

The mighty Mekong River is at the heart of all things  
Cambodian and has fascinated explorers and  
visitors for more than a century

WORDS STUART HEAVER

# LIFE BY THE MEKONG

**T**he largest freshwater fishery in the world, irrigating thousands of hectares of agricultural land and second only to the Amazon in the richness of its biodiversity,

the Mekong quite simply drives life in Cambodia. The recently extended Mekong Discovery Trail offers visitors a rare glimpse into the heart of this massive

Asian river and allows them to explore its islands, riverbanks and local communities by boat, bike and even horse and cart.

The southern gateway to the trail can be found at Kratie, some 160km upstream

from Phnom Penh. Kratie is a charming, if slightly shabby former French colonial outpost perched on the eastern bank of the river, which in the dry season runs a deep azure blue.

## The Mekong is the largest freshwater fishery in the world

Maps and general details about the trail are posted in most hotels. Although the official guidebooks have run out, Joe Frerichat, owner of the Red Sun Falling, the last bookshop on the Mekong, lets me study

his copy while I enjoy a Khmer supper of chicken and noodles in the store's riverside restaurant.

The trail offers several routing options but with Joe's advice I decide to hire a

bicycle and head north-east along the riverbank towards the deep-water pools at Kampi some 10km away, which are home to the critically endangered

Irrawaddy dolphins.

The ride along the road that hugs the riverbank is quite easy going as I pass through riverside villages shaded by tall coconut palms and return waves to



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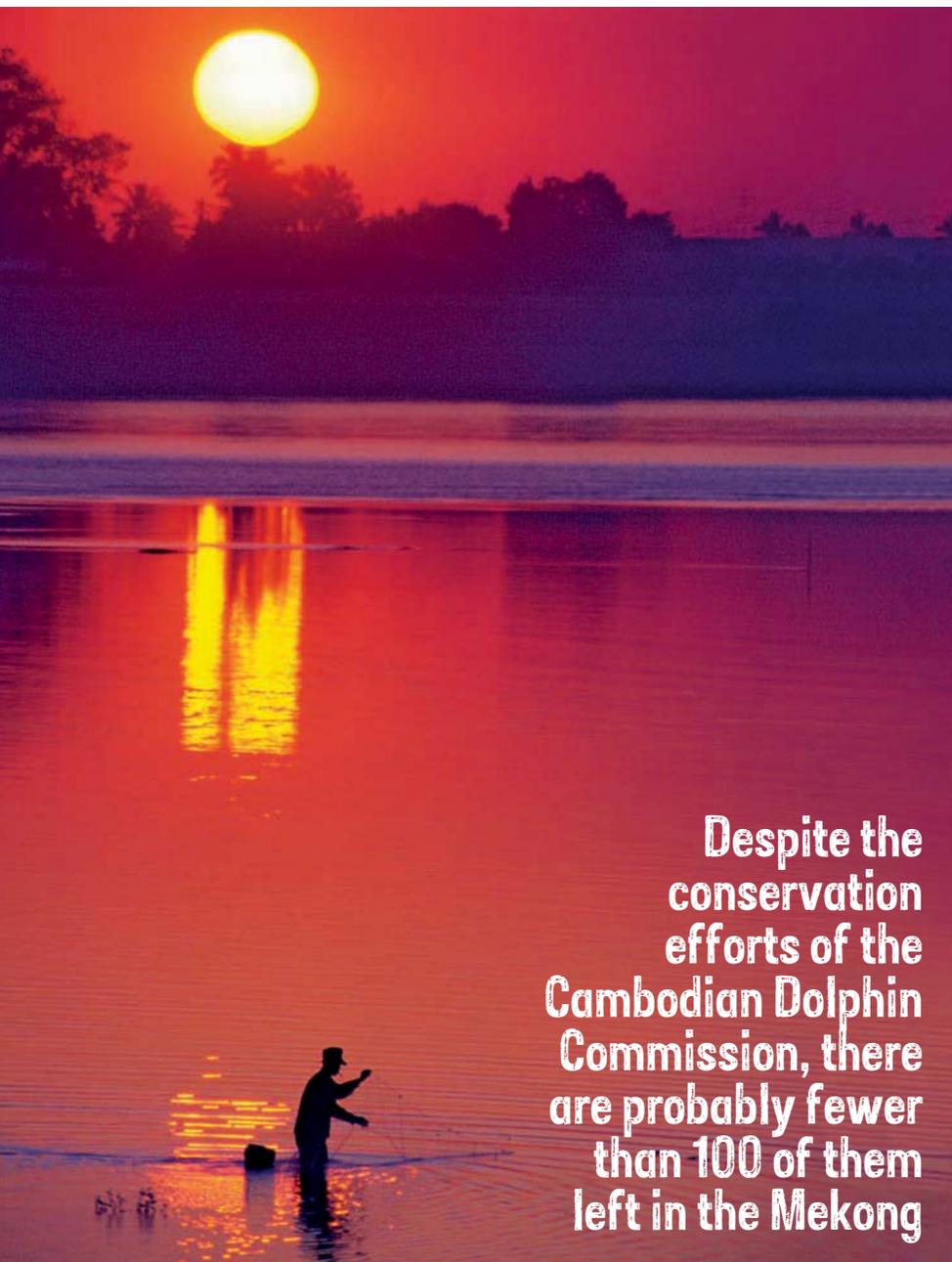
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Despite the conservation efforts of the Cambodian Dolphin Commission, there are probably fewer than 100 of them left in the Mekong

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A fisherman checks his nets at sundown; the rapids of the Mekong; the giant pirogues used for racing**



children shouting greetings. To my left, I catch fleeting glimpses of the Mekong as it winds past from the uplands of eastern Tibet 1,600km south and west to its final destination in the South China Sea.

