

## TRIP REPORT

### PANDAW - The Waterways of Vietnam & Cambodia.

#### Day 1.

On arrival in Ho Chi Minh City we were met by our smiling guide and transferred in a comfortable Mercedes mini coach to the Duxton Hotel near the Opera House. This modern four star hotel is highly regarded in Ho Chi Minh City and we settled into our spacious deluxe room to freshen up before dinner. Our welcome dinner was at 'Nam Phan' restaurant, just a couple of blocks from the hotel - one of the best local restaurants in the district for a wonderful introduction to the fresh flavoursome Vietnamese cuisine.

After dinner we ventured up to one of the city's more famous night spots - Bar 'Saigon Saigon' at the Caravelle Hotel - with live music and great views over the buzzing city. A quick nightcap later and it was time for a great night's sleep.



#### Day 2.

A leisurely start this morning, and after a great breakfast at the hotel we headed off with our guide to visit the Reunification Palace, Chinatown and the War Remnants Museum - all 'must see' icons in this fascinating city. We enjoyed a great introduction to Vietnamese noodles for lunch at 'Poh 24' before returning to the hotel with the afternoon at leisure. The location of the Duxton is excellent for exploring this part of the city on foot, which is how we spent the rest of the day.

#### Day 3.

We elected to join the early morning walking tour before breakfast which became quite a highlight. Firstly we joined dozens of locals with our own Tai Chi instructor for a very basic introduction to this morning's exercise ritual that many Vietnamese start the day with.

Now we were well and truly awake and continued our walk and visited the local Ngyen Cong-Tru markets. This was simply fascinating seeing all the fresh produce of absolutely every description - including many things we don't see at home, busily being traded in this street market. We wandered down the street with our guide explaining things to us before heading back to the hotel.

A hearty breakfast followed and then we headed off to the incredible Cu Chi tunnels. On arrival we were taken to a room and the basic layout of this maze of tunnels that housed thousands of Vietnamese during the many years of war they have endured was explained to us. We then walked around the tunnel area and whether you were adventurous enough to climb down into them or not (not for those who get claustrophobic) you get a real understanding of what an incredible system of tunnels this is - both to be hand dug in the first place and then to realise that the Vietnamese lived here, cooked here - even had an underground hospital - definitely makes you realise how difficult the war was for both sides.

Mesmerised by what we had seen we headed back to the hotel where lunch and our afternoon and dinner was at leisure. Feedback from guests recently has indicated that they would really enjoy more leisure time and that the occasional meal at their own choice of venue would be appreciated.

Day 4.

This morning we transferred by bus from Saigon down the busy highway to the port town of My Tho, along the way seeing the hectic day to day trading life of these industrious people.

On arrival at the pier exactly on schedule at 11 am, the friendly crew were at the gangplank to assist our embarkation and to welcome us aboard the Mekong Pandaw. Whilst our bags were taken to our cabins we were shown to the saloon for an introduction to the ship and safety briefing by Purser Neville, who has been with Pandaw since 2004.

The friendliness and professionalism of the crew was obvious from the first minute aboard, and my expectations of the ship were quickly exceeded.

The founder of Pandaw Cruises, Paul Strachan, has achieved a remarkable balance between colonial atmosphere and modern day comforts. Our cabin was beautifully detailed in Burmese teak, with plenty of storage, air conditioning and ensuite bathroom. Plenty of small touches like cotton bathrobes, slippers, umbrellas and a hairdryer were all noted.

We were given plenty of time to unpack and settle in - welcoming the thought that we did not have to pack and check out again for another seven nights - one of the many benefits of cruising.



The first dining gong sounded at 12.30 and we ventured to the dining room for the first of many superb meals on board. The freshest ingredients had been used to prepare a wonderful range of salads and a selection of hot dishes. It is important to note that one of the many excellent features of Pandaw Cruises is the hygiene levels. All food is prepared using bottled mineral water, as is ice production - so everything on offer is safe to eat and drink. The service even on this first sampling was incredible - we were treated like royalty - but also as old friends.

At 1300 Pandaw departed the dock bound for Cai Bei and after lunch we all watched in amazement as the hundreds of local vessels of all shapes and sizes plied the river going about their daily business. On arrival at Cai Bei we anchored and boarded a smaller boat for the trip to a local village. Here a local family business demonstrated the whole production process of using the longan fruit to create a natural sweetener used in confectionary and natural medicine. We then enjoyed first hand seeing the local rice 'popped' and combined with caramel to create the Vietnamese equivalent of a 'candy bar' - this process keeps a family of about ten (plus many other workers) busy full time - amazing!

