

Diana Chambers - Letters from Asia

Letter #8 - Mother Mekong



Up the Mekong

The Mekong flows from the mountains of Tibet through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, ending in the South China Sea. I have come here to research my romantic thriller, *Into the Fire*, in which a mother rejoins her former CIA case officer to rescue her kidnapped daughter in China's deep south. Why she is being held in this jungly Mekong area of Yunnan province is the heart of the story.

I have always been fascinated by border areas, where national identity is but a fluke of fate: remote politicians drawing a line on a map. Yet here, the Mekong defines her people more than a passport: Yunnan peoples related linguistically and culturally to those in Laos, Myanmar and northern Thailand. The Mekong feeds them as well. After the summer rains—when the river can rise as much as 100 feet—the fertile banks are cultivated by farmers living in houses perched securely on the upper slopes.



Mekong Village and River Boat

Ready to explore, we meet our boat in Luang Prabang, Laos, located on the Mekong's eastern shore. We will head upriver, our destination a small Lao border town from which we will ferry west to Thailand. This area had links to the "secret war" conducted during the Vietnam conflict—or the Second Indochina War, as the Laos call it,

the first fought against the French. In my story, a former Air America pilot based in Thailand will drop my characters, Eve and Ross, in southern Yunnan.

After rescuing her daughter, they will flee down the Mekong, hence our own journey. The river is full of jagged rocks and boulders and especially perilous during high water seasons when they are invisible. The waters are low now and we can see the dangers through which our savvy captain navigates. At times he must slip through a very narrow channel; other times he hugs one bank or the other, avoiding sand bars and other risks hidden to us.

Our young guide, Phang, is cute, hip and energetic, straddling the traditional Lao and online worlds. Born to a rural family, he has leaped generations in his short life. I sense he may feel a bit dislocated, as his society is in a state of flux. Laos is still a totalitarian state, a la China and Vietnam. However, he views the government as a fairly benevolent force, tripling salaries of village teachers, opening the land to private ownership, the Internet—and tourism. People will get rich but the culture is at risk. By forbidding relationships between Lao citizens and foreigners they are attempting to preserve a delicate balance.



Boat Captain's Wife

On our “slow boat” we have entered what Phang calls Lao time. What is the rush, anyway? I begin to wonder as I sink into that rare luxury: quiet relaxation with nothing to accomplish. Nothing but watch the world go by. And chat. He tells us of whiskey villages where people ferment alcohol from sticky rice and yeast, later seasoning the brew with scorpions, snakes or centipedes. 65 proof. “Cheap and strong.”

Laos remains an agrarian society and the Mekong banks are cultivated with care, tidy plots of rice and corn, melons, bananas and peanuts. Fishermen hang small nets from bamboo poles—although the use of dynamite is not unknown—while gold miners sift through muddy sediment with sieves. Bamboo grows on the hillsides, along with mango trees and teak. Sometimes, though, the manmade landscape is swallowed by steep cliffs of thick foliage: impenetrable jungle. Forbidding. I have a new understanding of the toughness required to survive here.

The day is both long and short, ending at dusk as the captain can no longer navigate without radar. We pass the first night in Pakbend, Laos. After climbing steep

steps up the mountain, we are shown just how high the mighty Mekong can rise! Across the dusty road from our guest house, the restaurant owner greets us in almost perfect American English. We learn he spent ten years as a monk in the capital, Vientiane, before marriage. As with the madrasas in Islamic countries, Buddhist monasteries provide education to boys with limited options. And quite a good one, judging by this cosmopolitan man.

A river cruise is such a gentle, easy way to travel and we are almost disappointed at the end of the second day to reach Huay Xai, the border town across from Chiang Khong, Thailand, for here the Mekong becomes the international border, as it does later with Laos, Myanmar and China. We had wanted to continue by boat to Yunnan but following the murder of some Chinese sailors last year—by Burmese and Thai drug dealers—they have closed their part of the river to foreign traffic.

Instead, we plan to spend a few days in north Thailand where Eve and Ross will organize their operation and then head by air for Yunnan province, China.