

FOOD & TRAVEL

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ESCAPE

A BEND IN THE RIVER

Caroline Phillips sets off on an aquatic adventure along the mighty Mekong on a former cargo ship



Cruising down the Mekong past
Luang Prabang



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Home for a week on the RV Laos Pandaw; Pax Ou caves overlooking the Mekong River, 25km to the north of Luang Prabang; monks in resplendent orange; Pha That Luang Temple, Vientiane; stepping ashore to visit a local village

We're cruising downstream past majestic mist-tipped mountains, buffalo wallowing at the riverside and longtail 'taxi' boats. Beside rubber plantations, banana trees and bamboo stilt houses. Fishermen casting out traditional nets from deserted white beaches. Mahouts bathing their elephants. And locals sieving for gold. The stuff of Asian adventure stories or Oriental fairy tales, perhaps.

We're on the RV Laos Pandaw: a handcrafted, teak-decked, Colonial-style, erstwhile cargo ship. It's her 10-day Laos Mekong cruise from Chiang Khong (Thailand) to Vientiane (the old French capital in Laos): the first river expedition since pre-war days to traverse Laos. A three-country voyage that crosses landlocked Laos to touch Thailand and Burma at the once notorious Golden Triangle.

We've been warned online to expect an 'adventure', including possible groundings on sandbars in the mighty Mekong and changes to the itinerary due to seasonal falls in water level. After all, we're travelling to remote areas. Nothing is certain. Indeed we set sail a day late. 'The vessel hit rapids going upstream and the engine wasn't strong enough,' reveals the engineer.

