

## Michelle Jana Chan

Kep, Cambodia

It is difficult today to find the sleepy south-east Asian vibe that was mythologised in battered 1970s guidebooks but a trace remains in Kep, where a strip of former fishermen's shacks faces the Gulf of Thailand. There I sat with Jean-Michel Filippi, a Corsican linguist who notates vanishing dialects, speaks more than a dozen languages and is the best guide I have had in years. The breeze blew, the sea splashed our feet, we drank pastis and ate fresh crab cooked with the country's most revered seasoning, Kampot pepper. He explained how *poivre de Kampot* used to grace the table of every self-respecting restaurant in Paris; he described pre-Angkor temples we would find hidden in limestone caves; and he alarmed me with his story of S'aoch, the endangered language he was documenting in Cambodia, now spoken by fewer than a dozen people. I wanted to cut short our lunch and let him get back to work.

Kep has an extraordinary stretch of 1950s and 1960s seafront villas. This is New Khmer architecture, with modernist lines, art deco curves and unadorned Bauhaus silhouettes – which was the vogue among Cambodian aristocrats and French expats at the time. Their decadent weekend homes became a prime target for the Khmer Rouge; the villas today stand pockmarked and abandoned.

Just along the coast Kampot is a lovely lazy backwater on the Tek Chou river with crumbling French colonial architecture. The town's hub is the Epic Arts Café run by deaf-mute youngsters who also put on spectacular dance performances, bringing together able-bodied and disabled kids. On the river, Rikitikitavi is the town's prettiest guesthouse with a view so lovely even the owner pauses to watch the sun set behind the Elephant Hills.

Change is coming. The road from Phnom Penh is being upgraded and colonial villas demolished to make way for new developments. A hotel, casino and entertainment complex is planned nearby at Bokor Hill station but also a smaller-scale sustainable resort, Song Saa Private Island, built on two islets known as “the sweethearts”.

*Details: Audley Travel*

*([www.audleytravel.com](http://www.audleytravel.com)) offers a two-week trip to Cambodia visiting Kep, Ankor Wat, Phnom Penh, including a helicopter ride over the Angkor Wat from £1,430, including accommodation, transfers and excursions.*

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