

Post



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Mar 26, 2023 · 5 min read

# Take me to the river - March 26, 2023

Updated: Mar 28, 2023

## ***SUMMARY***

This is one (of many) parts of our trip that I've been looking forward to - our Mekong River cruise. Check-in happens to be at our hotel where we find out that on our boat, which hold 68 passengers, there will only be 9 of us! We board a full size luxury bus for the 4.5 hour trip from Siem Reap to Kampong Cham. It's a lovely group and we bond over our very first lunch at a roadside restaurant. Onboard it becomes clear that we are far outnumbered by the crew and they start spoiling us immediately! - Karen

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## ***DETAIL***

Today we change location and mode of transportation, all in one. We'll end our day on a ship motoring down (up?) the Mekong River.

We do our normal waking, bathing, and breakfasting. After packing, we abandon our room, check out, and (at a different, temporary desk at the hotel) check in for our cruise. We meet Sarik, our Cambodian guide for the first half of our Cambodia-to-Vietnam cruise.

We ask and find out that the cruise will initially be nine people, five English speakers and four German language passengers. In Phnom Penh we add two more and then at the boarder we lose a person. And the ship, how it can carry how many? Sixty-eight, oh, my. We later hear that we shouldn't feel too bad about this situation. Reportedly the ship is owned and operated by a wealthy Vietnamese businessman. He is, perhaps, looking for losses to offset gains, or to otherwise 'condition' money, seemingly legally.

Our luxury bus for the ride can, likewise, hold many more than us nine. We divide up by language, the four Germans at the front with their guide, and us five English speakers further back with Sarik. It'll be a four-plus hour drive to the boat, we're told, with a lunch stop in the middle. If we need a 'comfort break' with are to give 10 to 15 minutes notice. Sarik will find a suitable 'happy room' along the route. If we don't have time to give that much notice, we'll be stopping at a 'happy tree'. There, the gentlemen are said, in local parlance, to be engaging in "Shooting the rabbit" while a lady would be "picking the flowers".

En route, Sarik introduces himself and starts to tell us about Cambodia. According to him, the two things most of the world knows about this country are 1) Angkor Wat, and 2) the Khmer Rouge (and the killing fields). Sarik was born after all that ended, but being the youngest of eight, his older siblings weren't so lucky. Two were lost to the regime, to disease and starvation. The country had 195 killing fields and we'll have the opportunity to visit one and hear about them. It doesn't sound like fun, but like the holocaust it's undoubtedly important that this chapter of history not be forgotten.

First though, lunch. The boat will be all luxury, we gather, but our first lunch, along the road, will be a bit more, shall we say, rustic. It's good, though, and they have beer (if we are willing to pay). We are and we do. All nine of us sit together, around a big table with food on top and a sleeping dog underneath. Everyone introduces themselves and it's clear that two of the Germans speak English at least as well as us (we?). It's going to be a fun cruise. The fluent English speaking Germans are Nicholas and Ann. Stacked vertically, they're over four meters tall. Nicholas has on a t-shirt with 'Arnold' from the Terminator movie and the line "Come with me if you want to live". He has the body to match!

Of us English speakers, we're the only ones currently from/living in the US. Liz is from Vermont but teaches school kids at a US base in Bahrain. She and I both went to UVM in Burlington, though in different decades (probably millennia). She was to have been with an American friend living and teaching in Tokyo, but her friend opted to go to a Harry Stiles concert in Tokyo and got covid. She said the concert was so worth it! Grith and Jacob, the other two English talkers, speak perfect English but are from Copenhagen, Denmark.

All I have to pay for my US\$1.50 beer is a \$10 bill. The change is doled out, eventually, \$2 at a time, with a long pause in between to see if I'll say "stop". If I don't I get another \$2 and there's another very long pause. After a while I do give in.

On the bus our near term itinerary and customs are discussed. We're told what you do, and what not wear, in a temple. We had heard about removing your hat, and covering your knees and shoulders, but not about what Sarik termed "Bow-wow". We ask what that is and he explains it's when a young lady has a low-cut blouse and 'bows' to a priest, he looks up and says 'Wow!' This is to be avoided.

We hear about how compatibility in marriage isn't as important as having a proper match between zodiac animals of the bride and groom. Sarik has tried, unsuccessfully, to overcome this tradition. We're told about how much a dowery is and how much a wedding costs. We hear about the three 'rings' involved in a Cambodian wedding: The engagement ring, the wedding ring, and (later) the suffering.

At the boat we climb out of the bus, stiff from our long drive. We take pictures and scramble gingerly down the dried mud of the bank, between the dry weeds. There is a crewman every couple of feet to ensure we remain vertical. On board, we get our now expected chilled towel with which to wipe down.

In our room we unpack and then hang out with G&Ts on the top deck, watching our progress northward. We'll dock (i.e. nudge the bow of the ship ashore) prior to dinner and bedtime. At six we convene in the bar for our welcome champagne and safety talk. There are appetizers to go with the cold, yummy bubbly. Nevel, our very Indian and very proper hotel manager, is a hoot and makes the talk fun. He introduces the thirteen ship's department heads (to the nine guests). Later, at dinner, we have a delightful time getting to know our Danish and (for now) Bahranian shipmates. The unlimited wine doesn't hurt.

Dinner is great. I tried to have local food where I could. I later learned I probably have Snake Head Fish Soup. After dinner a towers, and 'feeling no pain' Nicholas offered that it's crazy that our close family of nine not be able to all eat at one table. We'll be looking for a change in seating arrangements for future meals. Before long it's time for our first night on board.

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## Photos



Sarik, our guide. Batchelor. Intent on being married by the end of 2023 (birth-year animal be damned)



Below our table at lunch. Am guessing this guy was born in the year of the dog.



Very representative of houses en route.  
The lake we're going around is the largest  
in SE Asia. In the rainy season it swells to  
five times its 'normal' size. Some houses  
have stilts 5m tall!



Krud. A beer I've not tried yet.



The boat at last!



Our room (bed for scale)



Our bathroom (thank goodness for wide angle lenses!)

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Ah... the sun deck



Awaiting our safety briefing (Liz, Nicholas, Ann, Margaret, Jacob)



Captain Bo and some of the many department heads

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