

**Angkor Wat – “Grander than anything left by Greece or Rome.”**



**Mekong's bountiful fish harvest (top).** Japanese experts help preserve the river's fish (above) and cultural heritage (left below).



**testament** to ancient civilizations and kingdoms stretch across the entire landscape.

When the Frenchman Henri Mouhot first saw Cambodia's Angkor Wat in the mid 19th century he marveled that the temple was a rival to “that of Solomon and erected by some Michelangelo” and “grander than anything left by Greece or Rome.”

Today, a complex of temples at Angkor dating from the 9th to the 15th centuries spreads magnificently across 400 square kilometers and has become one of the world's major tourist attractions despite its remote and difficult access.

In contrast, Bagan, in Myanmar's central dry zone, is one of the globe's most hidden archeological wonders, rarely visited but with so many temples, pagodas and stupas packed into an 80 square kilometer radius that experts are constantly puzzled by their numbers — 2,100 or 4,400? — the first dating from the 10th century the latest perhaps only a few months old.

Nestling peacefully on the banks of the Mekong

River, the old royal Laos capital of Luang Prabang is arguably one of the most beautiful towns in the world with its gentle fusion of 33 Buddhist temples, crumbling French colonial architecture and a stately 19th century pace of life.

According to legend, the Shwedagon Pagoda is more than 2,500 years old, but it still literally dazzles the skyline of Yangon, Myanmar's noisy and downbeat former capital, its solid brick stupa rising 326 feet into the air, literally covered in gleaming gold leaf. Other exquisite, if smaller, monuments dot virtually every village, bustling modern cities and remote jungle clearings across much of southeast Asia.

### Natural Beauty

THE REGION'S NATURAL BEAUTY rivals its monuments. The Mekong River is the main sinew of the region, flowing majestically from the highlands of Tibet through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam to the South China Sea 4,800 kilometers away.

**The Mekong provides food, drinking water, irrigation, transport and energy.**

It is the world's 12th largest river, but maybe more importantly it is home to the largest inland fishing industry in the world and supports an incredible 1,300 fish varieties including the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins and giant catfish.

The Mekong provides food, drinking water, irrigation, a major transport artery and energy to some 60 million people living in its immediate vicinity and helps support the entire 232 million population spread across the so-called Mekong countries.

As majestic as the region's history and natural wonders are, however, its wars and invasions have often been equally spectacular.

Bagan, for instance, was sacked by the Mongols as early as 1287. The last decades of the 20th century witnessed the deaths of millions of people and the destruction of towns, villages, homes, schools, hospitals and industrial complexes in various wars and the Cambodian genocide.

In the last few years the region has been bouncing





along, enjoying, at times, spectacular economic growth, political turmoil and devastating natural disasters including cyclones and terrifying tsunamis.

### Japanese Focus

THE MEKONG REGION, because of its proximity and obvious economic and natural wounds, has been a major focus of Japanese foreign assistance for several decades. In 2007 Tokyo announced the Japan-Mekong Region Partnership Program to help expand trade between the two blocs, promote regional integration and tackle common regional issues.

In 2008, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the 10-state Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which incorporates all of the Mekong River countries with the exception of China, agreed to strengthen their cooperation, encouraging further ASEAN and regional cooperation, bolstering the ASEAN secretariat and participating in various conflict prevention and peace-building activities (see below).

As evidenced by those agreements JICA has increasingly recognized the need for a regional approach, whether in Southeast Asia or Africa, particularly in the field of infrastructure to build airports, ports, roads, bridges and power plants.

With Japanese loans, grant aid and technical expertise, the Mekong region is now criss-crossed with a series of strategic north-south, east-west highways which are facilitating additional trade and people movement.

A 1,450-kilometer link between the Myanmar port of Mawlamyaing and Danang in Viet Nam, by way of Thailand and Laos, is almost complete. Already, goods which used to take two weeks by sea between Bangkok and Hanoi now take only three days by the overland route (see page 12).

### The Mekong – a major focus of Japanese foreign assistance for several decades.

### Other Developments

ROADS SPUR other development and projects. With the opening of the so-called East-West economic corridor linking Myanmar with Viet Nam, special economic zones are being established in the Lao town of Savannakhet to spur industrial growth and JICA is also encouraging plans for tourist expansion in the region.

