

Cambodia town - stuff of dreams and seafood

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Sunday, August 31, 2008

Kep, Cambodia -- Kam Noeun must be some sort of genius.

His Kimly restaurant appeared no different from any of a half-dozen others along the attached row of corrugated-roof shacks that serve as the local crab market. Yet Noeun and his family have honed to perfection their version of the local specialty, pepper crab, freshly stir-fried not just with black pepper but also with fresh whole stalks of green peppercorns, grown in the nearby local plantations.

Images



The crabs are fresh and briny, caught that day by one of the fishing boats moored outside. Smaller than the meaty Sri Lanka crabs that dominate in Singapore, they squirm on their way to the wok. But the pepper stalks, with their fragrant, herbal heat, buoy the crabs' sweetness in an unforgettable combination. Here in a crab shack at land's end in Cambodia, Noeun serves one of the finest seafood dishes I've ever had.

Besides the crab, Noeun's wine list would put to shame plenty of this country's seaside bistros. He brought us a 2006 white Bordeaux, a Premieres Cotes de Blaye. At \$13, it was twice the cost of dinner. Inevitably, we returned for another helping the following night. Noeun looked up, sighed, then smiled. "You're back!"

Quaint and decrepit, the seaside town of Kep (once called Kep-sur-Mer) is like a tattered telegram from Cambodia's colonial days. Founded in 1908 during the French era on a small cape less than 10 miles from the Vietnamese border, it was once a sparkling resort.

During the reformist era of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the 1950s and '60s, French and Khmer alike journeyed to its balmy shores for the tranquil sunsets over the Gulf of Thailand and relief from the bustling heat of the capital. One of Sihanouk's planned palaces, now in disrepair, lies not far above the town's main road. The French connection and Cambodia's brief cultural heyday explain the architectural blend of colonial and Khmer take on Midcentury Modernism.

The Khmer Rouge explains the rest. Quite simply, Kep was all but destroyed during years of civil strife in the 1970s. Kampot province, where the town is situated, remained one of the Khmer Rouge's final holdouts. It still reputedly harbors former loyalists. In the intervening years, looting and neglect wore Kep down even further.

Kep remains a near-relic, seemingly unreconstructed with the exception of a few municipal buildings and an increasingly posh set of guesthouses. Roads are lined with evidence of the years of unrest. Quaint terraces are worn away by old bullet holes. Tree-shaded steps lead to ragged concrete skeletons of villas that once were.

No raves, please

I'd promised my partner Kristina a proper beach stay on our trip through Southeast Asia. But Bali and Thailand evoked thoughts of backpackers and bad Irish bars. We wanted something remote and rave-free.

At first glance, Kep had little to offer: seafood, solitude and a glimpse of the former charms of Cambodia, filtered through the remains of war.

That is precisely its charm, not just for us but for the handful of Khmer families who still visit for the weekend. Though Westerners are slowly rediscovering Kep - seaside villas were for sale at \$80,000 - it has largely escaped the rapid transformation that has crept along the Cambodian coast.

To the northwest, the city of Sihanoukville, once Kep's rival as a resort, is now a key stop on the backpacker circuit. Australian-owned guesthouses line its streets, rooms at the Sokha Beach Resort start at \$250, and a \$2 billion resort is planned on the nearby island of Koh Rong. Though the airport closed last year after a fatal crash, flights are expected to resume later this year. Sihanoukville, obviously, is being groomed as Cambodia's Phuket.

The route to Kep

The route to Kep begins in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's chaotic capital. Five years ago, when I last visited, Phnom Penh felt very much like a frontier outpost itself - a slightly lawless enclave of aid workers, beggar children and French-speaking moto drivers who would speed you across town for 1 American dollar. Though the country's poverty is still visible at every turn, the changes are remarkable. A lone cash-advance booth off Monivong Boulevard has been supplanted by spotless ATMs run by Australia's ANZ Bank. Muddy Toyota Land Cruisers with Croix Rouge logos have morphed into Lexus SUVs. Thai-style tuk-tuks - three-wheeled open taxis - have invaded. Ambitious office buildings are being added to the skyline.

Unless you manage to find a private taxi (around \$45), the strenuous five-hour, 105-mile journey to Kep is via twice-daily buses that depart near Phnom Penh's Central Market, a relatively new convenience, thanks to newly passable roads. The route through Phnom Penh's dusty suburbs, past garment factories and swarms of Khmer schoolchildren in uniform, seemed to take forever. But we eventually wound south on two-lane National Route 3, traversing the monotone Cambodian plain. Only as the temperature dipped and we approached the coastal mountains did the scenery gain intrigue, just as the paved road ended for a bone-jarring 20-mile-drive to the outskirts of Kep.

High point of the day

The bus stopped near Kep's municipal beach, and we staggered off. Its arrival was clearly a high point of the day.

