old days. It left at some ungodly hour and I had to be on it. Even back then, Saigon rocked and it turned into an all-nighter. How my head hurt the next day, but it got worse as the bus was stripped down at the border to look for contraband. Taxi! Welcome to Phnom Penh – I didn't imagine for a moment it would become my home.

From the northeast, travellers have two options. You can cross the Mekong at Nakhon Phanom (T) to Tha Khaek (L); see p165; or at Mukdahan (T) to Savannakhet (L), where there is a new bridge spanning the river (see p163).

In eastern Thailand, you can cross by land at Chong Mek (T), near Ubon Ratchathani, to Vang Tao (L), an hour west of Pakse (L); see p162.

From Vietnam

The most popular crossing connects Lao Bao (V) to Dansavanh (L), linking the central city of Dong Ha (V) and the southern Lao province of Savannakhet; see p384. Further north there is another land border at Cau Treo (V) to Nam Phao (L); see p366. The nearest Vietnamese city, Vinh, is about 80km from the border and on the Lao side it's about 200km from the border to Tha Khaek, just opposite Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. There is another border in this region at Cha Lo (V) and Na Phao (L), connecting Dong Hoi (V) and Tha Khaek (see p366), but most travellers use Cau Treo (V).

It's also possible to cross at Nam Can (V) to Nong Haet (L), but this is a marathon trek starting in Vinh and aiming for Phonsavan; see p366 for more information. Another northern crossing is open at Nam Xoi (V) to Na Maew (L), connecting Thanh Hoa (V) or Hanoi to Sam Neua in Laos; see p366. However, this is pretty remote and it can take as much as four days to travel between Luang Prabang and Hanoi this way. Finally there is a more southerly border that links Pleiku (V) and Bo Y (V) with Attapeu (L) and Pakse (L); see p403. This crossing has still not been formally been named, as it only opened in mid-2006.

Keep your ears open for news on the border between Tay Trang (V) and Sop Hun (L) near Dien Bien Phu (V) opening up to foreigners. This has been rumoured for years, but it might just happen this time.

LAO–VIETNAM BORDER WOES *Andrew Burke*

If we had a Beerlao for every email we've received from travellers who have been scammed while crossing the Lao–Vietnam border, we'd be able to have a very big party. There are several different scams you might encounter, and other lies you'll be told that won't necessarily cost you money but will most certainly piss you off.

Among the most common is the '12-hour' bus between Vientiane and Hanoi, which is in fact a 20- to 24-hour trip including several hours spent waiting for the border to open. Once across the border (mainly at Nam Phao/Cau Treo but also Dansavanh/Lao Bao), another common scam involves the suddenly rising price. You'll know this one when your bus stops and demands an extra, say, US$20 each to continue. Local transport heading further into Vietnam also try this one, especially tourist-oriented minibuses. Annoyingly, there's little you can do to avoid these scams. You just have to expect the worse, but hope your crossing is trouble free, as many are. If trouble strikes, try to keep smiling to get the best result – paying a lower amount.

Alternatively, you could tell the scammers where to go and hope for the best. And as we discovered years ago (these scams have been running forever), sometimes it will pay off. For us, it happened on Rte 8 coming from Vinh to Cau Treo. Our minibus stopped halfway up the Annamite range and the driver demanded more money. We refused, got out and the incredulous driver left. No sooner had we asked ourselves 'What now?' than a truck loaded up with bags of cement lumbered over the hill and stopped. 'To the border?' I asked. 'Yes, yes, no problem,' came the smiling reply, even after I'd shown him we only had 1300d between us. Sitting atop the truck as we wound our way slowly up through the cloudforests was fantastic – and almost as good as the gesture itself, which had restored some of our faith in humanity. We had the last laugh on our greedy driver when we found him at the border trying to rip off a Canadian couple. Our advice: 'Don't, whatever you do, go with that guy.'

THAILAND

Thailand shares borders with Cambodia and Laos in the Mekong region, plus popular borders with Malaysia and Myanmar. Entry stamps are available at all Thailand crossings except for Beung Kan. It's possible to travel from Thailand to China (through Myanmar and Laos) by passenger boat; see p148.

From Cambodia

The border at Poipet (C) to Aranya Prathet (T) is frequently used to access Siem Reap (C) or Bangkok (T); see p222. Don't get scammed by the 'Scam Bus' though (see the boxed text, p219). Along the coast, crossings can be made from Cham Yeam (C) to Hat Lek (T) by road for connections to Trat (T), Bangkok (T) and Koh Chang (T); see p249. There are also three more remote crossings: from the town of Samraong through O Smach (C) to Chong Jom (T) in Surin Province (see p222); from the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng through Choam (C) to Choam Sa-Ngam (T), see p223; and from the southwest town of Pailin through Psar Prohm (C) to Ban Pakard (T); see p220.

