

# DELTA BLUES

THE RICE BASKET WATERWAYS OF SOUTHERN VIETNAM HOLD AN ENDURING MYSTICISM, DESPITE ENCRoACHING MODERNITY. SAILING DEEP INTO THE MEKONG DELTA, **RACHNA SACHASINH** FINDS LIFE-AFFIRMING SOUP, SONGS AND SELFIE-JUNKIES.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY MORGAN OMMER

Rolling past riverside vistas filled with dense mangroves and quiet Khmer sanctuaries on the *Mystic Sampan*.





FROM LEFT: Teow serves up a hot bowl of *hu tieu* from his floating kitchen; a statue of Ho Chi Minh in Can Tho; early morning hustle at the Cai Rang floating market; in Vinh Long province, a temple of the Cao Dai religion, whose pantheon of saints includes Victor Hugo.



**“I LOVE THE RIVER,” TEOW SHOUTED WHILE ASSEMBLING A STEAMING BOWL OF *HU TIEU* FROM THE GALLEY OF HIS WEATHERED SAMPAN. A MILDLY SWEET BROTH OF SHRIMP, PORK AND RICE VERMICELLI TOPPED WITH CITRUSY HERBS AND FRESH PARSLEY, *HU TIEU* IS THE STANDARD SOUP OF THE MEKONG DELTA.**

Teow’s rig was docked deep in Cai Rang floating market, a mind-boggling armada of more than 400 houseboats and sampans eight kilometers upstream from Can Tho, the provincial capital. Here, farmers, fishermen and middlemen gather in the wee hours to hustle rice, fish and produce, and, for many, Teow’s *hu tieu* is their go-to breakfast. It was just shy of 7 a.m., and Teow was trying to keep up with a queue four punts deep. The 40-year-old moved nimbly in his tight kitchen space, dressing piping hot bowls at breakneck speed before setting them adrift in the sea of skiffs. The scene was symphonic and delightful, and the *hu tieu* was damn good.

Centuries-old floating markets like Cai Rang anchor the culture of Vietnam’s Mekong Delta—and they are under siege. The delta is modernizing. Roads are replacing rivers. Salt water is seeping from the ocean and damaging crops. And, erosion is stripping away arable land and riverbanks. It’s conceivable that the delta’s floating markets and Teow’s *hu tieu* stand may be forced onto shore within the next generation.

To be honest, I knew little about the Mekong Delta before I arrived, with images in my head primarily of warfare, of a battleground for nationalist forces against the French and then the Americans. In fact, marauders and settlers have been traipsing through this small,

waterlogged landscape for centuries. My recent journey was inspired by the delta’s latest settler, hotelier Adrian Zecha, who had just opened Azerai in Can Tho—the second installation of his “affordable luxury” brand after launching in Luang Prabang last year—on an island right across from Can Tho’s lively quay. The founder of luxe heavyweight Aman Resorts, which he left nearly four years ago, Zecha has an uncanny ability to sniff out astonishing locales and throw them into the spotlight. A sleepy rural idyll with lingering Indochina vibes, the Mekong Delta is hardly on the jet-set circuit, and Zecha’s choice piqued my interest.

The Mekong Delta has a muddled history, to put it mildly, but, “it’s also pure and deeply relaxing. To fully experience it, you have to get on the water,” Zecha insisted to me. He positioned Azerai smack in the middle of the river, on an island forested with old banyans and sliced by mangrove-lined canals. To get there, you have to take a boat.

So, I packed my waterproof bags and, taking Zecha’s words to heart, I hewed as close to the river as possible, traveling on a luxury yacht, a converted rice barge and no-fuss sampans. My forays around Chau Doc, Sa Dec, Cai Be and Can Tho revealed a captivating landscape dotted with a motley mix of pagodas, mosques, churches

and curious shrines that honor ancient spirits, warlords and even Victor Hugo. Zecha was right—folks here are a good-natured lot and delta-living, while on the threshold of change, is still remarkably pure and calm.

