

# A ROAD LESS

SANDWICHED BETWEEN ITS HISTORICAL ENEMIES THAILAND AND VIETNAM LIES THE TINY AND LEGENDARY KHMER EMPIRE OF ANGKOR, WHICH PEAKED BETWEEN THE 10TH AND 15TH CENTURIES. THE MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER ENTERS FROM LAOS AND EXITS THROUGH SOUTHERN VIETNAM, CROSSING THE COUNTRY NORTH TO SOUTH. THE 435KM COASTLINE ALONG THE GULF OF THAILAND IS DOTTED WITH ABOUT 20 ODD ISLANDS.





# TRAVELLED

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**2012** My first trip to Cambodia In October was for over a month with some diving in the last week. Five hours by bus from the capital Phnom Penh is Sihanoukville; many overseas visitors don't go beyond this hub of beach life, resorts, restaurants and bars as it's the country's night life and party zone! Sihanoukville, Cambodia's only deep water port, was created in the 1950s in honour of young king Norodom Sihanouk, and there's a few dive centres offshore. Diving in Cambodia started in 2001 with Scuba Nation. The Dive Shop followed in 2005; cheerful German Dennis Funke bought into it in 2009 with his partner Irfan and Dennis invited me to see for myself.

Roughly two hours by boat brought me to Koh Rong. Lush and tropical, the island has some beautiful and mostly deserted beaches within walking distance. The original fishermen's village was crowded with businesses, restaurants, bars, guesthouses and resorts. I spent a few days at the Paradise Bungalows in a very basic hut, but the lounge and restaurant made up for it.

From the palm-shaded beach, the pristine turquoise to pastel green water looked picture perfect. My first Koh Koon dive day in eight-metre deep shallows over a sand patch on the east of the island was actually a muck dive with lots of horse mussels, oysters and scallops, crowned sea urchins and other urchin species such as the heart and poisonous flower urchin. Like an oasis of life, a magnificent sac anemone hosted a couple of saddleback anemonefish or Panda clownfish.

The following day's dive was on the west side south of Koh Rong, another muck dive with coral bommies. I used a close-up outfit and was delighted to see quite a few nudibranchs such as *Gymnodoris rubropapulosa* with orange spots, white gills and orange rhinophores; *Hypselodoris tryoni* in tandem, *Flabellina* and *Facelinidae*, plus hermit crabs. The highlight was a pale gray catshark-like creature, whose tail stuck out from under a rock and the head appeared on the other side. It was the elusive brown banded bambooshark *Chiloscyllium punctatum*. Up to a



Main: Dive boat moored at the pier at sunset.  
Bottom Right: Giant clam *Tridacna gigas* (sideways), Coral.





Long beaked coralfish *Chelmon rostratus* were in pairs, banded in orange and white with a black spot; big balls of bubble coral, a chocolate grouper *Cephalopis boenak* lurked in a seafan's branches, and plenty of blue lined groupers *Cephalopis formosa* hid in every hole.

metre long, this shy species is best seen at night. In the afternoon the Corner Bar had better vis, with schools of white tongue jacks *Uraspis helvola*, gold spotted jacks, barred jacks, orbicular batfish and yellowtail barracudas. A blue-girdled angelfish was a surprise, an octopus popped out of a hole and two map cowries eventually gave me a sense of direction.

On day three Dennis took us southwest to Buddha Reef: boulders, sand, whip coral, anemones and nudibranchs made the dive, plus lots of 30-40cm giant clams. The next stop at Small Island was similar, except for swimmer crabs and plenty of *Fungia* corals carpeting the slope in the shallows.

I mentioned my disappointment to Dennis; "Ach!... you haven't picked the right time, you know, we're still at the end of the rainy season; if you come at the beginning of the year, you'll have the best visibility!", he explained. So be it – I'd plan a trip for my clients a year later in the dry season and include diving...

**2013** I returned to Cambodia in December. The Dive Shop had moved to Koh Rung Samleum south of Koh Rong, a positive change. We landed on the island's west coast on New Year's eve. I'd booked into Robinson's Bungalows; this 'no frills' little resort was the Dive Shop's property as well. It had a 'true blue' feel – natural, authentic, no village on the golden sand beach, only the little secluded Huba Huba resort at the other end. The bay was lit by a gorgeous sunset, the water was clean and magically transparent. A 30 minute trail over a jungle ridge to the other side of the island led to a beach with at least six resorts – a Full Moon party was in full swing the night I arrived.