A short distance away by our boat and a short walk through a local village with dozens of small children madly waving at us we visited a historical house giving us an insight into a previous era of Vietnamese history.

I have omitted to mention our wonderful guide 'Twai' who travelled with us for the Vietnam sector of the voyage. From his friendly welcome back on board Pandaw to his incredible knowledge, passion and huge smile - it was clear that we were going to continue to get a genuinely entertaining and in depth insight into the way of life along the Mekong River.

On arrival back on board, the crew greeted us with ice towels and removed our shoes to be cleaned. This process occurs after every shore excursion to protect the beautiful teak decks on board the ship.

After a welcome hot shower there was a briefing for the next day in the saloon over a gin & tonic before returning to the dining room for dinner. This feast started with a 'lights out' and the team arriving at each table with a sparkler lit serving dish - the start of another great meal. It is worth noting that

throughout the cruise all bottled water, soft drinks, local beers, spirits and tea and coffee are complimentary - leaving only imported wines to be purchased - and refreshingly the selection is both reasonable and prices (particularly by cruise standards) quite inexpensive; ranging from \$15-\$35 USD per bottle. The selection included whites, reds and champagne from France, America, Chile and Australia.

To finish a fantastic first day on the mighty Mekong we were treated to a local musical cultural show up on the sundeck before returning to our cabin for a great nights sleep.



Day 5.

Pandaw's public spaces are a real feature of the ships - and probably the most significant is the sundeck, occupying the whole upper deck - mostly under shade incorporating a bar, and enough beautiful varnished and padded teak deckchairs to seat the whole compliment of guests in an uncrowded colonial opulence! This was also the spot for an early riser's tea or coffee and breakfast was available from 6.00 - 9.00 am in the dining room.

Our days touring started with the Cai Bei floating market - with hundreds of small local boats moored close to each other, selling a huge range of local produce. In a unique form of 'retailing' each boat displayed a sample product - for example a pumpkin - high up on a bamboo pole - indicating the type of produce in the undercover 'hold' of the boat. Whilst it at first appears like bedlam - as is always the case in these environments - there is a system to the craziness and it crated the livelihood for thousands of people in this area alone.

After the buzz of the local market we travelled across river and enter the canal system towards Vinh Long. Enroute we stop at a wonderful local house with a huge bonsai garden and enjoy tea and local delicacies. We then cruise on in our local long boat to visit a local brick and pot factory. Here we again see a very manual process of making and firing bricks and pots and even this being a Sunday, dozens of locals of all ages were busy hand crafting the pots and statues for export, including to Australia. I am sure I have seen the finished products in Bunning's and the like!



Whilst we had been exploring, our ship had relocated upstream and was waiting for us to reboard in time for another sumptuous lunch - a reminder of how comforting it is to return after local exploration to a safe, comfortable, clean 'home' and enjoy food without any hygiene concerns.

Pandaw then up-anchored and we cruised towards Tan Cham. In the late afternoon our Vietnamese guide Mr Twai gave a fascinating presentation on the history, particularly modern history of his country. It was a stark reminder of how, for how long and how recently Vietnam had been under different rule and at war and how encouraging it is to see the country now prospering.

This evening we enjoyed another excellent dinner on board.

#### Day 6.

Following breakfast of fresh local fruit (and a freshly cooked egg or omelette if you weakened!) we boarded a local fast long boat for a scenic ride through the Tan Cham canal to Chau Doc. On arrival at this bustling riverside town we boarded a small fleet of rickshaws for a fun 'up close & personal' ride through the streets enjoying the local life at its best. This was without doubt a highlight of the trip so far. The ride finished at the local markets and we wandered through saying hello to the friendly locals and viewing the incredibly diverse range of produce, much of it very new to me!

We then boarded smaller sampan boats and visited one of the 5,000 floating fish farms in the region including a frenzy when the fish were handfed. The morning's touring concluded with a walk through the Muslim Cham village with a little retail therapy of the jewellery and silk scarfs - maximum price approximately \$4 USD.

It was then back to Pandaw for lunch with the chef again having designed the menu to take advantage of the local produce and specialties of the region we are in.

Pandaw had then arrived at the Vietnam Cambodia border and anchored whilst officials and the ships crew completed immigration and customs formalities (painless for us!).

Later this afternoon one of the talented chefs provided a fruit carving demonstration turning a papaya into a work of art in a short time.

