

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME



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Two neighbouring towns on Cambodia's southern coast tell the story of the country's recent past. Under-touristed yet possessing boundless charm, cosmopolitan Kampot and sleepy Kep make a delightful trip back in time to a golden era in the kingdom. Although far from the temples of Angkor, there are plenty of cultural attractions and beautiful sights to take in.

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It was on a day trip from the beach resort of Sihanoukville in 2014 that I first drove with wide-eyed curiosity through Cambodia's lush southern countryside to two towns. Kampot possessed a languid and bohemian quality epitomised by a literary festival and fertile art scene. Kep was a throwback to heady 1960s Cambodia, when the GDP was on par with London's and culture thrived, reflecting the confident national mood. Back then, Sihanoukville or 'Snooky' was a fast-rising seaside town, until a poorly regulated government initiative to transform its streets into a casino hotbed ended in ugly catastrophe.

I returned to Kampot and Kep in 2017 and again in 2020, hoping the same fate hadn't befallen these twin bastions of 20th-century history and architecture — and that their laid-back personality remained intact despite globalisation. To my relief, they remained immune from the developer's wrecking ball, and are still attracting visitors with their tranquility. My chosen mode of transport this time was the Southern Line rail route, which gently rolls in upholstered comfort across the countryside. The train line reopened in 2016 after being taken over by Royal Railway.

The US\$7 journey to Kampot, which starts at Phnom Penh's grandiose art deco station, takes almost five hours, redefining the concept of slow travel. Sharing the carriage is a mix of excited young locals plugged into their Netflix downloads and older travellers admiring the view through the window — which, once you're outside the urban jungle, is hypnotic. After swooning over rural scenes of palmyra palms, rice fields, gaily coloured houses, and slowly ruminating oxen, we're treated to glimpses of the protected rainforest of Bokor National Park before finally grinding to a halt at our destination.

(Facing page) Scenic sunset views by the waters of Kampot village. (This page, from top) Kampot's colonial French buildings now house cafes and shops; the road to Bokor National Park in the Kampot province is flanked by greenery.



KAMPOT OF TREASURES

You could never accuse Kampot of pandering to modernity, and the station — barely changed since its construction in the 1960s — makes an appropriate entry point. Its open-plan ticket area, royal-blue colour scheme, and pyramidal roof are period pieces from King Norodom Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People's Socialist Community) development spree. During this period, the monarch paved the way for a modernist style, known as New Khmer Architecture, to forge a distinctive identity for independent Cambodia.

In this town, the past is etched into every street corner. *The Big Durian*, an artwork taking pride of place in a busy roundabout, is an affectionate salute to the pungent fruit. Before the Khmer Rouge, durians were vitally important to the town's economy. But its most prized food export nowadays is its utterly distinctive and sharp-tasting Kampot pepper. Resembling a string of bright green beads, the pepper is sold in speciality shops, particularly around the tourist mecca of Old Market Street.

A perfect loop taking in Kampot's essential sights starts near Entanou Bridge at the historic riverside Kampot Fish Market, that's now converted into a fashionable restaurant. Along this elegant promenade studded with period street lamps — known as Norodom Quay, or simply 'The Front' — lies a grand display of some of southern Cambodia's most decorative architecture, including many government buildings. But it's the combination of the Prek Teuk Chhou river's calming outlook and the tree-lined strip's restaurants and bars, spilling out of the shophouses opposite, that keeps the crowds returning to this scene resembling a century-old painting. It's like discovering a sort of Asian Aix-en-Provence, with the French colonial legacy colouring every aspect of life.

At the Kampot Provincial Museum, I turned down a side road to revisit two fondly remembered landmarks from my 2014 stay. To my delight, they were both still here: the hotel Mea Culpa, where a monk joined us for a late breakfast of bread from a wood-fired oven, and straight ahead, the sprawling Lotus Pond. I spent an enraptured hour around the pond chasing late-afternoon shadows, trying to photograph one of the most extraordinary



(This page) A giant durian installation in Kampot, the durian capital of Cambodia. *(Facing page, from top)* The famous Lotus Pond at sunset; Entanou Bridge, also known as Old Bridge, is a historical structure from the French colonial era. It was repaired after being destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era; colourful riverside boats housing eateries in central Kampot.

GETTING AROUND

It's possible to drive from Phnom Penh to Kampot in three-and-a-half hours, but it's far more desirable (and affordable) to take a leisurely ride on the Royal Railway. The train passes through selected destinations on the southern coast — including Takeo, where there's a 15-minute snack stop. Kampot is approximately five hours from Phnom Penh station; Kep, the next stop, takes 30 minutes longer. The original tracks were laid in the 1960s to complement the road link from Phnom Penh.

Once in Kampot and Kep, you can arrange for car rides through more established hotels. But given the short distances covered, it's more economical (and fun) to book your transport through **Grab** (grab.com) or **PassApp** (passapptaxis.com), a popular homegrown ride-hailing app. To pre-book Royal Railway tickets, visit baolau.vn or simply purchase your train tickets at station counters; visit railtravelstation.com/royal-railway-cambodia for timetables and the latest information.