Taking a brief rest in the shade of a pagoda, I meet Soda, a teacher at the local school, who lives with the monks at the temple. Their newly laundered orange robes flap on washing lines behind him as he tells me about the giant pirogues that are taken downstream to Phnom Penh every October for racing in the water festival. "The boat I race in is over 50 metres long," he tells me proudly, running his hands along the side of the brightly painted riverboat. On the dusty riverside track behind the pagoda, I overtake a group of young monks and a mongrel dog that has stopped for a scratch in the shade of a stilted timber house.

In Kampi, I head out onto the river itself in a traditional long-tail boat under a blazing sun, skippered by Pherom, a local fisherman who re-trained as a guide and takes visitors out in search of dolphins. "The dolphins don't mind the people visiting," he tells me as he manoeuvres his boat around the deep-water pools in the river. Within a few minutes, we see a mother and her calf rolling gently in the water a few metres away. Ours is the only boat on the water and it's a magical moment on the Mekong.

Gordon Congdon of the World Wildlife Fund office in Kratie tells me that despite the conservation efforts of the Cambodian Dolphin Commission there are probably fewer than 100 of these creatures left.

Pherom agrees to take me further upriver and the gently rolling river becomes

foaming rapids. A bumping and scraping of wood can be heard above the sound of the roaring water as the boat bruises itself on a large boulder. Pherom skilfully lands on a small sandy island in the middle of the river and our only observer is a white heron on a distant rock. A swim proves difficult as the current is running so fast, even in this sheltered backwater, that it takes all of my effort just to avoid being swept downstream.

Bidding farewell to Pherom, I head north again and arrive in the small town of Sombor to meet Khoun Tola of the Cambodian Rural Development Team. Tola arranges home-stay visits to simple fishing villages on the nearby island of Koh Pdao. The river taxi that transports me 8km across the river to the island is packed with people, boxes and baskets of supplies. On arrival at Koh Pdao, my fellow homestay

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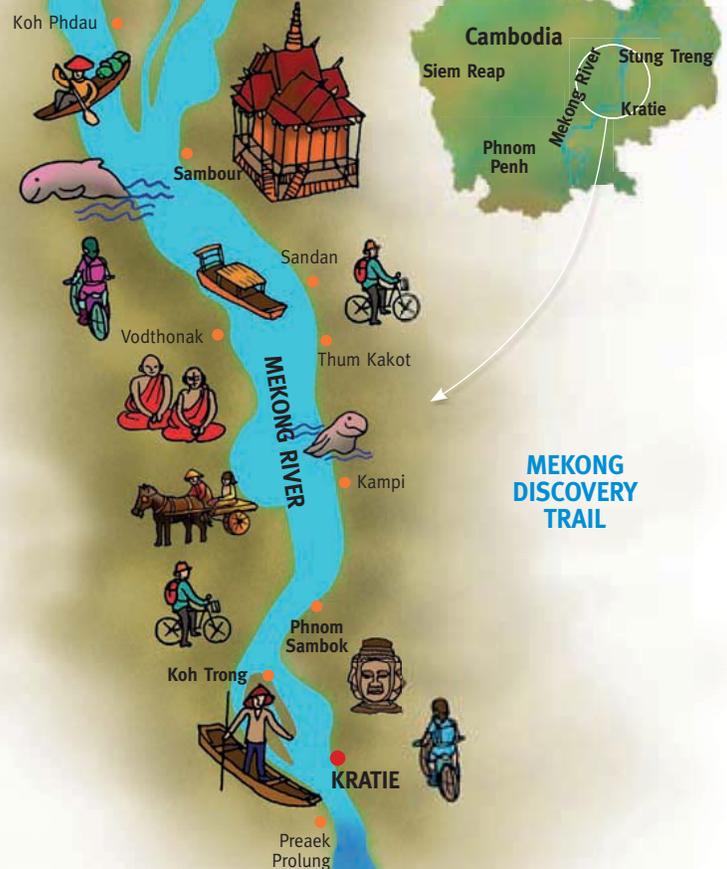
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**MEKONG  
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guests are invited to prepare food with their host families before meeting the village elders.

It's time to return at sunset to the shore by boat — water buffalo drink, men mend their nets, children play.

Tola tells me that a hydro-electric dam and power station are being proposed for the Mekong at Sombor to supply much-needed electricity. This could mean the end for the Koh Pdao villagers, whose modest houses would be submerged under a 600km reservoir. It might also spell the end for the Irrawaddy dolphins.

After the French Mekong Exploration Commission of 1866, its senior surveyor Francis Garnier admitted in his memoirs that he had become "mad about the Mekong". Some 145 years later, having spent just a few days on the Mekong Discovery Trail, I think I know what he meant. ★

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