

South Coast



Fringed with tropical beaches, pristine mangrove forests and unspoilt islands, Cambodia's South Coast also boasts national parks of global ecological importance and two eerie, almost-deserted colonial-era resorts. With a cracking selection of attractions both luxurious and adventurous, the area is now on the most direct overland route from Bangkok to Phnom Penh.

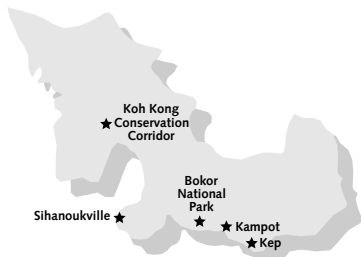
Kampot, Cambodia's principal seaport until the founding of Sihanoukville in 1959, still retains some of its French-era charm. A great place to chill out, it's also a good base for visiting the misty highlands of Bokor National Park. Kep, once the country's most exclusive beach town, was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period and the civil war, but is making a slow, stylish come-back. The booming city of Sihanoukville, Cambodia's main beach resort, is a short drive from Ream National Park and a one- to three-hour cruise from some of the country's best scuba diving.

The western portion of the South Coast, wild and remote, is dominated by the impenetrable jungle of the Cardamom Mountains (Chhor Phnom Kravanh), one of mainland Southeast Asia's largest and best-preserved forest areas. Ecotourism is starting to open up the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor, home to tigers and elephants, which stretches along NH48 from Krong Koh Kong, near the Thai frontier, to the Gulf of Kompong Som, north of Sihanoukville.

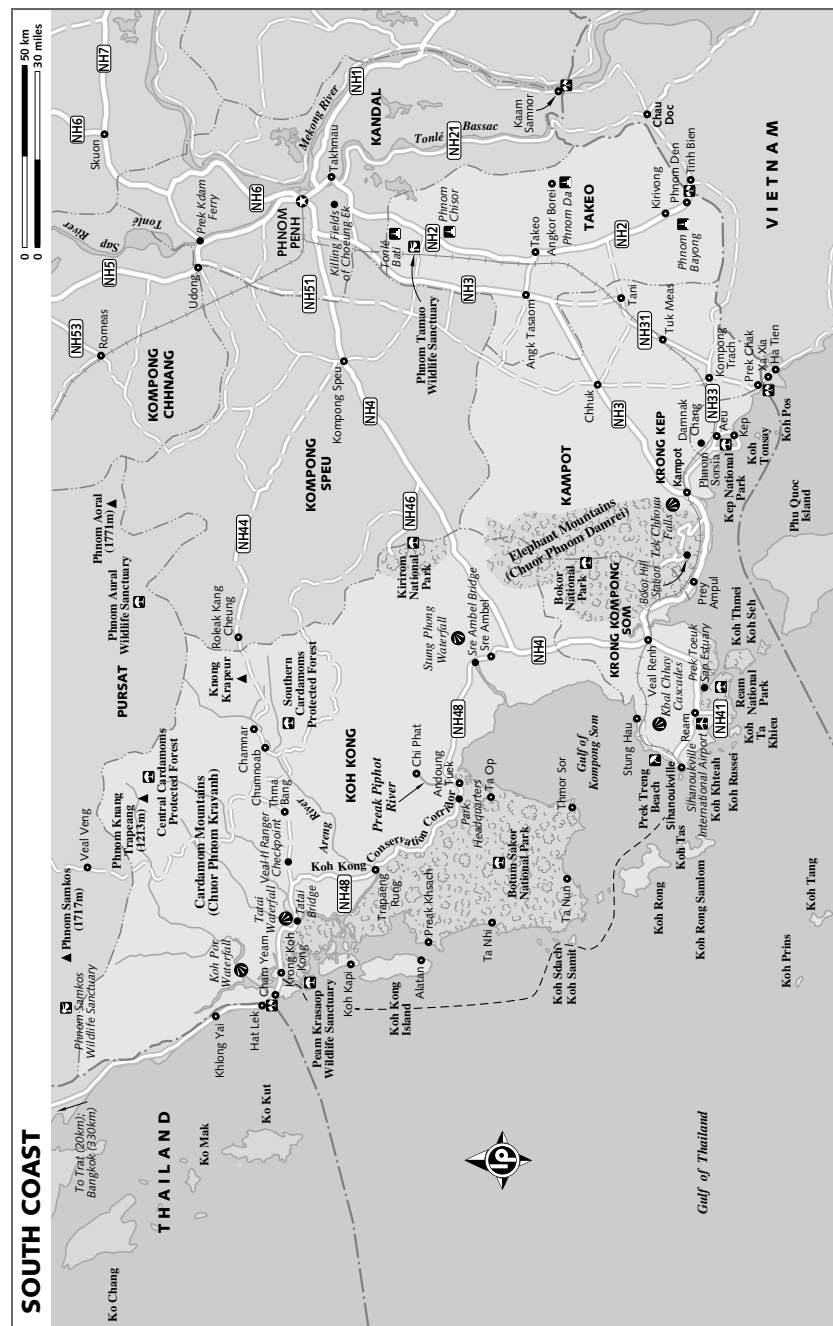
Near the Vietnamese border are some fabulous cave-temples and the Angkor Borei region, 5th-century birthplace of ancient Cambodian civilisation.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the uninhabited islands, isolated beaches, pristine rainforests, mangrove-lined rivers and remote waterfalls of the **Koh Kong Conservation Corridor** (p186), which is just opening up to ecotourism
- Soak up the sun in **Sihanoukville** (p193), home to blissful beaches, tropical islands, scuba diving and a lively nightshift
- Journey up to cool, mist-enveloped **Bokor National Park** (p219), with its abandoned casino and breathtaking coastal views
- Kick back in quiet **Kampot** (p215), a pretty river town with some of Cambodia's best-preserved French architecture
- Explore remote islands and dine on fresh seafood around **Kep** (p224), the mid-century mecca of Cambodia's jet set



■ ELEVATION: 0-1800M ■ POPULATION: 2.6 MILLION ■ AREA: 27,817 SQ KM



Getting There & Around

The highway route from Bangkok to Phnom Penh passes through the Cham Yeam–Hat Lek border crossing near Krong Koh Kong and continues east along NH48 and then NH4.

The South Coast region now has two international crossings with Vietnam, at Phnom Den–Tinh Bien, south of Takeo; and Prek Chak–Xa Xia, southeast of Kep at Ha Tien.

Phnom Penh is linked with Sihanoukville by NH4; buses are cheap and frequent. NH3 goes from the capital to Kampot, but for now buses take the long way around via Kep (NH3 and then NH31). NH2, recently upgraded, links Phnom Penh with Takeo and the Phnom Den–Tinh Bien border crossing. Almost all the area's other roads are unpaved and often become degraded in the wet season. In Takeo Province, boats are almost as popular a form of wet-season transport as motor vehicles.

Until 2003, when the Thai army carved NH48 out of the jungle, it was nearly impossible to get from Krong Koh Kong to anywhere else in Cambodia by land. The area will undergo a second transport revolution when NH48's four slow ferry crossings are replaced by bridges sometime in 2008. For now, at least, a daily ferry links Krong Koh Kong with Koh Sdach and Sihanoukville.

Sights in this chapter are organised from west to east, perfect if you're coming from Thailand. If you're starting in Phnom Penh just read the listings in reverse order.

KOH KONG PROVINCE

ខេត្តកោះកុង

Cambodia's far southwestern province, vast and sparsely populated, shelters some of the country's most remarkable and important natural sites. Incredible deserted beaches line the west coast of Botum Sakor National Park and nearby islands – including the largest, Koh Kong Island – while inland are lush rainforests with ecotourism potential as vast as their mountains, streams and hamlets are remote. Diving and snorkelling, too, have a bright and very colourful future.

The best base for exploring the province's untamed jungle, spread out along the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor, is the riverine town of Krong Koh Kong, 8km from the Thai border. From here, motorboats can whisk you to

rushing waterfalls, secluded islands, sandy coves and Venice-like fishers' villages on stilts.

KRONG KOH KONG

ក្រុងកោះកុង

☎035 / pop 29,500

Once Cambodia's Wild West, its frontier economy dominated by smuggling, prostitution and gambling, Krong Koh Kong has recently taken big steps towards respectability. The city centre is still scruffy but new midrange hotels are going up, especially along the landscaped riverfront, and ecotourism promises to transform the town into the gateway to some of Southeast Asia's most breathtaking coastal and mountain habitats. Koh Kong Conservation Corridor highlights accessible from here include Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary, Koh Kong Island, the west coast of Botum Sakor National Park and several waterfalls.

Orientation

Krong Koh Kong's commercial heart is located near the roundabout at the intersection of St 3 and St 8, and south of there, towards Psar Leu (the market). A big shopping centre is being built at the intersection of St 5 – as NH48 is known as it passes through town – and St 3. The ferry landing and most of the midrange hotels are on or near St 1, which runs along Stung Koh Poi, a 2km-wide estuary.

Information

Guesthouses, hotels and pubs – including the Oasis Bungalow Resort and the Sauna Garden Bar – are the best places to get the local low-down. You can also check out Koh Kong's unofficial website, www.koh-kong.com, and two free rival pocket guides, *Koh Kong* and *Koh Kong Guide*.

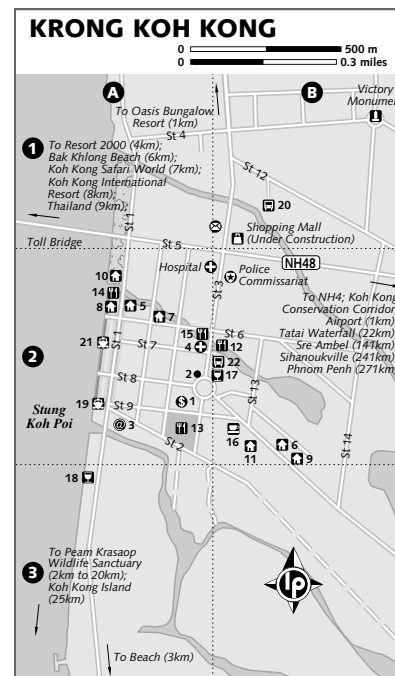
The Koh Kong City Hotel sells Cambodian SIM cards (US\$12). Thai mobile phones work here.

INTERNET ACCESS

Asean Hotel (☎936667; St 1) Internet access (per hour 60B to US\$2) is available here, as well as next to Rasmey Buntam Guesthouse and along St 2 near Psar Leu.
Sokha Computer Technologies (St 2; ☎ 6am–10pm) One of a number of mom-and-pop internet places along St 2.

MEDICAL SERVICES

In a medical emergency, evacuation to Thailand via the Cham Yeam–Hat Lek border crossing is possible 24 hours a day. In



INFORMATION

Aceda Bank.....	1	A2
Pharmacie Koh Kong.....	2	A2
Sokha Computer Technologies.....	3	A2
Visal Sok Clinic.....	4	A2

SLEEPING

Asean Hotel.....	5	A2
Blue Moon Guesthouse.....	6	B2
Bopha Koh Kong Hotel.....	7	A2
Koh Kong City Hotel.....	8	A2
Neptune Guesthouse.....	9	B2
Phou Mint Koh Kong Hotel.....	10	A2
Rasmey Buntam Guesthouse.....	11	B2

EATING

Baan Peakmai.....	12	B2
Psar Leu.....	13	A2
Riverfront Restaurant.....	14	A2
Sauna Garden Bar.....	15	A2

DRINKING

Bob's Bar.....	16	B2
Moto Bar.....	17	B2
Sunset Bar.....	18	A3

TRANSPORT

Boats for Hire.....	19	A2
Bus & Taxi Station.....	20	B1
Ferry to Sihanoukville.....	21	A2
Rith Mony Bus Office.....	22	B2
Virak-Buntham Bus Office.....	(see 11)	

Thailand there's a hospital in Trat, 92km from the border.

Pharmacie Koh Kong (St 3) A reliable pharmacy.

Visal Sok Clinic (☎011 988586; St 3; ☎ 6am–9pm)

The clinic of choice for NGO staff with minor medical problems. There's no English sign but staff speak English and French.

MONEY

Thai baht are widely used so there's no need to buy riels. *Moto* drivers who offer to help you change money are probably setting you up for a rip-off. There are exchange shops around the southeast corner of Psar Leu.

The nearest ATMs are at the Cham Yeam–Hat Lek border crossing, a few metres inside Thailand. They can be accessed without visa formalities – just mosey on over to the Thai immigration counter, explain that you need an ATM and leave them your passport.

Aceda Bank (St 9) Handles Western Union transfers and may get an ATM in 2008. Will soon move to new quarters a few blocks north.

Sights & Activities

The best nearby beach is on the eastern (ie city centre) side of Stung Koh Poi about 4km south of the bridge at the tip of the peninsula. You can get there along the river on foot or by *moto*; by car you have to loop around to the east.

Across the estuary from town and about 2km south of the bridge, **Resort 2000** has a grassy beach area and eating options that are popular with Khmers. Further south, **Bak Khlong Beach** has cheap fish and seafood.

The pool at the **Oasis Bungalow Resort** (☎092-228342, 016 331556) is open to nonguests for US\$2 a day. The Oasis also has details on Krong Koh Kong's first **dive school** (it's planning to offer PADI courses, reef dives and jungle river dives), **canoe rental** options and three-hour **boat trips** (1600B) to observe endangered **Irrawaddy dolphins**.

For information on natural sites around Krong Koh Kong, see Koh Kong Conservation Corridor (p186).

Sleeping

Most of the city's accommodation options are near the ferry landing, though some of the cheapies are a long block or two southeast of the roundabout on St 3. Many places pay *moto* drivers a commission, leading to a whole lot of Sihanoukville-type shenanigans (see p213).

THE TREPID TIGER TRAINER *Daniel Robinson*

I'd heard that animal welfare may not be the primary consideration at **Koh Kong Safari World** (☎016 800811; admission for foreigners US\$12, for kids 90cm to 140cm US\$8; 🕒 8am-5pm), run by Koh Kong International Resort (the casino-hotel a few kilometres away at the border), but the Disneyesque gateway – in a style that Bavaria's mad King Ludwig II would have found irresistible – didn't hint at anything sinister.

The park has the usual zoo animals but it also puts on the sort of live-animal shows banned in most countries, with performances reminiscent of a 19th-century circus sideshow. Every morning, and into the early afternoon, birds ride tiny bicycles, orang-utans dressed up as boxers throw punches and a man puts his head inside a crocodile's mouth.

While wandering around I ran into a slight, soft-spoken Khmer fellow who looked a bit lost – a park employee, as it turned out. 'I see there's a sea lion show', I said, pointing to a notice board. 'No', he replied, not any more, 'sea lion dead'. Not a good sign.

'What's your job here?' I continued, guessing that he worked in ticket sales. 'I the tiger trainer', he replied. Intrigued – I'd never met a tiger trainer before – I enquired if Safari World would soon be adding tiger shows to its animalian repertoire. 'No', he shook his head sadly, 'I not work; I afraid'.

The woman who lies on top of the crocodile – another Safari World hit – is probably similarly untrained and terrified but I'm guessing she needs her salary too badly to go on strike.

Neptune Guesthouse (☎011 984512; r 100B)

The cheapest place in town, the Neptune has nine very basic rooms with plank beds, mosquito nets, bare neon lights and sinkless bathrooms.

Blue Moon Guesthouse (☎016 575741; r US\$4-10;

🕒) Run by a friendly former park ranger, this modest place has nine medium-sized rooms with spring mattresses and compact bathrooms. Air-con rooms come with hot water.

KRONG KOH KONG – KICKBOXING POWERHOUSE

Traditional Khmer kickboxing – similar to Thailand's Muay Thai, which Khmers insist is in fact Cambodian – is especially popular in Krong Koh Kong, and many of the country's top boxers, including the national champion, Eh Phouthong, hail from here.

Matches (40B) are sometimes held in Krong Koh Kong on Saturday nights, especially in the dry season. The hugely enthusiastic crowds include quite a few women and the provincial governor who, it is said, never misses a match. Locals are joined by Thai punters from across the border.

For details on times, ask someone to translate what's being said when you see an old pick-up driving around town with its loudspeakers blaring.

Rasmeay Buntam Guesthouse (☎016 207771; r 150-

400B; 🕒 📺) A decent 14-room place with so many colourful tiles you'll think you're in Tunisia. The same family runs a bus company (Virak-Buntham) and an internet café.

Phou Mint Koh Kong Hotel (☎936221; St 1; r US\$5-

15; 🕒) In a great riverside location, this hostelry – painted light blue – has 20 spacious rooms, including the best-value fan rooms in town. The US\$15 rooms have both hot water and a fridge; otherwise a fridge costs US\$1 extra.

Bopha Koh Kong Hotel (☎936073; http://bpkhotel

.netkhmer.com; St 6; r with fan/air-con from 200B/300B; 🕒) Once the top dog in town, the 40 rooms here are impersonal but comfortable and come with TV and fridge. VIP rooms have two huge beds and an all-wood living-room corner.

Asean Hotel (☎936667; http://aseanhotel.netkhmer

.com; St 1; r US\$10-20; 🕒 📺) The new hotel across the street blocks river views but the rooms here are spacious and comfortable, with proper bathrooms and endearingly tacky wall lamps. Pricier rooms have hot water.

Koh Kong City Hotel (☎936777; St 1; http://kkcthotel

.netkhmer.com; d US\$15-20; 🕒 📺) Opened in late 2006, this welcoming, professionally run place – right on the water – has 56 rooms with snazzy tub-equipped bathrooms, cable TV, hot water and fridges. Good value for money. Guests get 15 minutes of free internet.

📍 **Oasis Bungalow Resort** (☎092 228342, 016 331556; http://oasisresort.netkhmer.com; tr US\$20;

🕒 📺) In a quiet rural area 1.5km north of the city centre, this delightful oasis of calm, run sustainably, has five cheerful, spacious bungalows with all the amenities. To get there from the corner of St 3 and St 4, follow the blue signs north for 1.2km. Call ahead and they'll arrange transport from town or the border.

Koh Kong International Resort Club (☎016 700790,

Thai number +66-39588173; www.kohkonginter.com; r 1600B-2500B, ste 7000B-35,000B; 🕒 📺) Cambodia's borders are littered with casinos that cater to Thai gamblers (gambling is banned in Thailand) and this monster resort, next to the Cham Yeam-Hat Lek crossing, is one of the biggest. It's got a whopping 509 rooms and, next door, an imposing new casino – neoclassical with baroque touches – that looks like it was flown in from Baden-Baden. Accommodation and food are free if you play 20,000B a day. An 18-hole golf course is planned.

Eating & Drinking

Thai food is more common here than in most parts of Cambodia. There are cheap **food stalls** around the perimeter of Psar Leu – have a look along St 2 and north of the market along St 3.

Hotels with well-regarded restaurants include the Asean Hotel and the Bopha Koh Kong Hotel.

Baan Peakmai (☎393906; St 6; mains 60-150B;

🕒 7am-10pm) A relaxing Thai-style garden restaurant that's a real hit with Thai expats. The monster menu includes several dozen vegetarian choices and a fair spread of seafood.

Sauna Garden Bar (☎015 601633, Thai number +66-78082286; codgerbojer@yahoo.com; St 3) Both a relaxing sauna and a garden restaurant with good Khmer, Thai and Western food, this place is something of an expat hang-out and is also a good source of local information.

Riverfront Restaurant (☎011 943497; St 1; mains 100B-200B; 🕒 7am-9pm) Across St 1 from the Asean Hotel, this Thai and Khmer place specialises in reasonably priced seafood and soups (150B), including delicious tom yam. Four breezy pavilions out over the water afford truly romantic sunset views.

Moto Bar (☎936220; St 3; mains 80B-200B) More geared-up for the Pattaya expat on a visa run than for the average backpacker.

Bob's Bar (☎016 326455; mains 100B-150B; 🕒 9am-9pm or later) Breakfast is available all day long at this cheery, Aussie-run restaurant-bar.

Serves Western dishes and the best espresso in town.

Sunset Bar (☎016 326455; St 1; 🕒 8am-8pm or 9pm or later) Right on the waterfront nestled in a row of fishers' houses, this mellow bar – an ideal spot to watch the sun go down – is the best place in town for a laid-back beer. It's hidden down an alleyway – look for the 'Bar' sign.

Getting There & Away

When NH48 finally gets its four new bridges, ending the frustrating traffic jams at the ferries, travel times will plummet and transport options to Sihanoukville (220km) and Phnom Penh (290km) are likely to mushroom.

Krong Koh Kong is linked to the Thai border by a dual carriageway of sorts – not only does it lack lines, lanes, signs, reflectors and verges/shoulders, but some locals drive as if it were two parallel two-lane highways! The 1.9km bridge over Stung Koh Poi, built and run by the Thais, costs 4800r/44B each way for a car and 1200r/11B for a motorbike; bicycles and pedestrians cross for free.

Flights from Bangkok to Krong Koh Kong are planned.

BOAT

Passenger ferries link Krong Koh Kong with Sihanoukville's ferry port (4½ hours) at 8am; departures from Sihanoukville are at 9.30am. Khmers pay 50,000r or 500B, foreigners are charged US\$20. The route is handled by two vessels, the **Royal** (☎016 851934) and the **Khemara** (Kamra; ☎016 852223). Immigration police check passports before boarding. Tickets in both directions can be booked through guesthouses and hotels. When you arrive in Krong Koh Kong, be prepared for a rugby scrum of *moto* drivers hoping to take you to the border.