CURRENCY

Cambodia operates a dual system for payment. US dollars are accepted ubiquitously and US\$1 is equivalent to roughly 4,100 Cambodian riel (KHR), the official currency. It's common to receive riel as change for US dollars. Many upscale hotels and restaurants accept international credit cards.

sunsets I've experienced in Asia. I'd never fully appreciated the term "golden hour" until I'd seen the sun dip behind the National Bank of Cambodia building on the edge of the pond, re-casting the architecture around it with an otherworldly glow that verged on the celestial.

I returned to Phsar Kronat (Old Market), on the edge of a large public square, to find a once-sleepy area reinvigorated. Stallholders have for years hawked their goods here. While the low-rise architecture remains, the market now reflects the cosmopolitan new town, flaunting a colourful selection of stores, bars, and restaurants.

At any of these street-facing eateries, you'll find yourself mingling with 'pot-pats' (local slang for expatriates) and other travellers who are wining and dining before retiring to one of the nearby hotels. I'd half-expected to find a Holiday Inn encroaching on the townscape, à la Siem Reap, but was relieved to discover that today's Kampot offered nothing but the same, beautifully refurbished boutique-hotel



accommodations that it always did. There's huge respect for heritage buildings in this region of Cambodia; one notable new arrival is a hotel, converted from a 1930s theatre building, that later became a cinema.

After a fulsome breakfast, I took a scenic motorbike ride to Bokor Mountain, another area that's witnessed many changes. After the original resort's holidaymakers retreated, the ghostly peak was transformed into a clandestine casino. Now, it's populated only by well-heeled guests at Le Bokor Palace (rebuilt as a luxury hotel), and by curious visitors who come to enjoy the commanding views over Cambodia's Southern Islands and the Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc. Aside from the odd speedboat or sand dredger, few boats ply the waters around Kampot, but kayakers revel in the Green Cathedral, where a billowing tree canopy forms a jungle-like scene for an undemanding afternoon's adventure. Picturesque, peaceful, and respectful of nature, this section of the river sums up Kampot's easygoing appeal in one fell swoop.



KEP CALM AND CARRY ON

A 20-minute taxi ride away, Kep-sur-Mer (or Kep as it's now called) presents a time capsule of the period roughly coinciding with the post-independence era, Cambodia's own Swinging Sixties. Before exploring the town, I dined in the cooling ocean breeze at The Sailing Club, a seafront restaurant carved out of an old fisherman's house, which sits cheek by jowl with stately villa development Knai Bang Chatt (which means rainbow encircling the sun). Built by protégés of New Khmer Architecture frontrunner, Vann Molyvann (1926–2017), this boutique resort felt like a fitting spot to reassess Kep through its historical buildings.

The exclusive modern comforts of Knai Bang Chatt proved something of a false dawn. Kep's 21st-century incarnation resists glossing over history, instead projecting scenes of rose-tinted nostalgia everywhere you look. Even 2012's addition, Crab Statue, is a kitschy homage to the blue swimmer crab, the town's biggest food export. Mounted on a retrofitted plinth by the sea, the signage under the acrobatic-looking crustacean simply proclaims "Welcome to Kep" in bold typography.

At the crab market, a familiar line of vendors stood at the roadside, all purveying multicoloured tubs of fish sauce. Halfway along, I was delighted to see casual eatery La Mouette still holding court. There, I'd dined on one of the simplest and most delicious meals I've ever savoured in Asia — a chicken rice dish garlanded with Kampot pepper. All the eateries here have tables overlooking the crashing waves of the Gulf of Thailand. As I walked to the end of the pier, I found Arts Café, a half-restaurant, half-artisanal store selling comfort food, crafts, and clothing.



(Facing page, from top) The journey from Kampot to Kep takes about 30 minutes by car; Kep's crab market sells blue swimmer crabs, the town's biggest food export; it's hard to miss the giant crab statue and welcome signage in the middle of the sea. (This page) Take a relaxing stroll along the pier at the Sailing Club.

Outside, a group of orange-caped young monks solemnly marched back from the boating marina jutting into the sea. Along the coastline, Kep Beach is a modest yet wildly popular strip of sand where crowds of locals — overjoyed to feel the refreshing tide in these baking-hot temperatures — frolic in the sea, in front of a lively market. This town was once synonymous with prosperity and cosmopolitanism, being a glamorous resort where King Sihanouk owned a villa, and French colonialists raced sports cars along the seafront with the Phnom Penh elite. The scene here could not be more authentically Cambodian if it came with Khmer subtitles.

Opposite the Crab Statue and its two playful companions — the White Lady Statue and Playing Pin Statue — a quiet suburban road reveals what has become of Kep's golden era. Wildly overgrown grass and overhanging tree branches now cover the gates and gardens of villas belonging to the high society of 1950s and 1960s Kep, some designed by Vann Molyvann. While the once-exclusive estates lie abandoned, their

original bones still protrude in proud defiance of the passage of time, gleefully unrestored.

Cambodia's last female monarch's former residence lies along the main road, similarly derelict — a scene of faded grandeur redolent of Miss Havisham's house in David Lean's *Great Expectations*. Many of these properties were looted during the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, marking a sorry end to Kep's glory days.

Forty years later, a string of attractive seaside hotels upholds a tradition of hospitality forged over decades in this town. Today's Kep is more functional than flashy, but it remains as lovable as ever, and is a richly evocative reminder of happier times in the kingdom. ■

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