

Kep: Seaside Cambodian town begins to stir

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By Mike Eckel - The Associated Press

KOH TONSAY, Cambodia -- Ask for the crab. In black peppercorn sauce.

The proprietor of the thatched-roof and bamboo-walled island restaurant will acknowledge the order in sign language and broken English. She'll shuffle across the seaside grass over to the dock where the crab cages sit, steeping in the Gulf of Thailand's tepid waters.

She'll return with a bucket of crustaceans and fry them in an iron wok over a charcoal fire in her open-air kitchen, searing them in a sauce made largely from sweet, fiery Kampot peppercorns. She'll bring you a heap of steaming seafood, pepper sauce, paper napkins and beer to the shaded picnic tables. You'll eat the crab - soft-shells and all - sucking the sauce from your fingers, drinking the beer to blunt the fiery pepper and thank the stars that few people have discovered the culinary and aesthetic pleasures of this southern coastal region.



Cambodian vendors sell shrimp and other seafood at the Crab Market, a motley collection of seaside shacks that make up the main drag in Kep, Cambodia

While Cambodia's Angkor Wat temples are its biggest tourist draw, beach-bound tourists - particularly those looking for more than the backpacker-on-a-shoestring itinerary - are waking up to the unexplored beauty this muggy country has to offer. The low-key beach town of Kep and the riverside village of

Kampot, a three-hour drive south of the capital Phnom Penh, offer rough edges but simple charms, along with nearby islands like Koh Tonsay, where the crab in peppercorn is served.

The Kep-area beaches also offer alternatives to better-known regional beach resorts like Thailand's Phuket and even Cambodia's own Sihanoukville. Sihanoukville was a favorite of jet-setters (Jackie Kennedy visited in the '60s) before the country was beset by the horrors of wars, coups and the Khmer Rouge. These days, Sihanoukville's luxury resorts have plenty of attitude, having been rediscovered by growing numbers of nouveau-riche Cambodians and others. Sleepy Kep, in contrast, seems to attract a clientele that spurns Sihanoukville's swagger.

The town of Kep consists of a collection of modest residences and hotels tucked into the foliage off crumbling pavement and dusty roads, along with rows of motley shacks and several grand villas, many of which still show the ravages inflicted by the Khmer Rouge who sneered at Kep's bourgeois trappings. Kep Beach is mostly a stretch of rocky sand directly under the main road, though that doesn't stop the locals from swimming along the stony promenade. Notable local landmarks include an unusual nude statue of a fisherman's wife and a monstrous statue of a crab. The 16-room Beach House hotel and its tiny swimming pool hide just above the beach in the tropical hillside foliage, offering sweeping views of the gulf.

Bending around the promontory to the west and north is Kep's main drag, the Crab Market: a line of bamboo and thatch shacks where you can find crab, fish, prawns and squid, not to mention laundry service, tourist trinkets, boat rides, motos (mo-peds), cold beer, cheap drugs, Internet connections, massage services and just about anything else you can imagine. The circus mix of locals, backpackers and proper tourists is a prime spot for people-watching.

Farther up the coast are Kep's nicer accommodations. Inland and up in the hills, there's the Veranda, with a wooden restaurant and bar on a slope with a vista of stunning sunsets over the water. Waterside, Knai Bang Chatt has the swankiest lodgings in town with an emerald infinity swimming pool and stylish, modernist building.