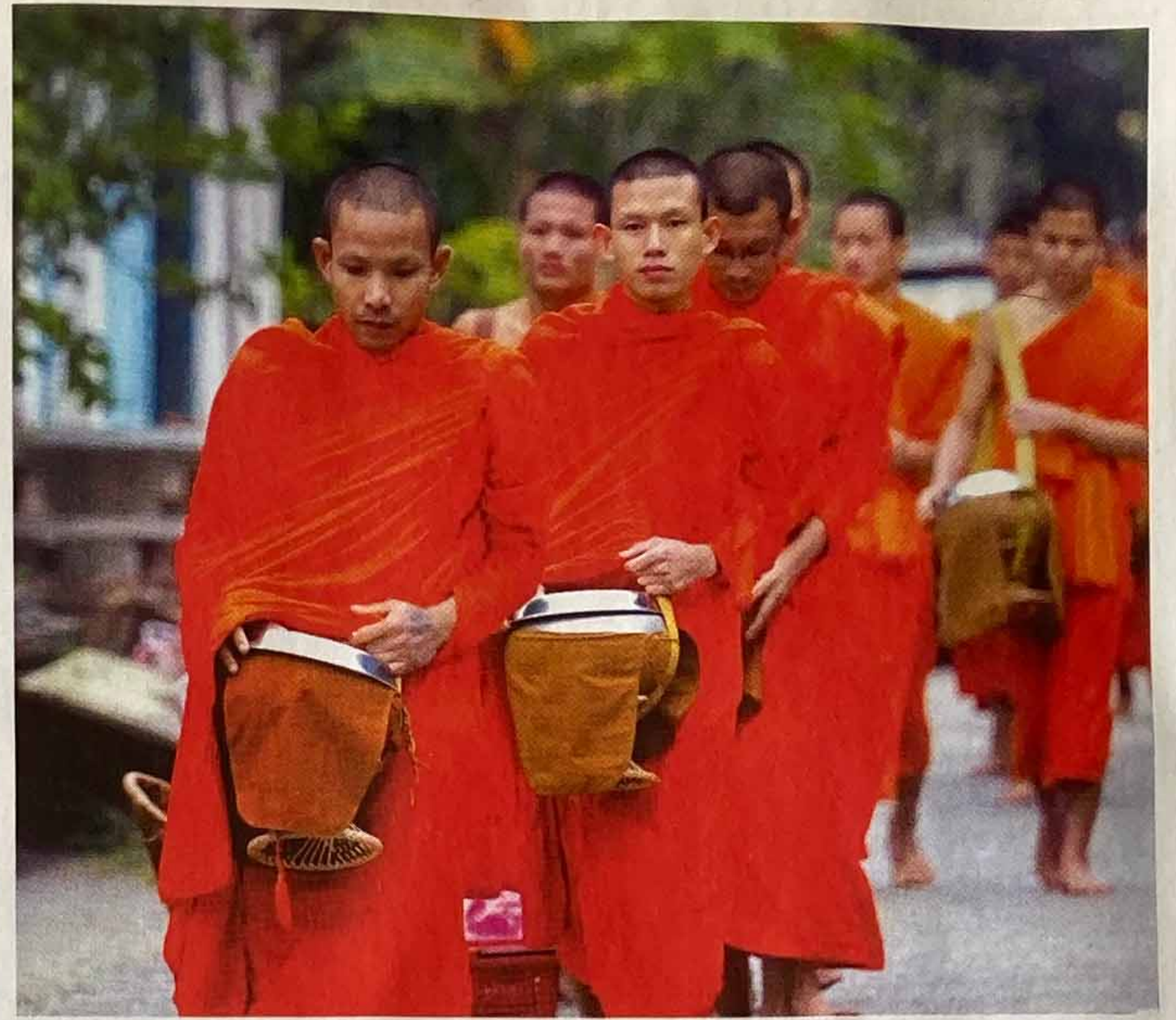
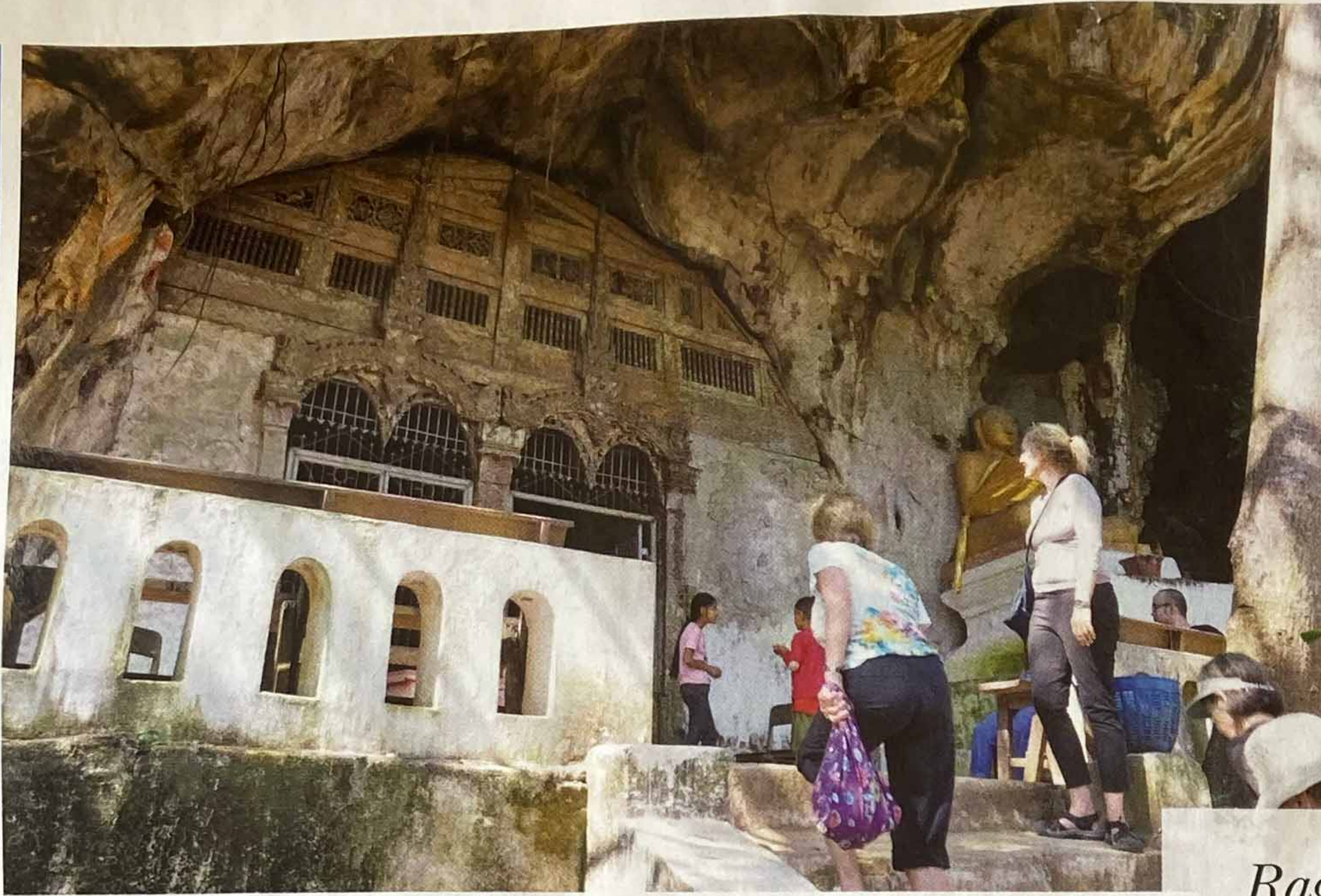
By way of travel insurance against further 'adventures', I sit at the bow by the shrine the Captain has made offering rice, marigolds and incense to the spirits. But he negotiates the rocky Mekong and rapids expertly. He's been working this river for 15 years.

