

# Kep

Once a popular Gulf of Thailand beach-vacation town for the colonial French elite and wealthy Khmer, Kep, like every place else in Cambodia, was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge and is now rebuilding itself. Today the town feels like a backpacker's haven that has just about turned over. It's a quieter and more authentic alternative to Cambodia's other popular seaside holiday destination, Sihanoukville, to the west, which has a casino-on-the-beach atmosphere.

Kep is billed as a two-hour drive south of Phnom Penh, but it really takes more like five (and that's with a driver navigating Cambodia's seemingly rule-free roads). The route passes through Cambodian countryside dotted with traditional stilt houses and grazing cows.

There isn't much to do in Kep except lounge around Knai Bang Chatt, the top hotel in the area; hike or bike in Kep National Park; go to the crab market; or watch the sun set over Vietnam, which is 12 miles away. There are also some nice day trips to take, such as to Rabbit Island or Kampot. But this is Kep's allure: It's a restful place after Siem Reap's early wake-up calls and Phnom Penh's pulsating energy.



DAY TRIP

## RABBIT ISLAND

**Koh Tonsay**, or Rabbit Island, is an underdeveloped otherworld about a half hour from the mainland by way of a local fishing boat. There are chaises for rent on the crescent-shaped beach, basic cafés, and rustic backpacker huts (pictured) that cost a couple of dollars per night to rent. Skip hiring a boat from Kep's pier and instead access Rabbit Island via a Knai Bang Chatt excursion, which provides a butler and a chef who prepare a massive beach-barbecue feast of fresh seafood.



WHERE TO STAY

## A BOHO BEACH HOTEL

A stylish 18-room property on the water, **Knai Bang Chatt** is housed in three villas (the Blue Villa is pictured) that were built between 1962 and 1965 by protégés of Vann Molyvann, Le Corbusier's famous Khmer student. (Two more villas were later added.) Here Art Deco architecture meets Indochinese and Japanese design accents, such as Cambodian stilt beds, Vietnamese antiques, and clay objects. General manager Joffrey Gris, a jolly, bald Frenchman, choreographs the action around the hotel, which includes an infinity pool, a private beach, and The Strand restaurant. The Sailing Club, next door, offers water activities like paddleboarding and kayaking. It also has a lively bar. *Rooms from \$275; Phum Thmey, Sangkat Prey Thom; 855-36/210-310; knaibangchatt.com.*



LOCAL CUISINE

## WHEN IN KEP, EAT CRABS WITH PEPPER

Kep is better known for its crab (sweet and cheap) than for its beaches (small and rocky). Along the town's main road, which hugs the shore, is the **Kepp Crab Market** (pictured above, left). It doesn't have an address; it's just there. Any of the vendors on the sea-end sidewalk will pull crabs out of the water for

\$3 per pound (negotiable) and cook them for about 75 cents total. Next to the Crab Market is a row of restaurant shacks serving the day's catch. Any will do, though Kimly's is the best known.

Kepp crab seems made for Kampot pepper, which comes from Kampot, an hour's drive from Kep. Kampot pepper is to Cambodia what Champagne is to France: Both have a protected geographical indication, a certification that

safeguards regional agricultural products.

**Sothy's Pepper Farm** (*Pepper Rd., Kep; mykam.potpepper.asia*), run by Sorn Sothy, is the one to visit in Kampot. It has three pepper fields from which the pepper is harvested (pictured), as well as a shop. While Kampot pepper is widely used in Khmer cooking, as Sothy tells travelers, pepper sauce—black pepper, lemon juice, and salt—is especially great with crab.



## TOUR OPERATOR

### OUR MAN IN CAMBODIA

DEPARTURES traveled in Cambodia for 11 days with London-based travel outfit **Brown + Hudson** (*brownaandhudson.com*), whose founding partner Philippe Brown ferrets out itineraries around the globe that are not typical or obvious. The company goes above and beyond to show clients unique and customized experiences. For example, Brown + Hudson orchestrated it so we didn't see another traveler on the grounds of Angkor Wat for sunrise, and organized an elaborate breakfast in a *tuk-tuk* for us and archaeologist Damian Evans at Angkor's Ta Nei, a research temple that was utterly deserted when we were dining. Logistically, the trip was seamless, from skipping customs at the airport to being booked on the Cambodia Angkor Air flight from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in a row with an insane amount of legroom (okay, we'll give it away: row 27). But to experience nirvana at Angkor Wat? Talk to Brown + Hudson. **CONTINUED ▶**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: BERNARDO SALCE; BROWN + HUDSON; CHRISTOPHER WISE; NICOLAS AXELROD/ROOM



# The DEPARTURES Guide to Cambodia

Traveling through the Southeast Asian country reveals a nation developing an identity for itself beyond its well-trod temples. BY JESSICA FLINT

Change is afoot in Cambodia, located between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and bordering the Gulf of Thailand. "It's more of a rebirth than a birth," says Lim Muy Theam, an artist and designer based in Siem Reap, the country's cultural capital. Cambodia's history was practically erased during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, from 1975 to 1979, which was responsible for the genocide of nearly 2 million Cambodian people and, along with it, the dismantling of the country's heritage. Political unrest followed until 1998, when Prime Minister Hun Sen and

the Cambodian People's Party came solely into power (they remain there today). Because 68 percent of the country's population is under the age of 30, the older generation is trying desperately to instill a sense of tradition in the younger one, which is eager to move on from the past and catch up with the rest of Asia. This creates a palpable melting pot of emotions: hope mixed with heartbreak. DEPARTURES travels to the cities of Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Kep (pictured above), and to the island-resort Song Saa, and discovers that it's this dichotomy that is paving the way for Cambodia's future. **CONTINUED ▶**

AARON JOEL SANTOS (MONKS); SAM JAM (TEMPLE DETAIL)