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Uncharted ASIA

Ancient ruins, unspoiled beaches, and distinct wildlife adventures define these four emerging destinations in the East.

by PAUL RUBIO

Recovering from previous political, social, and/or economic turmoil, new regions in the Orient are opening their doors to travelers, proving there's a whole lot of Asian extraordinary left to discover. Newfound confidence has opened the floodgates of investment, instigating a love affair between luxury tourism and several of the continent's unspoiled corners. Here, four mind-blowing Asian destinations to explore before they veer onto the beaten path. >

KOH RONG ARCHIPELAGO, CAMBODIA

Virgin islands await couples looking for undiscovered shores.

On an isle in the Koh Rong archipelago, a small series of islands some 15 miles south of the Cambodian mainland, the private island resort of Song Saa endows the Gulf of Thailand with a slice of Bora Bora-style luxury (its overwater bungalows are the idyllic accommodations everyone dreams about). The islands of Koh Rong are lush and completely wild, evoking fantasies of massive proportions. Put in perspective, the island chain's second-largest island, Koh Rong proper, is roughly the size of Hong Kong but with a human population numbering below 2,500. The rest of the islands, besides Koh Ouer, home to Song Saa, remain uninhabited. While easily combined with a trio to Angkor, the Koh Rong archipelago stands alone as a superlative, hidden beach destination on any sojourn through Asia.

VITALS:

Days to spend: 3-4.

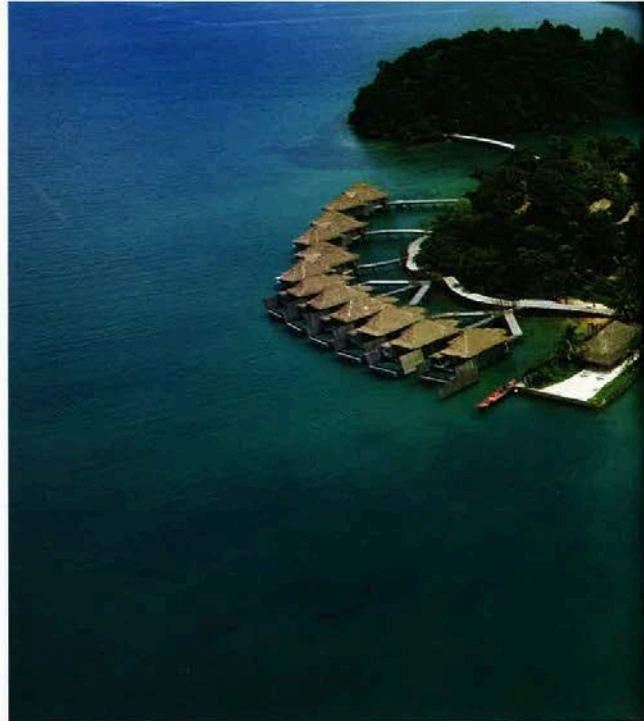
Nearest international airport: Phnom Penh International Airport (PNH). From there, it's a 3.5-hour drive south to the coastal town of Sihanoukville, where you'll board a private boat and sail 30 minutes to reach the archipelago. If already in Cambodia and coming from Siem Reap, avoid the driving portion and fly domestically into Sihanoukville Airport (KOS).

Visa: Obtain a visa on arrival, or skip the queues and get an e-visa in advance (evisa.gov.kh).

When: November to April. Peak water clarity (and the best diving and snorkeling) is between October and November and again April to May.

TO DO:

- Perfect the art of doing nothing, feet in the sand, or feet planted in your private swimming pool that overlooks the surrounding cerulean waters and verdant landscape.
- Ask the staff to pack lunch and Champagne, then set off via kayak to find your own private cove for a romantic afternoon.
- Take a boat over to Koh Rong to experience daily life in the coastal Cambodian village of Prek Svay. Through the Sala Song Saa excursion, visit a local school or farm and check out the community projects established in association with Song Saa, such as the implementation of a waste management system in the village.
- I like the nature trails of Koh Rong island, and keep a lookout for the resident Oriental pied hornbills. Or dive one of the six surrounding dive sites and encounter rainbows of tropical fish aplenty.





Clockwise from left: An ocean-view villa; an aerial view; and an unspoiled beach, all at Song Saa.



STAY:

Song Saa (all-inclusive from \$1,440 double occupancy per night; songsaa.com) is a destination in and of itself. The resort, which opened in 2012, remains the sole five-star establishment in southern Cambodia. Its 27 overwater thatched-roof villas are super-fashionable yet understated. Each villa sports subtle, eco-chic design elements like artwork created from discarded oil drums and fishing boat hulls, tables and chairs crafted from driftwood and tree trunks, and double-story, hand-carved wooden doors. More overt pops of glamour also surface: minibars fashioned from Louis Vuitton trunks, glass-bottom floors, and hyper-seductive outdoor shower areas. The resort delivers every island amenity imaginable, from a beachfront gymnasium to a hilltop alfresco spa to a seductive feet-in-the-sand-type restaurant, as well as a stylish overwater bar and restaurant. Beyond the frills—and an aesthetic that rivals the best of French Polynesia and the Maldives—it is also the essence of the stunning Kon Rong archipelago, a place where nature is to be appreciated slowly and quietly.

Bonus: Inquire about Song Saa's Pack for a Purpose program, which benefits the Song Saa Foundation. You'll hand-deliver an extra suitcase filled with much-needed school supplies and teaching tools to the remote island villages. You've never seen children get so excited over pencils, textbooks, and notebooks. It's truly a beautiful experience. **B**