Kristina and I hopped a tuk-tuk, which struggled up the hillside where most lodgings can be found. It stalled about halfway up, so we left our bags in the back and trekked behind to the stone entryway of the Veranda Guesthouse, located near the hiking trails to Kep's hilltop national park.

The Chinese-run Veranda is known not only for its picturesque bungalows - reached by a series of elevated walkways - but also for its picturesque bar and restaurant, offering a view that encompasses all of Kep. Our thatched bungalow was tidy and compact, with a full bath and a hammock-equipped patio looking directly out over town. A mosquito net was essential, but we also were constantly foiled by what we deduced to be a lizard that ate a new hole through Kristina's

backpack each day. As the bungalow was already on 10-foot-high stilts, we preferred not to contemplate what precisely our visitor might be.

It was time for an ice-cold Angkor ("My Country, My Beer") and a remarkably well-made gin and tonic. (The lodge also offers a surprisingly good, if overpriced, wine selection.) We gazed at the outline of Phu Quoc Island, the crumbling villas and low-hanging tropical cumulus clouds that gathered each day around dusk. Squeezed between the hills' thick vegetation and the sea, the impression was undeniable that we had quietly come to the edge of the world.

The Elephant Mountains

By no means affluent, Kep gets by as a humble fishing town with a middling beach, nonpareil scenery and the reputation of its seafood.

It has fared better than its neighbors. To the northwest lies the atmospheric, if grungy, river town of Kampot, in the shadow of the Elephant Mountains. Until last year, this onetime port city served as staging point for trips to the Bokor Hill Station, perched at an elevation of 3,500 feet at the end of a bone-jarring 26-mile ride.

A former French settlement, Bokor once epitomized colonial civility with its Catholic church and opulent hotel-casino, the Bokor Palace. With the Khmer Rouge, it became the site of battles between Khmer combatants and the Vietnamese army, leaving it in such disrepair that its ghostlike status amid the mountain fog provided a steady stream of visitors, many of whom would pay \$5 to stay the night. All that ended this winter when the Cambodian government leased the whole area to energy company Sokimex, which intends to resurrect Bokor as a posh resort, supplanting bullet holes with blackjack. The road is now closed except to a few well-connected tour guides.

Kampot also gave its name to the peppercorns grown throughout the province. As early as the 19th century, Kampot pepper was exported; through much of the 20th century, it was cherished by French gastronomes. The dried peppercorns have a unique fruitiness and pungency; they are readily found for sale in jars along the beach in Kep for a dollar or two. It is fresh Kampot pepper that makes Kep's pepper crab quite so distinctive.

A worthwhile excursion is a visit to Koh Tonsay (Rabbit Island), 3 miles offshore. We made our way to the local marina near the east end of town, where for \$15 to \$20 you can hire your own boat and boatman for the day.

The island, once a penal colony, is now inhabited by a half-dozen families who operate beachside cabanas, serve seafood and cold beer, and rent rustic huts on stilts.

Koh Tonsay's beaches are far more pristine than Kep's, with calm, clear waters. Over beer and a plate of pepper squid, we watched the occasional pig wander by as a pair of Englishmen docked, aided by a swarm of helpers unloading camping getup worthy of Kipling.

We left this well-outfitted bunch behind and took a walk. A rough path encircles most of the island, leading to even more remote inlets where you can see the looming hills of Phu Quoc in the distance. Just don't ask your skipper to take you farther south. Koh Tonsay is about equidistant from the mainland and Vietnam's territorial boundary. Given frequent border tensions, a pleasure cruise into Vietnamese waters is ill advised.

We returned to shore in time for a sunset stroll along Kep's shoreline. As the single main road is just a mile or two long, almost everything in town can be reached on foot. A full loop can be achieved in

a morning. Near the municipal beach, we passed beyond Kep's other landmark - a towering plaster statue of a Khmer woman, sometimes called a mermaid, placed dramatically on the end of a pier. Its appearance from the bus signals your arrival in Kep, and it guards over the town pleasantly.

Limestone caves

With one day left, we wanted to explore inland. We negotiated with the Veranda's clerk for a moped (the guesthouses will also arrange guided tours). He scored a brand-new Suzuki - clearly borrowed from one of the staff - that, despite inadequate seat padding, turned out to be the best vehicle we rode in Cambodia, thanks to the luxury of a functional speedometer.

Armed with a hand-sketched map, we set out first for Kampong Trach, site of dramatic limestone caves, where the Khmer Rouge held several kidnapped Westerners in 1994. Beyond Kampong Trach lies the road to Vietnam, so we backtracked to hunt for pepper plantations, querying several puzzled roadside police officers - *Mrek?* we asked ("Pepper?") - before heading on to Kampot.