I boarded the *Aqua Mekong*, a luxury 20-suite cruising ship, in Phnom Penh and sailed on the Upper Mekong across Vietnam’s delta basin, from Chau Doc to My Tho. The ship’s swish lounge was the ideal spot to witness the river transition from the wide, languid waterway in Cambodia into a mesh of channels, tidal mudflats, mangroves, shrimp and fish ponds, orchards, and paddies.

Locally, the Mekong River is known as “*Cuu Long*” or Nine Dragons, after its nine branches, and their alleged dragon-infested waters. Some say there are only eight natural tributaries—an extra one tacked on because nine is auspicious in luck-obsessed Vietnam. It makes sense. Eking out a living in these parts requires skill and plenty of luck. In spite of a history of wars and floods, farmers coax three to four crops of rice annually and, year-round raise fish and harvest a staggering array of tropical fruit. Naturally, the delta is known as Vietnam’s rice basket.

Delta-style wooden houseboats, known as *ghe*, plied the waterways, their prows emblazoned with fierce red



# NIGHT ON THE DELTA BACKWATERS WAS SUBLIME AND TIMELESS



The water being a constant draw, Azerai's villas offer a choice of lake or river views. OPPOSITE: A gentle glide along the Mekong backwaters.







FROM FARLEFT: *Banh hoi mat vong*, or hammock vermicelli spring rolls, and their creator, Mrs. Thuan, in Can Tho; Café 1985, Can Tho; horizon views from the *Aqua Mekong* deck; Cai Be's Catholic church.



eyes to ward off river monsters. On deck, hammocks and laundry fluttered in the breeze, woks and cauldrons hissed in open-air kitchens, and strains of twangy Vietnamese ballads cried in the wind. A steady fleet of trawlers and barges heaped with rice and dredged sand motored by, their captains steering the wheels with their feet. I sailed past rice mills, conical brick kilns, and floating villages that hovered above bamboo cages filled with farm-raised fish.

Chau Doc is home to the delta's highest concentration of the Muslim Cham ethnic community, and the town boasts several mosques. Chaney, the *Aqua Mekong's* lead guide, took us to visit one. At midday, Mubarak Mosque was surprisingly cool inside. Mr. Sen, the toothless caretaker, spoke in halting stream of consciousness: "Muslim, Buddhist, we all grew up together. We get along." He paused. "People came to pray by boat, but now people work in town. Have you seen the market?"

I hadn't, so I went to the local market in search of Chau Doc's other attractions: fermented fish-and-anchovy *nuoc cham*, or the town's take on fish sauce. There, I met the affable Mrs. Anh seated in a sea of fillets and sauces. "The entrails mixed with shredded green papaya sells the best," she said, beaming. Mrs. Anh set up her shop shortly after

the war ended in 1975. Back then, fish was plentiful, she told me. These days, Chinese and Lao dams upriver interrupt the Mekong's natural flow, and higher sea levels create brackish pools that disrupt freshwater habitats. In spite of the decline, Mrs. Anh seemed upbeat, making the most of whatever she could get her hands on.

In My Anhang village a bit downstream, Mrs. Sau, a 61-year-old wedding singer, told me, "The river gives us a good life, but also a hard life," and elucidated another way distant China affects the delta. Even though many farmers are diversifying from rice by growing tropical fruit for the Chinese market, "Chinese tastes keep changing," she laughed, throwing up her hands. I left Mrs. Sau in her beautiful, century-old wooden house pockmarked with bullet holes and shrapnel, where she continued to belt out melancholy *Cai Luong* ballads, the "Delta blues" of southern Vietnam.

Sa Dec, the seat of Dong Thap province, is a watery paradise chock-full of flower, bonsai, fruit and sugar cane farms. In the market, baskets of flamboyant hibiscus and sunny marigolds sat next to pans full of live delta catfish and fat eels waiting to be beheaded. Market women dressed in patterned pantsuits and conical hats smiled broadly and waved cheerfully as I wandered past, offering a piece of fragrant jackfruit or inviting me for a

cup of *caphe da* (iced coffee). We didn't speak a common language, but we were fluent in "selfie." Delta women, I learned, love selfies as much as anyone else.

