

First Class Around The World

KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA
SPOTTING IRRAWADDY DOLPHINS ON THE
MEKONG RIVER



Spotting Irrawaddy Dolphins on the Mekong river

by Murli Menon*

There were about 1000 Irrawaddy river dolphins at Kratie a few decades ago but due to the exploitation of natural resources of Cambodia by unscrupulous Chinese, the dolphin population of Kratie and neighbouring Steung Trean has plummeted to less than a

hundred. The local population of Kampi are extremely protective about the river dolphin and are making an all out effort to protect these gentle delicate creatures who show an almost human like intelligence. Spotting the river dolphin along the banks of the Mekong in Kampi is as exciting as a jungle safari in the wilds of Africa and one must visit Cambodia and experience the magic of spotting the river dolphin as it is a soul stirring journey.

One starts one's journey in the afternoon and makes the 15 km. drive from Kratie to Kampi by a motorcycle in 30 minutes, as some parts of the village roads are rough and bumpy. The road winds its way along the western bank of the Mekong, and offers spectacular views of the river and the lush greenery surrounding the opposite bank. The wide expanse of the river at Kratie, almost makes it resemble an inland sea, with the waters stretching from horizon to horizon. One can see small bamboo huts, with palm leaved roofs, selling beautiful carvings and artefacts of dolphins and this announces the impending arrival of Kampi.

One stops at the entrance of the boat pier and pays the mandatory fee at the entrance and makes one's way to the slow boats that are parked on the banks of the river. These boats are equipped with diesel engines to cross the fast flowing river, but on reaching the dolphin spotting areas, the engines are switched off and the boat is anchored by a rope to the mangroves that are scattered on the eastern banks of the river and one begins one's wait for the Irrawaddy dolphins.

The boat cruise to the dolphin spotting areas takes about an hour and the cool breeze blowing across the river makes one feel cold in the height of the afternoon. Watching the flowing waters of South East Asia's longest river which starts off as a tiny stream from the divine lake Mansarovar in Tibet and makes its way down through Thailand and Laos, before entering Cambodia and finally meeting the sea at Vietnam is a hypnotic experience, especially when the engines are switched off. Dolphins are extremely sensitive to the sounds and the best chance of allowing a dolphin to approach one's boat is to anchor the boat in the middle of the river and wait in pin drop silence for these creatures to make their surface at regular intervals to breathe! The appearance of the dolphin is preceded by a special sound which is the cue one needs to start clicking the camera to get a good photograph before they dunk beneath the waters.

Capturing a river dolphin on the camera needs quick reflexes, a sharp eye and a keen sense of hearing. First, one hears the sound of the dolphin as it surfaces to breathe. Next, the dorsal fin protrudes out of the water, resembling a small rock protruding out of the waters. A second later one can see its grayish body for a fraction of a second before it plunges in to the river, only to surface again, a few metres away before disappearing again. Dolphins always travel in groups and more often than not they move in pairs and it does get tricky, when two dolphins surface at the same time! All one can do is enjoy the oxygen rich air, perch oneself on the edge of the boat and continuously try to be in the present, patiently waiting for these gentle mammals to surface. One becomes an expert and trying to spot the fins of the dolphin or watching the trail of surf that could indicate its location.

However, the swirling waters of the river, the gently bobbing boat, the mild sunshine and the cold breeze coupled with the patient wait on the boat, makes dolphin spotting an ideal experience to relax to the tune of nature and focus on the present. One almost forgets one's worries and stops thinking of the future as one is eagerly watching the next move of this gentle animal.

The river dolphin is extremely supple and swift and can disappear and appear in a split second. Even capturing them on a video camera

is difficult as now they are seen and now they vanish! However, if one concentrates and keeps one's attention in the present it is possible to get some amazing pictures of these river dolphins. Going in pursuit of these dolphins is an exercise in futility as dolphins have an acute sense of hearing and race away on hearing the slightest sound of the boat's engine.

Also, dolphins have an aversion to any humming sound and tend to move away from all such sounds. Almost all modern day appliances like refrigerators, air-conditioners, washing machines, airplane engines, motor cars, motorcycles and scooters make sounds that affect the brain waves of humans as well as dolphins and increase the amount of stress. Hence, one indicates to the boat man to switch off the engines as early as possible and wait in silence for the dolphins to venture near the boat. Nature rewards patience and in about an hour, two dolphins, moving in synchronicity surface near one's boat and continue to playfully frolic around, offering a rare opportunity to capture them on one's digital camera.

