The Mekong Delta will long be associated in the minds of many Americans with the protracted war in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Flat and extremely fertile, the Mekong Delta is a maze of densely populated canals and low-lying agricultural fields—especially rice paddies—which frequently flood. Many villages in the delta region are accessible only by water.

The region begins in lower Cambodia, where the Mekong is known as the Tonle Thom (Great River). Below Phnom Penh, the river splits in half, forming the Upper River and Lower River. Where the river enters Vietnam, it divides into many branches, which is why the Vietnamese call the Mekong the Song Cuu Long (River of Nine Dragons). By the time all the branches flow into the South China Sea, the Mekong has traveled roughly 3,000 miles from its source in the mountains of China.

(Top) The Mekong Delta is one of the most densely populated regions along the entire river. This photograph, taken in Dong Thap Province, Vietnam, shows a lively scene of workers, boats, and commerce. Photo by Nguyen Xuan Hoanh, courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

(Right) Flat, fertile fields of rice are a common sight in the southern Mekong region. Photo by Nguyen Minh Tam, courtesy Smithsonian Institution.