A stroll through the older parts of town revealed abandoned French colonial mansions nearly swallowed by the jungle. French writer Marguerite Duras spent her early adolescence in Sa Dec during the heyday of French Indochina. Duras's 1929 novel, *The Lover*, describes her affair with Huynh Thuy Le, a debonair Chinese merchant, whose ornate bungalow is now a museum. When published, such coupling was forbidden. These days the delta's multicultural milieu is less segregated, and Duras and her lover could live happily ever after.

**A**t My Tho, a port town in the delta's eastern quadrant, I disembarked the *Aqua Mekong*, leaving its roof-top pool, David Thompson-created menu and other comforts behind. Up to now, I had traveled on the Tien River or Upper Mekong, one of two major tributaries. Now, it was time to disappear into the backwaters.

The ferry from My Tho to Cai Be stopped running a few years ago, so I begrudgingly took a cab right up to Cai Be's landmark Catholic church. Built in 1929, the church's impressive bell tower loomed over the pleasant

town. I poked my head in just in time to catch the pre-recorded mass. *Chua gie xu*—"Jesus" in Vietnamese—was lit up in neon, while his flock of 30 or so old-timers sat solemnly in the antique pews.

Befuddled and slightly amused, I marched over to the river landing and boarded the Can Tho-bound *Bassac* for an overnight passage through Tien Giang, Vinh Long and Ben Tre provinces. Roosters and sampans were everywhere, but so were stereos, satellite dishes and new construction. Composite, plastic sampans showed up every so often, explaining the handful of abandoned shipyards. Downriver from Cai Be, we visited a canal-side hamlet where practically everyone made rice paper and coconut candy. On the recently paved toe path, motorcycles, bicycles, children and dogs played a dangerous game of chicken, while a middle-aged man hand-fed lettuce to an actual chicken.

Traversing Vinh Long, we stumbled upon a 350-year-old Khmer pagoda tucked in a dense tropical jungle. Murals showed classical Indian scenes of the Buddha's life and path to enlightenment. Further downstream, a Cao Dai temple, with a gilded yellow-and-blue facade and almighty "left eye," beckoned like a lodestar. Cao Dai's pantheon of saints includes Victor Hugo—who actually never set foot in Vietnam. In the serene courtyard, I





FROM LEFT: A charming room in Nam Thi Holiday Home, Cai Be; the eyes of a *ghe* boat ward off river monsters, in port town Sa Dec; a woman rides through Sa Dec in a traditional *ao dai*.



sipped tea with a congregation of gray-haired gentlemen. I asked about Victor Hugo, and the abbot piped up, “His mind is bright like the moon.”

The *Bassac*’s charismatic 25-year-old cruise director, Nguyen Tu Trang “Annie” Thien, took me ashore to her birthplace Mang Thit, an island village where we forded paddies and irrigation ditches shimmering over “monkey bridges,” precarious arrangements of sticks and bamboo. Only the elderly and children live here. Young adults are off studying or working in cities, but “they’ll come back to take care of their parents,” Annie said. Tombstones were scattered across rice paddies and kitchen gardens. In life and death, delta folk are bound to their land.

Night on the delta backwaters was sublime and timeless. Boats of all sizes flicked their lamps before slipping past each other in absolute darkness. Water and land marched all the way to the horizon and disappeared into the starry sky. I could have been here last year or last century, and it would have looked exactly the same.

By midday, the *Bassac* moored at Ninh Kieu Quay in Can Tho. The heat had driven most people inside but, by dusk, the city came back to life. Can Tho’s name translates roughly to “river of poems,” in homage to a traditional passion for storytelling and singing by the river. Remarkably, this still happens. Brightly lit neon dinner boats cruised up and down the lively quay, strains of Korean pop and electrified *Cai*

*Luong* ballads trailing behind. On the promenade, boatmen, businessmen and lovers strolled and posed for selfies. Farther down the waterfront, fishermen lounged on board their sampans, singing and playing cards.

