


# This new river cruise ship offers the Mekong's most luxurious adventure

Sailing between Cambodia and Vietnam, Uniworld's latest introduction takes guests on a far-flung odyssey steeped in high style and eye-opening experiences.

BY ALEXANDRA KIRKMAN

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**The Grand Suite aboard the Uniworld Mekong Jewel, which debuted last month as the newest, most luxurious ship on the Mekong River.**

COURTESY OF UNIWORLD BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISE COLLECTION



Notoriously powerful and traversing six countries, the Mekong River is a literal force of nature, flowing nearly 2,800 miles from high in the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea. Widely considered the lifeblood of Southeast Asia, its rushing waters support the livelihood and sustenance of some 70 million people.

The river's stretch linking Cambodia and Vietnam—which rely especially on the Mekong's bounty, its fish serving as the primary source of protein for nearly 80% of their populations—is now home to [Uniworld's \*Mekong Jewel\*](#), the newest and most luxurious ship on the storied waterway. Launched last month and akin to a floating five-star boutique hotel, the 34-cabin vessel immerses guests in the nations' unique cultures, complex pasts, and present-day dynamism on an unforgettable 13-day journey between Siem Reap and Ho Chi Minh City.



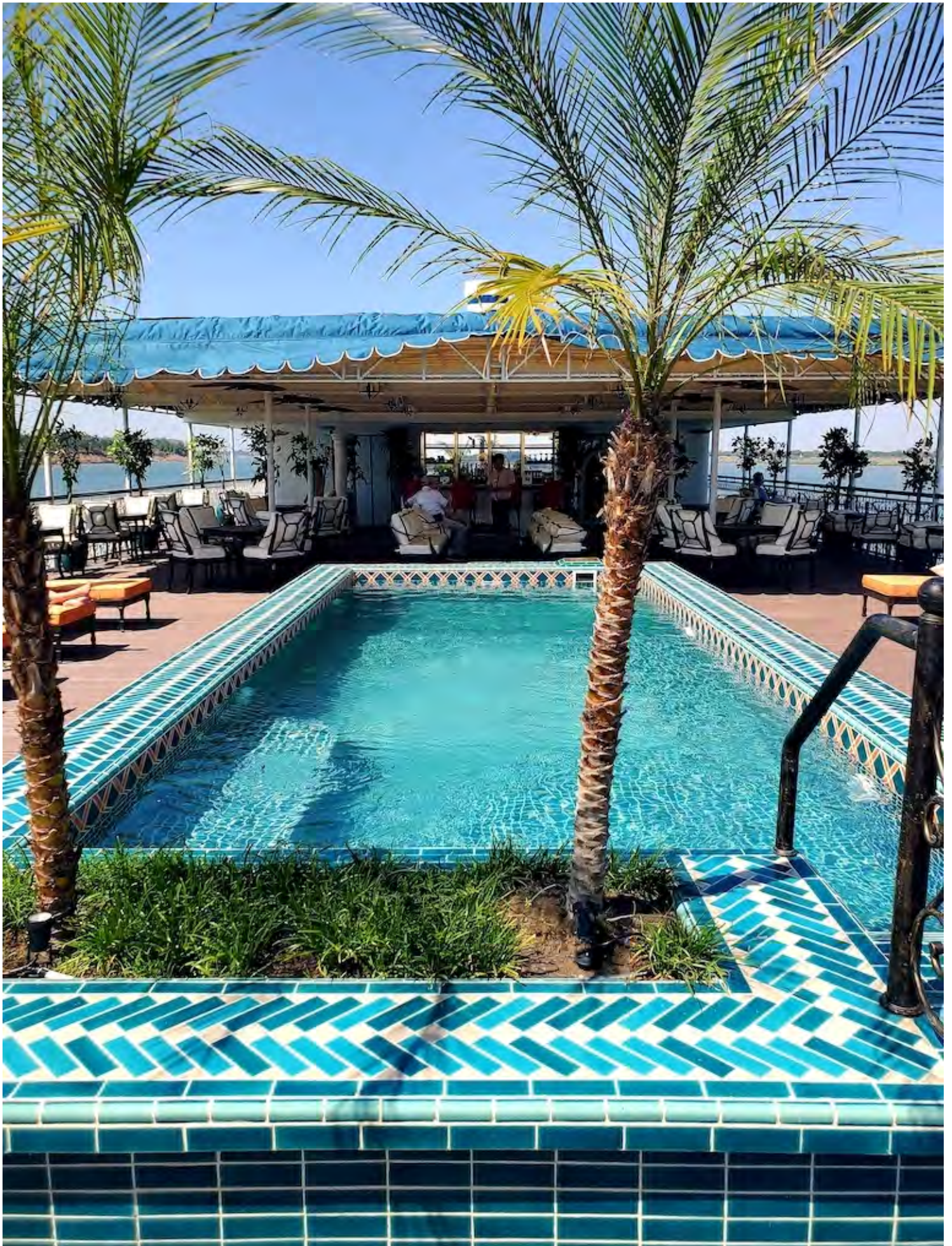
The Mekong Jewel's atmospheric indoor lounge showcases the sumptuous, locally inspired decor for which Uniworld ships have come to be known.

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Constructed with sustainable materials, Uniworld's latest introduction showcases the artful opulence that underpins the brand's esteemed reputation. Awash in sumptuous silks and hand-painted furnishings, the decor evokes the height of mid-century chic—from the lushly appointed indoor lounge's ebonized cane armchairs to the celadon-potted tropical plants that enliven the spacious sundeck, the ship's crowning glory.