Meanwhile, on board, the cabins are comfortable, the staff delightful and the food good. There are four à la carte courses for lunch and dinner: dishes like chilled cucumber soup, baked Mekong river fish with ginger and soya sauce, ostrich stroganoff and mango bread and butter pudding.

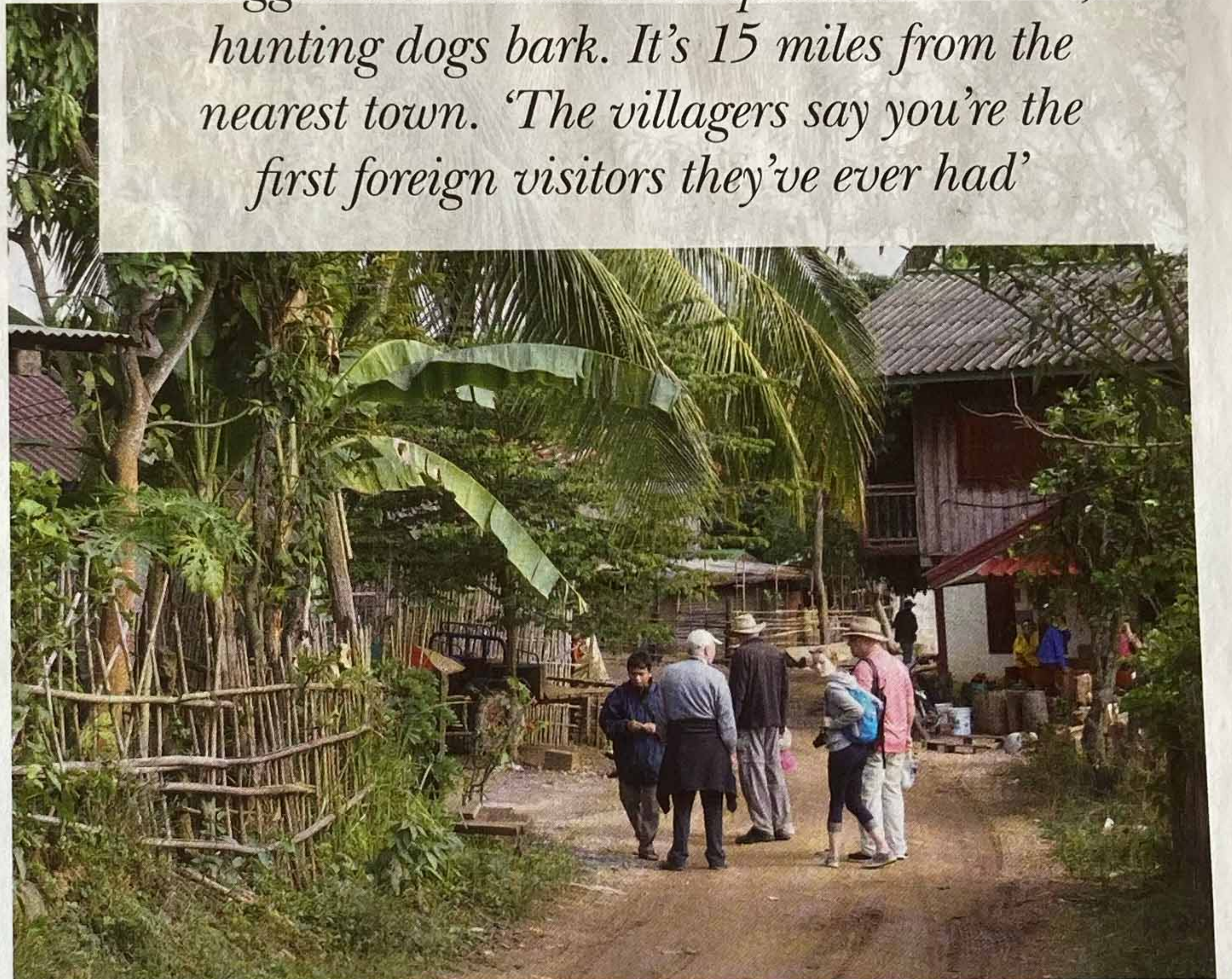
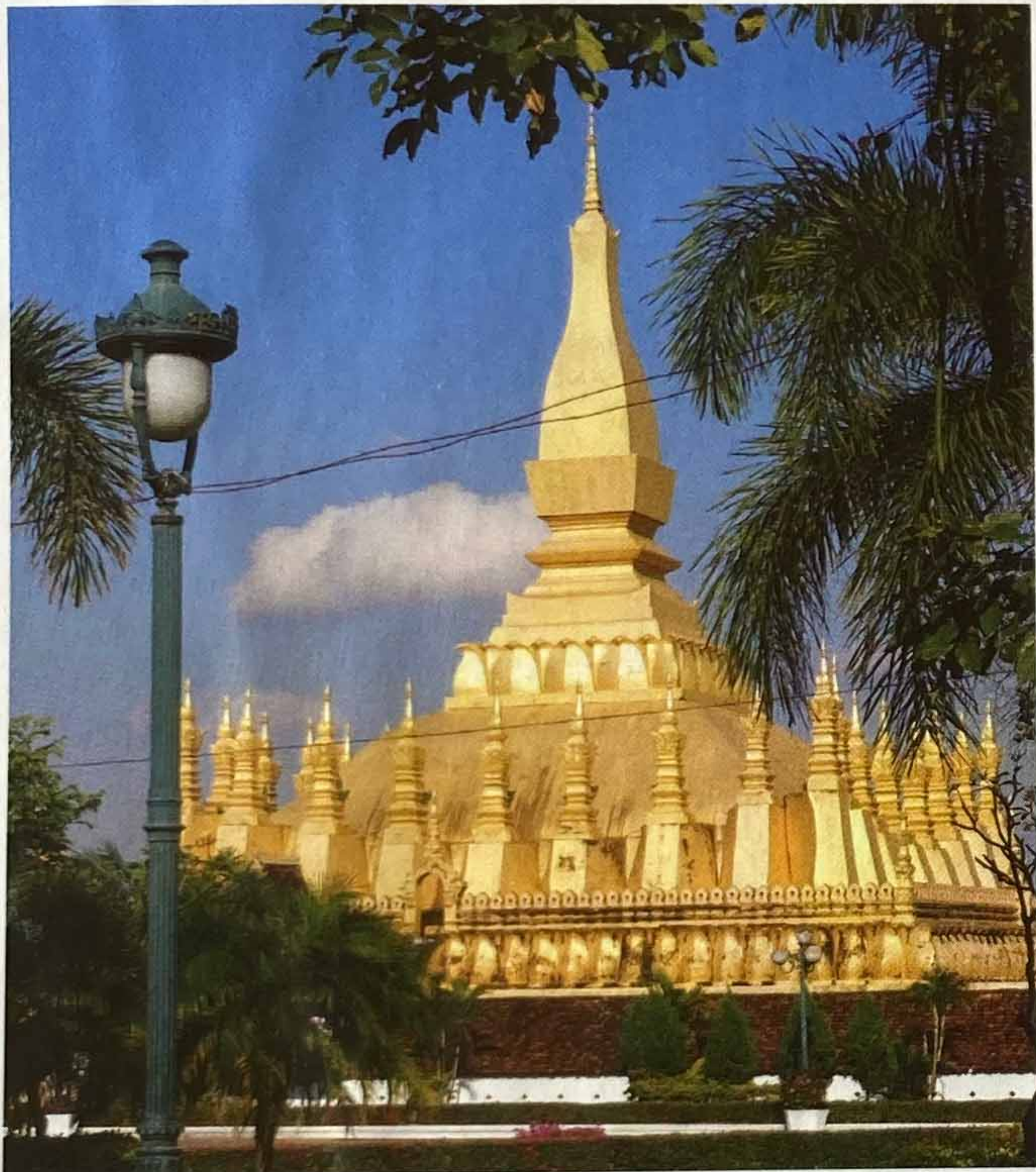
Ours is the only pleasure ship we see during our days on the brown river that cuts a swathe through the heart of the country. Yes, there are occasional speedboats (their drivers wearing motorbike crash helmets), and fishing boats near villages. But sometimes we don't encounter any other boats for days as we pass lush jungle, tiny tribal villages and tropical forests.

