

# Back<sup>to</sup> basics

AN ISLAND IN CAMBODIA IS THE EMERGING DESTINATION FOR  
TRAVELERS SEEKING A TRIP BACK IN TIME. WORDS

& PHOTOS JUSTINE LOPEZ







### THE SIMPLE LIFE

As my ferry docked at the small pier, I was immediately entranced by the colorful fishing boats bobbing in the emerald green ocean. Glancing down, the water was so clear I could spot huge schools of fish flitting around beneath the surface.

As I peered toward the shore, it was obvious that Koh Rong really is as undeveloped as they say. The main town of Koh Tuich Village is nothing more than a miniscule hamlet, consisting of three rickety piers and a smattering of barebones bungalows and rustic beach bars.

I quickly learned that there is nothing glamorous about Koh Rong. There are no five-star hotels or luxurious spas or world-class restaurants. And that's precisely the point.

Unsure of where to stay my boyfriend, Eric, and I popped into a few different bungalows along the beachfront (which also serves as the town's main

**A**s a diehard beach lover, I am always on a quest to find the perfect beach. But after traveling throughout Southeast Asia for the past decade, I've learned that so-called "picture-perfect" beaches are a rare find.

In the past couple of years, there has been a lot of hype about Koh Rong, Cambodia – an island rumored to be a truly unspoiled paradise. With no roads and no stable supply of electricity, it is about as close to being off the grid as a tourist destination gets. And with its transparent turquoise water, flawless white sand beaches and blissfully undeveloped terrain, Koh Rong sounded like it was too good to be true.

I had heard numerous people muse that Koh Rong is what Thailand's islands were like 25 years ago, before their shores were inundated with package tourists and sprawling megaresorts. But I'd also heard that the clock is ticking; that it's only a matter of time before the secret gets out and major developers break ground.

I suppose the mythology that surrounds Koh Rong is what inspired me to check it out for myself. And I wasn't alone. Each day small ferries head to the island from mainland Cambodia, carrying tourists, like me, who want to catch a glimpse of an untarnished paradise before it's too late.





drag). Rooms ranged from dodgy dorm beds for US\$3 a night to slightly more upscale beachfront bungalows for \$70. Even the nicest of rooms was spartan and only contained the essentials – a bed, a mosquito net and a fan.

As I looked at the bungalows on offer, part of me was concerned that I wouldn't be able to cope without my creature comforts during my five days on the island. There would be no TV, no AC, no Wi-Fi. And when I learned that generators only run from 6 p.m. until 2 a.m., the idea of roughing it quickly started to lose its appeal.

We finally decided on a modest wooden

bungalow perched high on the hillside. Not only did its location offer a nice ocean breeze to help keep us cool at night but it had a spacious balcony with an incredible bird's eye view of the town below, with its colorful rooftops and kaleidoscopic blue water.

Despite my apprehensions about living the simple life, I realized if I was able to wake up to that view every morning I could easily forgo a few modern conveniences.

#### SIMPLE PLEASURES

A visit to Koh Rong is like stepping back in time and essentially unplugging from modern life. For me, being truly

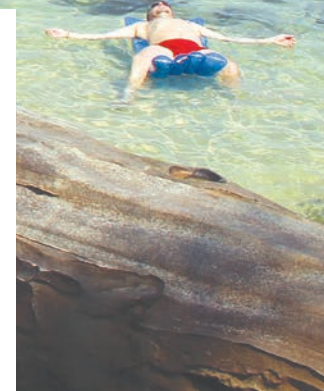


disconnected from the outside world was a welcome change of pace.

It gave me the freedom to spend my days indulging in the little things I'm usually too preoccupied to enjoy, or even notice. I had the time to lounge in a hammock and read a book, frolic in the bathtub warm water and explore the nooks and crannies of the island.

And it was having this time to explore that led me to find what might possibly be the most beautiful beach I've ever laid eyes on.

As Eric and I were savoring a heaping plateful of tamarind soaked noodles (typical Khmer cuisine) on the beach, we noticed a group of travelers head down a narrow alleyway and disappear into the jungle. Curious about where they could possibly be going, we asked around and learned that there was a supposedly more





beautiful, less touristy beach on the other side of the island.

I found it impossible to imagine a more perfect beach than the one that glimmered in front of me. But given that I had heard that Koh Rong is home to some of Southeast Asia's best beaches, I had to investigate.

Long Beach, as it is known, is an uninhabited stretch of sand and is only accessible by boat or via an hour-long trek through the jungle. So, the next morning Eric and I set off on a hike.

We were told to wear closed-toe shoes instead of sandals because the terrain could get a bit "treacherous." I was honestly a bit nervous – scared that we would either get lost in the middle of the jungle or that I would break my ankle with one misstep.

Regardless of my reservations, we traversed up the steep hillside. After 40 minutes of following a crude trail though the forest, we reached what looked like a dead end. Standing atop a massive boulder, we looked down



and saw a rope dangling down the face of a 15-meter cliff. Refusing to turn back, we proceeded to scale down the nearly 90-degree incline.

We somehow made it down injury free. Exhausted, exhilarated and covered in dirt, we sauntered toward a clearing and emerged from the jungle. We were giddy with excitement when we saw the flawless strip of white sand that unfurled before us, extending as far as we could see. The sand was so powdery fine that it literally squeaked underneath our feet as we walked. And the water,

with its beautiful aquamarine hue, was completely unblemished by coral or sea grass. Long Beach was as close to perfect as I could imagine.

The only signs of civilization were the dozen or so tourists that were scattered along the shore and the handful of bungalows that were sprinkled along a rocky outcrop at the far end of the beach. The rest of this seemingly endless stretch of sand was completely untouched by the outside world.

At that moment I understood what all the hype was about and why people talk about Koh Rong in such hushed and reverent tones. While it's sad to think about Koh Rong being overrun with package tourists and sprawling megaresorts, I feel lucky that I was able to glimpse this island paradise before it changes forever. 📌



#### IF YOU GO...

**Getting to Koh Rong:** The island does not have an airport, so the only way to reach the island is via a two-hour ferry ride from the coastal town of Sihanoukville.

**Leaving the island:** Because spots on the ferry are in demand, it's important to book a ticket on the ferry at least a day in advance. It's not uncommon for boats to fill up, especially in the high season.

**The electricity situation:** Koh Rong does not have a steady supply of electricity. All hotels, restaurants and business have electricity from 6 p.m. until 2 a.m. Many also turn their power on from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m.

**Where to stay:** For the best view in town head up the hill to Highland Beach Bungalows. We paid \$30 per night for two people. To get there from the pier, head left and follow the signs up the hill.

**Check out the phosphorescence:** It's possible to take a nighttime tour to check out the bioluminescent plankton that dwell in the surrounding waters. The tiny plankton literally glow in the water – it's a sight to be seen!