

the Mekong expedition

Brooks Institute students take on Southeast Asia—and the challenge of photojournalism.

If you think of world-famous Brooks Institute as a school for studio photography, think again. Last summer an intrepid band of 20 Brooks students set out from the school's Santa Barbara, California, campus for a three-month photographic expedition in Southeast Asia. Led by teacher and photojournalist Paul Liebhardt, the group's goal was to document life along the important Mekong River. Each student undertook a specific project. Some headed north into Vietnam and China to photograph life in the villages sustained by the river and to document the effect of modern technology and development on local traditions. Others worked on photo essays exploring religious practices, recent wars, and the social status of women and children. And three students even set out to find the source of the Mekong River, venturing high into the mountains of Tibet.

Though the students fanned out into a half dozen different countries, their home base was Chiang Mai,



Thailand. They met there once a month with Liebhardt during the summer-long sojourn to trade notes, assess their progress, and change direction if necessary. As with any true adventure, each student's Mekong experience took on a life of its own.

Mark Shaw spent a week working as a medical assistant—and taking pictures—in a Thai AIDS facility. "Several of the patients died while I was there," he



recounts. "Sometimes I was shooting on autopilot because of what I was witnessing. But the photographs mean more to me than any I've ever made, and I'm a better person for having gone through the experience."

Brian Watt had a different but equally moving experience. When he returned to a Laotian hill village a month after his first visit to do some additional shooting, he was greeted like royalty. "As soon as I arrived, two people began to fan me with their hats, someone else lit a fire to make me a cup of tea, and two children began picking mud off my feet," he recalls. "People opened their hearts to us," says Julie Cunningham, who photographed in Vietnam. "Children flocked to the river banks to say hello, and adults and children would hold my hands and stroke my arms with affection."

Not every experience was so welcoming. Charmed by a town in southern Vietnam, Michael Lucia checked into a local hotel so that he could spend the next day shooting—only to be called at midnight by the police, who told him he couldn't stay overnight there. "They had me driven to a city two hours away," says Lucia. "I just waited until four that morning and got a ride back. It was a beautiful place, and I was determined to photograph it!"

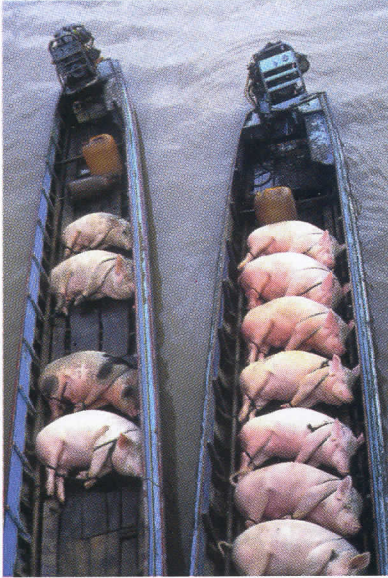
Henrique Mangeon was amazed by the lingering reminders of the Vietnam War as he took pictures along the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. "There were bomb craters everywhere," he says. "And the locals use war debris to make tools and build things." Collecting scrap

metal from the war is, in fact, a living for many of the area's natives. "They find and defuse bombs, sell the shells, and use the explosives for fishing," says Mangeon, who photographed one such entrepreneur as he searched a rice field with a metal detector. "There were land mines where we were walking, so I tried to step exactly where he was stepping. Taking pictures took concentration because I was worried that if I made one false step, I'd be dead."

Perhaps the most harrowing and extraordinary adventure of all, though, was had by students Chris Paganelli, Brian Peluso, and Pedro Castellano. With the help of two local guides, the trio undertook an 11-day trek to the remote source of the Mekong River, some 16,000 feet up in the Tibetan plateau. Riding on horseback for up to 12 hours a day, they endured freezing temperatures, pounding hail, and a dangerous food shortage. "At one point we were surviving on rationed noodle soup," says Paganelli. "Luckily, some nomads gave us food and shelter just when we needed it most. But we were never sure we'd get there because no map exists and communication with the natives was so difficult." (The students were, in fact, the first Westerners many locals had ever seen.)

Paganelli, Peluso, and Castellano finally did reach the Mekong's source. It was, apparently, just the second time Westerners had done so; a 1993 *National Geographic* expedition had tried and failed. But for the three

Clockwise from above: A scene from an AIDS hospital in Thailand, by Mark Shaw; a local boy on the way to the Mekong's source, by Chris Paganelli; a sea of small faces in Jing Hong, China, by Jill Reardon.



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Top left and left:
Mekong River
scenes, by Amy
Gayeski. Top
right: Remnants
of the Vietnam
War, by Henrique
Mangeon.

stubborn students the reward was greater than just being able to say they'd made it—the sight, and their pictures, of the three spectacular glaciers that feed the Mekong, one of the world's longest rivers.

The students' monumental effort didn't stop when they flew back to Santa Barbara last September. They immediately went about processing, printing, and editing their images for a gala exhibition and multimedia slide show—titled, fittingly, "The Mekong River: A Dragon's Tale"—to be premiered at Brooks on April 30 and May 1.

Presentations from previous years' Brooks expeditions to China, India, and Africa have gone on to garner top awards at important multimedia competitions. If the Brooks Mekong expedition's remarkable photographs are any indication, those honors will doubtless continue—and given the students' hard work, they are richly deserved. —RUSSELL HART AND CHRISTA REED

To see more photographs from Brooks Institute's Mekong expedition, visit www.synergyis.com/mekong.