



Local fishermen at Mai Pei Bei.



Rong Saloem island has endless stretches of chalk-white sand.



There is very little accommodation at Ream National Park.



If you stay for a while at Mai Pei Bei, you can opt to do volunteer work, like teaching at the school.

Rong Saloem a few days later. Hailed as the next Ko 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 black cobra.

Most of the time, however, I spent in the aptly named Lazy Beach Bungalows (US\$40/RM121 a night) chilling out in one of half a dozen thatched-roofed 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 at the 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 fresh-caught squid.

Back at Sihanoukville and 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 9.30 from Ochhteual beach, I was soon leaping from the high prow of the boat into the soft sand of Koh Russei.

An hour's 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 daytrippers, but I opted for the more peaceful Koh Ru Bungalows (from US\$15/RM45) 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 called *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 15,000ha of land and 6,000ha 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 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.

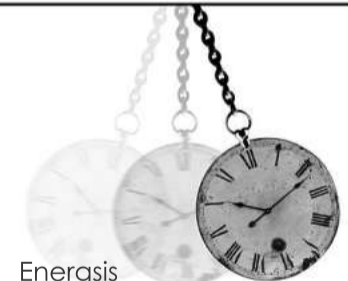
Apart from a few budget rooming places, the only accommodation inside the park is the Ream Beach Guesthouse (room from US\$15/RM45 a night), a basic-but-friendly sleepy right on the beach where I spent the night.

Early the next day, a small boat whisked me on the 30-minute ride across the glittering gulf to Koh Thmei, a pristine island where I'd reserved a room at the eco-friendly Koh Thmei Resort (room from US\$15 a night).

Sitting on the balcony of one of the resort's wooden bungalows overlooking a long sandy beach fringed by casuarina trees, I ordered another mojito and toasted the sun setting in streaks of fiery crimson over the gulf of Thailand.



Preparing dinner on Bamboo Island, which is just two long sandy beaches linked across the middle by a jungle path.



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