

ASIAN TRAVELLER

Experience The Real Asia...

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Mekong River cruise

Journeys up river and back in time

Kamu Lodge, a unique adventure camp perched on the banks of the Mekong River, has launched a two-day journey deep into the heart of Lao culture and a Buddhist way of life that has remained almost unchanged for centuries.

The traditional Lao long boat embarks at 9 am from Luang Prabang and journeys upstream to Dan Village, a secluded place where locals are working to rebuild a Buddhist pagoda.

The next stop is Doun Khoune, the private shrine of King Sisavangwatana, the last king of Laos. This is followed by a visit to the Pak Ou Caves, where devotees have left thousands of Buddhist icons over the years - a must-see for Luang Prabang visitors.

"Buddhism is as much a part of Lao history and tradition as sticky rice and fish sauce," said Kurt Walter, group general manager of Apple Tree Group Hospitality. "Seeing these shrines and holy places up close is as near as you can get to the soul of

this country, to what makes the people tick. It's not just a religion, it's a whole way of life."

After the caves, guests will enjoy a traditional lunch at a local restaurant on the opposite bank of the river, before re-boarding and visiting two more villages, populated by the Hmong and Kamu people.

The Hmong are Christian and believe in shamanism, while the Kamu are animists and pray to the souls of the forests. Guests will have the opportunity to visit local homes and schools, and engage with the locals, whose friendliness and hospitality are well-known.

In late afternoon, the boat docks at Kamu Lodge, a one-of-a-kind base camp that combines the comforts of a hotel with the cultural traditions of Laos and a finely tuned environmental sensibility. Two hours north of Luang Prabang, the lodge is secluded, not only from the city,

but also from the other distractions (TV, wireless internet) that so often intrude into nature.

A gourmet dinner made from local ingredients is served overlooking the Mekong, and guests spend the night in soundly constructed safari tents that come with en suite bathrooms, balconies, hot water and electricity (from solar panels).

"Kamu Lodge is fully committed to a low-impact experience, but that doesn't mean we skimp on comfort, whether with our excellent mattresses, fully stocked bar, or the fixtures we've added to the long boat to make sure you travel the Mekong in style," said Walter.

Those still curious about the local way of life can also try their

hand at planting rice, fishing and archery in a field shared with the neighboring village. The next morning after breakfast, the boat returns to Luang Prabang, making leisurely progress downriver so guests can enjoy the sight of the tangled jungle banked against the flowing waters.

The package prices starts at USD 237net/person, based on twin occupancy and includes accommodation, full board, river and shore excursion, as well as guide fees. ■

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