



**CAMBODIA**

**GOING COASTAL**

With new flights and lodges, Cambodia's beaches and islands are more accessible than ever - but get there soon, says **Guyan Mitra**



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ecisions,  
decisions...  
Though I guess  
you can't complain  
when the toughest  
task of the day is  
to choose which

tropical island to 'hop' to next.

To be honest, I was more than happy to stay put. Sat on a sea-softened plank of driftwood on a gentle smile of blonde sand that curled in between two palm-tree-topped headlands, the castaway isle of Koh Russei was perfect. A tiny island of 20-odd bungalows spread across two dreamy beaches, it felt like just the idyll the masses have been unsuccessfully searching over and under every rock of Thailand for.

Another gaudy sunset of flame and crimson lit up the skies. The peachy sun cast a pink glow on the soft, still sea, glowing the luminous hue of a cosmopolitan cocktail. As the inky night drew in, my fellow bungalow-dwellers and I huddled around a beach bonfire. We philosophised about the twinkling Milky Way above and the shimmering phosphorescence in the shallows below. It was all very Alex Garland.

And just like in his book, word of this barefoot paradise has spread. Jude Law and Sienna Miller came here last year, braving the sweltering wooden-shack huts and sporadic electricity of the Koh Ru backpacker resort for a snatched moment of isolation. Before they broke-up, that is.

Either way, if you're looking to hide from paparazzi, or anyone else for that matter, then this is the spot. Flopping from beach to beach, choosing at random from the scores of islands that pepper the horizon off the southern coast of Cambodia, it's an intrepid beach bum's dream. Nicked by coves of empty, coconut-milk-white sand, dotted with mangroves and waterfalls, and skirted by rainbow corals, these are the go-before-it's-too-late isles of South-East Asia. >





Sun and serenity  
Sihanoukville's Otres  
Beach is one of the  
mainland's best  
stretches of sand

## ◀ Winds of change

The move from hippie to hip is underway. Opening in February, the sustainable private-island resort of Song Saa hopes to lead the way in high-end ecotourism.

Tugging in the other direction, large Chinese and Russian corporations have recently bought long-term leases for many of the prime near-coast islands off Cambodia's major port, Sihanoukville. They plan on transforming the central coast into 'Dubai with casinos', a Del Boy-esque tourist office rep gleefully informed me. The global recession is the only roadblock halting immediate development – buying a little more time for us back-to-basics beach bums.

The prevailing winds of change aren't all ominous. I've been coming to Cambodia for a decade, including a six-month stint in Phnom Penh in 2004. With the long-awaited Khmer Rouge trials finally commencing at the end of 2011, there's a feeling that the demons of history are gradually being laid to rest.

Crime and safety are barely an issue for foreigners now. Slowly, the once mine-laden countryside is opening up. New Chinese-funded tarmac roads criss-cross much of the country, slashing journey times. With six daily flights from Siem Reap (near Angkor) to Phnom Penh, and the excellent new roads, you can catch sunrise over Angkor Wat and be on the islands in time for sundowners. This was once a nerve-jangling 16-hour odyssey of two raggedy boats either side of a spine-jarring bus trip.

Not that there was anywhere to stay once you reached these idyllic beaches. Unless you went to one of the old-school colonial

resorts, where the Western love affair with South-East Asia's beaches first began.

## A tale of three seashores

The coast breaks up into three regions: Koh Kong, Sihanoukville and Kep. The latter, close to the Vietnamese border, was Christianised Kep-sur-Mer by the French in

the late 19th century. The colonists would come here for some R&R between bouts of carving up Indochina. The burnt-out shells of grand Provençal-style villas – torched by the Khmer Rouge – are still there today, with some being converted into modern hotels.

For now, Kep has Cambodia's highest concentration of chic beach hotels. I wasn't ▶

## CAMBODIA WHAT ELSE IS NEW?



### ◉ Go birding & kayaking on Tonle Sap

For many travellers, Tonle Sap (pictured above) is just a big lake to be crossed en route to Angkor Wat, but now ABOUTAsia Travel – a Siem Reap-based, English-run Cambodia specialist – is unveiling its wild side. Their new day trips involve **kayaking into the Prek Toal Core Bird Reserve** – a world-class spot for water birds – with an expert guide from a local conservation NGO. ([www.aboutasiatravel.com](http://www.aboutasiatravel.com))

### ◉ Explore a new temple at Angkor

The 'World's Biggest Puzzle' is the phrase being used to describe the **51-year-long restoration of the Baphuon temple at Angkor** – which finally opened to the public last summer. 300,000 original sandstone blocks had to be put back into the right place to create the three-tiered wedding cake of a temple at Angkor Thom, which is now among the region's grandest.

### ◉ Fly from temples to coast

After four years without a direct air link, a **thrice-weekly flight between Siem Reap** (gateway to Angkor Wat) and **Sihanoukville** (gateway to Cambodia's coast) resumed in 2011. The route is operated by Cambodia Angkor Air ([www.cambodiaangkorair.com](http://www.cambodiaangkorair.com)); fares around US\$85.

