

Southeast Asia's Best-Kept Secret

By Ronan McMahon
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I'm five minutes out of town on the beautiful white sands of Sokha Beach, contemplating the glass-flat turquoise waters of the Gulf of Thailand.

Small islands dot the horizon. Some have overnight accommodation. On others you can bring your tent. With only four other people on this beach, it's quiet here and leaving won't be easy.

But, with the opportunities I've discovered, I have a big excuse to come back.

The stretch of Cambodia's coast from the border with Vietnam to north of Sihanoukville is set to explode. This is where, a century ago, the wealthy French colonial types came to vacation and escape the city. They ate crabs and danced in giant ballrooms under elaborate chandeliers.

Theirs was a life of privilege and luxury. Of course, what we recall of Cambodia is a more recent—and more difficult—history of civil war and dictatorship. But now the country's making a comeback.

Tourist numbers are growing at a strong double-digit rate. Road improvements have made this coast more accessible. And (bar Myanmar) this is Southeast Asia's last big secret.

In the jungles overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, abandoned French-colonial mansions wait for someone to bring them new life as renovated homes, boutique hotels, or apartments. In the town of Sihanoukville right now, \$60,000 buys you a comfortable 1,500-square-foot apartment.

Sokha beach, where I'm staying, is just one of Sihanoukville's five beaches. I drove from the capital, Phnom Penh, in just over three hours. For the first two hours, the excellent road passes through a landscape that's green, flat, organized, and tidy. Only the brightly-colored Buddhist monasteries told me I was in Southeast Asia. The last hour of the drive is different...stunning.

Giant chunks of jungle-clad rock rise almost vertically from luminous green paddy fields. Steep, dark-green hills rise from the coast. It is uncannily

like Costa Rica's Southern Zone. It feels surreal to see temples rise from a jungle canopy that looks so familiar to me.

Ninety miles south of Sihanoukville, the small town of Kep, in the province of the same name, was founded as a beach resort in 1908. Originally named Kep-sur-Mer, the town has French influences everywhere in the ocean road architecture and cuisine. It's like the Côte d'Azur in the tropics.

Around Kep the coast is rocky and the beaches stony. Today's border with Vietnam is just a few miles away. This border is disputed, as is the sovereignty of the islands off Kep, which are Vietnamese territory. Travel by boat from this stretch of Cambodia's coast to these Vietnamese islands isn't permitted. Among them, just off this coast, is Vietnam's popular and flourishing resort island of Phu Quoc, well established on the tourist trail.

There is something happening farther along this coast, a stretch with jaw-dropping views. If it succeeds...and if the touted ferry service to Pho Quoc happens...it will put this stretch of coast on the route western vacationers take through this region. This coast will then quickly catch up with more developed Vietnam.