

MEKONG DIARIES

Part Six, Vietnam



Day 60 – Entering Vietnam

Today we catch a bus from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, where we arrange for the next stage of our journey downstream to Vietnam by boat. A ferry service runs twice each way every day, carrying tourists through a stretch of river with an amazing history.

At one time, Cambodia's rulers moved the country's capital from Angkorian Siem Reap to the junction of the Tonle Sap and the Mekong when trade began to replace agriculture as the engine of national wealth and influence. And since then, boats have been making their way upstream through the mouths of the Mekong Delta to the lands of the Khmer and beyond.

As an aside, check out this website about an Asia Society exhibition called "Arts of Ancient Vietnam: From River Plain to Open Sea." This beautiful site tells the story of the long cultural history of Vietnam, a history few are aware of.

We have been forced to be diligent in planning the Vietnam leg of our trip—not that we normally lack diligence, but because Vietnam is not an open book where visitors can write critiques in the margins. This being said, it is also not China, and we have been able to arrange a promising schedule of locations and interviews, all sanctioned by our government guide.

We set up our camera on a tripod in the back of the ferry as it pulls out of the port in Phnom Penh, and for the next five hours the camera snaps off one frame every second, time-lapsing all the way to Cau Doc.

Our journey doesn't stop at the floating restaurant where the ferry docks. Instead, we load bags onto our arms and toss our now-considerable bulks onto the backseats of a tiny flock of motorbikes that take off through the busy streets of Chau Doc.

Our drivers seem possessed with a desire to terrify the large tourists who were foolish enough to have flagged them down. We adjust our knees and shoulders to avoid high-speed shavings by trucks and oncoming cars, and 10 incandescent minutes later we pull into a bus stop and, after buying a ticket on a minibus to Can Tho, have a quick bowl of truly weird noodles.

Then we board the minibus which, soon after leaving, pulls into a small shop—whereupon the conductor proceeds to load an incredible amount of cigarettes into the bus, pulling back the panels and ceiling to stuff more cartons in and finally donning a special set of pants and a jumper in which dozens of cigarette packets are stored.

Once our minibus has been transformed into a motorized nicotine delivery system, we're off. We arrive several hours later in Can Tho, in time for dinner and then to bed.

Day 61 – Delta Concerns

Last night we briefly met our government guide, and this morning he is up before us, waiting downstairs in the dining room of our small hotel.

We order a baguette-and-omelet breakfast washed down with strong oily coffee sweetened with condensed milk. Then we set off to our first meeting with Nguyen Quang Vinh, the director of the Center for Managing Environment and Resources.

The weather is steamy, and as much as we try to hide our size, the short walk across town to the offices has us properly hot and bothered. Waiting in the Center's offices for the director, we stand beneath the vents of every air conditioner we can find, trying to re-crisp ourselves like overheated lettuce leaves.



A pump house in the Mekong River at the entrance to the sprawling port city of Chau Doc. It tests one's imagination to consider how many times this water has been lifted from and returned to the river since its journey began more than 4000 kilometers upstream in Tibet.

The Center manages the environmental quality of natural resources, air, underground water, and wastewater, so we are hoping this interview will be a wide-ranging conversation about the Delta and its problems coming from upstream and from the ocean. The director does not disappoint. After taking as much care as we do to arrange flowerpots and chairs to make the interview aesthetically pleasing, he proves to be a warm and generous interviewee.

The issues troubling the Delta turn out to be the same as those facing the deltas of most of the world's major rivers: climate change and the over-engineering of the upstream river. Research by scientists identifying the coasts that are most vulnerable to rising seas has found that the Mekong Delta in Vietnam is the third-worst-case scenario in the world. With a rise of more than a meter, the metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City would be under water, tens of millions of people would be displaced, and the country's economy would be devastated.

On the other side of Vietnamese concerns over the future of the Delta are those changes being wrought to the river upstream. Ironically, many of the dams under construction on the Mekong are projects with Vietnamese backing. These are hydropower plants that will supply Hanoi and drive the nation's economic growth. But it is the annual flooding of the river that creates, feeds, and fertilizes the Delta, and the disruption of these cycles would devastate the Delta's agricultural and fishing industries.