I hit the water on 1 January at the Lazy Beach site on the southwest of Koh Rung Samleum. At less than 10m there were white gorgonians and white whip corals everywhere. Also, white with dark spots in clusters *Jorunna funebris* nudibranchs were combing the rocks. I came across a few pink skunk clowns in their magnificent sac anemone, looking bottle green underwater but actually crimson red in colour. The visibility was unpleasantly familiar. At Lazy Beach's north end the Sponge Garden was indeed full of barrel sponges covered in paper-thin white sea cucumbers. There were also seafans, white harp fans, burrowing gobies and seapens in the sediment, plus poisonous flower sea urchins. Long beaked coralfish *Chelmon rostratus* were in pairs, banded in orange and white with a black spot; big balls of bubble coral, a chocolate grouper *Cephalopis boenak* lurked in a seafan's branches, and plenty of blue lined groupers *Cephalopis formosa* hid in every hole. Sadly, the destructive giant *Acanthaster* seastar was out grazing on coral. Schools of blackspot snappers *Lutjanus ehrenbergii*, small yellow-striped bigeye snappers *Lutjanus lutjanus* and scissortail fusiliers *Caesio caerulaurea*, were common.

Everybody slept late after the New Year beach fire and fireworks; I was the first one out. The manager had just witnessed an



This page:  
Pink skunk clowns in a magnificent sac anemone at Lazy Beach;  
French instructor Hussein teaching kids on the Dive Shop boat;  
The ornate flying snake took 15 minutes to swallow this giant gecko head first;  
A three-metre juvenile whale shark surfacing near the boat at Koh Prin;  
Robinson Bungalow's #6 on the slope above the beach.



Opposite Page:  
The 60mm *Gymnodoris rubropapulosa* discovered at Coral;  
A young Buddhist monk under his umbrella;  
The beautiful *Flabellina rubrolineata* grazing at Chicken Island.





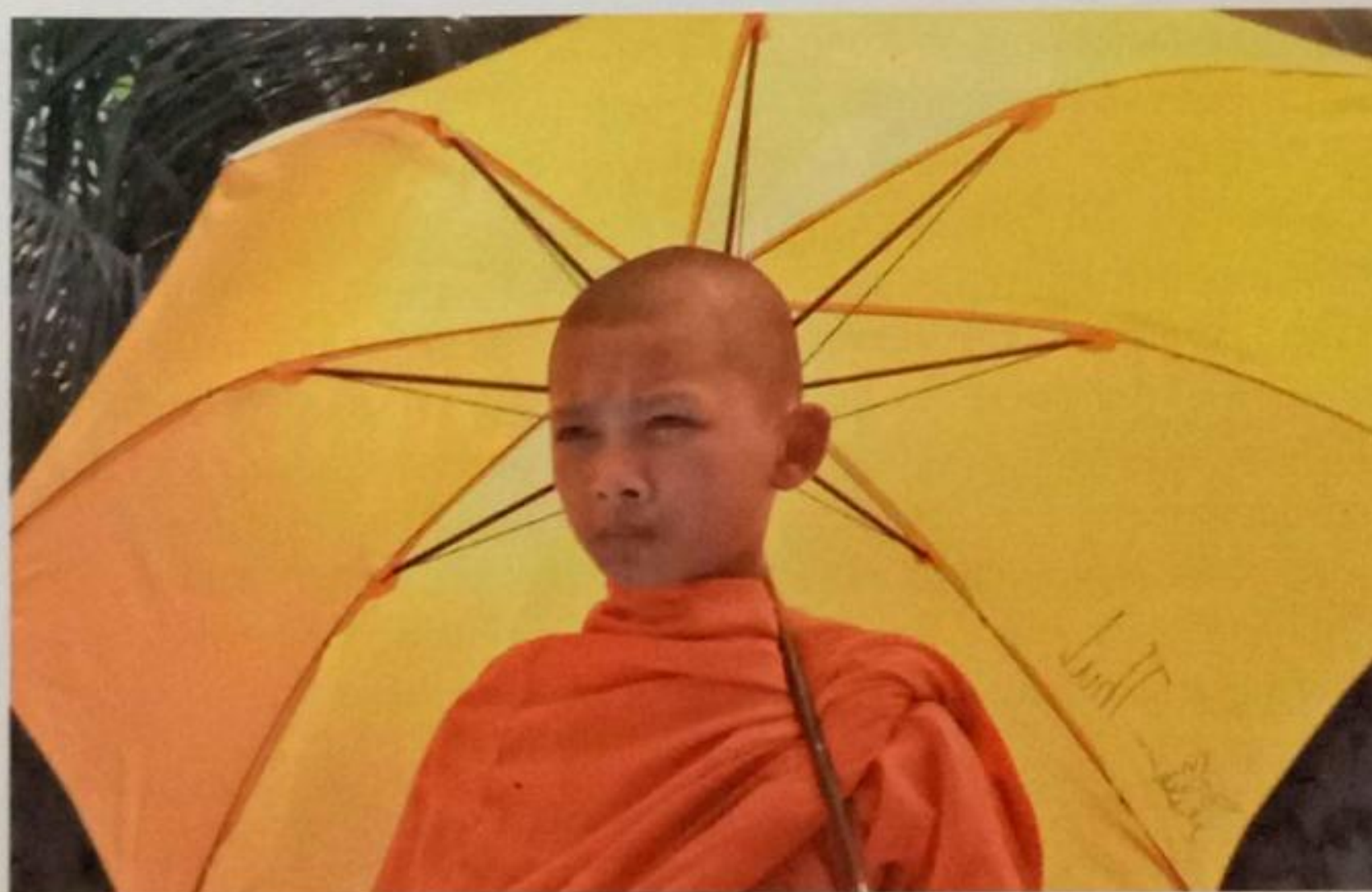
amazing sight outside his bungalow – a beautiful ornate flying snake had caught a giant gecko, pale blue with rusty orange spots, and was slowly swallowing it head-first. The pictures were breathtaking. The snake's head and throat distended amazingly over the unfortunate reptile, which was a mere memory 15 minutes later.

