

Hope blooms in Cambodian resort

In Cambodia, as the pain of the brutal Khmer Rouge years is relived in a courtroom in Phnom Penh, Petroc Trelawny goes further back in time to revisit the days of the French colonial era - and explores one of their old seaside playgrounds.

The security guard finally appeared, after my driver had spent some minutes shouting and banging the gate.



Much of Kep's French colonial era mansions and villas were destroyed

He was a middle-aged man, who stumbled out of what had once been the reception room window, down the curved ramp passing the crumbling remains of a pair of cast-concrete statues.

A few dollar bills later, the rusty chain around the gate was loosened and I was in.

Ghostly remains

Kep-sur-Mer is what the French called this small town in colonial times. A nice beach, lush forestation, and sea breezes to keep the *colons* [colonisers] cool - all this a matter of hours by car from the heat and dust of the capital.

From the end of World War II through until the mid 1960s, French settlers - and a few rich Cambodians - built dozens of bungalows and villas for themselves.

Then came the gradual rise of the Khmer Rouge. It soon became too dangerous to leave Phnom Penh.

At first the contents of the weekend homes were looted, then the doors and window-frames and roof tiles were taken.

What was left was then abandoned to the elements, or set ablaze as part of the Khmer Rouge's quest to eliminate anything to do with an imperial past.

But the buildings were too well constructed to be completely destroyed.

Now Kep is full of ruins, houses with crumbling verandas where pastis was once sipped as the sun set, lovingly tended vegetable plots now overgrown, trees where beds and sofas were once carefully arranged.

Of all the ghostly remains, my home-behind-the-gates was by far the most spectacular.



A grand double-fronted residence, with wide balconies on the first floor and gaping gaps where shuttered French windows would once have stood.

But there was something different about this place, and it took me a few moments to work out what. Then I realised. The ruin was surrounded by perfectly kept gardens.

The lawn was trimmed, the shrub-beds immaculate, the white roses carefully pruned.

“ Perhaps he dreams of a day when Cambodia's situation is more stable, rosier, and Kep-sur-Mer as was, can become a royal resort once again ”

The young gardener soon appeared, a broad smile on his face as he carried buckets of water.

Round the back of the house was his well, and his toddler daughter, alarmingly amusing herself playing with an axe.

I pointed to show that I would like to look inside the house, and he waved me in.

Red and white tiles still covered 60% of the floor. In the central hall, an elegantly curved staircase slowly wound its way upstairs, its banisters long gone.

The walls were riddled with bullet marks - there had obviously once been some stand-off here.

The occupant of the master-bedroom would have enjoyed spectacular views of the Gulf of Thailand.



The powder-blue bathroom has long since fallen into disrepair

The adjacent bathroom had once boasted a powder-blue suite - most of it gone, or reduced to rubble, save for the lavatory roll holder, which somehow had survived intact.

Mysterious benefactor

Then came a clue as to the ownership of this house. Another bedroom had been turned into a makeshift classroom.

A series of cartoons painted on the wall seemed to poke fun at the government.

In one a spotlight shone on a man in a suit, who looked like Hun Sen, prime minister for the past 25 years. In the beam, the word "transparency" was written in English and in capitals.

On another wall, a blackboard had the words along the top, again in English, HM Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia.

Sihanouk was monarch until 2004, when he unexpectedly abdicated, handing power to one of his sons, Norodom Sihamoni, a former ballet dancer who has spent most of his life abroad.

"King house, king house," my driver told me as we pulled away, waving goodbye to the gardener and his daughter.

In fact as I discovered later, it was actually the villa of the king's mother.

The king's own residence is on a bluff the other side of town, a '60s fantasy with sweeping picture windows and circular terraces overlooking the sea.

Again the house is crumbling, but the grounds are perfectly maintained.

So who is paying the gardeners? Locals told me that money arrives regularly and discreetly from the royal family itself.

Kep is gradually coming to life again.



The Khmer Rouge abolished money and private property

French families are staying in the simple hotel on the beach and an eco-resort has opened in the hills.

The grand former colonial governor's house - rather like a Normandy chateau - has been restored and surrounded by chalets, though a financial dispute means the complex is

currently locked shut.

Cambodia now attracts over a million foreign tourists a year, but Norodom Sihamoni is king of a nation that is still high up the UN list of Least Developed Countries and suffers from what has been described as "pandemic" corruption.

Recently the IMF announced Cambodia's economic outlook was distinctly gloomy.

But if it is the king who is keeping his gardens growing in this little coastal town, perhaps he dreams of a day when Cambodia's situation is more stable, rosier, and Kep-sur-Mer as was, can become a royal resort once again.