A word of warning: the sea can be dangerously rough and these boats were designed for river travel, not sailing the open seas.

It's not clear if this service will survive the easy land transport that will be possible once the NH48 bridges are opened.

BUS & TAXI

Rith Mony (☎015 404085; St 3) and **Virak-Buntham** (☎016 207771; St 9) run buses (you have to change vehicles at each crossing) and faster minibuses to Sihanoukville (300B, five hours by minibus) and Phnom Penh (300B, seven hours by minibus). Capital Transport is

planning to add a service to Krong Koh Kong. Guesthouses and hotels sell tickets.

On the northeast edge of town, Krong Koh Kong's **bus and taxi station** (St 12) has an unpaved parking lot and a tin-roofed waiting area. Buses tend to stop in town, so the only reason to come out here is to find share taxis – most numerous in the morning – to Andoung Tuek (300B), Sihanoukville (400B) and Phnom Penh (400B). Prices will surely drop as the bridges come on line. Share taxis can also be found around the northwest corner of Psar Leu.

To the Thai border, a private taxi costs 200B to 250B (plus the 44B bridge toll) while a *moto* costs 70B (plus the 11B toll). A *moto* from the border is cheaper – just 50B (plus the toll).

Getting Around

As we go to press, boats for excursions to destinations such as Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary, Koh Kong Island and Tatai Waterfall can be hired near the intersection of St 1 and St 9, but at some point the dock is slated to move across the river.

Motos are the most popular form of local transport; short hops in town cost 1000r/10B.

The Sauna Garden Bar and the Neptune Guesthouse rent 250cc dirt bikes (500B); the former also hires out jeeps (2000B).

The Oasis Bungalow Resort and Virak-Buntham bus company can arrange nine-person minibuses for local touring or travel around the country.

KOH KONG CONSERVATION CORRIDOR

The fabled Cardamom Mountains, an area of breathtaking beauty and astonishing biodiversity, cover 20,000 sq km of southwestern Cambodia. Their remote peaks – up to 1800m high – and river valleys are home to at least 59 globally threatened animal species, including tigers, Asian elephants, bears, Siamese crocodiles (p190), pangolins (p189) and eight species of tortoises and turtles. Botanically the area is something of a cipher because basic research has yet to be carried out, but so far more than 100 species of endemic plants have been identified.

The second-largest virgin rainforest on mainland Southeast Asia, the Cardamoms are one of only two sites in the region where unbroken forests still connect mountain summits with the sea (the other is in Burma). Some highland areas receive up to

5m of rain a year. Conservationists hope the Cardamoms will soon be declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

While forests and coastlines elsewhere in Southeast Asia were being ravaged by greedy developers and well-connected logging companies, the Cardamom Mountains and the adjacent mangrove forests – the most extensive on mainland Southeast Asia – were protected from the worst ecological outrages by their sheer remoteness and, at least in part, by Cambodia's long civil war. As a result, much of the area is still in pretty good shape, ecologically speaking, so the potential for ecotourism is huge – akin, some say, to that of Kenya's game reserves.

The Koh Kong Conservation Corridor stretches along both sides of NH48 from Krong Koh Kong to the Gulf of Kompong Som (the bay north of Sihanoukville). It encompasses many of Cambodia's most outstanding natural sites, including the mangrove forests of Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary, the pristine beaches of Koh Kong Island, Botum Sakor National Park and two huge, noncontiguous protected areas: the Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest, whose southern boundary is NH48, and the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest further north.

The next few years will be critical in determining the future of the Cardamom Mountains. NGOs such as **Conservation International** (CI; www.conservation.org), **Fauna & Flora International** (FFI; www.fauna-flora.org) and the **Wildlife Alliance** (formerly WildAid; www.wildlifealliance.org) are working night and day to help protect the area's 16 distinct ecosystems from loggers and poachers. But ecotourism, too, can play a role in generating income for local people and spurring sustainable development.

For information on the northern side of the Cardamom Mountains, accessible from Pursat and Pailin, see p238 and p252 respectively.

Tours

The Rainbow Lodge (opposite), 20km east of Krong Koh Kong on the Tatai River, arranges guided jungle treks and boat trips.

In Krong Koh Kong, a number of establishments organise land and sea tours in the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor and can go via Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary:

Blue Moon Guesthouse (☎016 575741) Run by a former park ranger, this outfit offers boat trips to Koh Kong Island, island overnights and land excursions to nature sites.

Neptune Guesthouse (☎016 575741) Has a 20-person boat and runs dry-season excursions to Koh Kong Island and up the river.

Oasis Bungalow Resort (☎092 228342, 016 331556; <http://oasisresort.netkhmer.com>) Organises boat trips to Koh Kong Island, Koh Por Waterfall and other destinations. Oasis Bungalow is also an excellent source of up-to-date information.

Sauna Garden Bar (☎015 601633, Thai number +66-78082286; codgerbojer@yahoo.com; St 3) Can arrange day trips into the jungle and, for those willing to rough it, two- and three-day camping expeditions into the Cardamom Mountains.

Sunset Lounge Tours (☎016 548977) Rents boats 'for island and dolphin tours'.

Ecologically and socially responsible travel companies planning adventure tours in the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest in partnership with Conservation International: **Intrepid Travel** (www.intrepidindochina.com) **Peregrine** (www.peregrineadventures.com)

Getting There & Around

All buses, minibuses and share taxis travelling between Krong Koh Kong and points east, including Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville, take NH48. Thanks to the efforts of environmental groups, including the Wildlife Alliance, agricultural development and land speculation along NH48 – a common sight, hundreds of metres deep, along new roads everywhere else in the country – have been strictly forbidden.

For details on transport options, see Getting There & Away under each listing.

A very rough road goes north through the wild Cardamoms to Pailin and Battambang, passing by remote mountain towns such as Veal Veng, O Som (where there's a ranger station) and Promoui (the main town in the Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary – see p239). It should be attempted only in the dry season by dirt bikers with oodles of off-road experience. Near Krong Koh Kong, the turn-off is on the old road to Phnom Penh past the airport, a few hundred metres beyond the army base. There's no public transport.

Motorcycles are loud, scaring birds and animals and making it impossible for the rider to hear their calls. By contrast, mountain bikes, which can go anywhere motorcycles can and some places they can't, are silent, letting you hear and feel the forest as you ride. Bike tours of the Cardamoms, and local bike-rental

options, are sure to sprout up over the next few years, including in Chi Phat.

Koh Por Waterfall

Upriver from Krong Koh Kong, these rapids pour over a stone shelf in a lovely jungle gorge. It's great to clamber around here in the dry season, as there are immense boulders to use as stepping stones.

A speedboat from Krong Koh Kong (one hour) costs about 1600B. By long-tail boat the trip takes three hours each way and costs 1200B. See left.

Tatai River & Waterfall

When driving east from Krong Koh Kong along NH48, the first bridge you come to – after about 20km – spans the Tatai River (Stung Tatai).

Set in a lushly forested gorge a bit upstream from the bridge, **Tatai Waterfall** is a thundering set of rapids in the wet season, plunging over a 4m rock shelf. In the dry season, when water levels drop, you can walk across much of the ledge and take a dip in the gently-flowing river. The water is fairly pure, as it comes down from the high Cardamoms where there are very few human settlements.

To get to the falls from Krong Koh Kong, you can either take a *moto* (the turn-off from NH48 is a couple of kilometres west of the Tatai River bridge) or a gorgeous motorboat ride via Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary (US\$60, one hour). Boats can also be hired at the Rainbow Lodge.

The tranquil **Rainbow Lodge** (☎017 602585; <http://greenscape.netkhmer.com>; s/d US\$30/40), a new eco-lodge on the Tatai River, has seven bungalows with fans and mosquito nets. Built using local labour and materials, its electricity is generated by solar panels and the wash-water arrived as rain. Whenever possible, waste is recycled and ingredients for meals (room rates include three a day) are purchased from local farmers. The lodge is a 10-minute boat ride from the Tatai River bridge – call ahead to arrange to be picked up.

Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary

Home to millions of magnificent mangroves, the sanctuary's numerous alluvial islands (some no larger than a house) are separated by a maze of bays and channels. Anchored by multiple roots in the briny sea, the trees, with their foliage just above the high-water mark,

dissipate wave energy and protect the coast from erosion, especially during storms.

The mangroves also serve as a vital breeding and feeding ground for fish, shrimp and shellfish and are home to birds such as the broad-billed sandpiper and Nordman's greenshank. The area is all the more valuable from an ecological standpoint because similar forests in Thailand have been trashed by short-sighted development.

The sanctuary, which covers 260 sq km, is largely uninhabited, though you may come upon a few **fishing hamlets**, whose residents use spindly traps to catch fish, which are then kept alive till market time in partly submerged nets attached to floating wooden frames. Further out, on some of the more remote mangrove islands, you pass utterly isolated little **beaches** where you can land and lounge.

The main gateway to Peam Krasaop is the settlement of Boeng Kayak, where the local community has built a 1km-long **mangrove walk** that consists of a series of elevated walkways, picnic platforms, a suspension bridge and a 15m-high observation tower offering brilliant panoramic views. The best time to come is early in the morning. In Boeng Kayak you can also hire boats for **bird watching**, **fishing** and – an hour or two after sunset – **firefly watching**.

On the sanctuary's west coast, along both banks of a channel, is the Venice-like village of **Koh Kapi**. Each of the fishers' houses – held aloft by stilts – has a blue or green wooden boat docked outside. Ask around to find a local family willing to prepare a fresh fish or seafood meal.

Endangered **Irrawaddy dolphins** can sometimes be seen early in the morning (6.30am or 7am) around the entrance to the Stung Koh Poi estuary, and occasionally the gentle marine mammals even swim upriver to Krong Koh Kong.

Much of Peam Krasaop is on the prestigious **Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance** (www.ramsar.org).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The best way to see Peam Krasaop is by boat from Krong Koh Kong, perhaps on the way to Tatai Waterfall or Koh Kong Island.

Because 40-horsepower outboard motors really slurp up the petrol, the cost of boat travel is largely a function of how far you go. An open motorboat costs US\$65 to US\$75 for a day trip to Koh Kong Island (right) and

back, including a meander through Peam Krasaop; more if you'd like to circumnavigate the island and stop at one of the mainland beaches near Preak Khsach, on the coast of Botum Sakor National Park.

It's best to set out early in the morning as the sea, often smooth as glass at 7am, tends to get choppy in the afternoon. Bring sunscreen, a hat and plenty of bottled water (for some unknown reason, one local brand is called Porn Marina). Make sure your vessel has life vests on board – and don't count on being able to summon rescuers with your mobile (cell) phone, as many offshore areas, including Koh Kong Island's west coast, lack coverage.

Koh Kong Island

Cambodia's largest island, about 25km south of Krong Koh Kong, towers over seas so crystal clear you can make out individual grains of sand in a couple of metres of water. Its **seven pristine beaches**, all of them along the western coast, get so few visitors that sand crabs scamper obliviously up and down the beach and the shoreline is dotted with colourful shells of the sort you usually see only in souvenir shops.

There's a police post near the 20km-long island's northern end, above the second beach you come to, so skippers may be reluctant to stop nearby – or even stick around the area too long. It's forbidden to explore the thickly forested interior. The island is not part of any national park or wildlife sanctuary and thus has few protections against rampant development.

Several of the beaches – lined with coconut palms and lush vegetation, just as you'd expect in a tropical paradise – are at the mouths of little streams. At the **sixth beach** from the north, a narrow channel leads to a genuine *Gilligan's Island*-style lagoon.

On Koh Kong Island's eastern side, half-a-dozen forested hills – the highest towers 407m above the sea – drop steeply to the mangrove-lined coast. The fishing village of **Alatan**, the island's only settlement (for now), is on the southeast coast facing the northwest corner of Botum Sakor National Park.

For details on getting to Koh Kong Island by boat (the northern tip is about one hour from Krong Koh Kong if you sail direct), see Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary (p186) and details on Koh Kong Conservation Corridor tours (p186).

'THAT PLACE WAS PARADISE UNTIL LONELY PLANET MENTIONED IT'

If Koh Kong Island is truly such an untouched paradise, why is Lonely Planet recklessly exposing its heretofore hidden charms? Won't publicity hasten the island's ruin?

Cambodia and its people desperately need economic growth, so it's inevitable that natural resources such as Koh Kong Island – hardly a secret either to locals or to Phnom Penh investors – will be developed. The question is, how? Will developers be allowed to construct massive resorts for package tourists interested only in sun, sand and creature comforts, chopping down trees and destroying the island's delicate ecosystem in the process? Or will local residents and the people in charge – in the provincial and national governments – realise that, in the long term, sustainable development that preserves the island's rare natural beauty is the way to go?

Each time you visit an ecotourism site, marvelling at its flora and fauna and unspoil habitats, you're casting a vote for sustainable development, backed up by cash in local pockets.

Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest

In an effort to protect the southern Cardamom Mountains (from poaching, logging and encroachment) by turning the forest into a source of jobs and income for local people, the **Wildlife Alliance** (www.wildlifealliance.org) is launching a project to transform the Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest (1443 sq km), whose southern boundary is NH48 between Krong Koh Kong to Andoung Tuek, into a world-class ecotourism destination.

Over the next few years, the Wildlife Alliance – with Dutch government funding – plans to:

- establish two visitors centres – built of natural materials (except wood!) – with displays on the Cardamoms' geography, flora and fauna. They will be situated on the Tatai River and at Andoung Tuek.
- build two ecotourism lodges, a 'forest retreat' near the Tatai River and a 'spa retreat centre' near Chi Phat.
- assist locals in organising boat tours along the area's many rivers.
- help establish community-based homestays and guesthouses in villages such as Andoung Tuek and Trapeang Rung and along the Tatai River.
- provide microloans so local people can set up small businesses hiring out mountain bikes and kayaks.
- expand ecotourism facilities in the Chi Phat area (see p191).

Central Cardamoms Protected Forest

The Central Cardamoms Protected Forest (CCPF; 4013 sq km) encompasses three of Southeast Asia's most threatened ecosystems: lowland evergreen forests, riparian forests and wetlands.

The rangers and military policemen who protect this vast area from illegal hunting and logging, with the help of Conservation International, are based in seven strategically sited ranger stations, including one in **Thma Bang**, where they run a **guesthouse** (to coordinate a visit 012 256777; ccp.kimsan@everyday.com.kh; per person US\$8). Opened in 2008, its four double rooms have outside bathrooms and electricity from 6pm to 9pm (there are plans to install solar panels). Meals are US\$2. Bring warm clothes as temperatures can drop as low as 10°C. Thma Bang lacks mobile phone coverage but the station has radio contact with the **Veal II ranger checkpoint** (092 269440).

Thma Bang District has the lowest population density (1.35 people per sq km) and the highest levels of poverty in Koh Kong Province. Mostly covered with dense rainforest, it is perfect for bird-watching or hiking – perhaps to a waterfall – with a local guide

END OF THE LINE FOR THE PANGOLIN?

In China and Vietnam, the meat of the Malayan (Sunda) pangolin – a kind of nocturnal anteater whose only food is ants and termites – is considered a delicacy, and the creature's blood and scales are believed to have healing powers. As a result, villagers in the Cardamom Mountains, who often hunt with dogs, are paid a whopping US\$40 per kilo for live pangolins (the price rises to US\$70 in Vietnam and US\$100 in China) and pangolin populations have been in freefall. Enforcement rangers are doing their best to crack down on poaching before it's too late.

TEN PERCENT

In 2007 researchers found 23 Siamese crocodile eggs in a nest on the Areng River, in the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest. They took 12 eggs to a protected site where, 45 days later, all hatched; after being blessed by monks, they were released back into the river. Observations confirmed that all 11 eggs left behind also hatched. It's hard to believe but these 23 hatchlings represent 10% of the entire global population of wild Siamese crocodiles!

(rangers can help you find one). The nearby **Areng River Valley**, some of whose inhabitants belong to the Khmer Daeum minority community, is home to the dragonfish (Asian arowana), almost extinct in the wild, and the world's most important population of critically endangered Siamese crocodiles (above), toothy critters that don't eat people.

The truly intrepid can hire guides for the trek from Thma Bang north to **Kravanh** (p239), which takes at least a week, or from **Chamnar** (linked to Thma Bang by road) over the mountains to Kravanh, a five-day affair. These treks are possible only in the dry season.

An easier option is the three-day hike from **Chumnoab**, east of Thma Bang, eastwards to **Roleak Kang Cheung**, linked to Kompong Speu by road. Between the two is **Knong Krapeur** (1000m), set amid high-elevation grassland and pines. Inhabited five centuries ago, the area is known for its giant ceramic funeral jars, still filled with human bones.

It may also be possible to accompany enforcement rangers on an overnight or three-day **patrol** – contact the Thma Bang guesthouse for details.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Few roads of any sort penetrate the Cardamom Mountains, ideal if you're trying to protect the natural habitat – roads, even rudimentary ones, tend to attract loggers, poachers and encroachers – but a bit of a problem if you'd like to visit.

The southern reaches of the CCPF are easiest to reach from the south. It takes about two hours to drive from Krong Koh Kong to Thma Bang (wet-season travel may be difficult or impossible). Turn off NH48 about 10km east of the Tatai River bridge; from the Veal II

(Veal Pii) ranger checkpoint, where a user fee may be collected, it's a further 50 minutes.

Thma Bang is linked to Chi Phat (opposite) by a difficult trail that can be handled by motorbike, but just barely.

The CCPF's northern sections can be accessed, to the degree that they're accessible at all, from Pursat (see p238).

Botum Sakor National Park

Occupying almost the entirety of the 35km-wide peninsula across the Gulf of Kompong Som from Sihanoukville, this 1834-sq-km national park, encircled by mangroves and beaches, is home to a profusion of wildlife, including elephants (about 20 of them, according to recent camera-trap evidence), tigers, deer, leopards and sun bears. The highest point is a 402m hill in the park's almost inaccessible interior.

Although a road is being built down the park's eastern side (it will eventually go all the way round the peninsula's coastline), the best way to see Botum Sakor is by boat. To get to the mangrove forests on the east coast and the almost deserted **beaches** on the park's southeastern tip, you can hire a long-tail boat in Andoung Tuek (opposite) or Sihanoukville. The west coast, with its many kilometres of fine beaches, is easiest to reach by boat from Koh Sdach (opposite). There are more **beaches** across the strait from Koh Kong Island, south of the picturesque fishers' village of **Preak Khsach**; for these destinations you can hire a boat in Krong Koh Kong (p185).

Small boats can be taken up into four mangrove-lined streams that are rich in wildlife, including the pileated gibbon, long-tailed macaque and black-shanked douc langur: **Ta Op**, the largest, on the east coast; **Ta Nun** in the middle of the south coast; and **Ta Nhi** and **Preak Khsach** on the east coast.

Grandiose tourist development seems to be on the cards for the park's west coast. A Chinese company has plans to build seven new cities (no, that's not a typo), an airport, golf courses and lots of hotels, though things are on hold while a three-year study is carried out. Another potential threat to the area comes from offshore oil rigs.

Botum Sakor is not yet geared up for tourism but at the park headquarters, on NH48 about 3km west of Andoung Tuek, it should be possible to arrange a hike with a ranger (US\$5 a day) or a boat excursion.

The nearest guesthouses are in Andoung Tuek, on the Tatai River and on Koh Sdach. On the south coast, it may be possible to overnight at the **Ta Nun ranger station** or in a basic guesthouse in **Thmor Sor**, an east coast fishing village linked by ferry with Sihanoukville.

Koh Sdach

Just off Botum Sakor National Park's southwest tip, this island has a small fishing port, a couple of sandy **beaches**, some modest eateries and a seaside bungalow outfit called **Mean Chey Guesthouse** (☎011 983806; r US\$5). It's linked to both Sihanoukville and Krong Koh Kong by ferry (p185), which costs US\$10 (2 hours from either city).

There are some fine **coral reefs** – excellent for diving or snorkelling – around some of the nearby islands. This is a good place to hire a boat to explore the wonderful beaches along the west coast of Botum Sakor National Park (opposite).

Andoung Tuek

On the western side of the highway bridge over Preak Piphot, this river port can be used as a jumping-off point for a boat trip along the east coast of Botum Sakor National Park (opposite) and for an excursion upriver to Chi Phat (below). Andoung Tuek is on NH48, 98km from Krong Koh Kong and 191km from Phnom Penh.

Botum Sakor Guesthouse (☎016 732731; r with/without bathroom 10,000r/20,000r) West of the bridge 250m, this has six basic rooms with bright pink mosquito nets. The bad news is that there's some dodgy electric wiring in the bathrooms; the good news is that you can get electrocuted only from 6pm to 10pm, when the town has electricity. One recent guest found a painted bullfrog in the shower, which was carefully redistributed outside.

Chi Phat

Chi Phat's pioneering community-based ecotourism project (p192), though at press time still a work in progress, gives hardy travellers a unique opportunity to explore the Cardamom ecosystem while contributing in a small way to its protection.

Chi Phat, though hardly the most beautiful village in Cambodia, is an excellent base for a variety of outdoor activities. Visitors can swim in the river, cycle (or take a *moto*) to several sets of rapids, hike in the forest (perhaps with

a former poacher as a guide; US\$6 to US\$10 per day) and play volleyball with the locals. Monkeys, hornbills and other rainforest creatures can often be seen along the banks of **Stung Proat**, an unlogged tributary of the Preak Piphot River accessible by boat. According to a village elder, the last time a tiger was seen in these parts was 1975.