The sediment that is laid down on the fields has a fundamental purpose. Carried from as far away

as Tibet, the Mekong is a conveyor belt of matter—clays, minerals, and dirt—that spreads out over the Delta's plains and is left there to shore up the shorelines every year. Dams stop the flow of sediment once the river's flow slows and loses the energy needed to carry the matter.

Instead, it collects in dam reservoirs, and this in turn changes the flow of the water downstream, as it speeds faster than before, unburdened by heavy sediments. This makes the river a destroyer, rather than a builder, of riverbanks and lands.

Our interview over, we stop at a café for a cool drink and to try to feel slightly less greasy. The afternoon is free for exploring, and with our cameras in hand we wander Can Tho, soon discovering that this small city is perhaps not so much a Vienna of the Orient as a suburb next to the Mekong.

Day 62 – Expert Testimony

With the sights of Can Tho failing to open a new window on life on the Mekong, we decide that our best efforts should be turned toward gathering as much expert testimony as we can.

Luckily, and by design, Can Tho is home to one of the region's premier environmental institutions, Can Tho University. Between classrooms and offices on the university campus, we knock on the door of the local chapter of the Delta Research and Global Observation Network, DRAGON.

The coincidence of its name and the Vietnamese name for the Mekong Delta—Cuu Long, or Nine Dragons—aside, DRAGON arose from the recognition that river deltas around the world experience similar threats and stresses. DRAGON's Vietnamese chapter was inaugurated in a sister-river relationship with the Mississippi River Commission, as New Orleans and the lands of the bayou have provided a dramatic case study of the many ways in which an over-engineered river system can take its revenge.

In a small office on the other side of the door, two middle-aged men are waiting for us—scientists manning their desks even though it is Sunday and everyone else has gone off campus. Le Anh Tuan, Senior Lecturer in the College of Environmental and Natural Resources and member of DRAGON, makes us a cup of tea while Dr. Duong Van Ni, Director of Research and also a member of DRAGON, exchanges pleasantries.

They explain that customarily it is considered proper to invest the first few minutes of any meeting in having a cup of tea and talking about inconsequential things, rather than leaping feet-first into the substance of the appointment. This gives us time to note the newly printed DRAGON reports on each man's table and the large satellite photographs of the Mekong and Mississippi deltas side by side covering the back wall.

The discoveries of natural scientists and shared concerns about a changing climate are fostering positive developments in how people around the world are starting to perceive, from vastly different perspectives, the importance of an ecological solidarity. For scientists, this common ground for sharing discoveries and information has long underpinned advances. Now, one of the silver linings of the world going to hell in a hot hand-basket may be a growing general awareness of the illusion of borders, and of the truth of our synthesis.

After taking tea, we cast around the grounds, trying to find a location for a shot that is not really ugly, really bright, or really noisy. Eventually we decide to take over the entrance to the department's wing. Each man's interview is long and strangely hopeful. We have expected them to predict a dire future, but find that they both represent a concerted effort to adapt to changes—and even to exploit them—by developing simple techniques that would profit from a rising sea such as salt-resistant crops, more fish farms, or salt production. Clearly, the small gains that their work can offer will not

compensate for the immense losses that will be suffered if the sea rises, and if the river is dammed from the mountains to the plains.

But as is the case in any university where real money flows, there is a tinge of politics in their statements, and not a small touch of Vietnamese pride. As Le Tuanh explains, the Vietnamese people have lived on the coast for millennia and have weathered many hardships in their long and unbroken history. The onset of climate change is another challenge, and they will respond to it with the same resilience and determination they demonstrated in the 20th century.

That night we walk to a restaurant with tables set on a platform hanging over the river. As we eat, we watch barges and houseboats ply up and down the channel. At the same time, Can Tho's residents ply up and down the boardwalk, taking the night air in the spirit of exercise. Meanwhile, rats the size of cats slink along the concrete banks, their dark wet backs shining in the street lights as they leap into the polluted water and swim under our feet.

Bon appétit!

Day 63 – A Floating Market

With the sun yet to rise, we are already downstairs for a quick breakfast of eggs and strained coffee sweetened with condensed milk, then into a brand-new taxi to a nearby floating market.



A merchant vessel at anchor in a floating market near Can Tho. Only recently have roads and bridges come to this world of water, where people live and trade on board flotillas of wooden boats.

