

TATTLER

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ONE STEP AHEAD: CAMBODIA

Koh Samui, Nha Trang and Penang once had it, that special South-East Asian boho beat we love. Luang Prabang has it, that hippie-dippy vibe, that cool-cat buzz. But where's left? The unchartered Cambodian reaches, that's where (ie, anywhere other than Siem Reap). Take Kampot, a chilled riverside town with Chinese shopfronts and faded French colonial villas. Stroll along the riverbanks, have a lazy coffee at the Epic Arts Café, watch the sun sink behind the sleepy Elephant Hills. And find Jean-Michel Filippi, a Corsican linguist who spends his time with a microphone in tiny-tot villages of around 13 people recording their dying dialects – and singularly the best guide you will come across this decade. Forget Angkor Wat! Here with a flashlight we scramble inside limestone caves, finding seventh-century temples like Phnom Khyang rising out of the loamy gloom.

Down the road is beloved Kep, like South Beach in the Sixties but gorgeously pockmarked, a crumbling seafront stretch of art deco and Bauhaus from the decadent pre-Khmer Rouge era. Now there is the

deeply wonderful restored Knai Bang Chatt, a slick modernist hotel with a cool bar, surf-splashed and where it's at. Nearby, the fishermen's shacks dish up the famous Kep crab (straight out of the water – the sweetest, creamiest flesh!) with zinging Kampot pepper, plucked from the bushes, a Rick Stein favourite that last year attained geographical indicator status (the same recognition that makes champagne only from Champagne).

There's change a-coming in Cambodia. But ignore the rolling mass and make for small-scale high-end projects like Song Saa, a Maldivian-style property on a private island with over-water villas opening in the Koh Rong archipelago at the end of the year. On the way home, overnight at 4 Rivers Floating Lodge, a string of spectacular safari tents amid the tropical rainforest that float on the Tatai river: fish, swim, wash in waterfalls and then go back to beautiful bobbing sleep under the stars. *Michelle Jana Chan*

To organise a trip to Cambodia, contact Audley Travel (tel: 01993 838160; audleytravel.com).