Longer-term ecotourism plans for the Chi Phat area call for kayaking, overnight camping, mountain-bike day trips to nearby waterfalls, river excursions on traditional wooden boats, bird- and animal-watching from observation towers and hides, rainforest canopy walks, aerial ziplines through the forest canopy and an elephant rescue centre where visitors will be able to help out. Also on the cards are one- to five-night mountain-bike trips and jungle treks (US\$10 to US\$30 per person per day) deep into the Cardamoms.

For now, the accommodation on offer is quite basic. **Phuong Vanny Guesthouse** (☎016 617183; r US\$4-5), run by a dynamic village woman, has six rooms (there are plans to add nine more) with hardwood floors and mosquito nets. The shared bathrooms have a barrel shower. The office of the **Wildlife Alliance** (☎016 951426), which oversees the project and can coordinate your visit, is next door. Homestays (US\$3 per person per night) may become available.

In the small **covered market**, a bowl of noodles costs 2000r. The riverfront has two little **eateries**, one of which doubles as a pool hall (yes, right here in Preak Piphot River City!). Meals at the communal restaurant cost \$US1.50 to US\$4.

By the time you read this the area may have mobile phone coverage.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Chi Phat is on the Preak Piphot River 21km upriver from Andoung Tuek. The best way to get there from Andoung Tuek is to charter a **fast motorboat** (☎016 348860, 016 565054; for 3/6 people US\$25/40) or a slower **wooden long-tail motorboat** (☎016 399134; US\$12). The fast boat takes 40 minutes and the slow 1½ hours. The ride is especially enchanting just after dawn, when the water is often smooth as glass. Much cheaper cargo boats (5000r, two hours) make daily merchandise runs, leaving Chi Phat at 8am or 8.30am and Andoung Tuek sometime between noon and 2pm.

CHI PHAT: AN ECOTOURISM CASE STUDY

Chi Phat's 500 families have long supplemented their meagre agricultural income with products from the nearby forests. Gathering non-timber forest products (known in development lingo as NTFPs) and small quantities of firewood can be ecologically sustainable, but around Chi Phat the wholesale forest destruction carried out during 'the logging time' – the anarchic 1990s – left the whole ecosystem, and villagers' livelihoods, way out of whack. For many, poaching endangered animals became a way of life.

When the **Wildlife Alliance** (www.wildlifealliance.org) came on the scene in 2002 in a last-ditch effort to save the southern Cardamoms, local villagers and outsiders were encroaching on protected land, destroying the forest by illegal logging, and hunting endangered animals for local consumption and sale on the black market. The only way to prevent ecological catastrophe – and, among other things, to save monkeys from being trapped, sold for US\$75 and sent to Vietnam to be eaten – was to send in teams of enforcement rangers to crack down on 'forestry and wildlife crimes'.

But enforcing the law constricted local people's ability to earn money to feed their children (or buy motorbikes), generating a great deal of resentment. Many didn't see that environmental degradation – caused, in part, by their own unsustainable activities – would leave them far worse off in a few years' time, though most everyone noticed that animals were getting harder and harder to find.

The Wildlife Alliance realised that in order to save the Cardamom forests, it needed the cooperation of locals – and that such cooperation would be forthcoming only if income-generating alternatives to poaching and whacking trees were available. In such a remote area, one of the only resources is the forest itself, and one of the few ways to earn money from plants and animals without destroying them is ecotourism.

Thus the Wildlife Alliance launched what's known in NGO parlance as a community-based ecotourism (CBET) project. Coordinated by an Israeli former-ranger experienced in collective endeavours from his kibbutz upbringing, the first step was empowering the local community. A committee of villagers was established to assess positive and negative impacts (eg of contact with Western culture), set goals and manage the project. Many of those who joined as 'stakeholders' were former loggers and hunters.

As we go to press, the Chi Phat CBET project is still in its pioneering phase, but initially sceptical locals are warming to the idea and are beginning to see the Wildlife Alliance, and forest conservation, in a different light. A trickle of tourists has begun coming up to Chi Phat and the income generated – income that goes both into villagers' pockets and into a community development fund – is starting to make a difference.

Groups working to support sustainable, low-impact CBET projects like that in Chi Pat have banded together to form the **Cambodia Community-Based Ecotourism Network** (CCBEN; www.ccben.org) – their website has details on other such initiatives around the country.

By *moto* the trip from Andoung Tuek is a hard – and, in the wet season, muddy – slog along a forest track (30,000r, 1½ hours).

Stung Phong Roul Waterfall

Although off the beaten path, this is one of Cambodia's most spectacular waterfalls, with five big drops arrayed around a vertiginous curve in the river. Clambering around is tough but worth it, as there are some good swimming holes at the right time of year.

The uppermost waterfall is a dramatic 10m high. Flat rock ledges border clear and surprisingly cool pools, and are ideal for a romantic picnic. If you sit quietly with your

feet in the water, little fish (goodness knows how they got up here) may nibble your toes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stung Phong Roul Waterfall is about 20km northeast of Sre Ambel in the foothills of the Cardamom Mountains. As the crow flies, Kirirom National Park (p116) is 20km further to the northeast.

In the dry season you can get to the falls by motorbike, though be warned: there are potholes big and deep enough to swallow an entire motorcycle, and getting around the rotted-out bridges can be a wet affair. From just northwest of the Sre Ambel bridge, turn

northeast off NH48 and follow the dirt road to the Bailey bridge. From there, an arrow-straight one-time logging road heads east and then north-northeast to a cleft in the forested hills. A 20-minute walk up the slope takes you to the uppermost waterfall.

In Sre Ambel, you can hire a *moto* (US\$15 return, one hour to the base of the mountain). In the wet season it's possible to go most of the way by boat. The falls are rarely visited even by locals so it may be hard to find someone who knows the way.

Sre Ambel

Since ferry service to Krong Koh Kong ended a few years ago, the only reason to come to this charmless smugglers' port, 150km from Phnom Penh, is to use it as a base for a trip to Stung Phong Roul Waterfall.

A few blocks down the hill and to the right from the market, there's a **guesthouse** (☎016 798956; r US\$5) with nine simple, medium-sized rooms and, next door, a similar 10-room **guesthouse** (r US\$5-12; ☎) with a partly Chinese sign. **Pohak Restaurant** (mains 6000r), across the street, serves – according to the nicely laminated menu – some unique delicacies, including odoriferous soup, salad Vietnamese girl, chickens with three legs, cow haunts water, eel falling in love and frontline troop open the way. For less martial fare, try the **small eateries** near the market.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Sre Ambel from Krong Koh Kong, take any vehicle heading to Phnom Penh or Sihanoukville and get off the NH48 either at the eastern end of the bridge (a *moto* from here to town costs 3000r) or at the oblique junction a few kilometres further east (from here the 5km *moto* ride costs 5000r).

Buses, minibuses and share taxis travelling between Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville stop at the intersection of NH4 and NH48, a 10km *moto* ride southeast of town.

KOMPONG SOM PROVINCE

Sandwiched between Kampot and Koh Kong Provinces, this tiny province is dominated by its main city, the dynamic beach resort and port of Sihanoukville.

Nearby islands, some with fine beaches, afford superb diving and snorkelling, and a few now offer bungalows. Other natural sites include Ream National Park, situated 18km east of Sihanoukville, and the Kbal Chhah Cascades.

SIHANOUKVILLE

ក្រុងព្រះសីហនុ

☎034 / pop 155,000

Surrounded by white-sand beaches and undeveloped tropical islands, the port city and beach resort of Sihanoukville (Krong Preah Sihanouk), also known as Kompong Som, is the closest thing you get to the Costa del Cambodia. Visitor numbers have risen steadily in recent years – and are likely to skyrocket if flights to Siem Reap are resumed – but for the time being, despite the boomtown rents, the city and its sandy bits remain pretty laid-back.

Named in honour of the then-king, Sihanoukville was hacked out of the jungle in the late 1950s to create Cambodia's first and only deep-water port, considered vital so the country's international trade would no longer have to pass through Vietnam. During the 1960s the city experienced a small tourism boom.

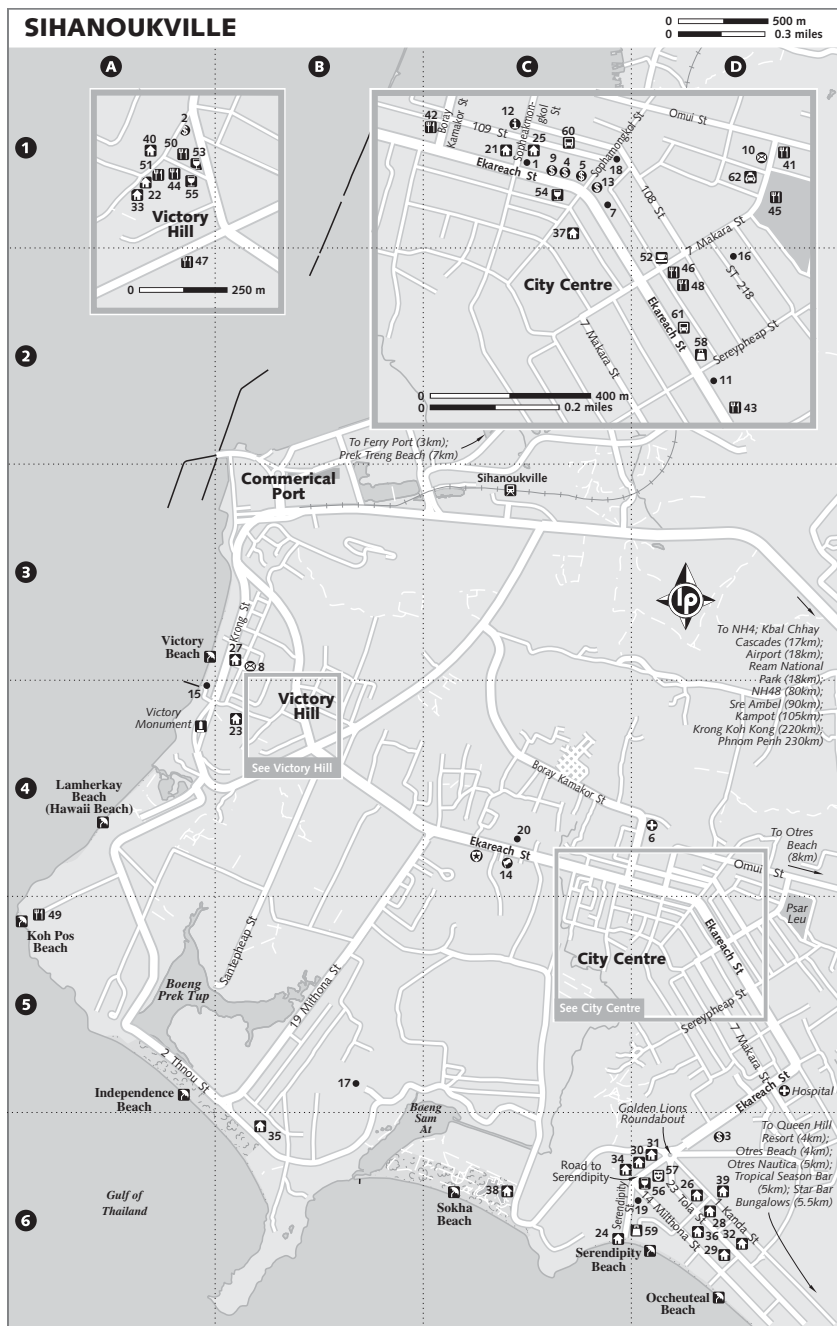
The big attractions around here are the four beaches ringing the headland. None of them qualify as the region's finest but on weekdays it's still possible to have stretches of sand to yourself. On weekends and holidays Sihanoukville is extremely popular with well-to-do Phnom Penhers.

Orientation

The scruffy city centre, where the bus station and most businesses are located, is spread out along and north of Ekareach St. It is roughly equidistant from the two main beach areas, the Serendipity-Occheuteal area, 2km to the south, and Victory Beach, 2.5km to the northwest.

Serendipity Beach – as the northwestern tip of Occheuteal Beach is known – is linked to the Golden Lions Roundabout by an unpaved access road, Serendipity St, and the Road to Serendipity, the area's commercial and culinary heart. Victory Hill (Weather Station Hill, also known as 'The Hill'), once the main backpacker haven, is up the hill from Victory Beach.

Boats to/from Krong Koh Kong dock about 3km north of town.



INFORMATION		Starfish Bakery & Cafe.....(see 48)		Mick & Craig's.....(see 30)	
Ana Internet Travel.....	.1 C1	Traditional Khmer Cooking.....	.20 C4	New Sea View Villas.....	(see 56)
ANZ Royal ATM.....	.2 A1			Psar Leu.....	.45 D1
ANZ Royal ATM.....	(see 26)			Samudera Supermarket.....	.46 D2
ANZ Royal Bank.....	.3 D6	SLEEPING		Small Hotel.....	(see 37)
ANZ Royal Bank.....	.4 C1	Angkor Inn Guesthouse.....	.21 C1	Snake House.....	.47 A1
Canadia Bank.....	.5 C1	Blue Frog Guesthouse.....	.22 A1	Starfish Bakery & Cafe.....	.48 D2
Casablanca Books.....	(see 30)	Bungalow Village.....	.23 B4	Treasure Island.....	.49 A5
Coasters.....	.24 C6	Coasters.....	.24 C6	Tutti Frutti.....	.50 A1
CT Clinic.....	.6 D4	Freedom Hotel.....	.25 C1	XXL.....	.51 A1
Diving & More.....	(see 18)	Golden Sand Hotel.....	.26 D6		
Eco-Trek Tours.....	(see 30)	Holiday Palace.....	.27 B3	DRINKING	
Laundry Express.....	.7 C1	Koh Meas Guesthouse.....	.28 D6	Espresso Kampuchea.....	(see 25)
Main Post Office.....	.8 B3	Lucky Guesthouse.....	.29 D6	Gelato Italiano.....	.52 D2
Mekong Bank.....	.9 C1	Mick & Craig's.....	.30 D6	Mojo Bar.....	.53 A1
Mr Heinz Books.....	(see 4)	Monkey Republic Bungalows.....	.31 D6	Paco's.....	.54 C1
Post Office.....	.10 D1	Orchidee Guesthouse.....	.32 D6	Rainy Season	
Q&A.....	.11 D2			Guesthouse.....	.33 A1
Samudera.....	(see 46)	Reef Resort.....	.34 C6	Reetox.....	.55 A1
Starfish Bakery & Cafe.....	(see 48)	Sea Breeze Guesthouse.....	.35 B6	Utopia.....	.56 D6
Tourist Office.....	.12 C1	Seaside Hotel.....	.36 D6		
Union Commerical Bank.....	.13 C1	Small Hotel.....	.37 C1	ENTERTAINMENT	
Vietnamese Consulate.....	.14 C4	Sokha Beach Resort.....	.38 C6	Open-Air Cinema.....	(see 23)
		Sovann Phnum Guesthouse.....	.39 D6	Top-Hat.....	.57 D6
		Sunset Garden Guesthouse.....	.40 A1		
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES				SHOPPING	
Antonov-24 Turboprop.....	.15 A4	EATING		Khmer Artisans.....	.58 D2
Centre de Fitness et de Boxe		Food Stalls.....	.41 D1	M'lop Tapang.....	.59 C6
Asiatique.....	.16 D2	Fruit & Veggie Stalls.....	.42 C1	Rajana.....	(see 48)
Claude Diving Centre.....	.17 B5	Happa & Ku Kai.....	(see 34)		
Diving & More.....	.18 C1	Happy Herb Pizza.....	.43 D2	TRANSPORT	
Eco-Trek Tours.....	(see 30)	Holy Cow.....	(see 43)	Bus Station Hour Lean.....	.60 C1
EcoSea Dive.....	(see 4)	Indian Curry Pot.....	(see 50)	G'day Mate Minibus to	
EcoSea Dive.....	(see 34)	Koh Lin.....	.44 A1	Kampot.....	.61 D2
Scuba Nation Diving		Koh Meas Mini-Market.....	(see 28)	Tutti to Kampot.....	.62 D1
Center.....	.19 D6				
Seeing Hands Massage 3.....	(see 11)				

Information

Sihanoukville is a centre that's developing so fast it's hard to keep track of all the new establishments and activities sprouting up around town.

BOOKSHOPS

Casablanca Books (☎012 484051; Road to Serendipity; ☎ 8am-10pm) Next to Mick & Craig's, this bookshop sells new and used English paperbacks.

Mister Heinz Books (☎017 802721; 219 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 9am-6pm or later) Stocks 6000 books in 10 languages, including lots of used English paperbacks and titles on Cambodian history. Most can be sold back for 50% of what you paid.

Q&A (☎012 342720; 95 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm) A secondhand bookshop that doubles as a café (mains cost US\$2 to US\$4.50).

Starfish Bakery & Café (☎012 952011; down alley, 62.7 Makara St, City Centre; ☎ 7am-6pm) Used books to sell and swap, mainly in English and Swedish.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access (per hour 3000r to 5000r) is easy to find in the city centre – there are internet cafés at 173, 193 and 236A Ekareach

St, inside the NGO-run Starfish Bakery & Café, and both inside and across the street from the Angkor Inn Guesthouse.

In the Serendipity area, internet outfits are sprinkled along the Road to Serendipity and can be found inside the Seaside Hotel and in the minimarket at the Koh Meas Guesthouse.

LAUNDRY

Lots of places around Serendipity Beach offer to do laundry for 3000r per kilo.

Laundry Express (☎016 988483; 157 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 7am-8pm) Costs US\$1 per kilo with a 24-hour turnaround; double that if you need your clothes in three hours.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Travellers have reported that a few guesthouses charge exorbitant rates for house calls by doctors.

CT Clinic (☎934222; ct_clinic@yahoo.com; 47 Boray Kamakor St, City Centre; ☎ 24hr for emergencies) All the expats and NGO workers head here when they need care, including emergency trauma treatment and rabies shots. Staff will tell you if you need to be evacuated to Phnom

SOUTH COAST

SOUTH COAST

Penh and will help you contact your embassy. Has a reliable in-house pharmacy.

MONEY

Most of the banks are in the city centre (on or near Ekareach St), though there are now several ATMs near Serendipity Beach and one on Victory Hill.

ANZ Royal (215 Ekareach St, City Centre) Has a 24-hour ATM. Also runs ATMs at Victory Hill and near Serendipity at 15 Ekareach St and in the Golden Sand Hotel.

Canadia Bank (☎933490; 197 Ekareach St, City Centre) Has a 24-hour ATM. Changes non-US-dollar travellers cheques.

Union Commercial Bank (195 Ekareach St, City Centre) Has an ATM.

POST

Post Office (19 7 Makara St, City Centre) Over the road from Psar Leu.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Guesthouses and bars are generally the best source of information and can equip you with the free *Sihanouk Ville Visitors Guide* (www.canbypublications.com), a useful pocket guide issued quarterly. The *Sihanoukville Advertiser* lives up to its name.

Tourist Office (☎933894; cnr Sopheakmongkol & 109 Sts, City Centre; ☎ 8.30-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Friendly but pretty useless.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Eco-Trek Tours (☎012 987073; ecotrektours.com@yahoo.com; Road to Serendipity; ☎ 8am-10pm) Next to Mick & Craig's, this agency runs snorkelling trips (US\$10), excursions to Koh Russei and Koh Preus (US\$10, including meals) and trips to Ream National Park (US\$15 to US\$25).

Diving and More (Tourist Information Centre; ☎934220; www.divingandmore.com; cnr Sophamongkol & 108 Sts, City Centre) Catty-corner from the bus station, this travel agency handles land tours and diving excursions.

VISAS

Ana Internet & Travel (☎933929; cnr Ekareach & Sopheakmongkol Sts, City Centre) Can help extend Cambodian visas.

Samudera Supermarket (☎933441; 64 7 Makara St, City Centre; ☎ 7am-9pm) Ditto.

Vietnamese consulate (☎934039; Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Sat) Issues some of the fastest Vietnamese visas (US\$35) in the world; staff can normally turn one around in 15 minutes or, at the latest, the same afternoon.

Dangers & Annoyances

Sihanoukville is not as dicey, security-wise, as its reputation of recent years may imply, but crime is certainly not unknown here. The most common problem is theft on the beaches while people are out swimming, often by drug addicts or children. Don't take anything valuable to the beach unless you have someone to keep an eye on it at all times.

Lone women should exercise caution when walking on Occheuteal and Otres Beaches after dark, as there have been assaults and at least one highly-publicised rape in recent years. There have also been a number of violent incidents along Victory Hill's main drag.

As in Phnom Penh, drive-by bag snatchings happen and are especially dangerous when you're riding a *moto*. Shoulder bags are an attractive target, so on a *moto* it's common sense to hold them tightly in front of you, especially at night. Never put a bag or purse in the front basket of a motorbike. Motorcycle theft is also a popular pastime in Sihanoukville. If you rent wheels, make sure they come with a padlock.

Night-time robberies sometimes occur, particularly around the 'chicken farm' red-light district near the container port and on the poorly lit parts of Ekareach St between the city centre and Victory Hill.

Take care with the currents off Occheuteal during the wet season as they can be deceptively strong.

