

Along for the glide

A boat ride on the Mekong River is a most tranquil way to take a look at Laos.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY
STEPHANIE CLIFFORD-SMITH

A TWO-DAY VOYAGE ON the Mekong River – by slow boat from Huay Xai to Luang Prabang – is the perfect way to get a feel for Lao life. We cross the Mekong into Laos from Thailand on a leaky dinghy with metal bench seats, fearing we'll be travelling like this all the way to Luang Prabang. But once we clear immigration at Huay Xai and find our boat further down the river bank, it's all good news.

Long, low and elegant, this vessel is a vision of polished-teak joinery, deep, upholstered seats and cream-brocade pelmets with silk fringing that dances in the breeze. It's February, late winter in Laos, so those gentle breezes are warm as we sit on the front deck reading, watching fishermen or waving to children playing on the river's edge. The back section of the boat, large as a living room, easily accommodates big cushions and tatami mats for postprandial snoozing.

On our boat lives the skipper, his wife and three-year-old daughter, who patiently poses for the tourist camera. Her mother sells us tea, beer and snacks and we watch as she prepares food for the family's dinner at the low dining table.

As we approach the village of Pak Beng in the late afternoon, a dozen boys keen for porting duty chase our boat along the river bank until we dock. For about a dollar a bag, they scoot our luggage up the steep, sandy banks to our hotel. A stroll through the wood smoke-scented village at dusk takes us to the



Meet and greet Mekong-style



Pak Beng



Pak Beng markets



Captain's daughter

market, now winding down for the day. The buffalo meat has sold out, but there are still plenty of herbs, a few fish and mounds of moss-green Mekong river weed. The best restaurant in town is an Indian-Lao place overlooking the river. From its fusion menu, we opt for a toothsome mutton curry.

A chilly start turns into another idyllically warm day on the river. First port of call is an abundantly self-sustaining village. Fabrics, vegetables, turkeys, chickens and pigs are all woven, grown and raised here, and a still produces a lethal rice spirit.

Later, a visit to the Pak Ou caves is a chance for exercise as we climb the cliff-hewn steps to see the hundreds of Buddha statues within. Back on board, hours pass easily until we arrive at our destination. Drinks at a riverside bar ease the melancholy of leaving our slow boat to Luang Prabang.

WATER WAYS

Most travellers who do this trip enter Laos from Chiang Khong, Thailand. Boat standards vary, so try to see your boat before parting with cash. You can buy tickets from some hotels and travel agents in Huay Xai or directly from the boat ramp on the riverbank. Expect to pay about \$US25 (\$30) for the two-day journey. Boats usually depart between 8am and 10am, depending on passenger demand.

 For airfares call **Qantas on 13 13 13** or visit **qantas.com**. For holiday packages to Laos call **Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15**.