Heading back to Koh Koon north of Koh Rung Samleum, we dived at Coral and Corner Bar and I swam at my own 'critter speed' to focus on photography and research. I had a friendly encounter with a big star puffer *Arothron stellatus* dozing on the sand; freckled goatfish *Upeneus tagula* were also resting on the bottom. As soon as we hit the current at the point, gold spotted jacks *Carangoides gymnostethus* and white tongue jacks *Uraspis helvola* showed up in schools; checkered snapper *Lutjanus decussatus* and floral wrasse *Cheilinus chlorourus* as well. At Coral I spotted a charming *Gymnodoris rubropapulosa* nudibranch (60mm) whitish with orange specks, white gills and orange rhinophores. Quite a jewel.

Giant clams *Tridacna gigas* popped up here and there, and a strikingly beautiful little wrasse with electric blue lines between green and yellow bands, with a red-orange line on the back. A school of unusual brassy jacks *Caranx papuensis* swirled around me at Corner Bar. There were some nice cushion stars, yellow emperors, white streaked monocle bream *Scolopsis ciliatus*, and goldband fusiliers *Pterocaesio chrysozona*. A newcomer – the charming diamond fish in small schools, diamond shaped, silver with yellow fins, is usually found in mangrove environments. The visibility was below average...

The morning Aaron, one of the instructors, offered the 3 days/2 nights liveaboard cruise to the Koh Prins islands, I jumped at it, despite having a chest infection. We dropped our moorings mid afternoon with five other guests on board: French-Cambodians Sebastien and Sophyline, Christine, a German girl doing her Advanced course with Dennis, and two girls from Singapore and South Africa. We sailed into the sunset over a glassy Gulf of Thailand and four hours later we anchored at Koh Prin. We slept in a shallow space under a canvas roof on top of the boat, and I was up at first light, exiting on all fours. The sunrise behind Koh Prin was soft, awesome and inspiring; it was to be a fine day. The three low-lying Koh Prins comprise Koh Prin, Chicken Island, covered in forest, tending southwards, and Koh Tang Ol. The latter – also called the Pinnacle – is a stack of rocks breaking the surface and was our pre-breakfast dive to a maximum depth of 25 metres.

The visibility improved as I sank slowly to 20m, equalizing my ears carefully. I made the seafloor like a hot air balloon doing a kiss landing in the savannah, and immediately saw a couple of white cowries wrapped in their speckled black mantle – nice start! Purple gorgonians, barrel sponges, corallimorpharians and red sac anemones with their pink skunk clowns were everywhere, plus spiny conch, cushion stars, and giant clams galore. Two white-eyed morays *Siderea thysoidea* with dotted golden bodies peeped from their hole in the rocks, one even fully emerging. Dennis saw a group of 10 cobias circling above a large boulder at depth. I despaired about the fishing nets strewn across boulders and discarded fishing lines extending everywhere like a creepy spider web, a deadly reminder of the damage done.



