

CAMBODIA

Kep. A new generation of sun-seekers is discovering this easygoing seaside resort, once the playground of Cambodia's royalty and French colonialists. *By* RON GLUCKMAN

SOMETIMES LIKENED TO ASIA'S Riviera, Cambodia's southern coast is an unspoiled stretch of seashore on the cusp of a boom. While most attention is currently focused on Sihanoukville and the bustling beaches around the country's only deep-water port, the smart set is flocking to the sleepy seaside town of Kep.

Long before former Cambodian king Norodom Sihanouk directed the building of a road linking the capital to the beach town that took his name, Kep was the getaway of choice for sun and sea lovers in this laid-back part of Indochina. Originally called La Perle de la Côte d'Agathe, this was unquestionably the country's classiest resort area right through the 1960's.

You can still spy ample reminders of that era in beach villas with curved stairways, porthole windows and other Art Deco-inspired features. Kep's serenity was smashed by decades of Cambodian fighting (many abandoned villas still bear mortar holes), but some of the old estates have recently been reborn as smart resorts, and the central promenade and main beach have been restored to their heyday of half a century ago.

WHEN TO GO

The ideal time to visit is during the dry season, November through February. Temperatures rise through April; May

and June are especially hot and humid. The rainy season follows and continues until October.

GETTING THERE

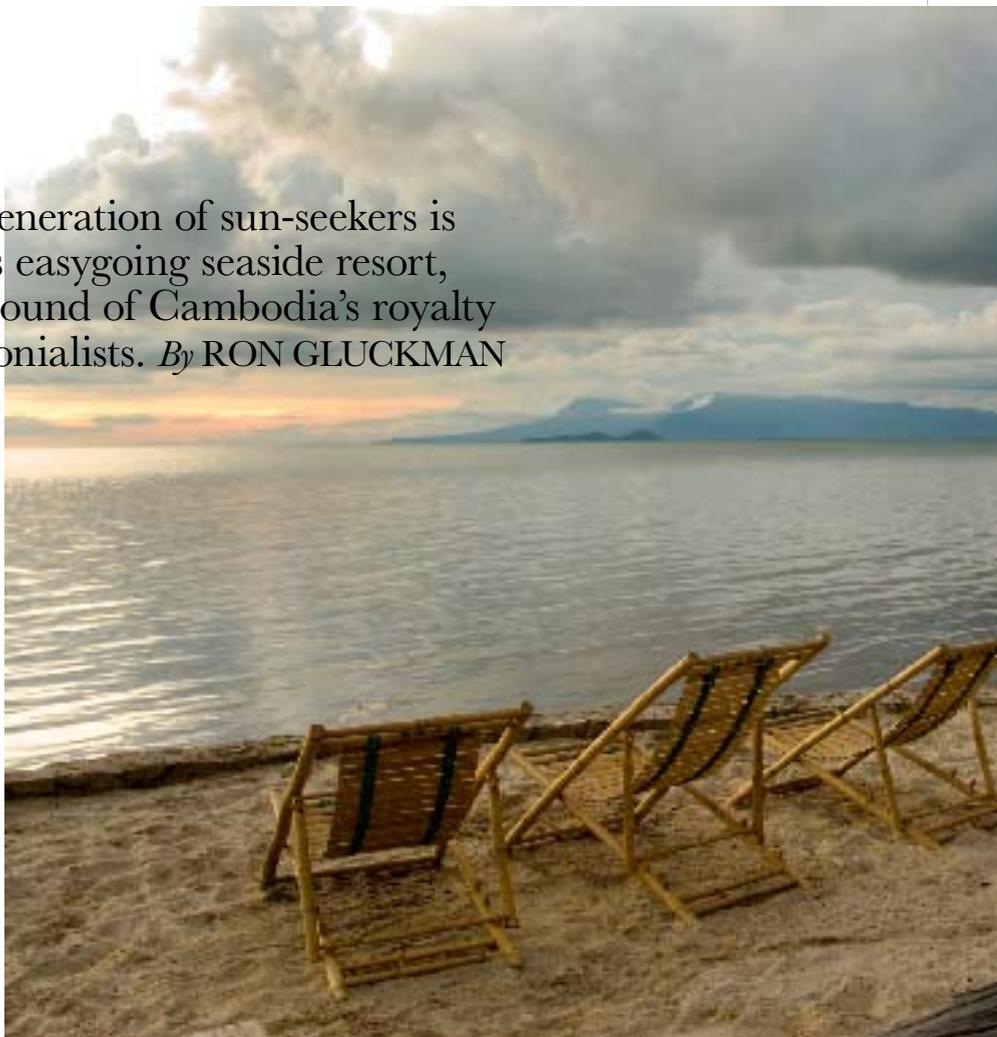
Kep is about a three-hour drive from Phnom Penh (*taxis from US\$30*). It is only a 20-minute drive from the riverside town of Kampot (*taxis from US\$5*), and a new border crossing allows land travel from the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

WHERE TO STAY

With its stunning Modernist architecture, **Knai Bang Chatt** (*Phum Thmey Sangkat Prey, Thom Khan Kep; 855-12/879-486; www.knaibangchatt.com; doubles from US\$146*) has become the hippest boutique hotel in

Cambodia. Originally launched by Belgians Jef Moons and Boris Vervoordt as an exclusive residence, the 11 rooms are outfitted with furniture fashioned out of rough-hewn wood. The hotel recently added a sailing club and an over-the-water restaurant in a traditional wooden house on stilts.

Restoration has returned **La Villa de Thomas** (*Central Beach; 855-12/170-2648; reservation@lavillakep.com; bungalows from US\$25*), a 1920's estate, to much of its former grandeur, with an unbeatable location on 1.2 wooded hectares above Kep's central beach. Newly built bungalows dot the premises; a bar and restaurant have just opened inside the original three-story brick mansion.



A front-row view of the sea at Knai Bang Chatt.



WHAT TO DO

Kep was designed for peaceful contemplation. There is still not much to do except walk the shoreline, soaking up dreamy views of nearby islands. The biggest is Phu Quoc, Vietnam's holiday isle of choice, soon to be accessible by ferry from Cambodia, according to a deal signed in late 2007. In the meantime, day trips can be arranged to nearby **Ko Tonsay** (Rabbit Island), where lunch is served on the beach while you snorkel in clear, blue waters. **Kampot** is a tranquil river town, with a smattering of colonial architecture testifying to its role as former provincial capital. From there, four-wheel-drive tours rattle up the rugged road carved through the jungle to Bokor, where an amazing ghost town containing the relics of a

1930's resort stands. Tours can also be arranged to Kampot's pepper plantations, which put Cambodia on gourmet maps nearly a century ago.

WHERE TO EAT

Knai Bang Chatt provides set meals, but make sure to reserve lunch and dinner in advance. **The Veranda Natural Resort** (*Kep Mountain Hillside Rd.*; 855-12/888-619; www.veranda-resort.com), a hillside property offering stone cottages and tree-house rooms, has panoramic coastal views and the most extensive wine cellar in town. For local flavor, head to the waterside shacks near Knai Bang Chatt for heaping platters of Kep's famous crab, paired with a lemony sauce awash in green peppercorns from the nearby plantations (*US\$6-8 per dish*). +

Tropical Modernism Clockwise from right: The picturesque ruins of a villa in the beach town of Kep; a glimpse of Bokor Mountain from Kep's shoreline; one of the restored Modernist bungalows at Knai Bang Chatt resort.

