



By Gillian McLaren

COASTAL CAMBODIA – *a quiet escape*

Hugging the Gulf of Thailand, Kep is a popular seaside resort in the South East of Cambodia. It was the height of fashion for French colonials and Cambodian high society to have a property here during the colonial period in the 60s.



However, during the notorious regime of the Kymmer Rouge, the mansions and hotels were all but destroyed and mostly ruins remain. These dilapidated places retain some of their former glory, so are worth a visit to see the gorgeous floor tiles and grandiose architectural style, not to mention the creative local graffiti.

Slowly some properties are being restored from their post-apocalyptic state, so precarious looking wooden scaffolding decorates various buildings.

Originally designed by students of renowned Khmer architect Vann Molyvann –the father of the New Khmer Architecture movement - *Knai Bang Chatt*, on the sea front, is now a

five star resort that has been tastefully restored in clean-lined chic. The bold, modern architecture of the 60s buildings was renovated, to include an infinity pool and restaurant in lush, tropical surrounds. Décor is simple, elegant Zen, with carefully chosen wooden antiques and ceramic lamps, in neutral tones. Lie on a hammock, strung under a leafy canopy and gaze at the ocean, with scores of Khmer fishing boats sailing in the distance, to and from the *Crab Market* nearby.

A festive mêlée of vendors and buyers makes for a delightful scene at the market, where women in brightly coloured traditional garments sell squid, fresh fish, crabs with bright blue legs, lobsters and other seafood, either fresh or cooked.

From before sunrise there is activity here and it continues through the day. Women haul baskets of crabs to shore, to bind their legs with yellow elastic bands and sort them into sizes. Along the pretty tree-lined boulevard, a row of restaurants - built on stilts to buffer the tidal waters - serves dishes using the catches of the day.





For fine dining, visit *The Strand*, a restaurant open at the sides, facing the ocean, set in the luxuriant gardens of Knai Bang Chatt, where the chef presents Khmer dishes with a contemporary twist. *The Sailing Club*, on the next-door property is the perfect spot to have a cocktail - as you gaze at the sunset over the pier, which stretches out into the ocean – before you taste their fresh seafood.

Tuk tuk drivers hail you enthusiastically and will take you to the nearby Kep swimming beach - in slow moving traffic with only a few cars and many motorbikes - where you may picnic on golden sands.

ABOUT Asia Travel organises pleasant excursions for you to explore the nearby countryside with its paddy fields, water buffalos and Bamboo houses on stilts.

Each farmhouse has a magnificent cock or two, ruling over the hens, occasionally a free-range pig and a Brahmin cow. Workers toil in the fields with straight legs and bent backs, as they plant the rice seedlings in perfect rows. Beautiful children dash about with carefree abandon and shout a cheerful, "Hello" as you drive past. Don't try to engage with them in English, as that is the only word they know.



A longer tuk tuk journey, through verdant countryside and over undulating hills, will take you to pepper farms, where you can see how the pepper is cultivated and buy some of the high quality green, white or black peppercorns, as well as have lunch which is packed for you, if ABOUTasia arranges your tour.

On the way, you are sure to see motorbikes carrying huge bales of hay, bunches of chickens, two large black pigs strapped down and even trailers filled with sand or sacks. Bicycles are also common and may transport several members of a Cambodian family on the bar or carrier. Ox-drawn carts are often seen. This simple agrarian lifestyle lived in the same way as centuries ago, is fascinating to photograph.





For a day of snorkeling and sunshine on one of two pretty white beaches, take a trip to Koh Tonsay or Rabbit Island, as it is known in English. Don't expect a pristine resort beach; rather think rustic with some chickens, floating flotsam, and wandering cows, in addition to your dream of tropical palm trees.

A sleepy town, with interesting history, Kep is the place to have a pleasant rest, while enjoying rural Cambodian culture and indulging in the abundance of seafood freshly caught each day. You will be able to imagine the bygone era, when Kep-sur-Mer was *the* place for summer revelry in the Kingdom of Cambodia. **d**

Knai Bang Chatt www.knaibangchatt.com



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