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Banishing the Ghosts in Cambodia

By HENRY ALFORD

IN Kep, a tiny town on [Cambodia](#)'s southern coast on the Gulf of Thailand, two British women are staring at the ghostly remains of a bombed-out seaside villa. Originally called La Perle de la Côte d'Agathe, Kep was founded in the 1920s and was the resort of choice for French Cambodia's jet set. But the [Khmer Rouge](#) had particular distaste for Kep and its sybaritic pleasures, and all but razed the town in the 1970s.

One of the women points out a trail of wetness on the villa's walls and floor where a dog has peed. "Oh, dear," she tut-tuts. "It looks like the building is crying."

Less than a mile down the road, rising from the ashes of Kep like an extravagant [bird-of-paradise](#), is the chic 11-room seaside hotel, [Knai Bang Chatt](#), designed in the '70s by a protégé of [Le Corbusier](#). No one is crying here. All is luxury and escapism; lush plantings and an infinity pool are combined in a way that fairly screams "James Bond love lair." Sprawled poolside is a muscular young Belgian gentleman engrossed in his [Ian McEwan](#). The man idly smooths out the waistband of his black designer swimsuit, the greatest irritation he will face all day. Tonight he will dine under a gorgeous palapa-style structure by the sea, and perhaps join other guests for a midnight swim in the Gulf of Thailand.

To many Americans, Cambodia means only two things — the majestic temples of [Angkor Wat](#) and the [Killing Fields](#) of [Phnom Penh](#). But there's another Cambodia — the southern coast — that is beginning to emerge as a popular alternative to the heavily trafficked [beaches](#) of [Thailand](#). Here, in towns like [Sihanoukville](#) — which, in its heyday in the 1960s, used to draw visitors like Jackie Kennedy and [Catherine Deneuve](#) — travelers are exploring the unusual pleasures that occur at the intersection of the luxurious present and the ravaged past.

When my boyfriend, Greg, and I spent a week on the coast this November, we experienced two firsts, both involving tiny bubbles. First, we went swimming one night in Kep among

phosphorescent plankton (it's as if thousands of underwater fireflies are doing a nonstadium version of "the wave"). Later we went into a pharmacy in Sihanoukville and, for \$2.80 for 20 tablets (U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere), bought one of the unheralded marvels of modern life: effervescent codeine.

This was not the Cambodia I expected — the tiny bubbles Cambodia. I'd had a sneaking suspicion that my first trip to the land of Angkor Wat and ancestor worship and rampant friendliness might somehow change me, but I expected this change to be triggered by the fact that about one fifth of this country's population, including most anyone educated, was wiped out by [Pol Pot](#) in the 1970s, or that the [United States](#) probably dropped more bombs on Cambodia during [Richard Nixon](#)'s presidency than it dropped on [Japan](#) in World War II.

YOU'D be hard-pressed to find a town center, let alone a bricks-and-mortar store, in Kep's bucolic center, but there's a buzz of activity at the series of shacks along the water that form the crab market. Here fresh crabs are pulled out of wooden cages that you can see just offshore, and, for \$7, cooked with curry and stalks of local Kampot peppercorns to produce an exciting variation of everything I'd ever eaten while wearing a [lobster](#) bib. Kep is also, oddly, without a decent beach — the sienna-colored sand at the half-mile-long town beach is clearly the world's largest accumulation of Cajun rub — but you can take a 20-minute boat ride out to Rabbit Island, where a scattering of pale, tubby Britons and gorgeous Danish girls laze on good sand or on the porch of rented huts and sunning platforms, all amid a scrum of mangrove trees, chickens and slightly confused cows. We set ourselves beachside and Greg pulled out a cigarette pack emblazoned with the name of [France](#)'s handsomest-ever movie star — Alain Delon — which he'd bought for 30 cents in town. I thought, I am surrounded by at least three kinds of beauty.

We also took day trips from Kep to a temple cave and to [Bokor Mountain](#). Although taxis, motorbikes and tuk-tuks are plentiful and cheap in Cambodia, we'd decided to hire, at \$45 a day, a kind and shy 28-year-old Phnom Penh driver named Toun Bon Thim to take us around in his car, including our subsequent nine-hour drive from the coast up to [Siem Reap](#) to visit Angkor Wat.

When Bon Thim and Greg and I stepped out of the car near the trail to the cave temple, we were greeted by a small band of giddy and adorable Cambodian children who wanted to guide us. The kids — led by a hilarious 14-year-old boy in a T-shirt emblazoned "Parental Advisory" — led us through a muddy rice field to a steep set of wooden stairs ("203 steps. Easy!," Parental Advisory coached me. "Easy for Mr. [New York City](#)!"). Soon we were peering down in a stalactite-dripping cave in which sat a very well-preserved seventh-

century brick temple, about the size of four phone booths. Parental Advisory looked at my popped eyes and, aping the helium-pitched voice of a flip teenage girl, he exclaimed, “Ohmygod!” Suddenly I wanted to revoke every sarcastic comment I’d ever made about [Angelina Jolie](#) and her Cambodian child; I longed to take Parental Advisory back to New York with us, and turn him into America’s next comedy sensation.

