

CAMBODIA

Floating Villages

The Mekong River is the origin of a fascinating phenomena which creates floating villages and a way of life deeply entwined with the rising and falling waters of the lake, which are as interesting as the diverse wildlife that is to be found here

■ By Murali Menon

This is being written from a floating house at the Tonle Sap Lake in north-west Cambodia. Also known as Cambodia's Great Lake or Boeng Tonle Sap in Khmer, Tonle Sap is the most prominent feature on the map of Cambodia, a huge dumbbell-shaped body of water. During the monsoon, the Tonle Sap is Asia's largest fresh water lake at 12,000 sq km. During the rains, a unique hydrologic phenomenon causes the river to reverse direction, filling the lake instead of draining it. The engine of this phenomenon is the Mekong River which becomes bloated with snow melt and rain during monsoon. This causes the excess water of the Mekong to flow into the Tonle Sap River, forcing the waters into the lake. This inflow expands the surface of the lake almost five-fold, inundating the surrounding forested floodplain and supporting an extraordinarily rich and diverse ecosystem. More than a hundred varieties of waterbirds including several threatened and endangered species, over 200 species of fish, crocodiles, turtles, otters and macaques inhabit the mangrove forests that surround this lake. The floating villages, stilted houses and a way of life deeply entwined with the rising and falling waters of the lake are as interesting as the diverse wildlife.

I spent a week at Kampong Khleang, one of the floating villages located at the centre of the Tonle Sap



Lake. The boat journey from Seam Reap to Kampong Khleang takes about three hours and passes several other floating villages along the way. The unique feature of these villages located on the outer periphery of the lake are the wooden houses built on stilts which are capable of being towed away to other locations by small boats and ropes. As the water level keeps fluctuating throughout the year with a significant drop during the dry season, these portable floating villages are transported to the stilts which are kept ready at all times. The houses become stilted when the water recedes. However, certain core areas of the Tonle Sap continue to have water throughout the year and these villages are floating villages in the true sense of the word. At Kampong Khleang, residents have rearranged their lives around the waters of the lake.

The picturesque floating village nestles in the midst of thick mangrove forests that line both sides of the boat during the gentle cruise on the placid waters of this translucent lake. Staying at this floating village is a close encounter with nature. As these villages are accessible only by boat and as the

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regular boat service is restricted to twice a day, it is an oasis of peace and tranquility after reaching Kampong Khleang. The journey to and from the floating village is through narrow waterways. The advantage of staying overnight at the floating village is mandatory to observe the large waterbirds that can be seen at dawn and dusk. One can see them perched on window sills, sitting atop the branches of the mangroves and even swimming in the waters.

As the Preak Toal bird sanctuary is located in the core area of the Tonle Sap Lake and is easily accessible by boat from Kampong Khleang, a three-day stay at the floating bamboo houses of the local villagers is an ideal way to unwind, destress and listen to the tune of nature. The Tonle Sap Biosphere reserve has been called the single most important breeding ground for globally threatened large waterbirds. This biosphere covers 21,382 hectare at the northwest tip of the Tonle Sap Lake and plays host to several species of water birds. The Preak Toal Environment Research Station organises guided boat tours of the sanctuary. But the ideal way to observe the wildlife at close quarters is to cruise

Hawkers set out on their boats with local cuisine to the floating village to sell their produce (left); residents have rearranged their lives to rotate around the water of the Boeng Tonle Sap (top), where staying in one of the floating houses (above) is a unique experience

along the waters in a private boat at dawn or dusk and make your way into the mangrove swamps that surround the sanctuary. Pelicans, gulls and the larger birds can be seen flying parallel to the surface of the water either singly or in pairs. They take off and land at great speeds like stealth bombers. As the sun rises, flocks of seagulls can be seen everywhere. Deeper into the mangrove forests, the number and variety of birds sighted increases.

The unique features of Kampong Khleang includes a floating pagoda, two floating churches, several floating markets, two floating schools and several floating tea-shops among numerous other innovations that have helped these ingenious villagers adapt to the changing water levels of Tonle Sap lake.