### ◉ Get active

Fancy horse-riding along paddy field trails, micro-lighting over a temple or sailing through the Gulf of Thailand? See Cambodia Differently ([www.seecambodiadifferently.com](http://www.seecambodiadifferently.com)) is living up to its name with a range of **hands-on excursions**, from quad biking to pottery. Helicopter tours to more remote temples like Banteay Chhmar are also taking off (ahem) – try tailor-made operator Selective Asia ([www.selectiveasia.com](http://www.selectiveasia.com)).

### ◉ Volunteer in a pagoda school

English language skills are very much in demand in Cambodian classrooms and ABOUTAsia Travel's philanthropic sister organisation ABOUTAsia Schools provide volunteer teaching assistants in the Siem Reap area. Volunteer placements are free (you will have to cover your own meals and accommodation) and there are now **opportunities to teach English at the pagoda schools for novice Buddhist monks**. ([www.aboutasiaschools.org](http://www.aboutasiaschools.org))



## South-East Asia



Don't eat the crusta Cambodia's crustacea are a popular beach snack

the islands of Koh Rong, Koh Rong Saloem and Koh Russei.

Then I found Otres Beach: 2km of honeyed, gold-dust sand that hides away to the east of the main peninsula. Lined by boho beach bars and a small clutch of low-key resorts, it's Sihanoukville's sole slice of serenity.

### Go west

If the lessons of dodgy development are to be learned, much of Cambodia's hopes for conservation and ecotourism are to be found west, towards the Thai border. Here, the second-largest rainforest in mainland South-East Asia tumbles down from the jungly peaks of the Cardamom Mountains to the shores of the Gulf of Thailand.

Loggers, poachers and developers have long been put off by Cambodia's troubled past, leaving a largely uncharted wilderness. Tigers, elephants, crocodiles and Irrawaddy dolphins are all found here, as well as hundreds of species of endemic plants. Ecotodges are slowly popping up, but it's still a fledgling industry.

Off the coast, Koh Kong Island and the surrounding archipelago are home to some of South-East Asia's finest Bounty-ad-beautiful beaches – squeaky, salt-white sand skirting electric-blue waters and all that. Ominously, on my last visit there were quite a few building sites, most of which were eagerly waving the white flag of ecotourism.

Koh Kong province could be the world's next great eco-destination in the mould of Costa Rica... or it could be the next Costa del Sol. Time will tell. One thing's for sure, time isn't on the side of the rest of the coast, which is why I'm rushing back again next year for my honeymoon.

That decision is easy. ■

◀ that impressed with the couple of small ochre covers that curled around the seaside town, so I stayed in Kep for a plate of local speciality Kampot pepper crab before taking a day-trip to Rabbit Island. Here I found another shipwreck isle with a handful of bamboo shacks and a rickety fishing village. An empty stretch of creamy sand unfurled for 200m, like a giant silk scarf. I had it all to myself except for some pigs and chickens that lumbered and scratched in the shade.

Back on the mainland I was reminded of my porcine friends in Cambodia's premier beach resort, Sihanoukville. On Victory Beach, rows of pink-skinned, overweight Euros rotated on a dormitory of sun-beds like you-know-what on a spit.

Confronted by the concrete mishmash of casinos, hookers and building-site detritus that thoughtlessly sprawled around a beach-lined headland, I couldn't find the appeal. For me, the town's sole purpose appeared to be as a launching pad to get to

## Coastal Footnotes

**Access city:** Sihanoukville

**When to go:** Jun-Oct Officially, rainy season, which is probably the only time to avoid if you want to do some sun-kissed island hopping.

**Dec-Feb** Peak months, when crowds and prices are at their highest.

**Health & safety:** Landmines persist in remote locations. Inoculations against typhoid, hepatitis and tetanus are advisable. There is no malaria in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap but consult your GP. Drink bottled/purified water.

**Further reading & information:** *Cambodia*

(Rough Guide, 2011); *Cambodia* (Lonely Planet, 2010); [www.tourismcambodia.com](http://www.tourismcambodia.com)

**Getting there & around:** There are no direct UK-Cambodia flights. Fly to Bangkok (11hrs), then on to Phnom Penh or Angkor (70 mins); try Bangkok Airways ([www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)). A thrice-weekly flight from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville was due to launch in Dec 2011.

Roads along the coast are excellent. Private taxis are comfy and cheap; Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville takes three hours and costs US\$35.

**Accommodation:** **Song Saa Private Island** (30mins off Sihanoukville; [www.songsaa.com](http://www.songsaa.com), right) is Cambodia's first truly Maldivian-standard resort with 27 deluxe villas spread across two private islands, all with an eco theme; from £425pppn, including meals, activities and transfers. **Knai Bang Chatt** (Kep; [www.knaibangchatt.com](http://www.knaibangchatt.com)) has 11 chic rooms spread over



three Art Deco villas, all looking onto the ocean-facing infinity pool; doubles from £74. **Lazy Beach** (Koh Rong Saloem; [www.lazybeachcambodia.com](http://www.lazybeachcambodia.com)) is a handful of basic but comfy bungalows scattered across a perfect sunset-facing beach; from £25. **4 Rivers Floating Lodge** (Koh Kong province; [www.ecolodges.asia](http://www.ecolodges.asia)), 18 deluxe tented villas amid the mangroves; from £86. **Koh Ru** (Koh Russei; [www.koh-ru.com](http://www.koh-ru.com)) offers the 'Thai isle before it was discovered' experience. Be warned, comforts are few. Bungalows from £10.

Alamy