At Chicken Island the visibility was better still. Among scattered boulders, whip coral, gorgonians and barrel sponges were the norm, together with Millepora fire coral. Small schools of blacktip fusiliers, yellow back fusiliers *Caesio lunaris*, one spot snappers, and bigeyed snappers occasionally swirled around divers out of curiosity. Chocolate grouper *Cephalopis boenak* and blacktip grouper *Epinephelus fasciatus* rested among rocks watching the world go by. I ducked into small caves and archways to discover clouds of one-spot cardinalfish, golden sweepers, and clusters of orange cup coral. Suddenly I found a couple of exquisite *Flabellina rubrolineata* with blue and white tipped cerata grazing on the rocks.

Back on board, the boat was moving at turtle speed between Chicken Island and Koh Prin when the captain shouted in Cambodian from the deck: "Kampot!..." Peering over the port side from the sundeck, I saw a baby whale shark surfacing for





a look. Translating the message brought everybody to the bow, ready to jump in on snorkel. Dennis and his student jumped in with full dive gear. I didn't join in, as the poor creature was anxiously moving away. They all managed to see it, and Sebastien got it on his Go-Pro. A big plus for the Dive Shop on the internet.

The next dive was on the spot in shallow water and straight into the current, but due to my nasty virus I didn't dive for the rest of the day. Dennis planned a fourth dive at Koh Tang Ol, plus a night dive at Koh Tang. To my despair he found the elusive brown bamboo shark which I so longed to see! One sure thing I learned that day was that Cambodian waters are a breeding ground for whale sharks in the dry season.

The Dive Shop on Koh Rung Samleun is an accredited PADI 5-Star dive centre offering a wide range of diver training. It has had great success in teaching novices and others to dive due to their terrific team of happy, dedicated and professional instructors. Their multi-lingual skills include English, French, Italian, German, sometimes Spanish, which is the key for a positive experience. As an island base with an alluring beach and calm waters, Koh Rong Samloen is perfect. Inexpensive accommodation in dorms or in simple wooden bungalows with a balcony and hammocks add to the ambience and accessibility. The Dive Shop has 10 onsite bungalows plus a restaurant offering a full range of Western and Khmer dishes.

#### The Dive Shop's Liveaboard Specs:

Length: 13.5 m; width: 3.8 m

Hull: wood/  
fiberglass

Engine: 6 cylinder  
167 HP

Fuel capacity: 200l  
+ 1000l

Cruising speed: 7  
knots

Navigation: GPS,  
compass

Water: 2400 Lt

Electricity: 500 W inverter

Compressor: Bauer Mariner 200 B (200l/min)

Accommodation: Upper deck sleep area for 10 persons max

Boat crew: 1 Captain, 1 Engineer & 1 Cook

Dive staff: min. 1 Instructor/Divemaster

Safety features: CB radio, life vests, life rings, fully stocked  
medical kit, 100% oxygen kit.