From Laos

The most popular crossing is from Vientiane (L) across the Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge to Nong Khai (T); see p285. There is also a river crossing between Paksan (L) and Beung Kan (T), about 120km from Vientiane, but it's rarely used by travellers; see p317.

Heading to northern Thailand, cross the border by boat at Huay Xai (L) to Chiang Khong (T) from where it is a short hop to the Golden Triangle (T) or Chiang Rai (T); see p314. There is also a new crossing connecting Huay Kon (L) and Muang Ngoen (T), linking Sainyabuli Province (L) with Nan Province (T), which is seldom used by foreigners.

From the south, travellers have the option of crossing the Mekong River at Tha Khaek (L) to Nakhon Phanom (T); see p320; or at Savannakhet (L) to Mukdahan (T); see p323. In the far south, you can cross by land at Vang Tao (L), an hour west of Pakse, to Chong Mek (T), near Ubon Ratchathani; see p327.

From Malaysia

On the west coast, the crossing between Satun (T) to Pulau Langkawi (M) is made by boat. On the east coast, Sungai Kolok (T) to Rantau Panjang (M) is a dusty land crossing for travel between Kota Bharu (M) and Pulau Perhentian (M). The major transit hub in Thailand, Hat Yai, and Penang-Butterworth in Malaysia, receive bus and rail traffic through the borders at Kanger (T) to Padang Besar (M) or Sadao (T) to Bukit Kayu Hitam (M). Betong (T) to Keroh (M) is also a land crossing open to foreigners.

From Myanmar (Burma)

There are two legal crossings: Mae Sai (T) to Tachilek (My) and Ranong (T) to Kawthoung (My). Be sure to have a valid Myanmar visa when exiting and be prepared for unexpected charges from Myanmar officials at the border when crossing into Thailand.

VIETNAM

Vietnam shares borders with Cambodia, China and Laos. Vietnam visas are not currently available at any land crossings, so be sure to arrange a visa in advance.

From Cambodia

There are three border-crossing options for travel between Vietnam and Cambodia: the road border at Bavet (C) to Moc Bai (V) which connects

Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City, see p227; the memorable Mekong River crossing at Kaam Samnor (C) to Vinh Xuong (V) linking Phnom Penh and Chau Doc, see p228; or the remote crossing of Phnom Den (C) to Tinh Bien (V), see p247.

From China

There are currently three border checkpoints where foreigners are permitted to cross between Vietnam and China. The crossing from Hékǒu (Yúnnán) to Lao Cai (V) is convenient for travellers going between Kūnmíng and Hanoi, see p449.

The other two crossings are located outside of Yúnnán province. The Friendship Pass (Huu Nghi Quan on the Vietnamese side, Youyi Guan on the Chinese side) connects Pinxiang (China) to Lang Son (V), see p374. There's also a seldom-used crossing from Dongxing (China) to Mong Cai in Vietnam's far northeast, see p374.

The China–Vietnam border-crossing hours vary a little but are generally between 8am to 6pm (China time). Set your watch when you cross the border as the time in Vietnam is one hour behind.

From Laos

The most popular crossing connects Donsavanh (L) to Lao Bao (V), linking Savannakhet (L) and Dong Ha (V); see p324. Further north there is another border connecting Nam Phao (L) to Cau Treo (V); see p318. From the Lao side it's about 200km to the border from Tha Khaek, while the nearest Vietnamese city, Vinh, is about 80km from the border. There is another border in this region at Na Phao (L) and Cha Lo (V), connecting and Tha Khaek (L) and Dong Hoi (V); see p321. However, most travellers use the aforementioned Cau Treo (V). It's also possible to cross from Nong Haet (L) to Nam Can (V), but this is a marathon trek starting in Phonsavan and aiming for Vinh; see p305 for details. Another northern crossing is open from Na Maew (L) to Nam Xoi (V), connecting Sam Neua (L) to Thanh Hoa (V) or Hanoi (V); see p308.

Finally, there is a more southerly border that links Attapeu (L) and Pakse (L) with Pleiku (V) and Bo Y (V); see p334. This crossing has still not been formally been named, as it only opened in mid-2006.

Keep your ears open for news on the border between Sop Hun (L) and Tay Trang (V) near Dien Bien Phu (V) opening up to foreigners. We heard it had finally opened as we went to press, but check this carefully before committing to crossing this way.