Although most of the two-lane roads that link Cambodia’s bigger cities have been improved and repaved in the past 10 years or so, anyone who jiggles his way in a Jeep up the 19-mile road that is being built on Bokor Mountain in nearby Kampot is vividly, if not violently, reminded of earlier road-based pittedness: by journey’s end you realize that if you were a gallon of paint, not only would you be thoroughly mixed, you would now be a solid. (Loung Ung, a Cambodian writer and land mine activist who has returned to Cambodia some 30 times since escaping in 1980 and moving to [Cleveland](#), told me that before the roads got better, she always packed sports bras for her trips back there.) The top of Bokor Mountain is the site of an abandoned hill station, including an eerie, burned-out palace hotel and a Catholic church where sometimes the fog sneaks up on you so thick that you can’t see your hand in front of you. The site was the setting for the climax of the 2002 Matt Dillon crime thriller, “City of Ghosts.”

“Almost every place in Cambodia has a ghost story attached to it,” Ms. Ung said. “I think it’s because we practice Theravada Buddhism: our gods are able to cross between the borders of the world. And we believe that our ancestors are always with us. When so many people died in our country in the ’70s, we ended up with a lot of haunted, unresolved lives. It’s not fear, it’s respect.”

Indeed, Greg and I got our own taste of unresolved living one afternoon in Kep. We were staying at a place called the [Veranda](#) — a series of funky bamboo and wood treehouses, many with terrific views of the Gulf of Thailand and the Vietnamese island Pho Quoc. Greg was lying in the hammock on our porch when he heard a series of mewling, feline cries coming from above him, followed by a soft thump. When he went into our bungalow, he saw first the air vent over our bathroom ceiling and then something more unusual: a kitten had landed in our shower. That night over drinks I told a fellow guest, “I think it’s a message from on high.” The man concurred: “Yes. And the message is: a kitten has landed in your shower.”

The theme of untethered animals is one that reasserts itself not infrequently in Cambodia. After Kep, we spent a relaxed day in sleepy Kampot — a placid riverfront lined with colonial-era buildings increasingly being renovated by expatriates — pottering around the second-

hand bookstore and taking in the view of Bokor Mountain.

From Kampot we drove three hours to the coast's most developed town, Sihanoukville, a drive during which we dodged cows, dogs and a monkey that had parked in the road in the manner of an irritable and recently deposed dictator. But the more common life-threateners were other human drivers, whose conception of the word "lane" can only be described as elastic. I asked Bon Thim if most Cambodians believed in reincarnation, and he said yes. I posited, "This may explain why they drive this way." Equally thrilling to behold were the loads that we saw heaped onto motorbikes — huge, jodhpur-shaped bundles of firewood or morning glories; a bureau and a desk; four twin mattresses; an IV drip; a family of four. Bon Thim told us: "On New Year's, when workers travel home, there is even more stacking. Sometimes 20 people stacked on the roof of cars or trucks. Sometimes driver has someone seated between him and his door."

In Sihanoukville, we reveled in the pleasures that the rest of the coast, however lovely, had denied us: white sand beaches, shopping, non-restaurant-based night life. The beaches ranged from the utterly pristine and private one at our hotel, the [Independence](#) — where Jackie Kennedy and Ms. Deneuve are said to have stayed and which earned the nickname the Ghost Hotel after the Khmer Rouge used it as a redoubt during their occupation of Sihanoukville — to the very crowded Occheuteal, lined with food shacks and vendors. During our visit to Occheuteal, I bought a bunch of litchis for a dollar from a woman carrying them on her head, but passed up requests to rent an inner tube (50 cents an hour), be massaged in my chair (\$6 an hour), have my back hair "threaded" (\$5), or hear a blind man sing (unspecified). Greg and I parked ourselves at one of the food shacks and started people-watching; we rewarded ourselves with mango shakes (mango ice and sweetened condensed milk are put in a blender and frothed to a fare-thee-well).

To shop in a country where the average daily wage is less than a dollar a day is to suddenly want to pay retail. Some of the arenas of this strange inclination are more direct than others: both of the shopping haunts that drew our attention were charity-based. On the muddy, trash-flecked dirt road that leads to Serendipity Beach, the northwestern end of Occheuteal Beach, we found the Cambodian Children's Painting Project, where kids who are kept out of school and forced into selling wares or themselves on the beach are given free language classes and painting lessons. We each bought a painting (\$4 each, plus \$1.50 each for frames). A few hours later we found ourselves at [Rajana](#), a gift shop whose proceeds go to teaching young Cambodians handicraft skills. We marveled over the jewelry made from recycled bomb shells (\$28 to \$32) and key rings made from recycled bullets (95 cents), prior to buying lots of silk scarves (\$6 to \$30) and lemon-grass candles in bamboo holders

(\$1.75).