With the day ending, we pattered back to the roundabout, with a statue of a white horse that marks the turnoff to Kep. We turned south and approached the seaside for one final evening of pepper crab. Soon enough, we encountered a string of ruined shoreside villas - elaborate concrete and iron walls covered with moss and tropical grime, the homes they once protected crumbled to the foundations. As we stopped for a closer look, children pedaled by, shouting "Hello!" in unison.

There, as we approached the traffic circle that marked our turnoff, was Kep in full, half-destroyed and full of life.

Five cool things about Kep

1. Kep and nearby Kampot (specifically the Traditional Music School) have cameo appearances in the 2007 documentary "Sleepwalking Through the Mekong," about the L.A. band Dengue Fever.
2. The name Kep is thought to come from French - "le cap" ("the cape"). A more fanciful version evokes the tale of a Khmer king who once fell off his horse and lost a saddle ("kep she"), which provided the area with its name until it was shortened.
3. Though Norodom Sihanouk had a palace built in Kep, he never resided in it.
4. As elsewhere in Cambodia, gasoline for motos is usually sold on roadside stands in 1-liter soda bottles. A liter costs about \$1.
5. Though some Kep destinations have Web sites, the town itself lacks Internet service. Leave the laptop at home.

If you go

GETTING THERE

There are no direct U.S. flights to Phnom Penh. But it's a short connecting flight from Bangkok (Thai Airways, Air Asia, Bangkok Airways), Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam Airlines) or Kuala Lumpur (Malaysian Airlines, Air Asia). Flights are also available from Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul and elsewhere.

From Phnom Penh, it will be a five-hour bus trip (\$3 to \$4 per person). Hour Lean (011-855-12-939-917) runs comfortable air-conditioned coaches. If your hotel or travel office books the bus, be insistent in your selection of bus company. We requested Hour Lean but were booked on Sorya for the ride down to Kep; the coach not only lacked the promised air conditioning but most of the seats were on the verge of collapse. Coaches typically play Khmer-language videos, which are charming for the first 45 minutes of the five-hour trip. Private taxis can also be arranged for around \$45 each way.

WHERE TO STAY

Most lodgings are clustered on the west side of Kep.

Tucked into a wooded hillside, **Veranda Guesthouse and Resort** offers bungalows (\$25-\$60 a night) with panoramic ocean views, all connected by a raised walkway. 011-855-12-888-619, www.veranda-resort.com.

Vanna Bungalows, just down the road from Veranda, offers a similar setup (\$10-\$20), though with more basic amenities. They take only phone reservations, which can be a challenge if you're booking from the U.S. 011-85-12-755-038, www.vannabungalows.com.

Going sharply upscale, **Knai Bang Chatt** evokes Kep's full prewar glamour. Situated in villas designed by a student of architect Vann Molyvann, the Khmer protege of Le Corbusier, its rooms (\$110-\$392), swimming pool and sleek design wouldn't seem out of place in Malibu. Amenities include yoga and a sailing club. After making Conde Nast Traveler's 2007 Hot List, it hasn't been wanting for business. 011-855-128-794-86, knaibangchatt.com.

The huts on **Koh Tonsay** (around \$10-\$15) also offer a charming, isolated stay, though bring your own mosquito net, bedding and plenty of DEET-enabled bug spray.

WHERE TO EAT

The crab market along Kep's shore provides most of the town's options. Any of the restaurants will prepare the local pepper-laced specialties. Kimly offers not only crab and squid with green peppercorns but also traditional Khmer soups and rice dishes (entrees \$3-\$8), along with its wine list. 011-855-12-345-753.

Both **Veranda** and **Vanna** have restaurants. Vanna's menu is more traditional Khmer, while Veranda's open-air Jungle restaurant offers Italian dishes in addition to the usual Khmer fare (entrees \$4-\$10), plus a solid wine list and bar.

Just above Veranda, **Le Bout du Monde** has a similar open-air setup and view, offering local seafood dishes (entrees \$4-\$8). It also has several basic guest rooms.

WHAT TO DO

The beaches in Kep are adequate, but the best beach option is on **Koh Tonsay**. Private boats (\$15-\$20) can be chartered on request and carry at least eight people. Buy a ticket at the marina on the east end of town, near the municipal offices. Arrange a return time, unless you plan to stay overnight on Koh Tonsay.

Sights farther afield include the limestone caves at **Kampong Trach**; the three hills of **Phnom Sar Sear**, with caves and a Buddhist retreat, en route to Kampot; and **pepper plantations**. Mopeds (\$5-

\$7/day) and bicycles (\$3/day) can be rented from most guesthouses or from stands in the town center. They allow you to explore the local area, and mopeds will carry you all the way to the towns of Kampot or Kampong Trach. For a more effective tour, you may want to arrange a tour or taxi (\$20-30) with your guesthouse.