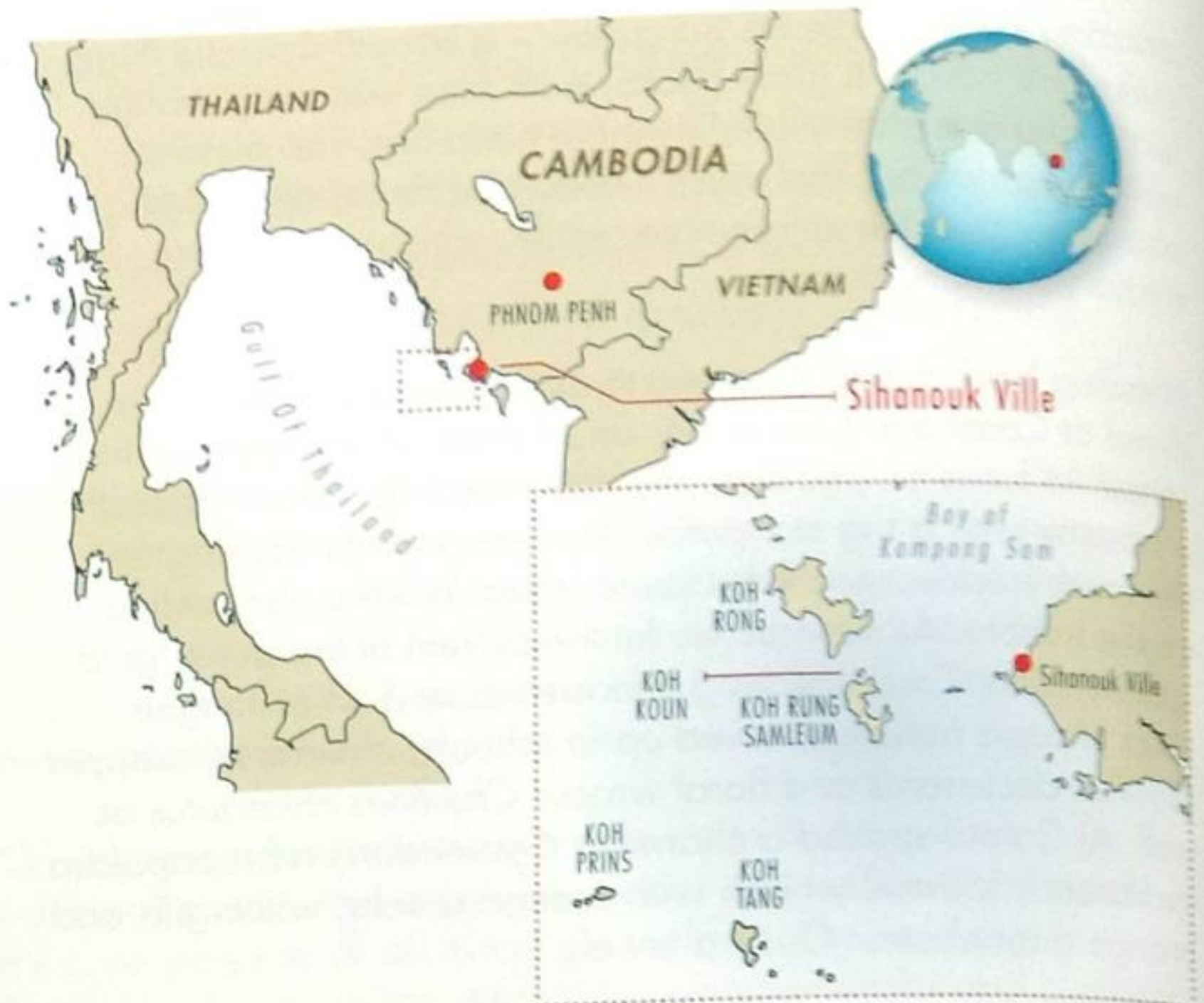


#### > LINKS

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#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: No coverage on Cambodia is complete without a bit of history.

- North of the Tonle Sap, the big inland lake, and near the town of Siem Reap, the archeological site of Angkor is a 'must see' – if you don't mind the hordes of Chinese tourists! First visited by Indian traders and missionaries as early as the first century, the land of the Khmers was converted to Brahmanism and Shivaism, from the 1st to 6th centuries under the early royal lineages. The Chinese later on influenced the kingdoms of Land Zhenla and Water Zhenla in the 7th and 8th centuries, with conspicuous brick temples such as Sambor Prei Kuk and Angkor Borei, during the so-called pre-Angkorian period.
- The real Khmer empire started in 790 under the rule of King Jayavarman II, and this was followed by the classical Angkor period where massive sandstone temples and monasteries were built from the 10th to 15th centuries. Religion evolved from Shivaism to Vishnuism in the first half of the 12th century when Angkor Wat was created. The most impressive architectural accomplishments occurred under the reign of the greatest King Jayavarman VII (1181-1219), who also introduced Mahayana Buddhism to the Khmer.
- The unavoidable decline came from the west with repetitive attacks from the Thais, who definitively sacked Angkor in 1431. The royalty chose to abandon the city, and relocated in Chadomukh, the future Phnom Penh.
- After the colonial French period (1863-1953), Cambodia accessed independence under king Norodom Sihanouk, who also unfortunately triggered the Khmer Rouge nightmare (1975-79). Two million people were killed under Polpot's genocide and communist regime, forever scarring this once peaceful country. Ironically, it is the much hated Vietnamese that have liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge, and who are ruling the country in the shadow of former Khmer Rouge leaders such as prime minister Hun Sen, who leads through corruption. The Cambodia People Party was reelected to power in late 2013, following obvious electoral fraud, which infuriates the opposition.
- Tourism is the economic development of Cambodia today, following Thailand's example. Like it or not, Cambodia has become a fascinating destination for tourists.