About the cover

Phung Hiep floating market, Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Photographed by John Pilkington

From its source on the frozen Qinghai Plateau north of Tibet, the world’s twelfth longest river passes through six countries before finally splitting into a maze of channels and disgorging into the South China Sea. The Vietnamese call the Mekong Delta their ‘rice basket’, but in reality these fertile flatlands produce much more than rice. On a typical day you might see coconuts, mangoes, a heap of turtles, a box of snakes or even a pot-bellied pig being paddled from a riverside village to be haggled over in one of the floating markets.

Trading begins as early as 4.00 am, and by sunrise the waterways are clogged with the sampans of marketeers and customers. Vendors of smaller items hoist a sample of their wares on a bamboo pole. Shoppers come by land and water, and as they stumble from boat to boat, they often interrupt their shopping to enjoy bowls of noodles prepared, rather alarmingly, on open fires in special ‘fast food’ sampans.

At the confluence of seven waterways is the busy market of Phung Hiep. The town lies at the heart of Can Tho province, a Garden of Eden whose orchards hang heavy with exotic fruits such as durian and rambutan. For me, it marked the beginning of a seven-month river journey through Cambodia, Laos, Yunnan and Tibet. The trip climaxed at 5224 m on the north-east face of Mount Guosongmucha, one of Asia’s remotest mountains, when two Tibetans and I stepped onto the Lasawuma glacier, identified in 1999 as the source of the Mekong. I was probably the first British person to do so.

John Pilkington
(For a list of lectures about this trip, visit www.pilk.net/lecturedates.html)