The delta may be on the brink of change, but its cuisine is still intact. My friend Thomas, a hilarious guide and Can Tho native, and I visited his favorite spots on a scooter foodie tour, starting with Mrs. Thuan, a 77-year-old matron who developed her own style of vermicelli called *banh hoi mat vong*, or hammock vermicelli spring rolls. On De Tham Street, a string of vegetarian restaurants sat alongside carts hawking Chinese wonton bowls and Vietnamese grilled pork stuffed in banana leaf. We sampled classic Khmer-style *banh cong*—shrimp, mung bean and pork fritters in Mrs. Sung’s diner. At Hu Tieu Nam Vang, I learned that *hu tieu*, Teow’s coveted shrimp, pork and vermicelli soup, is actually rooted in Khmer cuisine and is considered a quintessential delta dish.

At twilight, I boarded Azerai’s *ghe*-inspired ferry and made a beeline to Au Islet, Zecha’s river-bound sanctuary in the middle of the Hau Giang (Lower Mekong) thoroughfare. Glints of warm light from passing boats mingled with the starlight above and a balmy breeze drifted through the open-air cabin. When we approached the sweeping tree-lined cove, I glanced up and saw Can Tho Bridge’s shimmering profile span the horizon. Azerai was within earshot of Can Tho’s poetic din and

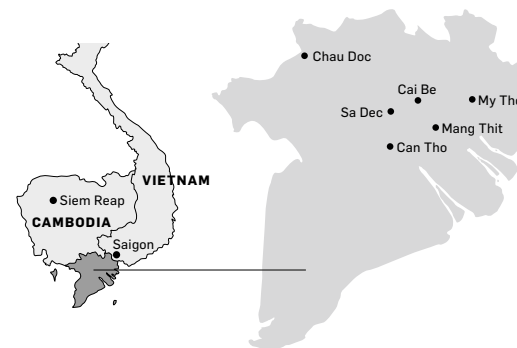
tucked under this utterly modern steel bridge, and it belonged wholeheartedly to the river.

The 8½-hectare Au Islet is a natural mangrove, and the majority of the wilderness was left untouched. Inspired by the delta’s low-lying countryside, the resort’s pitched-roof pavilions sit among ancient banyan trees whose tangle of sinewy limbs brush the green lawns. Set gracefully along the shoreline, the rooms recall the gathering of houseboats and floating villages on the river. A 34-meter infinity pool and a lotus pond anchor the verdant, tropical grounds, which include a Pilates studio, tennis courts, a children’s creative zone, and an ethereal spa, as well as a trio of dining outlets dishing soul-satisfying comfort foods—a melange of toothsome bistro fare and piquant delta-inspired bites.

Zecha’s iconic muted color palette and sophisticated simplicity were palpable, but so were the soft hum of sampans motoring by and the swish of fishermen’s nets hitting the water. The river beckoned, and I spent hours ensconced in my pavilion’s private veranda, watching river life roll by. I had finally made it to Azerai, and it was difficult to break away from its chill and cozy spell.

## MEKONG DELTA

As you float through this network of diverse waterways, be sure to make a few stops on land to scout out ancient temples, thriving markets and local villages, where the delta’s best dishes are doled out to all who ask.



### GETTING HERE

Fly into Saigon or Phnom Penh to begin your delta expedition. From Saigon, it’s a 90-minute car ride to Cai Be or My Tho pier, and a three-hour drive to Can Tho. From Phnom Penh, sail down the Mekong into the delta.

### CRUISE

**Aqua Expeditions** Soak in delta vibes aboard the swish, five-star *Aqua Mekong*. Gorgeous cabins and lounges are outfitted with contemporary, minimalist furnishings and floor-to-ceiling windows. Chill in the petit plunge pool or get pampered in the spa. Three- and four-night cruises depart weekly from Phnom Penh

or Saigon. [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com); *three-night Discovery cruises from US\$2,835 per person and four-night Explorer cruises from US\$3,780 per person, but prices vary based on season.*

**TransMekong Bassac** Frenchman Benoit Perdu handcrafted a wooden rice barge into a comfortable 10-cabin cruising boat. His overnight backwater jaunt gets up close to village life. [transmekong.com](http://transmekong.com); *overnight cruise US\$249 per person.*

### STAY

**Azerai** In Can Tho, Adrian Zecha channels the delta’s pure and relaxing mood on scenic Au Islet. River-, garden- and lake-facing

