



Island Hopping... Cambodian style

Words and Images by Heidi Fuller-Love



With 60 pristine tropical islands nestling in sapphire waters easily reached from Phnom Penh, Cambodia has palm fringed deserted beaches, traditional village life and beach shack living. Heidi Fuller-Love island-hops around the best. Trussed between two huge palm trunks, my hammock sways in a gentle breeze as Heng brings me a Mojito packed with ice and fresh mint. Stretching out a lazy hand to clutch the ice cold glass, I bless the owner of Sihanoukville's Snake house...a quirky Russian food restaurant where you eat surrounded by crocs and snakes. It is he who told me about the 60-plus islands studding the sparkling waters of The Gulf of Thailand along Cambodia's southern coast.

Far from the (sometimes maddening) full moon parties and kitsch bungalow accommodation cramming Thailand's coastal resorts, Cambodia's beaches, undiscovered for years because of the Khmer Rouge regime and the turbulent years that followed, are largely deserted, a fact that tempted me immensely.

"It's no tourist guide's junket," Ivor at the Snakehouse had told me. "Not many of these islands have decent transportation links, so if you want to discover the best of what's out there you'll probably need to hire a boat."

That night, in Sihanoukville, as my feet were nibbled free of calloused skin by fish in a tank, I decided to get a first taster and booked a ticket for Koh Tang...Ivor had warned me to bring plenty of camping gear. "Not many of the islands have proper tourist facilities, or accommodation so you'll need to be prepared and if you need diving gear it's probably better to arrange it all ahead of time from the mainland," he warned.

Dragging my heavy pack on and off boats and along sandy beaches and jungle paths was a bit of a nuisance, but I was soon glad I'd heeded his advice.

A breezy five hour trip from the mainland, Koh Tang became a battle ground in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge captured the crew of the SS Mayaguez, and US marines launched an aborted rescue operation. Later, in 1978, this uninhabited island some 40 kilometres south of the Cambodian mainland hit the headlines once more when Englishman, John Dewhirst, and New Zealander, Kerry Hamill, were captured here and later executed at the Khmer Rouge's notorious S21 prison in Phnom Penh. Deserted, apart from a small military presence, today Koh Tang has a happier reputation as one of the best dive sites in Cambodia.

Along with five other deep sea fans who'd come here with Scuba Nation dive centre (two-day live-a-board from \$220; RM 685), we set up tents in a shady spot behind the long sandy beach, then headed out to dive. Over the next few days we explored the wonderland of multicoloured shoals of fish that live in the Staghorn coral of Explosion Reef and frolicked with the barracuda, jacks and cobias along Three Bears Reef...then returned to the campfire every evening, ate fresh fish amok, and drank punch-packing palm wine under a brilliant canopy of stars.

However, with hair matted from washing in briny water and skin stinging from sunburn, the romance of roughing it Robinson Crusoe style began to wear thin, so I was more than ready for my next stop at Koh Rong Saloem a few days later.

Hailed as the next Koh Samui, Rong Saloem island is breathtakingly beautiful, with endless stretches of chalk-white sand, and a dense jungle interior where I hiked with a guide the following day and glimpsed a big fanged, deadly venomous black cobra.

Most of the time, however, I spent in the aptly named Lazy Beach bungalows (bungalow \$40 a night; RM 124.50) chilling



out in one of half a dozen thatched roof huts scattered along a sandy beach, nursed by a gentle curve of turquoise sea, then cooling off in the phosphorescent waters at night.

Seeking stimulation on the last day of my stay, I hired a long tail boat powered by an outboard motor that looked like a hedge trimmer, and headed round the coast to Mai Pei Bei to do some volunteer work.

"If you're staying for a while you can teach in our school, but if you're only here for the day, we'd love it if you help out with our beach clean up operation," said Nhean, who runs volunteer operations in this friendly little fishing village.

Along with Nhean, and some other volunteers, we combed the beaches all day for litter and felt pleasantly meritorious as we relaxed our tired legs and aching backs that evening in one of the local food shacks, sipping ice cold Angkor beer and supping on tasty chunks of freshly caught squid.

Back at Sihanoukville, surrounded by revelling crowds, I was soon feeling agoraphobic, so I decided to head for the islands on the other side of this lively Cambodian resort.

Catching the Coasters boat, which leaves every morning at 9.30am from Ochheuteal Beach, I was soon leaping from the high prow of the boat into the soft sand of Koh Russei.

A one hour ride from the mainland, Bamboo Island is just two long sandy beaches linked across the middle by a jungle path that buzzes with cicadas. Friends had recommended Bimbamboo Bungalows on the busy side of the island, which attracts all the day-trippers, but I opted for the more peaceful Koh Ru Bungalows (bungalow from \$15; RM47) on the southern side.

Painted in vivid colours these bungalows are fairly basic, with shared showers and toilets, but the gently shelving sandy beach strewn with seashells makes it ideal for kids, giving a laidback, family feel to this side of the island.

After a few days lazing on the beach and supping on prahok-flavoured fish, soup samlor machu and a grilled fish and pickle dish (trik kreoung pahok) at the beach restaurant, I headed back to Sihanoukville.

Up early the next day I headed a few kilometres out of town and caught the passenger boat, which travels along the mangrove-lined Prek Toeuk Sap River into Ream National Park.

Created in 1995 the park, which extends over 15,000 hectares of land and 6,000 hectares of marine habitat, is home to a host of endangered wildlife including king cobras, pythons, great hornbills and leopard cats.

During my six hour trip along this freshwater river, which empties into the Gulf of Thailand, I saw coffee-coloured Rhesus monkeys grooming each other in the sun, rare Irrawady dolphins that popped their strange, lumpy heads out from under our boat, and dozens of flying fish leaping out of the water around us like rainbow-coloured spinners.

Apart from a few budget rooming places, the only accommodation inside the park is the Ream Beach guesthouse (room from \$15 a night, RM47) a basic-but-friendly place to sleep, right on the beach.

Early the next day a small boat whisked me the 30-minute ride across the glittering gulf to Koh Thmei, a

facts:

Need to know:

- Very few islands have ATM's so make sure to bring enough cash
- Mosquitoes can be a problem, so bring plenty of DEET
- Few islands have shops, so stock up on high factor suntan cream before you go

Useful contacts:

Scuba Nation diving centre -

→ www.divecambodia.com

Snakeshouse restaurant -

→ www.snake-house.com

Lazy Beach Bungalows -

→ www.lazybeachcambodia.com

Ream Beach Guesthouse -

→ www.reambeachguesthouse.com

Koh Thmei Resort

→ www.koh-thmei-resort.com

Koh Ru Bungalows → www.koh-ru.com

pristine island where I'd reserved a room at the eco-friendly Koh Thmei Resort (room from \$15 a night, RM47).

Sitting on the balcony of one of the resorts wooden bungalows overlooking a long sandy beach fringed by pine trees, I ordered another mojito and toasted the sun setting in streaks of fiery crimson over the Gulf of Thailand. Like the bounty hunters I came in search of paradise and found it...in Cambodia. ■■