On day four we transfer to a local boat to enter the Nam Ou River and visit the Pak Ou caves, clambering up hundreds of steps in the white limestone cliffs, leaving behind the river spirits and discovering lion figures that guard the cave entrance. There's a Buddha convention inside: four thousand Buddha sculptures – 18th to 21st-century ones of bronze, wood and gold leaf, lacquer, ceramic and animal horn in two caves midst offerings of flowers, incense and candles.

As we go back down the steps, a fluorescent green snake dangles watching us from a tree – like some biblical metaphor. Laos is home to many endangered species like the large antlered Muntjac, the Indochinese tiger and the Asiatic bear. But I see only a snake and butterflies.



Ragged children with catapults hunt birds; hunting dogs bark. It's 15 miles from the nearest town. 'The villagers say you're the first foreign visitors they've ever had'



Next is Luang Prabang – the highlight of the trip – with its dazzling wood carved monasteries. It's the former royal capital and a UNESCO heritage site of more than 30 gilded wats (temples) at the sacred confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan River. It is famed for its history, frangipani trees and French cuisine; and for its weathered French colonial shopfronts and faded Indochine villas.

Although it's January – the warm, dry season – by morning it's an uncharacteristic five degrees, with torrential rain. We huddle under umbrellas to inspect exquisite temples with elaborate red and gold pointy, multi-tiered roofs: some with mythical serpent cum dragon carvings, monumental golden Buddhas, gold-leaf-flecked red columns, and genuflecting locals. Plus we see the early 20th-century Royal Palace with its collection of 15th to 18th-century Buddha statues and ancient bronze drums.

Back aboard, ten Lao perform a Ba Ci ceremony: offering bananas, coconut sweets and rice wine to the spirits. The singers chant for good fortune while musicians play traditional instruments. Then the troupe tie 14 blessed strings around our wrists. 'If you take them off, don't cut them,' advises the purser. 'And you must put them somewhere special.'

We rise at 5.30am the next day to see tak bat – when hundreds of monks in apricot robes usually leave the monasteries to walk the streets seeking alms from locals. But it's raining so hard that they don't arrive until 7am: barefoot, cold... and just 30 of them. The pious and tourists

sit on footstools, at kneeling height, handing out sticky rice balls and cereal bars – gaining spiritual brownie points while the monks accrue gold stars for demonstrating their vows of poverty and humility.

Soon we're back on the river again. There's an unexpectedly wow! sight on day eight with the controversial 107-foot-high Xayaburi hydroelectric dam, the gates of which tower like something from a James Bond movie. Passing through it is like being in a giant's enormous lock. The water drops from way, way above – cascading thunderously like a monumental waterfall to our side – and the crew pushes us off from the walls to avoid the ship hitting the sides as we pass through.

A day later we're at Ban Pak Yun village where the Hmong and Khmu tribes live; the former in ground-level bamboo huts, the latter in ones on stilts – and both boasting satellite dishes. Ragged children with catapults hunt birds; hunting dogs bark. It's 15 miles from the nearest town. 'The villagers say you're the first foreign visitors they've ever had,' says our guide, Keo, translating from Lao.

On our last day we're stuck in fog, grounded on a sandbank. The 'book boat library' that sails to remote villages is stranded nearby. Time for another adventure on the snaking Mekong? ■

BOOK IT: *Regent Holidays offers a 15-day trip to Laos including a ten-night cruise, from £4,195pp, based on two sharing, full board, flights and transfers. Pre and post cruise accommodation on a B&B basis. regent-holidays.co.uk*