Our Sunset cocktail party on the sun deck flowed into the daily pre dinner briefing where our purser 'Jude' detailed tomorrow's activities and shore excursions. Dinner was another gastronomic delight and now our third night on board the galley team's ability to provide not only great quality but most importantly variety was becoming quite obvious. Pandaw continued cruising towards Phnom Penh, anchoring just before midnight.

#### Day 7.

At seven our Pandaw moved from its anchorage to the dock of Phnom Penh located on a busy waterfront boulevard with the busy local peak hour in full swing. Following breakfast we met our new Cambodian guide "Phaly" and we ventured off touring - first stop the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda. The opulence of the structure and surrounding gardens was such a stark contrast to the quite obviously poor city landscape, however it was one of the more beautiful palaces I had encountered. A stop at the national museum gave a sound background to more of the artistic history of the country.

We returned to the ship for yet another wonderful lunch - really enjoying the style of the fresh salads - different every day - being the focus of lunches allowing just a light meal if so desired.

After lunch a fairly morbid but probably necessary tour was offered to firstly the 'S21' genocide museum followed by a visit to 'the Killing Field' - both being a stark reminder of the horrendous atrocities that



quite recently were a part of this country. I only joined the first part of the tour and this alone was a very sobering experience.

Those who did not wish to go to the Killing Fields were dropped at the 'Russian' markets where a huge variety of inexpensive items were available for bargaining. We then set off in a local 'Tuk Tuk' - for just a few US dollars and visited the best hotel in town - Raffles Royal Palace for a trademark cocktail, then the famous 'FCC' - the Foreign Correspondents Club overlooking the Tonle Sap River.

Whilst the ship still offered full dinner for those who wished to stay on board we elected to venture out into the vibrant night life, and visited a highly recommended local restaurant called 'Friends' for a simply wonderful, inexpensive meal. This restaurant was established some years ago to take in street kids and train them up for introduction to the hospitality industry - providing training, jobs and all profits going back to helping the kids - and the food service and value were simply sensational.

Another tropical storm threatened our Tuk Tuk ride back to the ship - but the rider was waiting in his raincoat with a huge 'no problem mister' smile on. We returned to Pandaw just in time to catch a Folkloric Cambodian children's dancing performance which was amongst the most enjoyable I have seen anywhere in the world.

Day 8.

Early this morning Pandaw departed the dock in Phnom Penh and we steamed slightly downstream to the junction of Tonle Sap and the upper Mekong river and headed upstream towards Chang Koh village - the location of our first shore excursion for the day. The first fascinating thing here was watching the Captain nose the ship bow first into the shore, tying up to a large tree and the crew setting up a gangplank for us to walk ashore with ease. An obvious benefit of these purpose built shallow draft vessels.

We were met by dozens of children soft selling local silk scarfs and they quietly followed us for the whole duration of our walk!

First we visited the local monastery with its simply amazing murals inside telling the story of 'Buddha.' We then wandered down the dirt road to see the typical Khmer village houses with the families busily weaving away in the workshop below the house. As had been the case the whole way the children particularly were very interested in us as they got very few tourists in this remote region of Cambodia.

The visit came to an amazing end when the mother of a child I had been bargaining with for the whole duration of the walk ashore came running down the steps as the ship was casting off yelling "OK mister OK \$10 OK" for a sheath of silk and we completed the transaction by exchanging money for goods hanging over the bow of the ship - it's a long while between opportunities in this part of the world!

As Pandaw cruised further up the Mekong we enjoyed another wonderful lunch from the team on board, followed by some leisure time on the sundeck to enjoy the ever fascinating passing scenery and activity.

At four pm we arrived at Peam Chhykang Village and disembarked to be greeted by more smiling locals. We firstly visited a clothing factory where the 160 young locals - supposedly minimum age 18 earning \$2 per 8 hour day working feverishly away producing cotton garments. At first you can't help feel that they are being taken advantage of until the guide explains that a regular government job pays around \$40 USD per month and a public doctor \$60 USD per month - it's just another world.

We then wandered the streets and were surprised to find the older children asking us if they could have a conversation with us just to practice their English. We visited another monastery and met the 95 year old head monk who had the best toothless smile I have ever seen!

Then another highlight was our visit to the local primary school where the children jumped to stand up as soon as we entered the classroom. Again even at around 8-10 years old they couldn't wait to practice their English on us!



We were farewelled with a school assembly, lowering of the school flag and a traditional song. We then left this simple but clearly happy existence for the comforts of our ship where we had time to shower, enjoy a sunset gin & tonic followed by dinner as we cruised to our overnight anchorage at Kampong cham.

