

Cambodia's not-so-secret paradise



24 May, 2013

By Sebastiaan de Vos

EVERY traveller to Southeast Asia wants to fulfil the same dream. They are searching for a tropical paradise with natural beauty, minimal infrastructure, a like-minded community and little to no drunken, raunchy Australians or anyone else belonging to the Full Moon Party species. (A Full Moon Party is described by Wikipedia as an all-night beach party that originated on the island of Ko Pha Ngan, Thailand, on the night of, before, or after every full moon. It is mostly attended by westerners.) Most of these fantasies are based on the setting of the 2001 movie, *The Beach*. And, if you hang out in any dingy backpackers' bar or bedbug-ridden dormitory anywhere in the region, you'll hear repeated murmurs of an untouched and un-Lonely-Planeted island off the coast of Cambodia that might just fulfil these dreams.

After visiting Koh Rong in the Gulf of Thailand, I can confirm the existence of such a place is not just a rumour.

I am not your common-or-garden variety sucker for natural beauty. There was, however, a moment shortly after I arrived on Koh Rong, that I caught myself standing on a beach, head

tilted slightly back and mouth open, emitting a soft, groaning noise. Never before have I been so overwhelmed by a view.

The 15km-long island is blanketed by a dense, tropical jungle unsullied by a single road. The forest is inhabited by water buffalo, monkeys, birds and an elderly Israeli man, Gil — known as "the walking man of Koh Rong", he has taken it upon himself to maintain the jungle paths and guide lost tourists.

Fringed by the military-green forest, the island's 23 beaches are ridiculously pretty, with sand so white it is hard not to suspect Photoshop was involved. Small rocky outcrops, three tiny fishing villages, a row of backpacker hostels, and a handful of bungalows, restaurants and bars separate the beaches. The turquoise ocean is so pristine that even hardened seaman Jack Sparrow would gasp in delight at the sight of it. It is one of few oceans left that hasn't been sucked dry by fishing trawlers. Instead, layer upon layer of unscathed coral gardens provide happy hunting grounds for shoals of fish of every kind.

What adds to Koh Rong's beauty is that you don't need large sums of money to enjoy it. You'll pay R55 a night for a basic backpackers dormitory bed. If you prefer a secluded bamboo cabin right on the beach, complete with private bathroom and air-conditioner, you will still pay only about R400 a night.

The food on the island is superb, which surprised me because of how remote and undeveloped it is. It is also inexpensive. An Italian couple operates a pizzeria that serves delicious calzone for less than R20. There are about four Cambodian-run restaurants that specialise in excellent all-you-can-eat braai buffets for R36 a person. I can, however, patriotically declare that the restaurant that tops the list in Koh Rong is Frank's Restaurant, a grill run by two South Africans who make the best burgers I have tasted, starting at R40.

It is tempting to simply hang about, take in the scenery and eat and drink while you are on the island, but actually, there is plenty to do. The clear ocean and ample sea life make it an ideal location for snorkelling, spear fishing, game fishing and scuba diving. There are two dive schools, which offer a range of different courses with prices that rival the schools on Thailand's famous dive island, Koh Toa.

Kayaks are available for hire to explore the smaller islands and extensive mango forests.

I, however, found hiking the best way to explore Koh Rong. One of the most rewarding routes is a short but tiring expedition that involves descending a steep cliff hanging on to a very old rope. It is worth the risk and exertion because the path leads you to the seemingly endless Long Set Beach. If you time it right, watching the sunset from this beach will take your breath away and, once the sun has sunk into the sea, you can avoid the old rope and hop on a traditional longtail boat that'll take you home for about R28.

Although Koh Rong's population is tiny, it has a lively and friendly social scene. But you won't find huge speakers blurring dubstep all night. Instead, the small bars are filled with great conversation fuelled by beers that cost less than R5 and strange-smelling cigarettes. And, if you don't understand slurred speech or get irritated by excessive giggling, you can retreat to one of the more up-market bungalows, some of which I'm told have impressive wine selections.

But it doesn't matter where you begin your evening, in Koh Rong everyone ends up in the same place — the ocean.

At about midnight, the sea puts on the most incredible display of phosphorescence. Walk into the water and, once you are waist deep, every ripple causes a burst of yellow-green light. It is magical.

But even paradise has its "issues". Getting to Koh Rong requires a three-hour boat trip from Cambodia's largest port, Sihanoukville. Because most boats leave early in the morning, it is necessary to spend a night in the port town. This would not be a problem if it were not for what appears to be affordable backpackers lodges by day transforming into crystal meth house and brothel combos by night. And if you try to escape outside, you're mobbed by hordes of children, rats and amputees, begging, eating your food or trying to sell you drugs. Even so, if you can avoid contracting a sexually transmitted disease or forming an addiction, Koh Rong is worth the pain of a night in Sihanoukville.

Another concern is that the secret paradise that is Koh Rong is no longer secret. More and more is broadcast about the island on the internet and there is a rumour that next year's edition of the Lonely Planet Guide will rate it the number-one destination in Southeast Asia. The fear is that when commercial interest takes hold, roads, cars, mini-marts, rave music, lumo paint and buckets of alcohol will follow. This will bring drunken, raunchy Australians, inevitably resulting in the dreaded Full Moon Parties. I know change is inevitable. But, given the utopia Koh Rong is now, I for one don't want to see it happen.