

The Best Kep SECRET

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Nestled between the sea and the mountains is a private oasis called Knai Bang Chatt, a boutique resort in Kep, 172 kilometers away from Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh.

The beach town of Kep in the eastern part of Cambodia, near the Vietnamese border, was the country's most prestigious summer address from the early 1900s to the '60s, where the French and Khmer elite communed to escape the heat and hassle of Phnom Penh. Summer villas and elaborate second homes flourished under the care of chefs de maison into near make-believe grandeur. It engendered an international culture of its own made more interesting with local culture and traditions.

At the height of the Khmer Rouge regime, however, the residents of this exclusive enclave dispersed, many of their colonial-era mansions and villas destroyed or abandoned, and the community that once gave them that rarefied gentility disintegrated into a wasteland.

Fast-forward to a few decades later when two Belgian friends, Boris Vervoordt and Jef Moons, on a motorcycle trip around Kep spotted a string of unfinished villas abandoned in the '70s. The two, who share a love for the arts, architecture and the sea, saw the dilapidated structures' potential and decided to purchase and restore them to what could have been their architectural zenith. Franscoise Lavielle, a French architect living in Phnom Penh, was commissioned to transform the Belgians' vision into a lovely seaside getaway.

Knai Bang Chatt is an appropriate name for this jewel. Loosely translated from Khmer, it means rainbow encircling the sun. In Buddhist sacred art, this rainbow refers to the halo around the Buddha's head. Moons recounts how he and Vervoordt chanced upon the same rainbow while standing on top of Angkor Wat. Driving their motorbikes from Angkor to Kep days later, they saw another rainbow around the sun and shortly after stumbled upon the abandoned villas. Moons believes they were led to Kep by the rainbow.

What is today Knai Bang Chatt was initially conceived to be the private homes for Vervoordt and Moons where close friends and family could escape. In 2004, with the property restored and repurposed, Knai Bang Chatt welcomed its first guest. Idyllic, poetic and chic, this lifestyle property is known for its exclusivity and stylishness. Commanding an area close to a hectare, Knai Bang Chatt is enclosed by solid wood and stones held together by mortar. The winding pathway leads from the gate to what is possibly Kep's best-kept seaside secret.

Four modern villas stand on the immaculate grounds—three accommodate guests while the fourth houses the management offices. The understated elegance of the place

Idyllic setting on the beach (opposite); beckoning waters at the edge of the resort (top).



is invigorating. It is like stepping into a Willem de Kooning painting, with its haphazard yet charming splashes of colors. Each villa bears a special hue from de Kooning's palette of muted charcoal, sky-blue, mocha, and pale cherry red. Only 11 rooms are available and each room is unique in its layout and interior design. Elegant local antiques and artifacts tastefully adorn the rooms.

In many ways, Knai Bang Chatt has remained a home for people who opt to spend their holiday in private and family-like atmosphere. Moons proudly states that Knai Bang Chatt "is your home. We do everything for you. We are the ultimate private experience."

Stephane Arrii, the resort's general manager, vividly recalls the Bokor National Park adventure he had organized. Taking off at the same time from Phnom Penh, two helicopters carrying resort guests made their way to the hills of Bokor, which is mostly inaccessible by land. The guests were ferried through breathtaking views at 3,540 feet above sea level and treated to champagne in the ballroom of the abandoned Bokor Palace Hotel inaugurated by the French in 1925.

"Everything is possible at Knai Bang Chatt," says Arrii who works his magic with a staff of 14 people.

To date, it has staged a private performance under the

stars by local opera singer Sethisak for a guest and his party of 30. It is also able to arrange for an intimate concert by local musician Kong Nai playing blues music, Khmer-style, on the three-stringed instrument *chepey*, or an all-ringside show of The Circus of Battambang—think rustic Cambodian Cirque du Soleil.

What ultimately makes this resort stand out even more is the extraordinary service it provides. Imagine sipping champagne in an abandoned hotel on the hills of nearby Bokor, or a romantic candlelit dinner at the end of a 50-meter boardwalk. The more adventurous may spend an hour or two testing the waters at the nearby sailing club, while others can watch the sunrise with a private yoga session on the rooftop terrace of one of the villas, and recover with a traditional Khmer massage by the sea. Others are happy to simply spend the day in the saltwater infinity pool.

Tasty, healthy fare is also a key element of the resort. A fusion of Khmer and Mediterranean cuisines figures prominently on the menu featuring organic local produce and fresh seafood.

Most visitors come from Europe but guests from the United States, Canada, Japan and Singapore have also discovered this little known resort. It has also gained a follow-

ing among the expatriate community in Cambodia, as well as the locals. Members of the Cambodian royal family, to be sure, are frequent visitors.

Moons and Vervoordt have embarked on a special project affiliated with the resort. In 2006, they launched the Hand-in-Hand Project, a US\$720,000 education and clean water program funded by private donations and visitors for over 545 families in the village of Chamcar Bei, just 17 kilometers from Kep. Three percent of the resort's income goes to the project.

Guests who experience Knai Bang Chatt find their own rainbow around the sun. As one guest wrote in the guestbook, the resort is "paradise rediscovered" while another declared, "Wonderland has a new meaning."

Knai Bang Chatt is launching lifestyle properties The Essence of Angkor and The Essence of Phnom Penh. A new cluster of villas with 22 rooms will be built next to the sailing club, while a villa resort on the mountains of Kep, with art as a strong feature, is in the pipeline. ☒

www.knaibangchatt.com

Opposite: Intimate dinners can be arranged at the end of a long boardwalk.

This page: Architecture provides a strong counterpoint to nature (top); a bouquet is being laid out on the table (above).