

Beach-bumming in Cambodia

With 60 pristine tropical islands nestling in sapphire waters easily reached from Phnom Penh, Cambodia is the place to island-hop while enjoying sand, surf and traditional village life.

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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 – 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 – because they were undiscovered for years due to the upheavals of the Khmer Rouge regime – are largely deserted, a fact that tempted me immensely.

"It's no tourist guide's junket," Ivor of the Snakehouse 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."

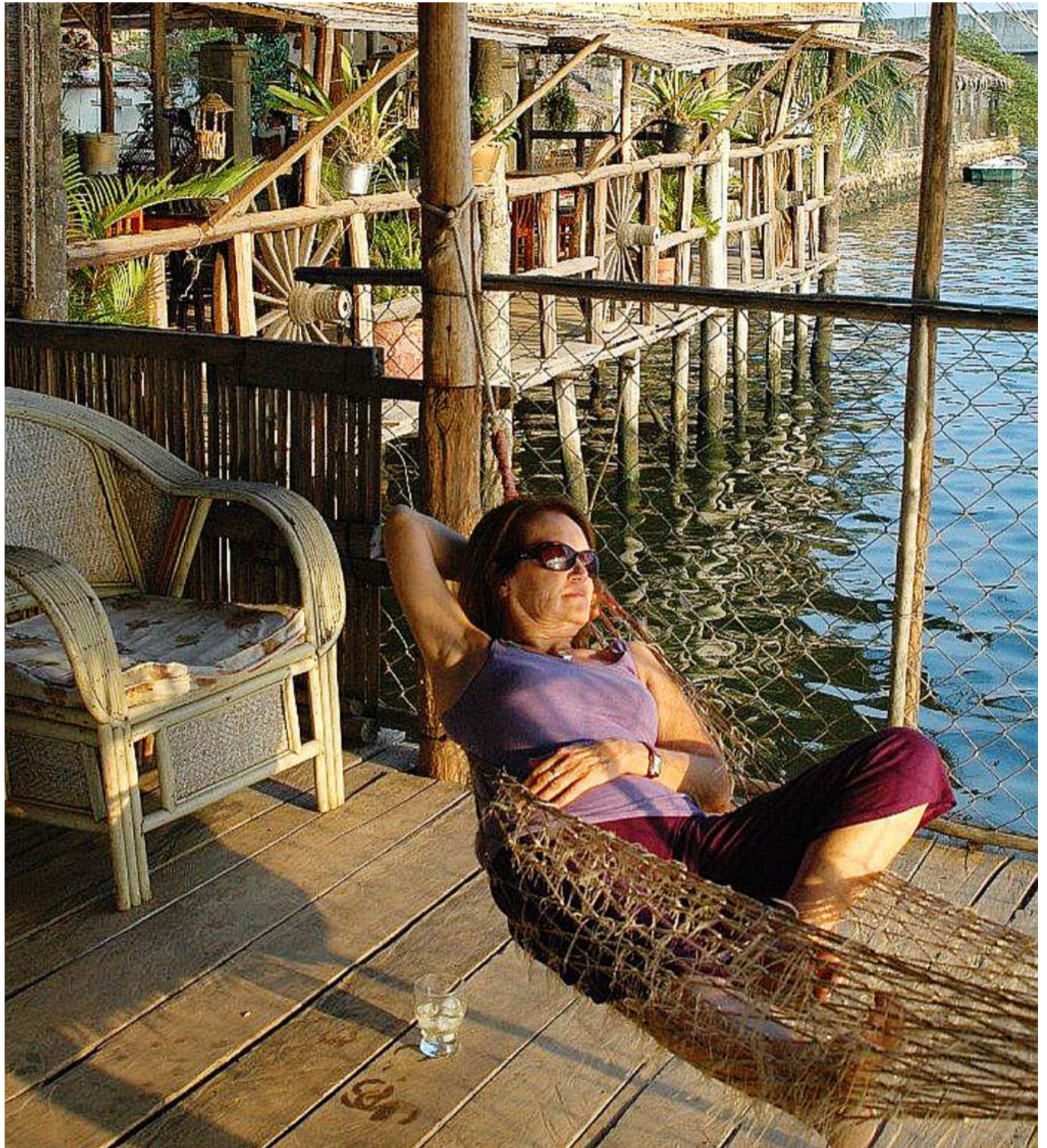
That night in Sihanoukville, as my feet were nibbled free of calloused skin by fish in a tank, I decided to get a first-taster and booked a ticket for Koh Tang. Ivor had warned me to bring plenty of camping gear.

"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 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 *SS Mayaguez*, a US-flagged container ship, and US marines launched an abortive rescue operation.

Later in 1978, this uninhabited island some 40km south of the Cambodian mainland again hit the headlines when Englishman John Dewhurst and New Zealander Kerry Hamill were captured here and later executed



Kicking back in Koh Ru bungalows.

at the Khmer Rouge's notorious S21 prison in Phnom Penh.

Deserted, apart from a small military presence, Koh Tang today 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 Diving Centre (two days' "room"-and-board from US\$220

(RM668), 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 barracudas, jacks and cobias along Three Bears reef, then

returned to the campfire every evening and ate fresh fish, and drank punch-packing palm wine under a brilliant canopy of stars.

However, with my 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



Catching the passenger boat which travels along the mangrove-lined Prek Toeuk Sap.



Enroute to Rong Saloem island. Hailed as the next Ko Samui, it is breathtakingly beautiful.