Outside of the tinkly piano-bar womb of Sihanoukville's two high-end hotels — the Independence and the Sokha — the town's night life caters mostly to backpackers and beach bunnies, some of them just in from party capitals like [Phuket](#) or Vang Vieng, and eager to shimmer and effloresce over cocktails. A stroll down Serendipity Beach will bring you in contact with fire throwers, mystics, British Vogue photographers, sex tourists and many, many opportunities to indulge in something called a “vodka bucket.” Here is the youth of the world, working hard to forget the inequities of working for an understaffed and poorly run N.G.O.; here is the youth of the world, working hard to remember the name of the French dude they just made out with. The signs of these revelers' impact on the local economy are not hard to find — certain beach bar/guesthouses offer a free night's lodging to those of their young customers willing to hand out fliers on the beach for an hour; the business card for one local bar included a map which pinpointed the locations of 1) the bar 2) an A.T.M. and 3) the hospital.

Once Greg and I had been home for two weeks, I contemplated whether my day-to-day life had been changed by the trip. I'd stopped e-mailing Bon Thim by then; I'd also burned through our lemon-grass candles, and distributed all our scarves and effervescent codeine and Alain Delon cigarettes. I'd given up trying to recreate the fabulousness of the mango shake that I'd had on the beach. I'd even — was it possible? — stared at our sunset-at-Knai Bang Chatt pictures so long that I had robbed them of their power. Things seemed fairly ... status quo. A wonderful status quo — but a status quo nevertheless.

And then I remembered. We're adopting a cat.

THE LUXURIOUS PRESENT MEETS THE RAVAGED PAST

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Any leg of the triangle that is [Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville](#)-Kep will take about three and a half hours by taxi and cost \$30 to \$60, depending on your negotiation skills. A tuk-tuk to Kampot or Bokor Mountain and back will run about \$25. The ever-reliable Toun Bon Thim can be reached at bonthim@yahoo.com. Several airlines, including Cathay Pacific (with a stop in [Hong Kong](#)) and Korean Air (with a stop in [Seoul](#)), have flights from [Kennedy Airport](#) in New York, with round-trip fares in April starting at about \$1,300, based on a recent Web search.

WHERE TO STAY

Knai Bang Chatt (Phum Thmey Sangat Prey, Thom Khan Kep; 855-12-879-486; www.knaibangchatt.com) serves breakfast at a rough-hewn 24-foot-long table under a palapa overlooking the sea, where dinner (about \$38 for two) is also served. Guests have use of Hobie Cat sailboats. Doubles from \$150 — U.S. dollars are accepted at hotels, restaurants and shops — in the high season (October through March); otherwise from \$110.

At the Veranda (Kep Mountain Hillside Road; 855-12-888-619; www.veranda-resort.com) doubles start at \$25. The resort's bar and restaurant, with the sight of gorgeous sunsets, is quite good, and serves mostly Western food (dinner for two, about \$26). Doubles from \$25.

The Independence (Street 2 Thnou, Sangkat No. 3; 855-34-943-3003; www.independencehotel.net), stylishly refurbished in 2007, is, along with the Sokha, Sihanoukville's most luxurious beachfront property. You'll need to take a tuk-tuk (about \$5 one way) if you want to go into town or to the public [beaches](#). Doubles from \$140.

WHERE TO EAT

At [Kimly](#) (to the left of the restaurants at the crab market along the waterfront in Kep; 855-12-435-096), the crab with Kampot pepper is the local specialty. The shrimp tom yum soup and the shrimp with Kampot pepper are also worth trying. Dinner for two, about \$20.

[Rikitikitavi](#) (River Road, Kampot; 855-12-235-102; www.rikikititavi-kampot.com) is on a balcony overlooking the river. A delicious fish amok — a kind of Cambodian curry that is steamed instead of boiled — is served in a banana leaf. The cook is a former sous-chef at the InterContinental in Phnom Penh. Lunch for two, about \$15.

Chhner Molop Chrey (Krong Street, Mondul 3, along the waterfront of Victory Beach in Sihanoukville; 855-34-933-708) is a long-established seafood restaurant, serving fresh fish, shrimp and crabs along the waterfront. Dinner for two, about \$16.

WHAT TO DO

At Massage (Champey Inn, 25 Avenue de la Plage, Kep), the setting (under a palapa, and not too far from the sea) is especially nice. Expect to pay \$10 for traditional hourlong massage; \$15 for oil massage.

Bokor Mountain. Visits to the top of the mountain are in a state of flux while the road is being built. You may be required to go with a ranger in his Jeep (\$40, plus \$5 park entrance; ask at the park entrance), or you may be able to go in a group tour (try Sok Lim Tours, 855-

12-719-872; www.soklimtours.com) for \$10, plus admission fee.

Rajana (down the alley at 62 7 Makara Street; 855-23-993-642; www.rajana crafts.org) in Sihanoukville is one of a chain of nonprofit stores, with wonderful textiles, and some clothing and knickknacks. The N.G.O.-run [garden](#) cafe downstairs serves good light meals, and is a fine place to cool off.

HENRY ALFORD is a contributing editor at Travel & Leisure and Vanity Fair, and the author of "How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People (While They Are Still on This Earth)."

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