The 30-minute drive is a bit like window-shopping at Vietnam's transformation from pastoral village life to contemporary industrial power. Some of our team first came to Vietnam's delta nearly 20 years

ago, when there were no roads or bridges. At that time, it was still a quiet and beautiful floating world where every road was a river, and the only means of getting around was by boat.

Now, however, the country's isolated hamlets and seasonally inundated towns have been linked to a national grid of roads. We pass road construction and bridge building sites, one after another. And beside all this development, the river is becoming increasingly vulnerable as its banks fill with industries and communities.

Eventually we stop at a town that is no different from every other town we have passed through, and our guide organizes a medium-sized boat to take us out to the floating market. By the time we are on the water, the sun is just showing in the sky, and already the colors are draining from everything as it turns a white heat on the world.

A few minutes away from our embarkation point, and just where two large channels meet, a huddle of 50 or so wooden boats marks our destination. Here, women in small hand-rowed boats and vendors dealing from the decks of 40-foot-long houseboats compete in selling vegetables, cabbages, peppers, pumpkins, and greens. Other businesses bob by, a man in a low-slung pale blue boat selling the most delicious coffee served in small green glasses, and two women cooking rice breakfasts in a wonderfully clean and well-organized kitchen ship taking up no more space than a booth in a diner. Shoppers test the produce and negotiate prices with an oar in one hand and their toes hooked securely over the edge of the deck, hips rocking in harmony with the chaotic rhythm of the market's shared wake.

We stop a few people to ask them about their life here. They are all happy to talk, but not for too long, as their window for business follows the course of the sun. By the time the day has heated up, most of the boats have moved on, and the centers of trade have spread out.

We drive back to Can Tho and pack our things for the next destination, Soc Trang. The trip in a nice big taxi all our own takes a few hours and carries us a few hundred kilometers closer to the sea and the end of the river—the end of our trip.

Day 64 – Plans and Practice

Today we confront the difference between plans and practice. On paper, getting to the end of a river sounds as simple as following a thin blue line, while in life getting to the end of anything is never that straightforward.

For one thing, the Mekong doesn't end in one single place but in eight enormous ones, each separated by deltaic islands and linked by unmarked roads and a series of ferries. Secondly, our schedule, already stretched, has now officially hit a deadline.

Thus, in order to cover the story now in the best way possible, we are drawing the geographical equivalent of a mobius strip so that we can touch all points in our narrative compass and at the same time meet our flight home.

Finally though—and maybe this is a lesson for future planning—the decision is taken to follow the shortest option. Beyond this, we must trust the universe, the road, and our guide to provide the content we need to tell the final stories of the Mekong.

We drive from Soc Trang to Tra Binh, and the land changes beside us as we go. What begins as an almost unbroken sea of rice paddies becomes, after a short time, sparse salt brush with a few scraggly trees and no houses except those along the canals.

We reach a small but bustling town where our driver asks directions to the sea. We must appear a

strange group in our brand-new bright white taxi, bristling with cameras and looking for something as unmissable as the South China Sea.

Eventually we reach a little fishing village built along a tidal creek about one kilometer from the mouth of the river. The town is literally split down the middle by the canal, with its twin halves radiating out from the banks. In order to get from one side to the other, we must drive all the way back to the small weir and bridge that is set at the entrance to the town. So we decide to push on driving as far as we can to try to get to the river and see the sea. The road narrows, and we stop when we see a large group of women working in an open-air fish factory. This is a large tin shed built outward to hang slightly over the edge of the creek, a nightmare of mud and household drains.



On a boulevard on a tidal salt creek, this fisherman's house sits alongside a community dedicated to a life on the sea. The crew's nets are dried and mended, stretching from the roadway, through the front yard and disappearing into the captain's home.

It is now low tide, and the water has dropped to a meter-wide ribbon of brown. The banks are thick with black-brown sediments. A teenage boy standing in sludge up to his thighs is gathering something in a bucket. Ocean-going fishing trawlers, beached by the low tide, are lined up along the banks, and crews can be seen caulking the exposed hulks and doing repairs.

The women in the factory are shelling little mud crabs, a manual production line cleaning and crushing thousands of brittle little bodies with rollers to extract their white meat. It is as hot as a drying oven inside the factory, but the women are jovial and happy to talk to us. Immediately we realize that, like the land, the people have changed. These women, their lives, their families, and their fates are not tied to the river but to the sea. They all describe a life where it is the sea that dictates success and happiness, hunger and harvest.