One annoyance for locals is underdressed foreigners wandering about town. Cambodia is not Thailand; Khmers are generally more conservative than their neighbours. Just look at the Cambodians frolicking in the sea – most are fully dressed. Wearing bikinis on the beach is fine but cover up elsewhere. Topless or nude bathing is a definite no-no.

Sights & Activities

BEACHES

Sihanoukville's beaches are in a state of flux as developers move in and murky leases are signed to cash in on the tourism boom.

The best all-rounder is **Occheuteal Beach**, whose northwestern end – a tiny, rocky strip – has emerged as a popular travellers' hang-out known as **Serendipity Beach**. Some of the city's best restaurants and pubs are a few hundred metres up the hill along the Road to Serendipity.

THE LAST BATTLE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

The final bloody confrontation of the Vietnam War took place far from Vietnam – in fact, off the coast of Sihanoukville.

On 12 May 1975, a month after the fall of Phnom Penh, Khmer Rouge forces using captured US-made Swift boats seized an American container ship, the SS *Mayagüez* (named after a city in Puerto Rico) while it was on a routine voyage from Hong Kong to Thailand. The vessel was anchored 50km southwest of Sihanoukville off Koh Tang – now a popular scuba-diving destination – while the 39 crew members were taken to Sihanoukville.

Determined to show resolve in the face of this 'act of piracy', President Gerald Ford ordered that the ship and its crew be freed. Naval planes from the US aircraft carrier *Coral Sea* bombed Sihanoukville's oil refinery and the Ream airbase, and marines prepared for their first hostile boarding of a ship at sea since 1826.

On 15 May marines stormed aboard the *Mayagüez* like swashbuckling pirates but found it deserted. In parallel, airborne marine units landed on Koh Tang. Thought to be lightly defended, the island turned out to have been fortified in anticipation of a Vietnamese attack (Vietnam also claimed the island). In the course of the assault, most of the US helicopters were destroyed or damaged and 15 Americans were killed.

Early on 15 May the Khmer Rouge had placed the crew of the *Mayagüez* aboard a Thai fishing boat and set it adrift, but they weren't discovered by US ships until after the assault on Koh Tang had begun. In the chaotic withdrawal from the island, three marines were accidentally left behind and, it is believed, were later executed by the Khmer Rouge.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC lists the war dead chronologically, which is why the names of the men who perished in the *Mayagüez* incident appear last.

Occheuteal's sand, backed by a row of casuarina trees, stretches for about 4km. In addition to sitting under parasols on rented chairs, you can hire an inner tube (2000r), charter a banana boat (US\$10) or ruin everyone else's peace of mind with a jetski (US\$60 per hour). The ramshackle restaurant shacks, convenient for a drink (beers go for US\$0.50) or a grilled meal (Khmer mains cost US\$2 to US\$4), are on short-term leases and may be removed by government bulldozers at any time. Much of the southern section of the beach, about 1.5km of prime waterfront, is now walled off pending its transformation into another exclusive Sokha resort complex. If you see a low-flying helicopter, it's probably landing at Prime Minister Hun Sen's huge Hollywood-style mansion.

At the southern end of Occheuteal Beach, go up and over the small headland and you'll get to **Otres Beach**, a seemingly infinite strip of casuarinas and almost-empty white sand that can definitely give southern Thailand a run for its money. Sadly, Otres has recently been sold so much is likely to change during the lifetime of this book. But as we go to press, the area is still gloriously quiet, with just a few little restaurants and small bungalow places and, for kayakers and catama-

ran rental and snorkelling excursions, Otres Nautica (p198).

To get to Otres Beach, follow the road fronting Occheuteal Beach, go around the closed section and drive up and over the headland (note: the descent is impassable to cars). From the city centre, you can follow Omui St from Psar Leu east out of town for about 7km. Both are pretty rough tracks.

Victory Beach was the original backpacker beach but has lost much of its buzz because, frankly, it's not the city's best strip of sand. However, investors seem to think the area has a midrange future. These investors include the Russian guy who created a restaurant under the wings of a real Antonov-24 turboprop (a true blessing to air travellers everywhere, as no-one is trying to fly the thing any more). The beach's southwestern section, around a small headland, is also known as **Hawaii Beach** and, after the old hotel near here, **Lamherkay Beach**. The island 800m offshore, **Koh Pos** (Snake Island), was going to be turned into a US\$300-million tourist resort until the Russian investor was arrested on child sex charges in October 2007.

Further southwest is tiny **Koh Pos Beach**, on the tip of Sihanoukville's headland; nice and shady but with rough waters.

Southeast of here, **Independence Beach** (7-Chann Beach), named after the hotel that has dominated the area since the 1960s, is a good stretch of clean sand but lacks shade and facilities.

Midway between here and Serendipity lies **Sokha Beach**, perhaps Sihanoukville's prettiest, which is now the exclusive property of the Sokha Beach Resort (p209). Except on particularly crowded high-season days, non-guests can spend the day here – and use the hotel's huge pool – on weekdays/weekends for US\$4/6 (50% off for children under 12). Confiscating the beach may have been an act of robbery perpetrated on the entire Cambodian public, but your stuff will be safe while you swim – there aren't any small-time criminals here.

About 7km northeast of the ferry port is casuarina-lined **Prek Treng Beach**, also known as Hun Sen Beach. Largely deserted (for now), it is marked by a number of Khmer-style open pavilions.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

The reefs around Sihanoukville are rich in corals, sponges and all sorts of sea life, from eels to anemones and stingrays to dolphins. Some of the best diving is around **Koh Tang** and **Koh Prims**, which require an overnight trip, though there's also decent diving closer in near **Koh Tas** (Koh Kaong Kang) and **Koh Rung Samloem** (two hours one-way).

Excellent snorkelling locales include coral-rich **Koh Khteah**, about 2km off Otres Beach.

Reliable operators include the following:

Claude Diving Centre (☎012 824870; above 2 Thnou St) Claude has been exploring the waters off Sihanoukville for 15 years now and specialises in longer trips to distant reefs.

Coasters (☎933776; www.cambodia-beach.com; Serendipity St) Offers PowerDive snorkel diving excursions (full-day US\$29) and, daily at 10am, boat tours to Koh Russei (US\$6).

Diving and More (☎934220; www.divingandmore.com; cnr Sophamongkol & 108 Sts, City Centre) A diving outfit offering PADI and SSI courses.

EcoSea Dive (☎934347; www.ecoseadive.com; 225 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 7.30/8am-7pm) Offers PADI and SSI courses, one-/two-dive packages (US\$39/59) and one-/two-day snorkelling trips (US\$15/49). Has a second office on the Road to Serendipity.

Otres Nautica (☎092 230065; otres.nautica@yahoo.com; Otres Beach; ☎ 8am-6/7pm) Situated 1km south of the Queen Hill Resort, this laid-back, French-run outfit

rents sea kayaks (per hour/day US\$3/15) and HobiCat sailing catamarans (US\$8/40) and can arrange snorkelling excursions on a fishing boat (half/whole day US\$30/50).

Scuba Nation Diving Center (☎012 604680; www.divecambodia.com; Serendipity St) The only PADI five-star dive centre in Cambodia. Highly professional, multilingual instructors with first-class equipment offer classes in English, Swedish, French and Dutch.

MASSAGE

There are loads of dodgy massage parlours in Sihanoukville but also some legitimate venues staffed by disabled locals:

Seeing Hands Massage 3 (☎012 799016; 95 Ekareach St; per hr US\$4; ☎ 8am-9pm) As elsewhere in Cambodia, Seeing Hands-trained masseurs are blind. Income from Seeing Hands Massage helps the local visually impaired community.

Starfish Bakery & Café (☎012 952011; 62 7 Makara St, City Centre; per hr US\$6; ☎ 7am-6pm) Blind and disabled masseurs, trained by Western massage therapists, perform Khmer, Thai, foot, oil and Indian head massages. Profits go towards social projects.

COOKING

Traditional Khmer Cookery (☎092 738615; khmercookery@hotmail.com; 335 Ekareach St; per person US\$25; ☎ 10am Mon-Sat) Teaches traditional culinary techniques in daily classes with a maximum of eight participants. Special requests (eg veggie) are happily accommodated. Cooking is done on a shaded, rain-proof terrace with plenty of counter space. Book a day ahead.

FITNESS

The French-run **Centre de Fitness et de Boxe Asiatique** (☎016 394276; St 118; per day US\$2.50; ☎ 5am-9pm) is a fully outfitted fitness club with 165 machines, free weights, late-afternoon aerobics and Khmer and Thai boxing classes (per class US\$3.50, personal coaching US\$6).

Sleeping

These days the most happening backpacker and midrange area is Serendipity Beach, including the beachfront, Serendipity St (the dirt access road to Serendipity Beach) and the Road to Serendipity (linking Serendipity St with the Golden Lions Roundabout).

A long block or two southeast of the Serendipity area, budget and midrange places offering excellent value for money can be found along the streets that parallel Occheuteal Beach, including 23 Tola St.

Development will soon bring big changes to Otres Beach, Sihanoukville's most pristine, but for now it's perfect for a romantic seaside getaway – if you don't mind being 4km or 5km out of town (US\$1.50 or US\$2 by *moto* from Occheuteal Beach).

Victory Hill (Weather Station Hill), the original backpackers' area up the slope from Victory Beach, has recently lost much of its popularity (except with French travellers), although the places listed below are far from the hullabaloo of The Hill's somewhat sleazy main strip.

The lively city centre, preferred by many long-termers, is very convenient if you're travelling by bus and has lots of banks and businesses as well as the main market. Of course, getting to the beaches requires a short commute (3000r to 4000r by *moto*).

Prices quoted below are for the high season, which runs from November to March.

BUDGET

Serendipity Beach

There are lots of guesthouses along the water, on Serendipity St and along the Road to Serendipity. Some are on land leased from the military police, an arrangement that may ensure their survival as nearby areas are snapped up by investors.

Monkey Republic Bungalows (☎012 490290; monkeyrepubliccambodia@yahoo.co.uk; Road to Serendipity; r US\$7) A favourite hang-out of the young backpacker crowd, this establishment has 26 bright-blue bungalows (12 of them added in 2007) set around two banana-shaded garden courtyards. All have simple furnishings, mozzie nets and verandas.

Mick & Craig's (☎012 727740; mcraigs@yahoo.com; Road to Serendipity; r US\$8-20; ☎) Attached to a restaurant of the same name, this guesthouse has 16 simple, eminently serviceable rooms with mosquito nets. In the heart of Serendipity's dining and nightlife strip.

Occheuteal Beach

A five-minute walk from Serendipity, this area's budget places offer solid value for money.

Sovann Phoum Guesthouse (☎012 504537; 1 Kanda St; r US\$5-12; ☎) This family-run place, set around a quiet paved courtyard, consists of 17 well-kept, compact rooms with tile bathrooms. The guesthouse will arrange free pick-up at the bus station if you call ahead.

Koh Meas Guesthouse (☎934337; kohmeas@hotmail.com; 23 Tola St; r US\$8-13; ☎) Opened in 2007, this laid-back, family-run guesthouse – the name means 'golden island' – has 12 rooms (more are planned) with simple but serviceable bathrooms. Air-con rooms have hot water.

Lucky Guesthouse (☎016 837146; 23 Tola St; r US\$8-15; ☎) A step up in terms of comfort and security from most budget establishments, this family-friendly place is quiet except when Prime Minister Hun Sen's helicopter lands next door. The 26 rooms are fairly large and come with practical decor. Singapore-accented English spoken.

Otres Beach

Star Bar Bungalows (☎934245; www.starbungalow.com; bungalow US\$10) Lapping waves are the loudest sound you'll hear at Star Bar, where the eight rustic bungalows – with cement floors, grass mat walls, thatch ceilings and mosquito nets – are just 10m from the waterline. Situated 1.4km south of the Queen Hill Resort.

Victory Hill

Rainy Season Guesthouse (☎092 583372; rainyseasoncambodia@yahoo.com; r US\$5) Attached to a restaurant with décor reminiscent of Tahiti, this French-run guesthouse, named after an album by the American singer-songwriter Elliot Murphy, has just four very basic rooms; prices include breakfast, so they're really almost free.

Sunset Garden Guesthouse (☎012 562004; d US\$5-10; ☎) Run by an enthusiastic woman in her late 50s, this spotless, family-run hostelry, in an Italianate house surrounded by a neatly tended garden, has 16 spacious and spotless rooms.

Bungalow Village (☎012 490293; bungalowvillage@hotmail.com; r US\$5-10) Set in a parklike, hillside garden shaded by tropical trees, this complex is just 200m from the beach and has an old-fashioned chill-out zone and nine basic bungalows with wood-plank walls and glassless windows; the more expensive bungalows come with sea views.

Blue Frog Guesthouse (☎012 838004; www.bluefroghotel.com; r US\$12-30; ☎) This quiet wooden house, just up the slope from Victory Beach ('three minutes down, 10 minutes up'), is run by a friendly Swedish-Thai couple. Its seven rooms – wooden upstairs, cement and tile downstairs – have bright bathrooms and king-size beds.

City Centre

These places are a two-minute walk from the bus station.

Angkor Inn Guesthouse (☎016 896204; angkorinn99@yahoo.com; Sopheakmongkol St; r US\$5-10; 🏠) Cheap and a little bit gloomy, this is a firmly established budget deal. Large TVs and small bathrooms are standard, as are super-soft foam mattresses. The best rooms have street-facing windows.

Freedom Hotel (☎012 257953; Sopheakmongkol St; d US\$5-12; 🏠) Behind the bright-yellow façade, the whole 20-room place feels a bit jerry-rigged and the halls could use some sprucing up, but the set-up is quite functional and each room is fairly large and has a fridge. Has a restaurant with hearty Western breakfasts. Guests get a free beer at the downstairs bar.

Small Hotel (☎012 716385; thesmallhotel@yahoo.com; r US\$10-15; 🏠) Neat and organised in the best Scandinavian tradition, this super-welcoming guesthouse – run by a Swedish-Khmer couple – has a cheerful lounge and 11 spotless rooms, all with air-con and fridge; the US\$15 rooms also have hot water. The giant spider on the wall above the lounge is made out of old weapons bent and welded into art. Often full, so book ahead.

MIDRANGE

With the exception of weekends, when Khmers head down from Phnom Penh, there's generally a glut of midrange rooms, a circumstance that translates into some good deals.

Serendipity Beach

Coasters (☎933776; www.cambodia-beach.com; Serendipity St; r US\$10-15, with air-con & hot water US\$25-35; 🏠) The 20 solid rooms and bungalows, many with verandas for some quality contemplation, are spread across the hillside above the beach, although the bar and restaurant run right to the water's edge. Situated 100m up an alley from the bottom of Serendipity St.

Reef Resort (☎934281; www.reefresort.com.kh; Road to Serendipity; d US\$35-45, q US\$60) Offering excellent value, this professionally run hotel has 14 good-sized rooms with views of the 12.5m pool, surrounded by a patio and lots of luscious purple orchids. Prices include breakfast. Bus station pick-up is available.

Occheuteal Beach

Orchidée Guesthouse (☎933639; www.orchidee-guesthouse.com; 23 Tola St; d US\$13-30, tr US\$40; 🏠) (📍)

A delightful 10m pool surrounded by chairs and palms is the centrepiece of this restful, family-friendly place. Popular with adventure groups, its 45 spotless rooms – some pool-side – have air-con, hot water, a fridge and well-designed bathrooms (rare in these parts). Prices include breakfast (except for the US\$13 rooms). Excellent value.

Seaside Hotel (☎933662; www.seasidehotel.com.kh; 14 Milthona St; r US\$20-50; 🏠) (📍) One of Occheuteal's most established hotels, with professional staff and 83 spacious rooms featuring lots of solid wood. Housed in an imposing Khmer-style building. Prices include breakfast (except for the US\$20 rooms).

Golden Sand Hotel (☎933607; goldensandhotel@gmail.com; 23 Tola St; r US\$27.50-44, ste US\$55-66; 🏠) (📍) The swishest place near Occheuteal, this 111-room hotel offers almost four-star comfort. Lobby highlights include elaborately carved wooden dragon chairs and a marble sea maiden with strategically long hair.

Otres Beach

Queen Hill Resort (☎011 937373; www.queenhillresortbungalows.com; Otres Beach; r US\$15-30; 🏠) Sihanoukville's most romantic getaway is spectacularly situated atop the isolated bluff between Occheuteal and Otres Beaches. Surrounded by crystal-clear waters, it has 22 all-wood bungalows, many with sea views, and 12 rooms. Sea breezes usually make air-con unnecessary. We've recently had reports of visitors being treated less than courteously.

Victory Beach

Holiday Palace (☎933808; www.holidaypalace.com; Krong St; r US\$25-35, ste US\$40-50; 🏠) (📍) The first casino complex to set up shop in Sihanoukville, this six-storey hotel – just 100m from the seafrost – keeps its rates low to draw in the punters. The spacious rooms are almost four-star quality and the suites are so enormous that, per square metre, they're probably cheaper than many US\$5 bungalows.

Independence Beach

Sea Breeze Guesthouse (☎934205; www.seabreezezest.com; 2 Thnou St; r US\$15-45; 🏠) (📍) Across the road from the beach and equidistant (3.5km) from the city centre, Victory Beach and Serendipity Beach, this family-friendly, Aussie-run place is a good choice for a bit of peace and quiet.

(Continued on page 209)

(Continued from page 200)

Has 20 capacious rooms, a steak restaurant and a motorboat; offers free pick-up and free transport to/from anywhere in town. A swimming pool is planned.

TOP END

An immense new luxury resort complex with 1.5km of private – formerly public – beach is being built along most of the southern half of Occheuteal Beach.

Sokha Beach Resort (☎935999; www.sokhahotels.com; 2 Thnou St; r US\$200-1000; 🏠) (📍) Cambodia's first five-star beach resort, this stunning Khmer-style complex has 166 super-elegant rooms and suites. Amenities include a spa, fitness centre, children's playground and huge pool, but better yet is the 1.5km private beach, long considered the best in town. Prices include breakfast.

Eating

There's a healthy selection of restaurants and cafés in all parts of Sihanoukville. Victory Hill's main drag, though sleazifying, still claims a dozen worthwhile restaurants, but the centre of gravity has definitely shifted to Serendipity Beach (a good spot for beachside barbecues) and the nearby Road to Serendipity. The centre of town has a number of worthwhile places, especially useful before or after a bus trip or during a night on the town.

Most beaches attract vendors selling everything from pineapples and quail eggs to freshly grilled prawns and fish. You may find it all a bit of a hard sell if you're just trying to relax on the sand, but provided you bargain, this can be an inexpensive way to snack your way through the day.

SERENDIPITY & OCHEUTEAL BEACHES

Many of this area's best restaurants are along the Road to Serendipity but lots of visitors end up dining right on Serendipity Beach, as the beachfront tables with candles are hard to beat for atmosphere, especially around sunset. The Reef Resort has an authentic Mexican place.

Happa (☎012 728901; Road to Serendipity; mains US\$3.50-6; 🍷 5pm-10pm) Authentic meat, fish, seafood and vegetable teppanyaki, with a variety of sauce options, is served amid tropical decor accented with

Japanese touches. Under the same roof, Ku Kai (☎012 593339) serves sashimi and tempura dishes.

Mick & Craig's (☎012 727740; Road to Serendipity; mains US\$4-10; 🍷 7am-11pm) Set under a thatched roof, this open-air restaurant has Western grub including pizzas, hearty vegetarian options, popular daily specials and a good selection of breakfasts.

New Sea View Villa (☎092-759753; 2-course meal US\$6.50) Just a few metres back from Serendipity Beach, this place serves up an incredible selection of food that's among the area's tastiest. Starters include scallops and an authentic tomato-moz-basil salad, while main courses range from a seafood platter to vegetarian dishes.

A number of small, **good-value restaurants** (mains US\$3-4), calmer and more hygienic than the beachside shacks, can be found a block inland from Occheuteal Beach along 23 Tola St.

VICTORY HILL

Even if you're staying elsewhere in town, it's worth checking out this lively area for its wide range of tasty and inexpensive cuisines, including French. Despite what the bloggers say, this area still has some of its old-time hippy vibe.

Koh Lin (☎012 588625; mains 5000r-16,000r; 🍷 10am-11.30pm) Its name a play on a play on the French word *colline* (hill), this unpretentious eatery has just five candle-lit tables and serves good-value Cambodian, Vietnamese and French bistro classics. Dessert options include profiterole, crème caramel and crêpes.

Indian Curry Pot (☎934040; dishes US\$2-4; 🍷 7am-11pm or later) The best place in Sihanoukville for North Indian and Pakistani specialties, both vegetarian and non-veggie (the latter are 100% halal). A cooling raita costs US\$1.

Tutti Frutti (☎016 464360; mains US\$2-4; 🍷 7am-10pm or 11pm) Brightly painted in yellow, orange and red, this cheerful eatery serves light meals, including Breton crêpes, panini and salads.

Snake House (☎012 673805; www.snake-house.com in Russian; mains US\$3-10; 🍷 8am-11pm) The best place in town for Russian mains (pelmeny, manty, chicken Kiev) and soups (red and green borsht, solyanka); it also serves seafood. In a unique, slithering twist, diners sit at glass-topped tables with live serpents – many venomous – inside. The jungle-enveloped complex includes a bar, a guesthouse and a crocodile farm: one false step and the croc will eat as well as you did.