Cultural heritage also informs the cabins, which range from 339 to 924 square feet for a standard and Royal suite, respectively. Latticework wall panels, ceiling fans,

and roomy marble bathrooms amplify the *Mekong Jewel's* luxe vibe and distinct sense of place, while a spa, sauna, steam room, hair salon, and library round out its long list of amenities.



The ship's tiled pool and spacious outdoor lounge serve as prime vantage points for observing the panoply of life along the Mekong.

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Considerable creature comforts aside, it's the scope and authenticity of the itinerary that makes an indelible impression from the outset. On a chartered bus from Siem Reap—where guests explore the singular Unesco World Heritage site of Angkor before the seven-night sailing—to the riverside hamlet of Kampong Cham to embark, Thun Soknin (“Nin”), a Uniworld Cambodian guide, pointed out the modest house in the quiet village where he lived as a child, before his family was forced out following the Khmer Rouge's rise to power in 1975.

A few days later, Nin led an excursion to the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, better known as Cambodia's infamous “killing fields.” Located amid quiet farmlands 10 miles outside the capital of Phnom Penh, it's among thousands of sites nationwide where the Khmer Rouge committed one of the 20th century's worst mass murders, claiming the lives of approximately 2 million Cambodians—nearly one-quarter of the population—over its four-year reign. Some 20,000 victims are thought to have perished here, where bone fragments and clothing scraps still protrude from nearly 130 mass graves.

Steering the group along the site's wooden walkways, Nin recounted how he lost his parents and seven siblings to Pol Pot's monstrous regime, and survived by eating insects and leaves out of his captors' sight at the work camp where he labored until Vietnam overthrew the government in 1979. “This place haunts my heart,” he said, wiping his eyes in the shadow of Choeung Ek's harrowing centerpiece—a memorial stupa housing thousands of skulls unearthed from its hallowed ground.



Wat Hanchey, an eighth-century Buddhist temple in Cambodia, is a memorable destination Mekong Jewel guests can visit to receive a water blessing from local monks.

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Other excursions highlight the grace and resilience of the Cambodian people, nearly one-third of whom still live at near-poverty levels despite the [economy's 8% annual average growth](#) from 1998 to 2018. At Wat Hanchey, a hilltop temple complex overlooking the river, young Buddhist monks clad in saffron-hued robes give guests a water blessing beneath resplendent frescoes of *apsaras*—celestial nymphs in Hinduism and Buddhism—deftly rendered in brilliant shades of turquoise, fuchsia, and lavender. In Angkor Ban—one of the few rural enclaves the Khmer Rouge left intact—guests visit an open-air school to help ebullient students practice their fledgling English and watch spirited performances of childhood anthems like “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.”

Outings in Vietnam offer insight into daily life on the river, which locals call Cuu Long, or “nine dragons,” for its number of branches that empty into the sea from the nation’s shores. On Gieng Island—studded with mango orchards and home to one of the country’s oldest Catholic churches—you’ll watch a local artisan craft a *non la*, the iconic Vietnamese conical hat, her practiced fingers swiftly stitching palm leaves to its sturdy frame. In Sa Dec—a sleepy riverfront town filled with faded French colonial villas and flower nurseries—you’ll explore a bustling wet market, where vendors preside over bubbling pools teeming with just-caught fish and glossy tangles of eels next to small mountains of pineapples, eggplants, and leafy bok choy.





The former residence of Huynh Thuy Le, the son of a wealthy Chinese landowner, in Sa Dec, Vietnam. His romance with the then teenage French writer Marguerite Duras was immortalized in her 1984 autobiographical novel, "L'Amant" ("The Lover").

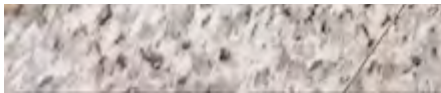
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Just down the road, the circa 1895 Huynh Thuy Le House—former home of the wealthy older paramour of the then teenage Marguerite Duras, who immortalized their taboo romance in her 1985 bestseller, *L'Amant* (*The Lover*)—will transport you back in time with its mother-of-pearl-inlaid doors and fanciful French-tiled floors. The next afternoon, you'll explore the Mekong Delta by rowing sampans, gliding through palm-fringed canals lined with verdant beds of violet water hyacinth to the sound of birdsong.

Back on board—where fragrant cold towels and revitalizing juice cocktails counteract the steamy Southeast Asian heat—locally inspired dining options help guests relax and refuel. Sprawling lunch buffets include an array of hot dishes (like scrumptious sesame fried chicken and other personal recipes of [Bea Tollman](#), founder of Uniworld's sister company, [Red Carnation Hotels](#)) and zesty salads, while Pearl, the ship's airy alfresco restaurant, serves up vegetable-laden spicy pho and flavorful banh mi for those craving a lighter bite.

Dinners are refined four-course affairs, whose standout—aptly titled a “South Asian culinary adventure”—features stir-fried beef tenderloin served with taro, yam, and ginger rice, followed by crispy banana rolls and coconut ice cream for dessert.





A local artisan demonstrates how she Vietnam’s Long Khanh island.

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hat—during an excursion to

The atmospheric indoor manager runs through the charming staff mixes night high-end exceptions, are to dusk, you’ll likely want to beeline to the serene sundeck.

After a dip in the sparkling, teal-tiled pool, while away hours between destinations in this prime perch, with frosty cocktails and fruit skewers in hand, the breeze rustling the surrounding greenery as snippets of life along the Mekong’s banks drift slowly by.

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