#### Day 9.

After another peaceful nights sleep and healthy breakfast Pandaw arrived at Wat Hanchey. With the ship again nose to the shore the crew built a gangplank and dug out steps for us in the bank for our early arrival to shore.

We walked the 'easy way' up the top of the mountain to see the pre Angkorian temples of Wat Hanchey dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Other than its religious importance this village was reminiscent of a peaceful hilltop resort. We enjoyed numerous conversations with the local children, fed a few monkeys and enjoyed the first real panoramic views of the Mekong River other than at water level.

After returning to the ship for lunch, we departed by bus for a visit to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Angkorian temples of Wat Noker and the twin holy mountains of Phnom Pros and Phnom Srey - known as Man & Woman Hills. We then travelled a short distance to an orphanage supported over the years by passengers from the Pandaw. Here 65 children live in the relative safety and security of this wonderful facility in on of six 'families.' We met one family of three young sisters, (two of them twins) who were abandoned when their parents divorced - it certainly pulled at the heartstrings and we all needed a reminder that they were in fact lucky by some standards. The children were friendly and proudly showed us the artworks they had created, some of which we purchased.

I left the orphanage committed to contributing something to this wonderful project from future tours.

#### Day 10.

Having re entered Tonle Sap we spent the morning cruising upstream to Kampong Chhnang. Along the way we were treated to a full ships tour starting in the sparkling clean galley - surprisingly compact when you consider the quality and diversity of the food we have been enjoying all week. We then met the busy team in the laundry, followed by the engine room, water treatment plants, storage areas and finally the wheelhouse. Everything we saw was a reconfirmation of the highly professional Pandaw operation. After some relaxation time on the sundeck with the riverbanks getting closer we passed one of the tightest turns in the river, creating a very small margin for error as Pandaw navigated the bend.

By lunchtime we were moored alongside the river bank at Kampong Chhnang, and after our last great lunch on board we boarded a fleet of small, very local sampan type boats for a visit to this classic Khmer river town on the edge of Tonle Sap Lake. We cruised past the hundreds of floating homes with the smiling children with virtually nothing, yelling "Hello! Hello!" and waving at us frantically. Our small boat then pushed its way into the busy dock area which was the crudest fish market I have encountered, watching the daily trading in full flight. A walk through the local markets and main street was a final reminder of the significant level of poverty and basic life that is part of rural Cambodia - and yet their friendly interested people made us feel incredibly welcome in their simple world.

As our wonderful cruise was coming to an end Purser Jude invited us to the sundeck for sunset cocktails and a disembarkation briefing followed by the farewell dinner where, in addition to a simply wonderful meal, we were introduced by name to every single member of the crew. To further reiterate my earlier comments, every member of the crew in every department had been as friendly, helpful and professional as any I have encountered in all the luxury ships that we represent in the world.

The product is a real credit to owner Paul Strachan and all his team who clearly continue to strive for perfection even in the challenging remote environment that they operate.



#### Day 11.

Pandaw cruises all the way to Siem Reap, with sad farewells to the wonderful crew, we disembarked - definitely our most civilized stop since we left Ho Chi Minh City a week ago. We checked into the Angkor Century Hotel and had time at leisure to freshen up before heading off touring for the afternoon.

We met our guide 'Sing Song' who took us out for a great couple of hours visiting the jungle clad Ta Prohm. This was a great introduction to this ancient world. After the tour I slipped away from the group to inspect a couple of other hotels in Siem Reap, and whilst it is quite a bit more expensive, if you would like a splurge at the end of the tour you should consider upgrading to La Residence, or for a little more Raffles. These are really beautiful hotels.

It was then back to the hotel to get ready for dinner at the Foreign Correspondence Club. These seem to be consistently great clubs in this part of the world and we enjoyed a great meal and as good as it was, missed our wonderful Pandaw crew!

#### Day 12.

This morning after breakfast we were again met by 'Sing Song' and we ventured off for a half day tour to the southern gate and the main part of Angkor Wat. The overall Angkor Wat complex is spread out over tens of kilometres and you could spend days wandering around with a guide book, however our morning tour certainly gave us a great understanding of magnificent world heritage listed treasures.

We returned to the hotel at around one o'clock with lunch and the afternoon at leisure to prepare for the journey home. The late check out that had been arranged made it very easy for us to pack and shower and head off to the airport at the end of what has been a truly remarkable luxury expedition.