XXL (☎092 738641; mains US\$7-11; ☎7am-11pm) The Belgian chef prepares classy, French-style *cuisine du marché* (dishes based on what's available fresh in the markets) and will be happy to uncork a bottle of French wine.

OTHER BEACHES

Treasure Island (☎012 755335; Koh Pos Beach; mains US\$3-8; ☎10am-2pm & 5-9.30pm) In an isolated spot in the middle of nowhere, this big, informal seafoodery is popular with Khmers and Asian tourists with a hankering for its 'Hong Kong-style' fish and seafood. Most everything is fresh and housed in tanks, just point to what you want and the staff will pluck it out. Prices are generally reasonable but read the fine print – some items are sold by weight.

CITY CENTRE

The city centre, including Ekareach St towards Serendipity, has more than its fair share of worthy restaurants.

Holy Cow (☎012 478510; 83 Ekareach St; mains US\$2-4.50; ☎9.30am-11pm) At this attractive, chic-funky café-restaurant, options include pasta, sandwiches on homemade bread (US\$1.50 to US\$2.50) and a good selection of veggie options, including two vegan desserts, both involving chocolate. The small shop sells M'lop Tapang products (opposite).

Starfish Bakery & Café (☎012 952011; 62 7 Makara St; mains US\$2.50-4; ☎7am-6pm) Tucked down a red-earth alley, this attractive, NGO-run garden café serves filling Western breakfasts, light lunches (sandwiches, quiche, tortillas, salads) and teatime treats such as brownies and apple tarts. Veggie options are legion. Income goes to help poor Cambodians get medical care, housing and microloans.

Happy Herb Pizza (☎012 632198; 81 Ekareach St; most mains US\$3-5; ☎8am-11pm) A pizzeria with a breezy, tropical twist. In addition to Khmer dishes, options include garlic bread (US\$1), salads (US\$1.50 to US\$3.50) and pasta (US\$2 to US\$4). Free delivery available.

Small Hotel (☎012 716385; mains US\$3.50-6; ☎7am-10pm) The best place in town for authentic Swedish specialties such as Swedish meatballs with mashed potatoes (US\$4.75), *falukorr scan* (Swedish sausage; US\$6) and *pyt i panna* (Swedish hash; US\$4.50). Also has delicious fish *amoc* (US\$5).

In the evening, **food stalls** (cnr Omui & 7 Makara Sts; mains 2500r) set up one block north of Psar Leu, the city's jerry-built main market that

went up in flames – under highly suspicious circumstances – in January 2008. Options include barbeque chicken, rice porridge or noodles with chicken, and a variety of Cambodian desserts.

SELF-CATERING

In the city centre, fruit and veggie stalls can be found at Psar Leu (opposite the post office) and at the southern end of Boray Kamakor St.

Samudera Supermarket (☎933441; 64 7 Makara St, City Centre; ☎7am-9pm) Stocks everything from cheese and wine to fishing rods.

Koh Meas Mini-Mart (23 Tola St, Occheuteal Beach; ☎7am-10pm or 11pm) Underneath the Koh Meas Guesthouse, this market carries wine, ice cream and things to spread on bread, including peanut butter.

Drinking

Late-night bars can be found on Victory Hill, along Serendipity Beach and in the city centre.

With the Angkor Brewery located right on the outskirts of town, beer is very cheap, starting at just US\$0.50.

VICTORY HILL

The Victory Hill nightlife scene has recently gone a bit sleazy and now includes half-a-dozen open-front bars where Western men come to shoot pool and make the acquaintance of much younger Cambodian women working freelance. Tame stuff compared with Thailand but a real turn-off to many backpackers.

The battle for the soul of Victory Hill has been joined. On one side are the 'girlie bars' owners, who dream of creating a Cambodian Pattaya, and on the other the fighting-mad owners of the area's legitimate businesses, whose receipts have been plummeting. One sign of progress: brash solicitation has stopped, so children out with their parents no longer whisper quizzically to their mothers, 'Why are all the ladies saying hello to Daddy?'

Among the nightspots in the area worth a look:

Mojo Bar (☎016 307704; ☎11am-1am or later)

The only place in town you're likely to hear world music, including Rai, this unpretentious, rough-hewn bar has over 20 kinds of rum, screens English football matches and hosts jam sessions on Thursdays.

Rainy Season (☎092 583372; ☎to 1am) Has a BBQ buffet, a tropical-style bar and (sometimes) live music.

Retox Bar (☎012 819451; ☎5pm-2.30am or later)

Often has live music (from 8pm) and jam sessions – guests are welcome to play instruments they keep on hand (keyboard, guitar, drums, etc).

CITY CENTRE

Espresso Kampuchea (☎012 478139; Sopheakmongkol St, two shops north of 235 Ekareach St; ☎7am-8pm) Appreciated for its excellent coffee, this café – just five tables and a tiny bar – is something of a hang-out for expats. Breakfast is served all day. The soundtrack is jazz and blues.

Gelato Italiano (49 7 Makara St; ☎7am-8pm) Run by students from Sihanoukville's Don Bosco Hotel School, this modern, Italian-style café serves espresso, latte, ice coffee and banana splits (US\$2), as well as its creamy namesake. Affords panoramic views of downtown Sihanoukville.

Paco's (☎092 542095; 198 Ekareach St; ☎noon-11pm or midnight) The décor and music will whisk you off to Iberia at this Spanish tapas bar, presided over by a genuine Madrileño. Tapas is US\$1 to US\$1.50, and mains run from US\$2.50 to US\$4. Paco's also serves paella and mini-*bocatas* (small sandwiches; US\$2).

BEACHES

Many of Sihanoukville's most popular backpacker pubs and beach bars are along Serendipity Beach and the Road to Serendipity. Places to check out include the bar at the **Monkey Republic Bungalows** (☎012 490290) and **Utopia** (☎934319; cnr Road to Serendipity & 14 Milthona St), a garden bar that's home to the 24-hour party people and offers free dorm accommodation.

Options on the sand at Otres Beach include the **Tropical Season Bar** (☎092 583372; ☎7am-1am), which doubles as a restaurant.

Entertainment

Popular night-time activities include hanging out in the shacks and pubs along Serendipity and Occheuteal Beaches, in the nightspots on the Road to Serendipity and in the bars of Victory Hill, some of which host jam sessions and live music.

In the evening there's lots to watch at **Top-Cat** (☎011 617799; Road to Serendipity; ☎), a clean, wholesome 'entertainment centre' where you can see moving images (or play Xbox 360-for-two) on a state-of-the-art, 8m hi-def screen.

Down the slope from Victory Hill, Bungalow Village has an open-air cinema.

Shopping

Khmer Artisans (☎012 615111; 101B Ekareach St; ☎8am-8pm) This shop, like its Phnom Penh flagship, has a good selection of creative, high-quality handicrafts, including exquisite textiles, silk items (purses, cushions) and embroidery.

M'lop Tapang (☎934072; Serendipity St; www.mloptapang.org) Run by a local NGO that works with at-risk children, this shop sells items made by street kids, so that they can attend school instead of peddling on the beach.

Rajana (www.rajana.org; down the alley, 62 7 Makara St; ☎7am-6pm) This nonprofit shop – upstairs at the Starfish Bakery & Café – sells fair-trade jewellery, clothing, accessories and crafts. Profits are invested in teaching handicraft skills to young Cambodians.

Getting There & Away

National Highway 4 (NH4), the 230km highway between Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh, is in excellent condition but is quite dangerous due to the prevalence of high-speed overtaking on blind corners. It's doubly dicey around dusk and at night, when all intercity road travel is best avoided.

NH3 to Kampot (105km) is also in tip-top shape.

Taking NH48 to Krong Koh Kong and the Cham Yeam–Hat Lek border crossing will be a breeze once the four ferry crossings are replaced by bridges, an engineering landmark that should happen sometime in 2008.

AIR

Sihanoukville International Airport is 18km east of town near Ream National Park. Temple-beach combo holidays have been much touted for years, but air service to Sihanoukville was suspended in mid-2007 after a plane went down near Bokor Hill Station. Siem Reap Airways is looking into reinstating the service.

BOAT

For details on the ferry to Krong Koh Kong, see p185.

BUS

The bus station – little more than a big parking lot – is in the city centre a block north of Ekareach St. Almost all companies charge foreigners a bit more than Khmers; prices quoted below are for foreigners. Bookings

can be made in person or via guesthouses and hotels, which take a commission.

Companies with services to Phnom Penh (four hours) include **Phnom Penh Sorya** (☎933888), Cambodia's largest bus company, which has six per day at US\$4.50; **Mekong Express** (☎934189), whose limousine buses have toilets, two per day at US\$6; **Rith Mony** (RMN; ☎934161), four per day at US\$3.50; **GST Express** (☎933826), four per day at US\$3.50 to US\$4.50; and **Paramount Angkor Express** (☎017 525366), US\$5. All have offices at the bus station with schedules posted. Departures are plentiful in the morning but peter out by about 2pm.

Phnom Penh Sorya can get you to Kampot (US\$3.50, two hours, one daily), as can a minibus company based at Sihanoukville's G'day Mate Guesthouse (US\$6.50); see p218.

Buses to Krong Koh Kong also leave from the bus station. Virak-Buntham has services to Krong Koh Kong and the nearby Cham Yeam-Hat Lek border crossing (US\$14; likely to drop as ferry crossings are replaced by bridges) and can get you to Bangkok (US\$31), Ko Samet (US\$31) and Ko Chang (US\$26). Rith Mony can also get you to Krong Koh Kong (US\$14). We've received reports of wild driving by some minibus drivers on this route.

It's a long haul to Siem Reap but if you don't mind spending 10 hours on the road it can be done, generally via Phnom Penh. Companies to contact include Mekong Express (US\$16).

SHARE TAXI

Many share-taxi drivers seem to think they're Michael Schumacher, so if you don't like blind overtaking you may want to wait for a bus.

MOTORBIKE RENTAL BAN

At press time, local authorities were not allowing foreigners to rent motorcycles, officially for safety reasons (half-a-dozen foreigners die around Sihanoukville each year in motorbike accidents). A few places are known to defy the rental ban – ask around for the latest at guesthouses, restaurants and bars.

As well as the rental ban, some police have been pulling over foreigners who've rented motorbikes in other towns for not having a valid Cambodian driver's licence. In many cases, US\$5 will get you out of trouble. Favourite spots for surprise police roadblocks – rarely seen in rainy weather, Sihanoukville expats note – are the Golden Lions Roundabout and the Caltex petrol station on Ekareach St.

Electric bicycles (per half/whole day US\$2/3), which can go for 40km to 80km between charges, are one way to get around the rental ban. They can be hired at the Monkey Republic Bungalows and the Orchidée Guesthouse.

Taxis to Phnom Penh (four hours) set out from the bus station. Expect to pay US\$5 for a cramped seat (US\$7.50 with just four passengers) or US\$30 to US\$35 for a taxi to call your own. In Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville-bound taxis can be found near Psar Dang Kor or Psar Thmei.

Share taxis to Kampot (US\$3.50, two hours) leave from an open lot across 7 Makara St from Psar Leu. Chartering your own costs about US\$20.

Eco-Trek Tours (p196) can arrange English-speaking taxis.

Getting Around

Some hotels and guesthouses offer free pick-up at the bus station if you book ahead.

BICYCLE

Cycling is a pleasant and environmentally friendly way to get around Sihanoukville. Some guesthouses offer rentals, as do two bookshops, **Mister Heinz Books** (☎012 342720; 95 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm), which hires out bikes for US\$2 per day, and **Q&A** (☎017 802721; 219 Ekareach St, City Centre; ☎ 9am-6pm or later).

MOTO & TUK TUK

Sihanoukville's *moto* drivers are notorious for aggressively touting passers-by and – more than anywhere else in Cambodia – ripping you off, so haggle hard over the price before setting out. Expect to pay a bit more than in Phnom Penh.

From the city centre, daytime rates are 2000r to Victory Hill, 3000r or 4000r to Serendipity, Occheuteal and Victory Beaches and US\$1.50 or US\$2 to the ferry dock. Expect to pay 1000r

SINS OF COMMISSION, SINS OF OMISSION

At Sihanoukville's bus station, you may encounter high prices being quoted for a *moto*. When a bus arrives, a *motodup* (*moto* driver) is assigned to each foreigner. Bargaining is futile – if you don't agree to the set price (usually 6000r to 8000r to the beaches) no other driver will take you.

Walk out to the main street, though, and you'll find a *motodup* who'll accept the market rate (3000r to 4000r to the beaches). *Tuk tuks* – ideal for travel with a big pack – can also be found on nearby streets.

Some guesthouses pay drivers handsome commissions to send custom their way, so if you've just arrived, getting your *motodup* to take you where you want may turn into a battle of wills. If your chosen hostelry is one that won't ante up, don't be surprised to hear that it's closed, has contaminated water or is 'full of prostitutes'.

or 2000r more at night. *Tuk tuks* generally charge about double the *moto* rates.

TAXI

At the bus station, the posted taxi fares are US\$6 to Victory, Serendipity and Occheuteal Beaches and US\$7 to the ferry port. This is a couple of dollars more than the going rate but the *motodup* cartel enforces higher prices to keep a lid on competition.

AROUND SIHANOUKVILLE

For details on what to see and do in Kirirom National Park, located midway between Sihanoukville and the capital, see p116.

Islands

More than a dozen islands – some with gorgeous, blissfully empty beaches – dot the waters off Sihanoukville. As we go to press, a number of exclusive island resorts are on the drawing boards.

Crescent-shaped **Koh Russei** (Bamboo Island), about an hour offshore, has several restaurant-bars, including QQ, and three basic beachfront bungalow groupings. One, with shared bathrooms, is run by **Coasters** (r without fan US\$10); see p200. Nearby **Bimbambo** (r US\$10-12) offers private bathrooms. With no electricity and no hawkers, this is a good place to completely relax.

Koh Rong, two hours from the mainland, has a fantastic beach on the southwestern coast, stretching for 5km or more. This 15km-long island has other fine beaches, too, and there's a bustling fishing community on the southeast coast with basic supplies available, plus fresh fish and crab. If one place is set to become the Ko Samui of Cambodia, this is it! For now, you can stay at **Lazy Beach Bungalows** (☎017 879552; r US\$10-15).

Koh Rong Samlon, just south of Koh Rong and 10km from end to end, includes a large heart-shaped bay with some shellfish cultivation, as well as good beaches on its north coast. EcoSea Dive (p198) has four bungalows here, usually used by divers on overnight trips.

Nearer the coast and to the south of Sihanoukville are several smaller islands that are an option if the open waters to Koh Rong are too choppy. **Koh Khteah** is the nearest (Otres Nautica runs snorkelling trips out here – see p198), while **Koh Ta Khieu** has better beaches but is near Ream Naval Base, Cambodia's navy headquarters.

Day trips to the islands, some with snorkelling, can be arranged by many Sihanoukville guesthouses and travel agencies (p196). See p198 for details on dive companies.

Ream National Park

ឧទ្យានជាតិរាម

Just 18km east of Sihanoukville, Ream National Park – also known as Preah Sihanouk National Park – comprises 150 sq km of primary forests (mostly lowland evergreen forest and mangrove swamps) and 60 sq km of marine habitats. It's home to breeding populations of a number of regionally and globally endangered birds of prey, including the Brahminy kite, grey-headed fish-eagle and white-bellied sea-eagle – look for them soaring over **Prek Toeuk Sap Estuary**, which is salty in the dry season and freshwater in the wet season. Endangered birds that feed on the mudflats include the lesser adjutant, milky stork and painted stork. The park's more common feathered residents include the great egret, little egret, woolly-necked stork, black-capped kingfisher and stork-billed kingfisher.

Ream's profusion of colourful butterflies includes multiple species of Hesperidae,

Lycaenidae, Nymphalidae, Papilionidae and Pieridae. All sorts of gleaming damselflies make their home in the park, too.

SIGHTS, ACTIVITIES & SLEEPING

Fascinating **jungle walks** led by rangers – most, but not all, speak English – are easy to arrange (hiking unaccompanied is not allowed) at the **park headquarters** (☎016 767686, 012 875096; 🕒 9am–5pm). A two- to three-hour walk from the Keng Kong Recreation Site (9.5km south of the park's HQ) to the Andoung Tuek Cascades costs US\$6 per person. Pond swimming is possible during the wet season. A five- or six-hour hike into the park's mountainous interior costs US\$2 per hour per participant. It's best (but not obligatory) to call ahead. The income generated goes to help protect the park.

Ranger-led **boat trips** (1–5 people US\$35 or US\$40) on the Prek Toeuk Sap Estuary and its mangrove channels are another option. You can often spot monkeys, dolphins and lots of birds, in addition to sunbathing, swimming and snorkelling (equipment hire costs US\$2).

In the coconut-shaded fishers' village of **Thmor Thom** – reachable by boat (US\$30 return for up to four people; 1¼ hours each way) – the national park has a ranger post known as Dolphin Station because, from November to March, you can often see dolphins in the morning and evening. Two-hour dolphin-watching boat trips costs US\$20 for up to four people. It's possible to overnight here – the village is a 25-minute walk from **Koh Sampoach Beach** – in an over-the-water **bungalow** (per person US\$5); meals are available from villagers.

Ream National Park's territory includes two islands with some fine snorkelling, **Koh Thmei** and – just off Vietnam's Phu Quoc Island – **Koh Seh**. In the dry season, if it's not too windy, you can get out there by wooden motorboat (US\$40 or US\$50) from the Prek Toeuk Sap ranger station.

Travel agencies offering day trips to Ream National Park include Eco-Trek Tours (p196; US\$15 to US\$25, including lunch).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Ream National Park, 18km east Sihanoukville, take NH4 to Sihanoukville International Airport; the park headquarters is 700m south of NH4 across the road from the new green-roofed terminal building. Boats leave from Prek Toeuk Sap Ranger Station,

about 3km further out along NH4 (at the bridge). A coastal road linking the park with Otres Beach and Sihanoukville is planned.

A return trip by *moto* should cost US\$5 to US\$10; the price depends on how well the driver speaks English and how long you stay. A private taxi costs about US\$25 for the day.

Kbal Chhay Cascades

Thanks to their appearance in *Pos Keng Kong* (The Giant Snake; 2000), the most successful Cambodian film of the post-civil war era, these **cascades** (admission US\$1) on the Prek Toeuk Sap River draw huge numbers of domestic tourists. That's why there are so many raised **picnicking platforms** (per day 5000r, more on holidays) and so much litter.

From the parking area, a rough log **toll bridge** (for locals/tourists 300r/500r), a miniature version of Cambodia's user fee-based highway system, leads to several miniature sandy coves, more lounging areas and some perilous rapids. The best spot for a safe, refreshing dip – by children as well as adults – is across another bridge, on the far bank of a cool, crystal-clear tributary of the brown-tinted main river. Free changing booths are available. Not much water flows here in the dry season.

The cascades are about 17km from the centre of Sihanoukville. To get there, head east along NH4 for 9km and then, at the sign, north along a wide dirt road for 8km. By *moto* a return trip should cost US\$5.

KAMPOT PROVINCE

ខេត្តកំពត

Kampot Province has emerged as one of Cambodia's most popular destinations for tourists – both foreign and domestic – thanks to an alluring combination of old colonial towns, abundant natural attractions and easy intra-regional transport. Highlights include Bokor National Park and its abandoned hill station, the caves around Kompong Trach and, in an adjacent mini-province of its own, the enchanting – if dilapidated – seaside resort of Kep (p224). Visitors often end up staying in the sleepy, atmospheric provincial capital of Kampot longer than planned.

Kampot Province is renowned for producing some of the world's finest pepper.

Indeed, before the war no Paris restaurant worth its salt would be without Kampot pepper on the table. Durian haters be warned: Kampot is Cambodia's main producer of this stinky fruit.

KAMPOT

កំពត

☎033 / pop 33,000

More and more visitors are discovering the sleepy riverside town of Kampot, a charming place with a relaxed atmosphere and a fine, if run-down French architectural legacy. Eclipsed as a port when Sihanoukville was founded in 1959, Kampot makes an excellent base for exploring Bokor National Park and the verdant coast east towards Vietnam, including Kep and a number of superb cave-temples.

Orientation

Commercial activity is centred around 7 Makara St, which stretches from the Central Roundabout to River Rd, and the padlocked old market. The main transport hub is around the Total petrol station, linked to the old market (Psar Leu) by a broad avenue.

Information

As of this writing, the tourist office doesn't have much to offer the public – guest-houses and hotels are a far better source of information.

Aclada Bank (cnr 7 Makara St & Central Roundabout) Can change travellers cheques and has a 24-hour ATM.

Canada Bank Handles travellers cheques and credit-card cash advances. One block northwest of Central Roundabout.

Epic Arts Café (☎ 7am–6pm) Has a small selection of English paperback books for US\$2.

Kampot Network (7 Makara St; per hr 3000r; ☎ 7am–10pm) One of a few internet cafés along 7 Makara St.