One morning, I climbed aboard a narrow splintered sampan skippered by the wizened 53-year-old Thong just as the sun was coming up. Thong, a capable and cheerful captain, knitted dried palm leaves into grasshoppers and cracked jokes while maneuvering the sampan through Cai Rang’s scrum of produce and fish-laden *ghe*. Here, I came upon Teow and his *hu tieu* skiff. “The river has been good to my family. But my children want to work in the city,” Teow told me. “Another five or ten years, and I may have to stop, too,” he said. By now this story was familiar. The Mekong Delta is caught up in the tension and excitement of a culture in flux. Yet, there is also a prevailing sense of equanimity and kindness, a live-and-let-live approach that keeps things moving forward.

I ended the outing with a refreshing *caphe da*, and struck up a conversation with Tung, a local fisherman. Tung started fishing 30 years ago, using a small, hand-paddled sampan. “The river is changing, our way of living is changing,” he said thoughtfully, yet expressed contentment with his simple lifestyle, with no plans to do anything else. “About five years ago, I bought a motor for my boat. That made my arms happy,” he said, laughing. ☺

pavilions have spacious footprints, with separate sleeping and dressing quarters and private verandas. [azerai.com/can-tho](http://azerai.com/can-tho); *doubles from US\$250.*

**Nam Bo Boutique Hotel’s** French-style pension makes for a cozy stay. Enjoy a bird’s-eye view of Ninh Kieu Quay while noshing on L’Escale’s French- and local-inspired menu. [nambocantho.com](http://nambocantho.com); *doubles from VND2,465,000.*

Tucked in a tropical garden, **Nam Thi Holiday Home** has three pretty loft suites, including one right on the Cai Be canal, and offers a wonderful local homestay experience. [fb.com/noithugiancua thiphan](http://fb.com/noithugiancua thiphan); *doubles from US\$45.*

### EAT, DRINK AND DO

Join the breakfast cruise to Cai Rang Market or Khmer Pagoda aboard **9 Dragons Sampan**, (formerly known as Mystic Sampan)—large comfortable boats that sit at level with the river, and explore the delta’s thicket of mangrove waterways, floating markets and hidden Khmer sanctuaries. Extensions include cycling in the countryside. [mekong-delta.com](http://mekong-delta.com); *breakfast cruises from VND775,000.*

Meet Thomas in Can Tho for a **Street Food Tour** ([cantharivertour.com](http://cantharivertour.com); *Street Food Tours from US\$29 per person, US\$45 for private tours*), by scooter or foot, and tuck into the delta’s iconic bites. On the tour, I enjoyed the hammock vermicelli

spring rolls at **Banh Hoi Mat Vong Ut Dzach** (VND50,000); *banh cong*, or shrimp, mung bean and pork fritters, at **Banh Cong Co Ut** (86/38 Ly Tu Trong; VND80,000); and *hu tieu* (shrimp, pork and vermicelli soup) at **Hu Tieu Nam Vang**, (50-52 Nguyen Khuyen; VND35,000 per bowl). **Café 1985** Can Tho’s liveliest hipster joint serves simple local snacks, excellent coffees and cocktails. Live music most nights. *138 Huynh Cuong, Can Tho; drinks for two from VND80,000.* Stroll around **Ho Xiang Thoi**, a man-made lake twinkling in fairy lights, and sip *caphe da* at a local coffee shop. *Huynh Cuong Street, Can Tho.*

Try prepping *lau vit nau chao* (duck hot pot with pickled tofu and taro) or *lau mam* (salted fish hot pot) at one of the cramped sidewalk eateries on Hot Pot Alley, like **Hem Vit Nau Chao**. *Between Mau Than and Ly Tu Trong, Can Tho; hot pot for two from VND150,000.* Celebrating the occult and medieval dark forces, the **Museum of Tarot** is a cheery three-story collection of tarot cards and arcane magic paraphernalia, among other curiosities. [musuem-tarot.com](http://musuem-tarot.com); *44 Nguyen Khuyen, Can Tho.* At **Chua Maniransay**, Can Tho’s main Khmer pagoda, the multilingual abbot can give a crash course on Vipassana meditation. *36 Hoa Binh Rd. –R.S.*