A Japanese-assisted project to widen the highway between the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi and its principal port at Hai Phong helped create an industrial corridor of factories virtually the entire length of the road.

Careful consideration has been taken to eliminate potential bottlenecks along these economic lifelines. Border crossings are an obvious (turn to page 10)

## jica and asean—closer links

**THE FIVE MEKONG STATES** are part of the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

JICA in recent years has been developing closer working ties with both groupings as well as the individual countries.

In 2008, JICA and ASEAN agreed to cooperate in several areas after identifying “their respective strengths and comparative advantages as well as areas where they can complement each other.”

A central plank is to promote further regional integration improving transport infrastructure, standardizing existing customs procedures, road regulations and other priority areas.

Problems such as

environmental degradation, piracy, drug and human trafficking, infectious diseases and terrorism will be tackled.

In an area which has been wracked by recent wars, the two participants also agreed to work toward both conflict prevention and enhancing peace-building capacities.

A joint study is being undertaken to find ways of strengthening ASEAN’s main administrative body, its secretariat, and a permanent JICA representative was appointed to that body.

ASEAN was first established in 1967 by five original member countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam became a member

in 1984, Viet Nam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999.

The group’s stated aims are to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development and promoting regional peace and stability.

The ASEAN Vision 2020 agreed the group should be outward-looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies.

The ASEAN region has a population of around 584 million people, a total area of some 4.4 million square kilometers, a combined gross domestic product of some US\$1,507 billion and total trade of US\$1,710 billion.

## avoiding past mistakes – saving billions of dollars



important manufacturing perspectives,” Tsuyoshi Shimizu, the Japanese course leader with a 40-year engineering career behind him, told the class.

Students looked uncertain about his opening remarks, particularly the emphasis on analyzing failure. Laos developed in recent years under a socialist system in which such an approach was not part of any curriculum.

But the locals were soon appreciative. “These are high-level lectures by Japanese experts and the course is well developed,” said Viengxay Phongxay, who works at a local UN agency. “It would be a great economic burden for me to try to get an MBA in a foreign country.”

JICA provides Japanese experts who work with the local economic and management faculty. In addition to purely business courses, the centers also stage cultural and traditional events from both Laos and Japan itself to foster mutual understanding and a Japanese language course encourages students to study in Japan and apply for positions with Japanese companies.

“The Japan center serves as a hub for human-resource development. We hope to turn out many people who will lead market oriented reform and development,” according to Manitoh Koodara, the president of the center.

When it was first opened, JICA underwrote all operating costs, but now local authorities contribute 50% and according to Japanese chief advisor Mikiharu Sato, “In the near future we hope Laos will be able to run the center independently.”

**ACROSS THE WORLD** billions of dollars worth of well-intentioned development projects lie idle and abandoned.

Major causes of the collapse of these so-called ‘white elephants’ are that in the original project planning few provisions were envisaged to make them sustainable—by training local personnel and embedding the principle of ‘local ownership’ in the communities and governments expected to benefit.

In its official development assistance (ODA) Japan has attempted to avoid those past mistakes by marrying projects with long-term sustainability.

As part of this effort Tokyo established 10 Japan centers, in nine Asian countries, including the Mekong states of Laos, Cambodia and two in Viet Nam.

They are staffed by Japanese teachers and experts with the aim, among others, of teaching local people the latest skills in subjects ranging from computers to administrative management or, in the

bureaucratic parlance, promoting ‘human resources.’ Laos is one of the world’s poorest countries. It began an open-door economic policy as long ago as 1986 but still lacks the skilled management to ensure continued growth.

The Laos-Japan Center was established in 2001 and last year the National University of Laos began its first MBA (Master of Business Administration) course on its campus in the suburbs of the capital, Vientiane.

One day recently some 30 students from high school, college and working personnel attended the opening of a short-term course on production management where they are expected to learn both production control and ways to increase productivity.

### LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

**“I WOULD LIKE TO TELL YOU** about my experiences—including my failures – and I want students to learn