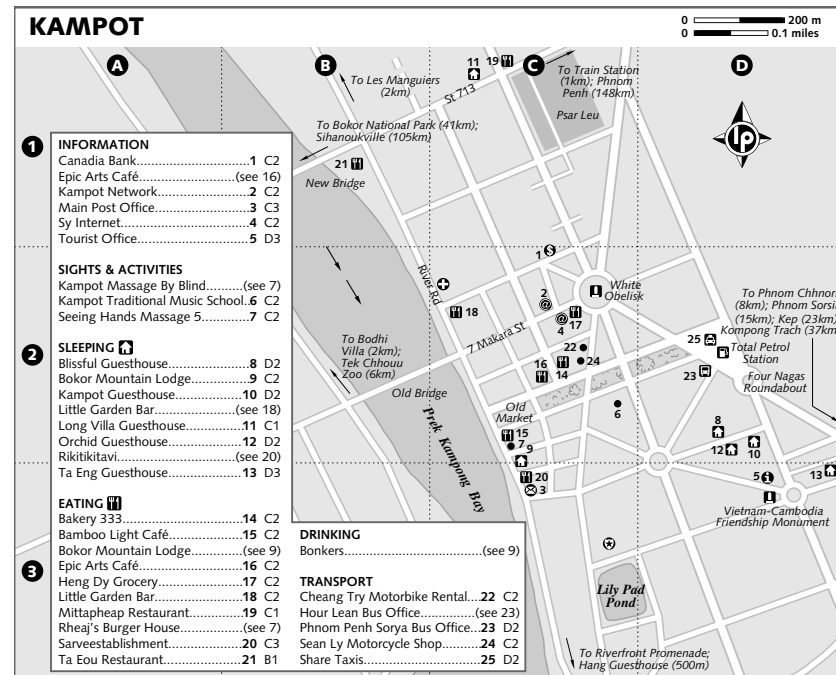
Sok Lim Tours (☎012 719872; www.soklimtours.com)

An established, professional outfit with reasonably priced trips to Bokor National Park, Kep and other South Coast sites. May also be able to organise cycling trips. Guides speak English and French. Bookings can be made through guesthouses.

Sy Internet (7 Makara St) Another internet café.

Sights & Activities

Kampot's most enjoyable activity is **strolling** along streets that evoke days long gone. Blocks lined with decrepit French-era shops can be found in the triangle delineated by 7 Makara



THE COST OF KEEPING COOL

Due to the underdeveloped state of Cambodia's electricity system – many towns get their mains supply from antiquated diesel generators – Cambodians pay considerably more for electricity than do vastly wealthier people in the West. In Kampot, for example, 1kWh of electricity costs a whopping 1200r. That's seven times the price in the UK, 10 times what you'd pay in the USA and 14 times what consumers are charged in Australia or Canada. To put it another way, an Australian earning minimum wage has to work for 18 seconds to buy one kWh of electricity while your average Cambodian has to work 1½ hours – 300 times as long! That's why Cambodians have adopted power-saving fluorescent light bulbs so much faster than people in the West.

When you run your hotel room's air-con unit, just three hours of coolness cost about US\$1 – what many Cambodians earn in a day. And it costs almost as much to keep a hot-water boiler on for an hour. That's why air-con rooms cost so much more than ones with fans – no-one is getting rich except, perhaps, the well-connected owners of the local electricity company.

The expense of diesel electricity is one of the reasons that quite a few hydroelectric projects are being planned, despite their environmental costs. Near Kampot, for instance, a dam being built upstream from Tek Chhou Falls will soon flood parts of Bokor National Park.

St, the Central Roundabout and the post office. The **old bridge** is quite a sight: destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period, it has been repaired in a mishmash of styles.

Kampot's riverside location makes it an excellent place to begin a **boat excursion**, either to scenic areas upstream or – at around 5pm, when the fishing boats head out to sea – downstream. Enquire at your guesthouse or ask around along the river. You should be able to arrange a seaworthy vessel for about US\$10 an hour.

Les Manguiers, a riverside guesthouse 2km north of town, rents out **river kayaks** for two hours/half-day/full day for US\$3/5/8 (marginally more for two-person boats).

Visitors are welcome to drop by and observe the students of the **Kampot Traditional Music School** (☎ 8-11am & 6.30-9pm Mon-Fri), which trains orphaned and disabled children in traditional music and dance. There's no charge but donations are welcome.

Blind masseurs and masseuses offer soothing bliss – especially pleasurable after a day of bone-jarring motorbike travel – at **Seeing Hands Massage 5** (☎ 012 503012; per hr US\$4; ☎ 7am-10pm) and **Kampot Massage by the Blind** (☎ 012 421043; River Rd; per hr US\$4).

Sleeping

It's worth bearing in mind that after a chilly day trip up to Bokor, a hot shower might be a welcome treat.

BUDGET

Ta Eng Guesthouse (☎ 012 330058; r US\$3-6) A few blocks from the centre on a street lined with

1960s row houses, this place has expanded from a family homestay into a popular guesthouse with 10 well-kept rooms and rooftop views. The gracious owner speaks French and English.

Long Villa Guesthouse (☎ 012 210820; longvilla.guesthouse@yahoo.com; 75 St 713; s US\$3, d US\$4-8; ☎) In a quiet spot near bustling Psar Leu, this family-run backpacker sanctuary, opened in 2006, has 15 smallish, good-value rooms. Offers Bokor and Kep tours and motorbike rental.

Blissful Guesthouse (☎ 012 513024; www.blissful.guesthouse.com; blissfulguesthouse@yahoo.com; r US\$4-8) Surrounded by a lovely garden, this atmospheric old wooden house has 11 rooms, four with shared bathroom. Danish-owned, it's got a popular bar-restaurant and, upstairs, a great chill-out area.

Bodhi Villa (☎ 012 728884; bodhivilla@mac.com; dm US\$2, r US\$4-8) Situated 2km towards Tek Chhou Falls from town (a few hundred metres upriver from the rail bridge), this happy hideaway – with four bungalows – is tucked away behind a luxuriant garden on the banks of the river and is a good base for water sports. A *moto* from town should cost 3000r. A larger version is planned on an island just downriver from the falls.

Orchid Guest House (☎ 092 226996; orchidguesthouse.kampot@yahoo.com; s US\$4, d US\$10-15; ☎) Set in a manicured garden full of orchids, this hostelry has 10 comfortable rooms and a fish pond out back. Pricier rooms come with air-con and hot water. Offers Bokor and Kep tours.

Kampot Guesthouse (☎ 012 512931; thean22@gmail.com; r US\$5-15; ☎) Has 26 spacious rooms with

soaring ceilings and TV. The garden restaurant offers good value.

Hang Guesthouse (☎ 932170; www.hang.esmartweb.com; r US\$10) Situated on the waterfront 800m downriver from the post office (300m south of the southern end of the riverfront promenade), this serene, family-run place is ideal if you want to get away from it all. The three bungalows face a quiet garden. Bicycles are free, so it's easy to get into town.

Little Garden Bar (☎ 012 256901; www.littlegardenbar.com; River Rd; r with fan/air-con from US\$10/16; ☎) This relaxing garden restaurant has six functional, spacious rooms, some with river views and hot water. More rooms are planned.

MIDRANGE

Les Manguiers (☎ 092 330050; www.mango.mango.byethost18.com; mango@camshin.com.kh; r US\$10-15, bungalow US\$20-35) This family- and child-friendly complex, 2km north of the new bridge, is set in a grassy sugar palm garden right on the river. Run by a friendly Khmer-French couple, it has three rooms and six simple but tasteful wooden bungalows (without hot water for now), a children's playground, badminton and pétanque courts, and two over-the-water gazebos. Use of canoes and basic bicycles is free. Serves *table d'hôte*-style meals. A *moto* from town should cost 2000r to 3000r. Call ahead for free pick-up.

Rikitikitavi (☎ 012 235102; www.rikikitavi-kampot.com; River Rd; r US\$25-35; ☎) This classy riverfront restaurant has five tasteful and very comfortable rooms, all with hot water.

Bokor Mountain Lodge (☎ 932314; www.bokorlodge.com; River Rd; r US\$25-35; ☎) A majestic French-era building facing the river has been turned into Kampot's most evocative hostelry. The five spacious rooms have 3½-metre ceilings and all the amenities; pricier ones come with a river view. Rates include breakfast.

Eating

Kampot now has quite a variety of decent dining options. There's a row of local eateries along 7 Makara St.

Rheaj's Burger House (☎ 012 333361; River Rd; mains US\$1.50-2.50; ☎ 7am-9pm) Run by a woman from New Hampshire and her Khmer husband, this eatery serves thick, juicy burgers and does surprisingly good hot dogs, as well as sandwiches, salads, pizza and home-made pasta.

Ta Eou Restaurant (☎ 932422; River Rd; mains US\$1.50-5; ☎ 10am-2pm & 6-10pm) Built on stilts

over the river, this is a top place for a sunset meal, with views across to Bokor. The menu is extensive and includes fresh seafood (crab with peppercorns is a favourite), veggie dishes and local broths.

Epic Arts Café (www.epicarts.org.uk; mains US\$2-3.25; ☎ 7am-6pm) A great place for breakfast (US\$2.50), home-made cakes or tea, this mellow eatery – staffed by deaf and disabled young people – can also pack a bagel lunch for a trip up to Bokor. Sometimes it hosts dance performances. Profits fund dance, music and art workshops for deaf and disabled Cambodians.

Mittapheap Restaurant (☎ 012 330105; mains US\$2-4) An establishment facing the market that's long been a favourite thanks to its great soups and Khmer and Chinese staples, all at fair prices.

Bamboo Light Café (☎ 016 936543; River Rd; curries US\$2.50-4.50; ☎ 7am-11pm) One of two rival Sri Lankan restaurants in Kampot. Local expats rave about the fine subcontinental flavours, the many veggie options and the riverfront terrace.

Little Garden Bar (☎ 012 256901; River Rd; mains US\$4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Set in the garden of an old French-period property, this tranquil little haven serves Khmer and international dishes, including pizzas (US\$5.50), and wine by the glass. The rooftop terrace affords superb river views.

Bokor Mountain Lodge (☎ 932314; River Rd; most mains US\$4-6) Not just a hotel, this French-era place has an atmospheric restaurant. Serves a good selection of mainly European dishes, including salads, deli sandwiches and pizzas.

Rikitikitavi (☎ 012 235102; River Rd; mains US\$4.50-9.75; ☎ 7am-10pm) Named after the mongoose in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, this stylish terrace restaurant affords unsurpassed river views and is known for its generous portions. Specialities include Kampot pepper chicken, imported beefsteak, sandwiches, burgers, burritos, salads, apple pie and plenty of veggie options. Serves wine by the glass.

Several hostelries have popular restaurants, including **Kampot Guesthouse** (☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) and **Blissful Guesthouse** (mains US\$2.50-4; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm), which serves Danish and Mexican dishes.

SELF-CATERING

Bakery 333 Around the corner from the Epic Arts Café, this is the best place in town for

fresh baguettes (500r). Look for the piles of split wood (for the oven) out front.

Heng Dy (☎0932925; Central Roundabout) A key address if you're heading off to explore Bokor, this grocery has a decent selection of imported goods, including chocolate, wine, cheese (in the freezer), canned goods and even peanut butter.

Drinking

Hostelries with popular bars include **Blissful Guesthouse** (☎ to midnight or later), with its happening little downstairs bar, and Bokor Mountain Lodge, a convivial 'gourmet pub' with a vaguely colonial ambiance, wine by the glass and a good selection of single-malt whiskies.

Bonkors (☎011 598176; River Rd; ☎ 1pm-midnight or later; 🍷) Run by an English couple, this bar has air-con, the best loo in town and 400 cocktails, as well as homemade ice cream, cheese cake and meat pies. Cigarettes and water are free. In case you're wondering, the name is a play on 'Bokor'.

Getting There & Away

NH3, these days in sharp shape, links Kampot with both Phnom Penh (148km, two hours) and Sihanoukville (105km).

Both Phnom Penh Sorya Transport and **Hour Lean** (☎012 939917) run two buses daily to midday to/from Phnom Penh (US\$4, four to five hours). Both companies take the long way around – via Kep (US\$2, 40 minutes) and Angk Tasaom (the gateway to Takeo; US\$2.50) – because the Bailey bridges on NH3 aren't bus-friendly. Both companies have ticket desks around Sokhoda Restaurant (facing the Total petrol station).

Other options to Phnom Penh, via Angk Tasaom, include share taxi (US\$4) and crowded-to-the-gills minibuses (US\$3). Both leave from a stand near the Total petrol station and are easiest to find between 7.30am and 10am.

A *moto/tuk/taxi* to Kep should cost about US\$3/6/10.

To Sihanoukville, Phnom Penh Sorya has a bus (US\$3.50, 1½ hours) at 8.30am. Share taxis cost US\$3.50, minibuses are US\$3, and a private taxi is about US\$20. Sihanoukville's G'day Mate Guesthouse operates a safe, reliable **minibus service** (☎017 707857; US\$6.50) between Kampot and Sihanoukville on Monday and Friday, with plans to make the service

daily. The service is door-to-door, with pick-up and drop-off at your guesthouse or hotel.

There is talk of establishing a regular boat service from Kampot to the Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc.

Getting Around

The average fare for a *moto* ride around town is 2000r (3000r in the evening). *Tuk tuks*, the latest addition to the local transport scene, cost about US\$1 in town.

Ta Eng Guesthouse can arrange *motors/tuk tuks* with drivers for US\$4/10 a day. **Long Villa Tours** (☎012 626698), based at Long Villa Guesthouse, rents out bicycles for US\$1 a day and motorbikes for US\$4 a day (US\$5 for a new one). **Orchid Guesthouse** hires out 250cc motorbikes for US\$12 a day.

Two excellent shops rent out motorbikes, cars and pick-ups:

Sean Ly Motorcycle Shop (☎012 944687; ☎ 7am-8pm) Rents out 125cc bikes for US\$3 a day (US\$5 for a new one) and 250cc trail bikes for US\$10. Can also arrange a car/pick-up with a driver for US\$30/60 a day.

Cheang Try Motorbike Rental (☎012 974698; ☎ 7am-8pm) Small bikes cost US\$3 a day, new 125cc Hondas are US\$6 a day. A car/4WD pickup cost US\$30/70 a day, including a driver. The owner speaks good English and often guides tourists himself.

AROUND KAMPOT

The limestone hills east towards Kep are honeycombed with caves, some of which can be explored with the help of local kids and a reliable torch/flashlight. Phnom Chhnork, surrounded by blazingly beautiful countryside, is a real gem and can easily be visited in an afternoon along with Phnom Sorsia.

Phnom Chhnork

The base of **Phnom Chhnork** (Phnom Chngouk; admission US\$1) is a short walk through the rice fields from Wat Ang Sdok, where a monk will collect the entry fee and a gaggle of friendly local kids will offer their services as guides. A well-tended staircase leads up the hillside and down into a cavern as graceful as a Gothic cathedral. There you'll be greeted by a **stalactite elephant**, with yet another elephant outlined on the flat cliff face to the right. Nearby is a formation that looks like a **calf's head**. Tiny chirping bats live up near two natural chimneys that soar towards the blue sky, partly blocked by foliage of an impossibly green hue.

Inside the cave's main chamber stands a remarkable 7th-century (Funan-era) **brick temple**, dedicated to Shiva. The temple's brickwork is in superb condition thanks to the protection afforded by the cave. Poke your head inside and check out the ancient stalactite that serves as a *linga*.

Phnom Chhnork occupies a bucolic site surrounded by rice paddies and meticulously tended vegetable plots. The view from up top, and the walk to and from the wat, is especially magical in the late afternoon and around sunset.

Phnom Chhnork is about 8km from Kampot. A bit past the rhino statue in the middle of NH33, turn northeast – across the road from the Cham mosque look for a sign reading 'Phnom Chngok Resort'. A *moto/tuk tuk* from Kampot should cost about US\$5/7 return.

Phnom Sorsia

Less interesting than Phnom Chhnork, **Phnom Sorsia** (admission free) has a gaudily painted modern temple and several natural caves.

From the parking area in front of the school, a stairway leads up the hillside to a colourful temple. From there, steps lead left up to **Rung Damrey Saa** (White Elephant Cave), named not for a failed mega-project but rather for a mineral formation situated to the right of the two Buddha statues. A bit past a slippery, sloping passage where one false step will send you into the abyss, a hand-sized hole leads to a **hidden pool** filled with refreshingly cool water. Nearby you can glimpse a peep show of tiny terraced paddy fields. Shine your flashlight up and you may spot bats.

From the colourful temple, steps angle up to the right to the **Bat Cave**. Inside, countless bats flutter and chirp overhead, flying out to the forest and back through a narrow natural chimney. Bamboo poles are used to hunt the creatures by swatting them out of the air. The circuit ends near a hilltop **stupa** with impressive views.

The local kids who guide tourists – and insistently ask for huge tips – are not likely to keep much of what you pay them. As soon as visitors hand over the cash, adults swoop down and confiscate most it.

The turn-off to Phnom Sorsia is on NH33 13.5km southeast of Kampot and 2.5km northwest of the statue of the white horse at the Kep junction. Look for a sign reading

'Phnom Sorsia Resort' – from there a dirt road leads about 1km northeast through the rice fields.

Tek Chhou Falls

ទឹកល្អិត

Hugely popular with locals, this pleasant bathing spot is likely to disappoint fans of sheer curtains of tumbling water as the 'falls' are really just a series of small rapids that don't even move all that rapidly in the dry season. However, the site has lots of little eateries and picnicking platforms, a prerequisite for any proper Khmer day out. A bouncy pedestrian suspension bridge leads to an island whose far side has some tiny strips of sand where you can swim.

The privately owned **Tek Chhou Zoo** (Teok Chhou Zoo; ☎011 768470; admission for locals/foreigners 3000r/US\$4), several kilometres towards Kampot from the falls, is small but clean and well-kept. The entrance is marked by twin statues of roaring tigers.

A *moto* to Tek Chhou Falls from Kampot (8km each way), past the durian fields, should cost about US\$4 or US\$5 return.

BOKOR NATIONAL PARK

ឧទ្យានជាតិបូកគោ

This **national park** (admission US\$5) – officially called Preah Monivong National Park – comprises 1581 sq km of protected land, most of it primary forest, that's particularly rich in endemic flora and provides a home to globally endangered fauna such as the tiger (recently photographed with camera traps), chestnut-headed partridge and green peafowl. In addition to the rainforest itself, with its unceasing insect and bird calls, the park's main attractions are Popokvil Falls and the abandoned French hill station of Bokor.

Bokor's moist evergreen forests – with dry dipterocarp and mixed deciduous forests in the north – shelter a wide variety of rare and threatened animals, including the Indian elephant, leopard, Asiatic black bear, Malayan sun bear, pileated gibbon, pig-tailed macaque, slow loris, red muntjac deer, lesser mouse deer, pangolin (p189), yellow-throated martin, small Asian mongoose and various species of civet, porcupine, squirrel and bat. Over 300 species of bird, including several types of hornbill, also live here. Don't expect to see much wildlife, though – most of the animals are nocturnal and survive by staying in more remote parts of the park.

CHEY YUTHEARITH *Daniel Robinson*

Chey Yuthearith is a modest man with a very tough job: director of Bokor National Park (p219). In a country in which short-term profit – from clear-cutting ancient rainforests, for instance – often matters to those in power more than long-term sustainability or saving endangered species, working from within the system to bring about incremental change requires consummate political skill and a great deal of perseverance and patience.

It also requires no small degree of courage. Winner of a 2004 Clark R Bavin Wildlife Law Enforcement Award, given by the **Species Survival Network** (www.ssn.org), Chey's citation mentions not only that he is 'a shining example of what a dedicated and honest official can achieve' and that Bokor has become 'a model protection project for Cambodia', but also that 'in the line of duty, he has received numerous threats against his life and has been the target of gunfire. Several of his staff have had hand grenades thrown at them and have suffered injuries as a result.' None of this was even hinted at during our conversation.

They was born in Phnom Penh in 1958. In April 1975, at the age of 17, he was marched out of the capital along with the rest of the population and was sent to Nereay Commune in Chhuk District, just east of what is now Bokor National Park. 'During the Pol Pot regime, I go to work in the fields, same as all the Cambodian people', he relates. 'No school, no market, no everything. Very hard job, not enough food'. When Chey took the reins of Bokor National Park, there was 'a lot of illegal activity like logging and hunting, and the local people and armed forces don't know' – or care – 'about the national park and the environment'. From 1996 to 1998, 'in the southeast of the park, every day we can hear the chainsaws. When we come here [to the ranger station at the park entrance] in 1997, we have only 10 rangers to protect the whole park, very big park.' He now has 56 rangers in eight stations and substations – but even this is 'not enough'.

Complicating his plans is a massive development programme being undertaken by the powerful, well-connected Sokha company – the same people who run the entry-fee concession at Angkor and managed to gain exclusive control of 3km along two of Sihanoukville's finest beaches. 'I worry about the investor, worry they cutting the forest, but I try to explain to them. I suggest that they make a study tour to Africa, learn from Africa how to make ecotourism. Maybe Kenya, where they don't build big buildings in a national park. I suggest to Sokha to build the same way here.'

The original Sokha plan was to construct a casino, a guesthouse and a golf course atop Phnom Bokor, in effect re-establishing the old French hill station. Chey gently explained to the men from Sokha that it's 'not possible to make a golf course because over there very foggy, cannot play'. Maybe, he jokes, 'put light inside the golf balls so people can play'.

Chey hopes that Sokha will think again about the golf course and that the investment will result in more, not less, protection for the park, especially its more remote areas. 'I want to make ecotourism here for the local people so they can earn money,' he explains. 'I told the director of Sokha to help the local people living around the park, give them jobs so they can earn money so there's no need to go to the forest to hunt, cut the trees.' Until now, a Bokor tree was just a tree. Perhaps when it becomes a Sokha tree, valuable because the forests are the park's big draw, it will get better protection than before. Perhaps.