However, this itself is no easy task and one can get only a few good pictures after several hours of waiting and watching for the dolphins to surface. After about four hours of waiting, the message spreads among the dolphin community and more of these delicate darlings begin to surface but they keep a safe distance from one's boat, as they become secure that the boat won't start its engines and follow them. The return to one's pier is a journey in serenity, calmness and peace, having successfully completed one's tryst with the Irrawaddy river dolphin.

How to get to Phnom Penh?:

Phnom Penh is connected by direct flights from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Singapore and Hanoi. The easiest way for Indian tourists to get to Phnom Penh is to fly to Bangkok and take the Air Asia flight from Bangkok to Phnom Penh. This flight ticket by budget airline Air Asia should cost no more than 5000 Baht (Rs. 6000/-) for the return ticket, if booked 15 days in advance on the internet. It is advisable to stay overnight at Phnom Penh before making the long bus journey to Kratie. From Kratie one has to travel 15 km. to Kampi to watch the dolphins. This journey can be made by a motor-bike taxi for U.S\$ 3 (includes pickup from one's hotel to drop back and includes waiting charges). The entrance fee to the Dolphin Conservation Area is US\$ 7, which includes a three hour chartered boat cruise along with a boatman who also doubles as a guide.

Where to stay at Phnom Penh?:

Cambodiana Hotel, located on the banks of the Tonle Sap River is the most convenient location to stay, as almost all tourist attractions including Grand Palace, Museum and Silver Pagoda are easy to reach. Also the hotel is itself located on the banks of the Tonle Sap river offering spectacular views if one can manage a river facing room by booking well in advance. The average room tariff at Cambodiana inclusive of taxes and buffet breakfast ranges from US\$ 80 to US\$ 100 (Rs. 3000 to Rs. 4000) per night in the low season which is from August to October.

Where to stay at Kratie?:

Riverside Hotel offers basic fan-rooms at U.S\$ 5 per night. No hot water showers are provided. It is ideal for a overnight stay. There are a few high end hotels at Kratie offering air-conditioned rooms with hot showers for U.S.\$ 15 per night for those who wish to stay longer at Kratie.

Where to eat at Phnom Penh?:

Many small [restaurants](#) serving Khmer, Thai and Indian cuisine are found near Sisaworth Quay in Phnom Penh. Steamed beansprouts with flat rice noodles and Chinese Spinach garnished with celery is a local dish which is good to taste and nutritious.. This dish as delicious to eat as it is pleasing to the eyes. The food at the [high profile hotels](#) is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Fresh tropical fruits including papayas, pineapples and watermelons are available at the local market. Siam City Hotel's buffet breakfast has a selection of fresh fruits, water-melon juice, orange juice, fresh vegetable salad and rice soup for vegans who don't consume any product of animal origin or products which contain minute traces of any product of animal origin. Shere-Punjab is a tiny restaurant serving Indian cuisine and the Indian chefs are happy to whip up pure vegetarian meals on request. The Dal Handi which goes well Chappatis and aloo jeera, is recommended. An average vegetarian meal for two should not exceed US\$6 (Rs. 240/-)

Where to eat at Kratie?:

Many street vendors selling everything from sliced fruits to fruit juices to stir fried rice noodles are found by the riverside promenade. Vegans can get a delicious mixture of grated coconut, baked with rice and sprinkled with baked beans and packed in environment friendly bamboo containers. Each bamboo stick is about 1 foot long and 2 centimetres in diameter and costs 2000 riel (Rs. 20/-) and makes an ideal breakfast for one person. This delicacy tastes similar to kozhekkata or puttu made in Kerala. However, no sugar is added to this sticky baked rice snack. Tender coconuts are available at street corners. A bigger version of litchee called rambutan is juicy and filling and a smaller version of the litchee is delicious and one can eat lots of it to replenish fluids during the long bus journey. Star Restaurant at the market serves hot steamed rice with vegetable curry (includes boiled potatoes, beans and carrots steamed to perfection with Khmer spices like galagal and lemongrass in a coconut-milk gravy) for U.S.\$ 3 which is a lip smacking , tasty meal in itself. The quantity is sufficient for two people.

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