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Kep's ruins recall Cambodia's golden age

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Kep Sur Mer (Kep by the sea), a tiny seaside town near Kampot, is one Cambodian hamlet that is only gradually finding its feet after years of war.

The seaside family home of Om Rasadei under renovation

The evidence of a destructive past is found down almost any street in Kep, where the skeletons of holiday villas sit idly while being quietly consumed by the jungle.

Dozens of the once plush homes in various states of decay are sprinkled around the seaside village.

"It's a kind of ruin," says Om Rasadei of present day Kep.

Rasadei is now a political advisor to Prince Norodom Ranariddh but, as a child of the Phnom Penh elite, he used to vacation in Kep in the 1960s, the period many still consider was Cambodia's 'golden age'.

Today the abandoned homes give the whole town an eerie feeling of having been just recently deserted. Some homes are structurally intact, others are clearly more in need of resurrection rather than renovation. Elsewhere there are once-stately villas whose only legacy is a lingering high fence, wrought iron gates and an overgrown plot of land.

Not every house is empty. A few of the homes have been supplemented with makeshift roofs and windows and are now homes to 'security guards', families paid by home owners to keep squatters out. Kep's abandoned villas are so ubiquitous in the town that they are even being used as the local Funcinpec and Sam Rainsy Party headquarters. In the 1950s and '60s, flush with a peacefully achieved independence, Phnom Penh's confident and wealthy elite appropriated Kep, the colonial retreat founded by the French in 1908.

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Known as the 'Cambodian Riviera', the town had its own casino and was frequented by parties of diplomats and well-heeled Cambodian society eager for a swim, a sail or a stroll on the beach. Wealthy Phnom Penhois built homes in confident modernist styles with expansive ocean views.

Rasadei recalls his final visit to Kep before it, like much of the rest of the country, was consumed by war. The son of the director of National Security, his family kept a large house on the oceanfront.

"Before the war in 1967 or 1968 my father sent me to Kep with some friends to prepare for my exams." The friends took their motorbikes on the train to Kampot and spent their time studying, swimming and playing guitars, he says.

"I remember the car contests that were organized by the King for sports cars, with ladies inside the car, usually wives of ministers or actresses, but it also had the mountains, the sea, good air and good food.

"Kep during the sixties was like a kind of a Cote d'Azur. It was frequented by rich people and high ranking people of the Kingdom, even the King and the Queen Mother," Rasadei says.

In its heyday then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk not only kept his own villa, but his own island as well. Ile des Ambassadeurs was a favorite spot for Sihanouk to entertain a regular stream of guests.

The King's home is no longer occupied by squatters. The local police asked them to move along two years ago and then took over a front room of the house as their own headquarters.

It has clearly seen better days. Trees, Ta Prohm like, have taken root and destroyed the high fence, bullet holes ring what was once the front door and all the homes' fittings, from the ceiling lights to the floor tiles, have been scavenged.

Over the years the house, in which Sihanouk became head of state in 1960, has been looted and abandoned and served as a barracks for the local militia before the squatters finally moved in.

The fate of the Royal household was like the fate of Kep's other luxury properties.

With the Lon Nol coup Kep became a ghost town, abandoned by holiday makers and sometimes

swamped by the war raging in nearby Vietnam. Around 1970 Vietnamese soldiers entered Kep and are said to have eaten all of the animals in the zoo.

That was positively civilized behavior compared to the actions of Cambodia's own revolutionaries a few years later.

Despite several recent high profile raids, Cambodian Movement for Health operations director Mom Kong has called on the authorities to pursue legal action against those

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The Khmer Rouge took Kep in 1975 and set about destroying its symbols of bourgeois culture, attacking the already abandoned holiday homes of Cambodia's elite. They also set about destroying any remnants of the bourgeoisie in Kep by herding all the local French speakers to a petrol station and setting it and them on fire.

An overgrown abandoned villa at Kep looks almost like a relic from an ancient Khmer era.

When the Vietnamese arrived in 1979 the houses again suffered with locals stripping what was left for building materials to sell to the Vietnamese. The town itself continued to live in fear with the Khmer Rouge shifting just seven kilometers away.

Roy Win, Kep's Red Cross chief, owns one of the few villas that is on the market.

It's a house with an interesting history.

During the early '90s Khmer Rouge commander Chhouk Rin, most well known for his alleged

involvement in the 1994 murder of three backpackers, was holed up in the colonial villa and using it as the headquarters for his Kampot province stronghold.

"I bought the house from Chhouk Rin in 1992," says Win of her beachside villa.

It must have been a good time to sell for Rin, who was given a new property by the government when he defected in 1994.

Win becomes nervous when asked about the villa's infamous owner, preferring to stick to sales talk.

The dilapidated two storey house is one of the largest in town and one of the few colonial era properties. Surrounded by palm trees and with absolute beach front Win thinks the house is a steal for anyone with a mind to restore its former glory.

"I paid 300 damleung of gold, but I will sell the house for \$150,000," she says.

Win says she pays a local police official 30,000 riel each month to look after the property.

The house, she says, is free of both ghosts and squatters and, while it may be run down, the building is still safe and sound.

"That is the structure of the French," says Win.

New Funcinpec Governor of Kep, Sim Son says that at least some of the houses are structurally sound enough for restoration but others will need to be pulled down.

Son says that he hopes to see homes restored but at the moment water and electricity are higher priorities.

"My primary idea is to turn Kep into a tourist destination but first we need

a master plan, we'll have to think about how to do it and seek input from infrastructure experts."

Without infrastructure the town remains a long way from its former glory. Rasadei's family home is the only one in town that is being brought back to life.

"At the time [of my 1968 visit] I didn't know I would not return for more than twenty years. One or two years later it was the beginning of the Lon Nol war and my parents sent me to France."

"I returned in 1992, just before the Untac election and, when I came back and saw the place it was a real shock. Phnom Penh was a shock but in Kep the city had just become a ruin," he says.

"The natural beauty is still there so I hope that one day there will be the political will to remake the city as it was before."

MOST VIEWED



At least 10 killed in Poipet casino blaze

At least 10 people were killed and 30 others injured in a midnight blaze that engulfed a high-end casino in Poipet town of Banteay Meanchey province on the Thai border on December 28. According to Nhem Phoeng, chief of administration at the Poipet town hall, the flames had



PM's visit to US embassy seen as a turning point in relations

Following Prime Minister Hun Sen's first visit to the US embassy, local analysts echo optimism that the "rare gesture" will significantly improve bilateral relations