Chey Yuthearith has been director of Bokor National Park since 1997, and is also the deputy director of Kampot Province's Department of the Environment.

Long kept off the tourist map due to Khmer Rouge activity, Bokor National Park is still threatened by poaching and illegal logging, especially in the north, as well as by squatters, development and, in the southeast, the Kamchay hydropower project. In the 1990s there was talk of making the park a World Heritage site but, sadly, the government's inability to protect the site put an end to the initiative.

On the frontline of the never-ending battle to protect Bokor is a group of dedicated foresters and enforcement rangers, paid in part by admission fees and assisted by expertise and funding from the Wildlife Alliance, an NGO based in San Francisco. At the park entrance, an informative (if low-budget) visitors centre has text and charts about Bokor's rare animals and the challenges of protecting the area's ecosystems.

As we went to press, plans were underway to re-establish some sort of a luxury resort atop Phnom Bokor. Whether this huge project – being carried out by the well-connected fellow who owns all those Sokimex petrol stations and holds the entry-fee concession at Angkor – will contribute to preserving the national park or endanger its rainforest ecosystem remains to be seen. Conservationists are hoping that judicious tourism development, especially ecotourism, can provide income both for local communities and for the enlightened management of the park.

The national park, including the hill station, are believed to be free of land mines, but as always in Cambodia, do the sensible thing and stick to well-worn paths.

Sights & Activities

BOKOR HILL STATION

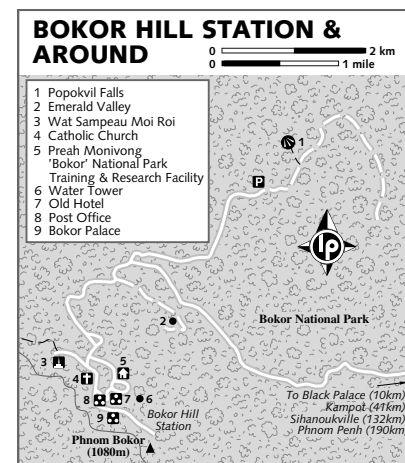
ភ្នំព្រៃប៊ុក

The eerie ruins of the old French hill station of Bokor, high atop Phnom Bokor (1080m), are known for their cool, even chilly, mountain climate and dramatic vistas of the coastal plain, one vertical kilometre below.

The road up to Bokor was built from 1917 to 1921 by Cambodian indentured labourers, many of whom perished. By the early 1920s a French holiday settlement had been established and a grand hotel-casino, the Bokor Palace, was inaugurated in 1925.

The hill station was twice abandoned: first when Vietnamese and Khmer Issarak (Free Khmer) forces overran it in the late 1940s while fighting for independence from France, and again in 1972 when the Lon Nol regime left it to the Khmer Rouge forces that were steadily taking over the countryside. It has been uninhabited ever since – except for the presence of either Vietnamese troops or Khmer Rouge guerrillas during much of the '80s and '90s. Because of its commanding position, the site was strategically important to all sides during the long years of conflict and was one location the Vietnamese really had to fight for during their 1979 invasion. The Khmer Rouge held out for several months, with one unit holed up in the Catholic church while the Vietnamese shot at them from the Bokor Palace, 500m away.

Today, Bokor Hill Station and its abandoned buildings have an eerie, ghost-town feel accentuated by a bright-orange lichen that carpets the exterior walls, giving them



an otherworldly cast. Mountain mists float through the abandoned buildings, and the sea views are either breathtaking or a complete white-out. The foggy showdown that ends the Matt Dillon crime thriller *City of Ghosts* (2002) was filmed here.

The old **Catholic church** looks like the priest locked it up only yesterday. Inside, bits of glass still cling to the corners of the windows and the altar remains intact; drawings of what appear to be Khmer Rouge fighters adorn the walls. Near the kitchen, one window holds the rusty outline of a cross. A bit up the hill, past the rusted green base of some Khmer Rouge military hardware, a sheer drop overlooks virgin rainforest.

The highlight of a visit to the hill station is the shell of the **Bokor Palace**, which has been stripped of everything of value. You can explore all four levels and the rooftop terrace, from which there's a magnificent view over dense jungles that stretch almost to the sea. It's possible to wander up and down the corridors, around the kitchens and through the ballroom to the suites above, past variegated ceramic floors, tiled bathrooms and a giant fireplace where cocksuck colonial French and wealthy Khmers could warm up on a nippy night. On cold, foggy days it can get pretty creepy up here as mists drop visibility to nothing and the wind howls through the building.

Other structures dotted around include an abandoned **post office** reached via a handrail-less footbridge; a **water tower** that looks like a spacecraft straight out of *Close Encounters*

of the *Third Kind*; and, across the lake from the ranger station, the shell of a modest **hotel**. Four decades too late, we recommend the rooms out back, which come with views.

About 250m northwest of the church, a road leads through a three-towered gate to lichen-caked **Wat Sampeau Moi Roi**, known as Five Boats Wat because some say the five oddly-sculpted rocks nearby resemble boats (although what they were smoking at the time is up for debate). Built in 1924, it affords tremendous views over the jungle to the coastline below, including Vietnam's Phu Quoc Island. Four cement supports that once anchored a Khmer Rouge radar station still stand just outside.

Debate rages over whether to redevelop the hill station. Some preservationists say it should be left untouched, while entrepreneurs salivate over its tried and tested potential. The mainstream environmentalist position is that it's most sensible to compromise, allowing limited redevelopment of the hill station area in order to generate much-needed funds to help protect the actual national park, much of which remains remote and relatively defenceless.

BLACK PALACE

As you drive up from Kampot, the first buildings you come to atop Phnom Bokor are Sihanouk's villa complex, known as the Black Palace. Inside the blotchy, windowless villas, you can still find rooms with elegant marble floors and bathrooms partly tiled in mid-century shades of pink and brown.

From here the final 10km pass through grassy scenery that's decidedly different from the lush forests along the hillside. Check out the lush **Emerald Valley**, visible to the left of the main road just before you reach the hill station.

POPOKVIL FALLS

ព្រំព្រៃកំពង់

This two-tiered waterfall is a fine place to bathe on a sunny day. The lower falls, the best place to swim, are 14m high. The upper falls, 18m high, can be reached by a path and a wooden stairway. The name translates as 'Swirling Clouds' and much of the time mists do indeed whorl just above the falls.

A shady, 11km trail links Wat Sampeau Moi Roi with Popokvil Falls. This route, which takes four or five hours, should not be

undertaken without a guide, as there's always the possibility of an unexpected encounter with a three-legged female tiger nicknamed Tripod, who has been known to roam the ridge along here.

From the hill station, the falls are about 15 minutes by road. At the time of writing a bridge was out so the last 2km had to be covered on foot.

TREKKING

Hiking has a lot of potential at Bokor but as yet there is little in the way of organised trekking. The park charges US\$20 for the services of a **ranger** (☎012 705245, 016 881540, 012 937666; US\$20) who will be experienced but won't necessarily speak English.

Tours

One of the most popular ways to visit Bokor is with a group tour (generally US\$8 to US\$10 including lunch, plus the US\$5 park fee), organised through one of the guesthouses in Kampot. Many concentrate on the old French hill station, so if you'd like to spend the day hiking through the rainforest make sure the itinerary is clear ahead of time.

Sok Lim Tours (p215) is a reliable outfit whose Bokor excursions (US\$10 plus the admission fee) include a sunset river cruise on the way back. The company also offers two-day jungle treks (US\$50 per person). Wild Orchid Adventure Tours, based at the Orchid Guesthouse (p216), and **Long Villa Tours** (☎012 626698), based at Long Villa Guesthouse (p216), are also good bets. Now that Sokimex has started building a new road up to Bokor, only certain tour operators seem to have permission to work in the park.

Sleeping & Eating

It's possible to overnight near the old hill station at the **Preah Monivong 'Bokor' National Park Training & Research Facility** (☎012 705245; dm US\$5, r US\$20-25), a national ranger training centre whose green Khmer-style roofs are easy to spot. The simply adorned rooms have comfortable beds (up to four) and hot water. Air-con and fans are not necessary up here, though extra layers may be, as temperatures can plummet as low as 12°C at night. Signs ask you not to open the window because the wind can get so fierce that it blows the dropped ceiling panels out of place! It's a good idea to call ahead for reservations.

The station generally offers a limited menu of the noodle or rice variety but some visitors prefer to bring edibles up from Kampot. Kitchen facilities are available.

Getting There & Away

Bokor National Park is 41km from Kampot, 132km from Sihanoukville and 190km from Phnom Penh. The access road begins 7km west of Kampot. Motorbikes, cars and pick-ups can be hired or rented in Kampot (p218).

As part of the hill station's redevelopment, the legendarily rough road up to Bokor – whose minibus-sized potholes make the Paris–Dakar Rally look like a Sunday drive in the country – is finally being upgraded. Rumour has it that while roadwork is underway, the only way to the top will be on foot or by Sokha-owned helicopter (US\$2500 from Phnom Penh), but according to other rumours the road *will* be open but not all day, every day.

Mountain biking is a truly hardcore option. There are no decent bikes to rent as yet but they may come. If the 1km vertical climb appears too ugly, it's possible to put the bike in the back of a pick-up, cut out the hard part and enjoy an adrenaline-fuelled descent, taking serious care on the corners.

KOMPONG TRACH

កំពង់ត្រាច

The dusty town of Kompong Trach has little to recommend it except that it's near Kampot Province's fabled pepper fields and not far from a spectacular cave-temple, and makes an easy stopover if you're travelling from Vietnam's Ha Tien border crossing to Kep or Kampot.

Wat Kirisan (Wat Phnom; admission US\$1) is a Buddhist temple built at the foot of **Phnom Sor** (White Mountain), a karst formation riddled with over 100 caverns and passageways and said by locals to resemble a dragon. Even without its modern religious shrines, the site would be worth a visit for its dramatic natural beauty. There's definitely rock-climbing potential here.

From the wat, an underground passage leads to the centre of the karst formation, where the sheer, vine-draped cliffs of a **hidden valley** unfold before you. This is the sort of place where you'd hardly be surprised to see a dinosaur munching on foliage or, à la *Jurassic Park*, chewing on a lawyer.

From here, other caves – some flooded during the wet season – lead through the hill. In one, there's a greenish stalactite that looks like the head of an eel, while nearby caves shelter **formations** that really do resemble the head of a crocodile, the body of a turtle, the dangling tongue (or perhaps tonsil) of a dragon, a military boot and a hillside of miniature rice terraces. The reclining Buddha was inaugurated in 1999 to replace one destroyed by the Khmer Rouge.

The only way to spot the most interesting formations, and avoid walking right by most of the passageways, is to hire a guide. Fortunately, friendly local kids with torches/flashlights, eager to put their evening-school English to use, are likely to spot you even before you get to the blue gate, where the entry fee is collected. Make sure your tip is big enough to cover the cost of batteries.

Near the wat, a tiny **café** serves water and sugarcane juice.

About 300m around the mountain from the wat, behind a lone tree-like bush, a narrow path, over loose stones and then up carved steps, leads to a tiny triangular opening, where an old concrete ladder descends 5m into the darkness (warning: the second-to-top and bottom two rungs are missing). Two more wooden ladders lead ever deeper into the slimy, slippery depths of the **cave**, where a guide – essential here – can point out slumbering bats and surprising limestone formations, one of which looks like a jackfruit.

Sleeping

In Kompong Trach, **Kiri Sela Guesthouse** (☎012 993317) is just west of the temple.

Getting There & Away

Kompong Trach, on NH33 15km north of the Ha Tien border crossing, is 37km east of Kampot and 23km northeast of Kep, and makes an easy day trip from both towns by *moto* or motorbike. From Kep Beach (one hour), take the coastal road east and then north and hang a right at the NH33.

To get to Wat Kirisan from Kompong Trach, turn onto the dirt road opposite the Aceda Bank – look for the yellow Western Union insignia and a white-on-blue sign reading 'Phnom Kompong Trach Resort' – and continue for 2km to the foot of the sheer karst outcrop. Follow the road to the

right (through the blue gate) and the wat is a few hundred metres ahead on the left.

KRONG KEP

Krong Kep is a province-level municipality that consists of little more than the town of Kep and Kep National Park.

KEP

កែប

☎036 / pop 4000

The seaside resort of Kep-sur-Mer, famed for its spectacular sunsets and splendid seafood, was founded as a colonial retreat for the French elite in 1908. Cambodian high rollers continued the tradition, flocking here to enjoy gambling and water sports, and in the 1960s it was home to Cambodia's leading zoo.

The Khmer Rouge – radical Maoists who loathed the bourgeoisie – were known to harbour a particular hatred for the town and the destruction they wrought was nearly total. Today, dozens of Kep's luxurious pre-war villas are still just blackened shells, poignant reminders of the long years of Khmer Rouge rule and civil war. Inhabited by squatters, the mansions – remnants of a once-great (or at least rich and flashy) civilisation that met a sudden and violent end – have a post-apocalyptic feel.

After several false starts, Kep finally seems to be rising from (or among) the ruins. It's again popular, especially on weekends and holidays, with the wealthy elite of Phnom Penh. Drawn by the languid, Riviera-like atmosphere, they drive down in SUVs to picnic and frolic on the scruffy beaches (even before the war, white sand was shipped in from Sihanoukville to keep up appearances). If you want to see the town before big money transforms it, you'd better hurry.

Orientation

From the roundabout at Kep's northern edge, turning east takes you up the slope to a bunch of hillside guesthouses, while turning west brings you to the Crab Market. Go straight (south) from the roundabout, or take the coastal road from the Crab Market, and you'll get to a second roundabout just up the slope from Kep Beach. The boat dock is further east, past Coconut Beach.

Information

Kep Tourism Office Not much seems to be going on inside this fine building, which is across from the roundabout next to Kep Beach.

Sunny Tour (☎012 548273, 012 870465) Run by a small group of *moto* drivers, this travel agency – at the northern end of the Crab Market – offers bus tickets and tours.

Sights & Activities

From Kep's northern roundabout, NH33A heads north past the mildewed shells of hand-some **mid-20th-century villas** that speak of happier, carefree times – and of the truly terrible Khmer Rouge years. Built according to the precepts of the modernist style, with clean lines, lots of horizontals and little adornment, they once played host to glittering jet-set parties and may do so again someday, though for the time being many shelter squatters (and, some say, ghosts). Don't even think of buying one – they were all snapped up for a song in the mid-1990s by speculators well-connected in Cambodia's murky corridors of military and civilian power.

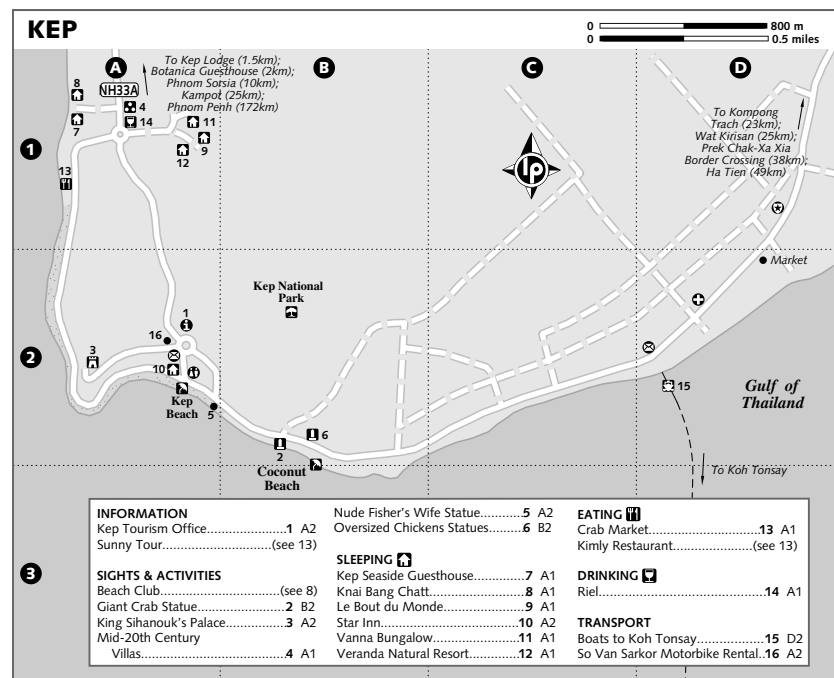
Kep Beach, which faces south and is thus not great for sunsets, is sandy but narrow and strewn with little rocks. The eastern end of the shaded **promenade** is marked by a **nude statue** of a fisher's wife. A **waterfront promenade** to the Crab Market was under construction as we went to press.

On top of the hill northwest of Kep Beach is a **palace** built by King Sihanouk in the early 1990s. Before his overthrow in 1970, Kep was one of his favourite spots and he used to entertain visiting foreign dignitaries on an outlying island nicknamed *Île des Ambassadeurs*. The king may have harboured thoughts of retirement here but his poor health and Cambodia's political instability meant that he never actually stayed at the palace, which remains unfurnished. Access is from the east; it's usually possible to walk around the grounds – after tipping the guard, if necessary.

Coconut Beach is a few hundred metres southeast of Kep Beach, just past the **giant crab statue** and across the NH33A from two gilded statues that locals say – with a great deal of justification – look like oversized chickens.

Sailboats (but, mercifully, not jet skis) may soon be available for rent at a restaurant-equipped **beach club** being built just north of the Kep Seaside Guesthouse.

Kep National Park, despite its protected status, is in a sad state. Occupying the interior of Kep



headland, it has no guest facilities. Access is via an 8km road open to 4WD vehicles. Kep Lodge may be able to arrange a half-day hike through the park as well as snorkelling excursions, fishing trips and seaborne visits to coastal mangrove forests.

Tours

If you're based in Kampot, **Sok Lim Tours** (p215) offers day trips (US\$10 per person, minimum four people) to Kep, Koh Tonsay (p227), the caves of Kompong Trach (p223), a pepper plantation and salt ponds.

Sleeping

Both along the shore and on the verdant hillside east of the Crab Market, the cheap guesthouses of old are giving way to pricier accommodation, including several self-enclosed mini-resorts. Few have TVs because, as of this writing, reception is limited to stations from Vietnam.

BUDGET

Kep Seaside Guesthouse (☎012 684241; admin@bnckh.com; r with fan/air-con from US\$6/15; ☺) So close to

the shore you can hear the waves (though there isn't exactly a sandy beach here), this three-storey place – dormitory-like in appearance – has 26 clean, simply furnished rooms. There's a small premium for upstairs rooms; Room 20 even has a full-frontal sea view. Often fills up with domestic tourists, especially on weekends and holidays.

Botanica (☎016 562775; www.kep-botanica.com; r US\$7) Opened in late 2007, this Belgian-owned place has five bungalows set in a flowery garden (thus the name) and a 'world kitchen' restaurant. Situated about 2km north of the Riel bar on the main road to Kampot.

Le Bout du Monde (☎012 242166; r US\$7-10) The last cheapie on the hill, this French-run garden guesthouse is basic but atmospheric. The rather flimsy bungalows, which are showing signs of age, have woven cane walls, split-wood floors, brick-walled loos and mosquito nets.

Vanna Bungalow (☎012 755038; www.vanna-bungalows.com; r US\$10-20; ☺) Popular with in-the-know expats, this mellow place has 17 solidly built, tasteful bungalows – all with fridges – set in pleasant gardens. The sunset sea views

from the restaurant's veranda are gorgeous. Pricier rooms have hot water and air-con.

MIDRANGE

Kep Lodge (☎092 435330; www.keplodge.com; r US\$15-28) On a quiet hillside 2km towards Kampot from the Crab Market, this friendly place has six bungalows (more are planned) with thatch roofs, tile floors, mosquito nets and tasteful verandas. A swimming pool is supposed to be installed in 2008. The restaurant has breathtaking sunset views and Phnom Penh prices. From the Riel bar, Kep Lodge is 1km north along NH33A and then 700m east. Bicycles are free for guests.

Star Inn (☎016 743701; r US\$25-35; 🏠) At the western end of Kep Beach, this brand new hotel has a lovely location and glorious sea views but the 30 rooms lack hot water and are decked out like a karaoke bar, with recessed red and green fluorescent lights over the beds.

Veranda Natural Resort (☎012 888619; www.veranda-resort.com; r with fan/air-con from US\$25/45; 🏠) Spread across the hill above town, this 15-bungalow complex – built of wood, bamboo and stone – is a memorable spot for a romantic getaway. The all-wood restaurant and bar afford stunning sunset views. Internet connections are planned.

TOP END

Knai Bang Chatt (☎012 879486; www.knaibangchatt.com; r US\$168-392) A boutique hotel whose 11 rooms occupy three vintage villas, this chic getaway has a waterfront infinity pool, breathtaking views and staff who wait on you hand and foot – the ultimate in luxury and exclusivity. Book well in advance.

Eating & Drinking

Dining in Kep is all about fresh seafood. For the best deals head to the Crab Market, a row of wooden waterfront shacks where you can tuck into mouth-watering grilled prawns, crab, squid and fish. In case you're interested, crabs – kept alive in pens tethered a few metres off the pebbly beach – costs 20,000r to 30,000r a kilo.

All of Kep's guesthouses and hotels have restaurants. The Veranda Natural Resort and Vanna Bungalows offer drop-dead gorgeous views along with Phnom Penh prices.

