

## Cambodia's floating villages

### Tonle Sap largest freshwater lake in Asia

By Michael McCarthy, Vancouver Courier  
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One of the great wonders of the world is the vast temple complex of Angkor Wat, spread through the jungles of northern Cambodia. Aside from the gigantic size of the complex --it was the largest city in the world in the Middle Ages before the jungle consumed it after its unexplained abandonment--one wonders why the Khmer empire was located here in the middle of nowhere, with no rivers or trading routes to support the city and its huge population. However, another great wonder of the world can be found a few miles away.

Tonle Sap is Cambodia's Great Lake and the most prominent feature on the map of Cambodia, a huge body of water stretching across the northwest section of the country. In the wet season, the Tonle Sap Lake becomes the largest freshwater lake in Asia, swelling to an expansive 12,000 square miles, and the largest freshwater floodplain in the world. More than three million people live on the floodplain around the Tonle Sap but what's interesting are the 170 floating villages found on the lake itself.

In the rainy season, a unique hydrologic phenomenon causes the Mekong River to reverse direction, filling the lake up instead of draining it. The inflow expands the surface area of lake more than five-fold, inundating the surrounding forested floodplain and supporting an extraordinarily rich and diverse eco-system. More than 100 varieties of waterbirds and over 200 species of fish, as well as crocodiles, turtles, macaques, otter and other wildlife inhabit the inundated mangrove forests. The Tonle Sap provides more than half of the fish consumed in Cambodia.

Sitting on the edge of the lake are these distinctive floating villages, many sitting on towering stilts, with their economy and way of life deeply intertwined with the lake, the fish, the wildlife and the cycles of rising and falling waters. Visiting them is not easy unless you happen to travel with your own motorboat, but not far from Angkor Wat you'll find the tiny port of Chong Khneas, where a fast ferry departs daily for the capital of Phnom Penh, a five-hour journey across the great waters. Here the Khmer and Vietnamese boat people live in their floating homes and a guided two-hour boat trip through the floating village costs \$6 U.S. and is an experience worth the time and effort.

Drifting through these drowned villages on a boat is the weirdest thing. In the dry season the houses stand eerily atop stilts in a sea of mud. At the height of the rainy season, the tops of trees poke through the surface of the water in a drowned landscape. Depending on the time of the year and the depth of the lake--it can be as little as a foot deep at times--trucks and cars look like they are being driven on top of the water and villagers appear as if they are

walking on the surface. Huge fish traps are placed everywhere. Some of the houses float, others are on stilts, and yet others are boats on which entire families live.

Being so close to a major tourist site like Angkor Wat, this floating village gets plenty of visitors, and the villagers have devised interesting tourist attractions like the crocodile farm, where you can get face to face with some nasty creatures who are, thankfully, kept in a pit. Just don't fall in. Then there are the snake girls, who live on barges and run up to visiting boats thrusting giant water snakes into people's faces. Certainly you can take a photo, but be prepared to pay a fee. There are even floating bars and restaurants, markets, a clinic and a school. Watching kids play basketball in the middle of a vast lake is something different. If you don't want to descend from your boat to explore, villagers will paddle out to meet you, offering excellent ice-cold Cambodian beer and snacks.

Other more remote floating villages can be visited at more time and expense, and bird watchers will go crazy floating through the giant mangrove swamps spotting the 100 different species of waterbirds. But make sure you don't fall out of the boat, because a floating clinic 200 miles away from the nearest hospital likely won't be able to patch up any crocodile attacks.