In the front yards of the houses lining the estuary, boat crews are also busy. In one yard, we stop to talk to a crew that is working to mend a big net. At the front gate, two men are stitching one end, while the net continues up the pathway and onto the porch and disappears into the front living room, with pairs of men working on it all along its length.

Driving back around the creek to the other side of town, we realize that this is indeed a substantial port town. With the help of our guide, we introduce ourselves to a ship captain who is drinking in a café just across the road from where his large trawler is beached. He talks of changes to the weather, worsening storms, and a sense of self tied to the sea, a love of the sea.

It is quite a moving experience to find this dividing line in the geography of people's identities. Until today, and for months now, everyone has been a child of the river, and now we have reached the end of her family and found a new tribe: the people of the sea. This feels somehow more real than even seeing the end of the river.

The captain advises us that we can catch a ferry to Dung Island, on the opposite bank of the river, where we might find people affected by land loss due to rising seas. So we drive back around once more and walk through the town's narrow alleys to find the ferry. We pass a seaman's temple where a towering statue of a woman who looks like Buddha, Mother Mary, and a Hindu goddess combined is adorned with sea creatures in her hair and storms in the folds of her robes.

A few minutes farther on, we reach the landing for a ferry, and for the first time see the end of the river. In the distance to the south, the sky and the water dissolve into each other in a tan brown haze that saturates the sense of scale and fills the void with formlessness, as if it were not opening to the world, but were merely a backdrop on a stage the size of the sky.

We board the ferry along with locals and a couple of dozen motorbikes. The river here is easily a kilometer wide, and the trip takes a while. Landing on the island, we find that the public amenities here at the end of the river include a moto stand with a handful of riders ready to take us around for a fee. After some negotiating and a lot of jokes about the size of the passengers and the likely damage to the bikes, we set off. An hour or so later, things start to get worrying when we find we still don't know what we can see on the island. Then we hear from a local man that there is a community toward the southwestern tip of the island that has recently lost land to rising tides.

An hour or so later, we find a small piece of land beside the river where there are signs of a collapsed embankment. After talking with local schoolchildren, we are directed back a few kilometers to a small house where the farmer who owns this land meets us and agrees to be interviewed. He confirms that the incursion of salt and the level of the tides have gotten increasingly worse in the last few years. Just this year, he had to let go of his farmland as the tides claimed it. Now he waits for the government to find new land for him.

Waiting for a ferry to carry us back to our taxi, we pick through the ruins of what must once have been nice homes, now abandoned to the rising tides. It is an experience being repeated in deltas from Vietnam to Louisiana, the first refugees from a rising sea.

Day 65 – The River's End

Today we have a single, simple goal: to get a boat and go to the literal, physical end of the river. Our first approach is to try to follow our maps and get to a new town that appears to be located at the very tip of the land, in the mouth of the river.

But eventually we find ourselves stuck behind a truck on a bridge, very much landlocked in the middle of nowhere, with the river and the sea out of sight somewhere over a few kilometers of farms

and trees. After a few hours of bashing along barren roads and denting the driver's nice new taxi, we call it quits and head back to the fishing village we found yesterday to try to find a boat.



Seen over the ship's bow, piled with nylon nets, the shoreline thins as a small fishing boat takes us out through the mouth of the Mekong River, the final distance to be covered since our journey began at the river's source in Tibet months earlier.

Once in the town, we drive straight to the end of the estuary creek, where an industrial-sized wharf is located to service the trawlers that moor in this port. While some of us eat, and others film an amazing operation to replace a huge boat's propeller using ropes and wooden beams and the crew's catlike ability to tightrope walk, the request is sent out throughout the harbor: Does anyone want to earn a week's wage in half a day to take some crazy journalists to the mouth and back?

Eventually a small boat no wider than a sedan makes it way over to the wharf, and its captain makes a deal with us. The trip out to the mouth is filled with a sense of growing significance. To have actually traveled from the origin to the end of one of the world's greatest rivers has become a single act, now completed as the bow of our last boat cuts toward the vast nothingness that greet's the river's end.

The banks withdraw, salt forests and mangroves thinning until all that remains of the land is a thin line of mud flats stretching out of sight. Bobbing in the water just past landfall, it is clear that we will have to travel far out from land to reach real sea water. But our journey with the river ends here, in the place where it loses shape and mixes with the sea./.