Kimly Restaurant (☎017 904077; mains medium/large 15,000r/20,000r; 🕒 8am-9pm or 10pm) Perhaps the

best of the Crab Market eateries, specialities here include prawns with sprigs of Kampot pepper and fresh crab. Mains come with a tasty dessert: fried taro root in sugar.

Riel (☎017 902771; www.kep-riel-bar.com; 🍷 breakfast & 6pm-late) This unpretentious bar, restaurant and bakery, owned by a Dutch former sound engineer and his Khmer wife, occupies a hangar-like space outfitted with wicker chairs and a couple of hammocks. Specialities include pastries, cakes, German beer bread and home-made ice cream confectioned without eggs (to avoid salmonella). Prices are quoted only in riels – thus the name. The website has an activities calendar.

Getting There & Away

Kep is 25km from Kampot, 172km from Phnom Penh and 49km from the Vietnamese town of Ha Tien. The Cambodia-Vietnam border at Ha Tien has been open to tourists since mid-2007.

Both Phnom Penh Sorya Transport and Hour Lean run Phnom Penh-Kampot buses that pass through Kep (they also serve Angk Tasaom, near Takeo). On Phnom Penh Sorya, the fare to Kampot (40 minutes) is US\$2; arrival times from Phnom Penh are variable. Buses stop at Kep Beach, where *motos* await, but you can ask to get off near the Riel bar or Kep Lodge. Ticketing is handled by guesthouses or Sunny Tour.

To get to Kampot by *moto/tuk tuk/taxi*, count on paying US\$3/6/10 one-way (a bit more if the driver speaks English). Drivers hang out at the northern end of Kep Beach and at the Crab Market, but it's easiest to have your guesthouse make arrangements.

Getting Around

Kep has almost no street lighting – the town only got mains electricity in early 2007, when it was linked to the Vietnamese grid – so a flashlight/torch helps if you'll be walking around at night.

Kep's *moto* drivers are a cooperative bunch: they all know each other and many have long-standing ties to this or that guesthouse. A ride from the Crab Market to Kep Beach costs 2000r. Hiring a *moto* for the day costs about US\$10 (more to Kompong Trach).

So Van Sarkor (Sovann Sakor; ☎012 608345; 🕒 6am-late year-round), 50m west of the roundabout above Kep Beach, rents out 100cc motorbikes (US\$5 for a 12-hour day) and bicycles

(US\$2.50 a day). A 250cc bike may be available for US\$15 a day.

Botanica Guesthouse rents bicycles/mountain bikes to nonguests for 3500r/8000r.

AROUND KEP

Kep makes a good base for visiting several delightful cave-temples, including **Wat Kirisan** near Kompong Trach (p223), **Phnom Chhnork** (p218) and **Phnom Sorsia** (p219).

Rumour has it that there may soon be a boat link from Kep to the unspoiled beaches of **Phu Quoc Island**, 25km to the southwest, whose loss to Vietnam is still bitterly resented by many Cambodians.

Koh Tonsay

កោះតូនសាយ

Koh Tonsay (Rabbit Island), said to have the nicest beaches of any Kep-area island (except Vietnam's Phu Quoc), is so named because locals say it resembles a rabbit, an example of what too much local brew can do to your imagination. If you like rusticity, come now before the island is changed forever by development.

At the 250m-long, tree-lined **main beach**, which faces west towards the setting sun, you can dine on seafood, lounge around on raised bamboo platforms and stay in thatched bungalows. North American travellers of a certain age may be tempted to hum the theme tune from *Gilligan's Island*. Many people say Koh Tonsay is a 'tropical paradise' but don't expect the sanitised resort version – this one has shorefront flocks, flies, chickens, packs of dogs and wandering cows.

From the southern end of the main beach, a 10-minute walk takes you to a fishers' hamlet and two more sand **beaches**, one on either side of the island's narrow southern tip. It's possible to walk all the way around Koh Tonsay.

The island's interior is forested and, except along the beaches, trees grow right up to the water's edge. On the **hilltop** you can see the remains of a one-time Khmer Rouge bunker.

Other Kep-area islands include **Koh Pos** (Snake Island; about 20 minutes past Koh Tonsay), which some say Chinese investors plan to turn into a resort, and beachless **Koh Svai** (Mango Island), whose summit offers nice views.

SLEEPING & EATING

Strung out along the main beach, the island's five rudimentary guesthouses – all

family-run and all with tiny open-air restaurants – include **Thi Am** (☎012 343759) and **Nyan Voyet Mai** (☎012 893102), which charge US\$5 for a raised bungalow with a mosquito net and, across the yard, a sit-down toilet. Meals cost US\$3/5 for a small/large portion of fish, crab, squid, shrimp or free-range chicken. (The latter may wander under your table and one traveller reports having his feet well hen-pecked!) The English menus look like they could have been nicked from an eatery on the mainland.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boats from Kep's boat dock to Koh Tonsay (20 minutes) cost US\$15 return, including a US\$5 tax. *Moto* drivers often offer to arrange boat rides for US\$5 per person, so for groups of four or more it may be cheaper to handle the booking yourself. If you'd like to stay all day or overnight, arrange a time to be picked up. Guesthouses can help make arrangements. Especially in the late afternoon, keep an eye out for schools of little silver fish jumping out of the water in unison.

TAKEO PROVINCE

ខេត្តតាកែវ

Often referred to as 'the cradle of Cambodian civilisation', Takeo Province includes several important pre-Angkorian sites built between the 5th and 8th centuries. The whole area was part of what Chinese annals called 'water Chenla', no doubt a reference to the extensive annual floods that still blanket much of the province. An important kingdom among several smaller states that existed at the time, its principal centre was at Angkor Borei, with other religious foci at Phnom Chisor and Phnom Bayong. Centuries later, sites such as Phnom Chisor continued to exert a strong pull on the kings of Angkor and many came to pay tribute to their ancestors in elaborate ceremonies.

Today, Takeo is a poor, rural province whose economy is based on farming and fishing. The temples of Tonlé Bati (p114) and Phnom Chisor (p116), near Phnom Penh, get a healthy number of visitors each year, but few foreigners spend much time in the provincial capital, Takeo, gateway to Angkor

Borei, where it's easy to score a slice of real Cambodian life.

TAKEO

តាកែវ

☎032 / pop 39,000

Takeo, the quiet, lakeside provincial capital, is an excellent base from which to take a zippy motorboat ride to the pre-Angkorian temples in the Angkor Borei area, and is an easy stop if you're travelling between Phnom Penh and Kampot. Little visited by foreigners, it lacks the architectural charm of some provincial towns but does retain some of its French-era legacy, especially around Psar Nat.

Cycling groups en route from the Mekong Delta to Phnom Penh, via the Phnom Den-Tinh Bien border crossing, often stop off here because NH2 has luxuriously wide, paved verges/shoulders.

Orientation

Laid out on a grid, Takeo is hemmed in by a large *boeung* (lake) to the north and a huge flood zone to the east. The old town centre is around partly occupied Psar Nat (Meeting Market). The town's main commercial strip stretches along NH2 (St 20) from Independence Monument to the bustling main market, Psar Thmei (New Market), next to the bus and taxi station.

Information

You can surf and check emails at the Mittapheap Hotel, next to the Sotheavy Guesthouse and perhaps at Bayong Tours.

Aceda Bank (☎931246; NH2) Takeo's only bank can change travellers cheques and has a 24-hour ATM.

Bayong Tours (☎931193, 012 971411; sunsophal@yahoo.com; St 14) An English-speaking travel agency that opened in 2007.

Soch Tith Internet (NH2; per hr 3000r; ☎ 6am-8pm) A proper internet café facing Psar Thmei.

Takeo Tourism (☎931323; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Facing Psar Nat, the provincial tourist office has helpful staff who can supply you with photocopied maps and may be able to arrange an English- or French-speaking guide to Angkor Borei and Phnom Da.

Sights

Psar Nat, an ugly concrete structure built after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, is surrounded by streets partly lined with arched, French-era buildings. One block east of the market, **boats** travelling along Canal No 15

to Angkor Borei leave from St 9, which runs along the water.

The **lakefront promenade** along the northern edge of town is a popular late-afternoon hang-out for local youth and a favourite backdrop for wedding photos. At its western end, a cement **pier** (St 3 btwn St 15 & St 17) that's seen better days attracts young couples in the mood to commune with lily pads and frogs – and each other. The area is especially romantic at sunset.

The brand-new **Provincial Museum** (St 4), built in the style of a Khmer temple, is supposed to open its exhibits on local archaeology and culture in 2008.

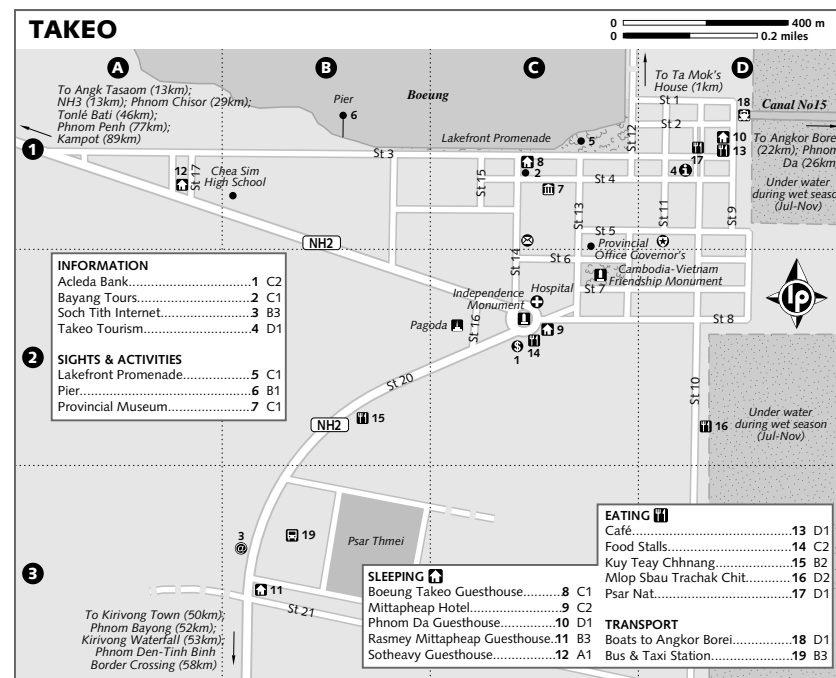
Takeo Province's most notorious native son, Ta Mok – AKA 'The Butcher' – served as the Khmer Rouge's chief-of-staff in the 1960s and was later commander of the Southwestern Zone, where he presided over horrific atrocities. Ta Mok was paranoid about his personal security and had an elaborate house built in the middle of the lake. It is said that he had the architects and builders executed upon completion of each floor, which included hidden rooms and escape passages. Today, **Ta Mok's House**, which is about 1km north of town at the end of a causeway, is occupied by a police training facility but can be viewed from the outside. Ta Mok, who had two more residences near Anlong Veng (p259 and p260), died in prison in mid-2006 awaiting trial for genocide and crimes against humanity.

Sleeping

At one of the less-than-spotless guesthouses facing Psar Nat, one recent visitor had his cupcake snatched by a rodent!

Boeung Takeo Guesthouse (☎931306; cnr Sts 3 & 14; r US\$5-10; ☎) Boasting the most romantic location in town, including a balcony overlooking the lakefront promenade, this quiet place – owned by a member of the National Assembly – has 19 spacious, clean rooms with TV and cold water. Ask for a room with a view, as it's no more expensive.

Phnom Da Guesthouse (☎016 826083; St 9; r US\$5-10; ☎) Facing the lake near the boat dock, this newly renovated, family-run hostelry has 10 cold-water rooms with high ceilings and carved wooden doors and a spacious, grille-enclosed balcony with watery views. Ask for a room with a window (not all have one) and, if possible, a lake view.



Soteavy Guesthouse (☎016 869482, 012 935133; NH2 at St 17; d US\$5-10; ☎) A new establishment about 1km towards Phnom Penh from the centre, this yellow, four-storey structure – surrounded by balconies – has 27 smallish rooms with low ceilings, ceramic tile floors, compact bathrooms and air-con you can really crank up.

Mittapheap Hotel (☎931205, 012 341744; St 20; d US\$5-15; ☎) Facing Independence Monument about midway between the bus station and Psar Nat, this place has 35 darkish rooms in four buildings arrayed around a coconut-shaded back yard. Staff speak some English. Pricier rooms have hot water.

Rasmey Mittapheap Guesthouse (☎016 882362; NH2) Facing Psar Thmei, this place – run by the Mittapheap Hotel – is convenient to public transport.

Eating & Drinking

There are plenty of food stalls around Independence Monument. By night, this is the place to snack on Cambodian desserts or enjoy a *tukalok* (fruit shake).

Psar Nat (St 10; ☎) early morning-dusk) This grimy market shelters a handful of basic food stalls

that are great for coffee, tea or traditional Khmer breakfast soup (2000r). Also has a few vegetable sellers.

Café (St 9; ☎) closed evening) This unpretentious place, run by an exceptionally tall lad, serves Takeo's best ice coffee (1500r) – but no food – under a tin roof.

Kuy Teay Chhnang (☎011 618868; NH2; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Likely to fulfil the promise implied in its name, which means *bon appétit*, this spotless eatery specialises in Chinese soups (3000r), which are lip-smackingly tasty early in the morning. It also has lots of rice-based Khmer dishes. There's no English sign; look for neatly parked motorbikes out front and a fake brick façade.

Mlop Sbau Trachak Chit (☎011 974040; St 10; mains 5000r; ☎ 9am-9pm) Offering better value than some of the places in town, this restaurant – outdoors under a thatch roof – and its delicious Khmer dishes are hugely popular with the locals, especially in the evening. Neither the menu nor the sign are in English; from St 10 walk through a gate with an Anchor Beer sign over it and follow the wooden walkway to the restaurant.

Getting There & Around

NH2 linking Phnom Penh with Takeo (77km) is in reasonable condition, with just a few potholes to slow things down. **Phnom Penh Sorya Transport** (Jin Phnom Penh 012 631545) runs air-con buses between Phnom Penh's Psar Thmei (7500r, 2¼ hours, six a day till 3.30pm) and Takeo's bus and taxi station, which is in front of Takeo's own Psar Thmei. These buses go past Tonlé Bati and Phnom Chisor. By six-passenger share taxi or crammed minibus, the trip from Phnom Penh costs about US\$2.

If you're heading south, the easiest destination to get to is Kampot. Buses, taxis (1¼ hours) and minibuses (US\$3) can be picked up 13km west of Takeo at Angk Tasaom, an ugly, chaotic transport junction on NH3, where you'll find hawkers, eateries, a market and even two hotels, but precious few English speakers. Phnom Penh Sorya Transport runs just two buses a day between the capital and Kampot, so searching for a taxi or minibus on the west side of the NH3 is probably your best bet. Traffic peters out by mid-afternoon.

The best way to get to Kep is to hop on a minibus or share taxi to Kampot, though a few Kep-bound buses pass by Angk Tasaom in the morning.

To get from Takeo to Angk Tasaom, you can take a *remorque-moto* (without/with a shade roof 1500r/2000r) from Psar Thmei, a *tuk tuk* (8000r) from Psar Thmei or the hospital, or a *moto* (5000r) wherever you spot one.

Within Takeo, a *moto* from Psar Thmei to Psar Nat should cost 1000r.

AROUND TAKEO

For details on the temples around Phnom Chisor, see p116; for those around Tonlé Bati, see p114. Both are in Takeo Province.

Angkor Borei & Phnom Da

អង្គរវប្បវិ ឆិង ភ្នំដំរី
Known as Vyadhapura when it served as the capital of 'water Chenla' in the 8th century, Angkor Borei – founded in the 5th century – is one of the earliest pre-Angkorian sites in Cambodia.

Today, Angkor Borei is a small, impoverished riverine town surrounded by an ancient wall. The local economy is based on dry-season rice cultivation, year-round fishing and raising the chickens and pigs that forage on the unpaved streets.

The modest, new **archaeological museum** (J012 201638; admission US\$1; ☎ officially 7-11am & 2-4pm, unofficially open all day), a bit east of the road bridge, occupies a Khmer-style building set to open in 2008. Featured are locally discovered Funan- and Chenla-era artefacts, including human bones, pottery, jewellery and stone carvings. The dark-red statues are copies of important works now in Phnom Penh's National Museum (p84) or Paris' Musée Guimet.

A local family has turned part of a traditional Khmer home into the signless **Srey Pao Guesthouse** (J012 383094; per person 10,000r). The two basic rooms come with mosquito nets and shared bathroom. To get there from the bridge, go north one block and then go left (west) for 100m – it's next to the wooden stall selling schoolbooks.

You can grab a bite at the rudimentary psar (market), a few blocks inland from the river.

The twin hills of **Phnom Da** (US\$2), spectacularly isolated by the annual floods, are 3km south of Angkor Borei. The rocky slopes shelter five artificial caves, built as Hindu and, later, Buddhist shrines and, during the Vietnam War, used as hideouts by the Viet Cong.

On top, 142 steps up, is a **temple** whose foundations date from the 6th century. Rebuilt in the 11th century, it's 12 sq m and 18m high. The entrance faces due north, with blind doors – decorated with bas-relief *nagas* – on the other three sides. The lower section is laterite, while the upper reaches are made of red bricks. The finest carvings have been taken to museums in Angkor Borei, Phnom Penh and Paris.

About 50m northeast of the temple, a huge **'floating boulder'** sits balanced on just three points. Vietnam can be seen 8km to the southeast.

Nearby, on a second hillock, is **Wat Asram Moha Russei**, a smaller, restored Hindu sanctuary, made of sandstone, that's 5.5 sq m and 8m high.

At the dock, a couple of very basic cafés serve coconut milk and soft drinks.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Angkor Borei and Phnom Da are about 20km east of Takeo town along Canal No 15, built in the 1880s to connect Takeo with the Tonlé Bassac and the Mekong Delta. Clearly delineated in the dry season, the waterway is

surrounded by flooded rice fields the rest of the year.

For great, bracing, open-air fun, zip along the canal in a fibreglass motorboat (US\$25 return, 35 minutes to Angkor Borei, 10 to 15 minutes more to Phnom Da) or, in the dry season, a smaller wooden motorboat (US\$15 return), both available for hire at Takeo's boat dock. All but a small part of what you pay will be spent on fuel. In the wet season the water can get rough in the afternoon, so it's a good idea to head out early. Bring sunscreen, a hat and, in the wet season, rain gear. Many of the heavily laden boats you pass are bringing terracotta tiles and smuggled fuel from Vietnam.

Larger boats (3000r per person, two hours) depart from Takeo's boat dock at 1pm or 2pm and from Angkor Borei at about 7.30am. Another cheap option is to wait around for enough locals to fill a share motorboat (8000r per person).

Phnom Da used to be an island during the wet season but a causeway now assures year-round land access. From Angkor Borei, wooden long boats (3000r per person) travel frequently to Phnom Da, or you can take a *moto* (US\$2 return).

Angkor Borei can also be visited on an overland day trip from Phnom Penh. By car, take NH2; drive east on Highway 107, which passes south of Phnom Chisor; and then turn south at Prey Lvea.

Phnom Bayong

ភ្នំបាយង់

Affording breathtaking views of Vietnam's pancake-flat Mekong Delta, the cliff-ringed summit of Phnom Bayong (313m) is graced by a 7th-century **Chenla temple** built to celebrate a victory over Funan. The *linga* originally in the inner chamber is now in Paris' Musée Guimet but a number of flora- and fauna-themed **bas-relief panels** can still be seen, eg on the lintels of the three false doorways and carved into the brickwork. The site, once surrounded by two concentric walls (remnants are still visible), still attracts pilgrims and is tended by Buddhist nuns who live nearby in basic huts.

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The steep walk up to the temple takes about 2½ hours return. The trail is not clearly marked, so it's a good idea to hire a local lad (or five) with a machete (5000r or 10,000r). Along the way you're likely to see locals out collecting leaves and roots for the preparation of traditional medicines. Bring plenty of water and thick eyebrows (or at least a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from your forehead). The descent over smooth rocky inclines will help prepare your leg muscles for the next ski season.

In Kirivong town, **Tran Hout Guesthouse** (J016 500033; NH2; r US\$5-8) is friendly but its 17 tiny rooms are lightless and have poor ventilation.

Further west along the Phnom Bayong access road is **Phnom Tchea Tapech**, whose summit is marked by a jumbo standing Buddha reached by a monumental staircase. This new temple complex was inaugurated in late 2006.

Kirivong Waterfall, 2.5km west of the southern edge of Kirivong town, is popular with locals, especially on warm weekends, but it's nothing to write home about – unless you like telling your friends about all the litter you've seen. Until it's cleaned up (there are plans...), the only reason to head out there is to check out the market stalls selling the area's most famous product: topaz and quartz, either cut like gems or carved into tiny Buddhas and *nagas*.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kirivong town is on the nicely paved NH2, 50km south of Takeo and 8km north of the Phnom Den–Tinh Bien border crossing. Phnom Bayong is about 3km west of the northern edge of Kirivong town; the turn-off is marked by a painted panel depicting the temple.

From Takeo, a *moto* costs about 30,000r return. It's cheaper to take a share taxi or a bus to Kirivong town and then hop on a *moto* at the turn-off.

From the border, it's easy to catch a *remorque-moto* or a *moto* to Kirivong, whence minibuses go to Takeo and Phnom Penh. Catching a taxi at the border may involve phoning to have one sent from Kirivong town.