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National February 19, 2024

Discover the gems of Sihanoukville's coastline

James Whitehead / Khmer Times



Koh Rong is a breathtaking island, located 25 kilometres off the mainland coast of Sihanoukville. The island is one of the most attractive islands in the region for both local and international tourists. Anaya Koh Rong



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Khmer Times turns its focus to the prime island getaways in the country located off the coast of Sihanoukville to find out why they are fast turning into world-acclaimed luxury tourism destinations. With tourists primarily from Singapore

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Three of Cambodia's prime island getaways – Koh Rong, Koh Rong Sanloem and Song Saa Private Island – located off the coast of Sihanoukville are fast becoming world-acclaimed luxury tourism destinations, along with witnessing large-scale public and private investments to increase the capacity and standard of tourism offerings in the region in years to come.

Besides, some lesser-known islands – Koh Puos, Koh Thas, Koh Mano and others – are expected to raise awareness to investors and tourist arrivals in coming years.

One thing is for sure, all of these islands are natural jewels of the Sihanoukville coastline, able to bring sustainable tourism development to the region for many years to come.

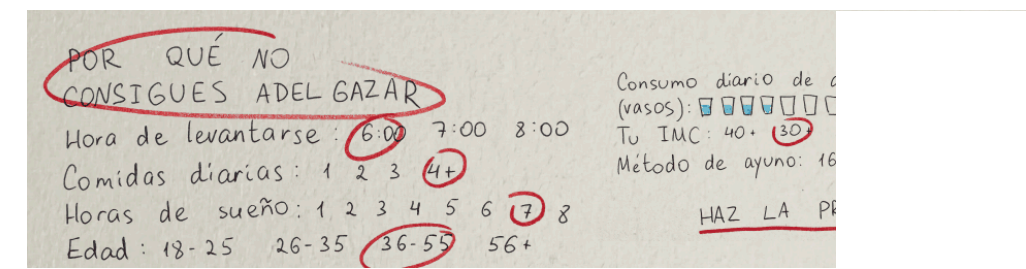
Koh Rong

Koh Rong is a 78-square-kilometre island located 25 kilometres off the mainland coast of Sihanoukville. With four village communities comprising just 4,000 villagers, along with hundreds of hotels and resorts, the island is fast becoming known as one of the most attractive islands in the region for both local and international tourists.

Alexandre Rebibo, owner and operator of two resorts on Koh Rong, Anaya and Tamu Koh Rong, said that in the first two

Rong hotels and other nearby attractions.

In particular, he said that demand in 2024 is increasing in Koh Rong's Pagoda beach area.



Song Saa Private Island located just off the coast of Koh Rong mainland is gaining worldwide attention and seemingly setting the bar high for other luxury ecotourism ventures. Song Saa Private Island

Rebibo explained that in comparison, however, last year’s low season, from May to October 2023, was exceptionally quiet, posing challenges for many hotels.

Nonetheless, he said that this year, as travel begins to increase globally after the post-pandemic downturn, there is more optimism that the upcoming low season will be better than the last.

According to Basta Binici, director of Experts Beyond Realty (EBR), who has managed the company’s Koh Rong office since 2019, there has been a boom of tourism on the island in the recent few months compared to all previous years on record, 2000-2023.

“Many resorts are currently fully booked,” he said, and “the highest increase is in demand to the high-end and medium-level luxury resorts.”

Once a haven for backpackers, Binici says the island is now gentrifying, and attracting more high-end tourists than previously.

Most of his hotel’s guests come from Europe, said Rebibo, but he noted that despite seeing some gentrification in Koh Rong arrivals this year, tourists on Koh Rong still vary from “adventurous backpackers to luxury travellers, offering a diverse mix of visitors to the island.”

Koh Touch, the main tourist beach on the island, still maintains its appeal to backpackers with budget accommodation and a laid-back atmosphere, said Rebibo, “but there is been a noticeable shift towards luxury tourism on the island, with the development of upscale resorts and amenities catering to a higher-end clientele.”

Apart from the Koh Touch area. where more affordable backpacker options still exist. it’s not easy to find a room below

Rebibo said a major factor driving increased arrivals this year was the recently completed expressway between Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville, which has made it easier to reach Koh Rong from within Cambodia. This has added to its appeal to both domestic and international guests.

Since June 2023, the island has been connected to mainland electricity thanks to a submarine cable. He called the new submarine cable a “significant development that improves infrastructure, and which is essential for supporting hospitality services.”

Binici also noted new public infrastructure such as a comprehensive concrete road network island-wide, urban and road lighting networks being established, and most importantly, “the Koh Rong International Eco-Tourism Airport construction has already begun and is progressing at a great speed”.



Song Saa Private Island is perfect for guests seeking total privacy in an idyllic island setting, Song Saa Private Island

Compared to 2023, Bicini's real estate agency has witnessed a 100 percent increase in business from both real estate buyers and renters on Koh Rong, and he believes this “skyrocketing demand” comes on the back of wider awareness of the huge infrastructure investments ongoing, such as the islands improved logistics network and the ongoing Royal Group airport development.

“Everyone is happy about the ongoing airport construction as it will increase the number of tourists arriving, hence the demand for the services and products of the businesses,” he said. This leads to an increase in the market value of the real estate and business owners will benefit from the higher number of tourists arriving on the island, he explained.

Rebibo, however, said that it's too early to know whether the new airport will provide a huge boost to tourism arrivals on the island. “It's true that Sihanoukville airport is very close and has only two flights per day arriving, so at this stage, there is no specific interest in opening a new airport,” he explained.

The actual impact will depend on factors like flight frequency and tourism growth, said Rebibo. “If we have only two flights per day like Sihanoukville, the impact will be very limited,” he said.

But due to the fact that many of his hotel guests are arriving from Siem Reap flights, direct air links to the island might develop the demand on the island more so now through its connectivity, he said.

Environmental preservation of Koh Rong must be a key consideration moving forward too, he said, as the island attracts more tourists than other locations as it remains wild and unspoiled.

“While the airport may enhance accessibility and attract more visitors, when I discuss with travel agencies and tourists, they are concerned about its ecological impact, especially on a pristine

Binici contended that the main protection comes from the island's official masterplan, which is being strictly followed by local officials and other development partners.

"Koh Rong will always have green energy, clean beaches, and a huge nature-to-residential-area rate, thanks to the island's masterplan," he said.

Future outlook

Binici said that infrastructure development was the biggest factor ensuring a bright future for the island, noting that the ongoing improvements afoot are creating a strong platform for future tourism growth, especially in the high-value tour sector.

However, he noted that to support arrivals, growth in global marketing will also prove crucial for Koh Rong.

"More efforts on marketing, international campaigns, viral ads and content regarding island nature, beaches, life and tourism, and its sustainable nature, are highly important factors for continuing growth in arrival numbers into the future years," said Binici.

Given the correct international exposure, Binici believes that in the next decade Koh Rong will rival Phuket, Thailand, in both arrivals and reputation and even surpass it at some point.

"Koh Rong is the first Cambodian island with hard titles, heavy investment on infrastructure, a sustainable master plan, safe beaches -unlike Phuket, and clean water," he said.

Rebibo too, looking to the future, expects Koh Rong to see a lot of growth in popularity. However, he hopes that guests continue to come to the island for nature and adventure, and its natural beauty is maintained.

Sustainable development is a top priority, which many hotels on the island are taking steps to promote, he said.

Initiatives already underway include limiting the use of plastic, organizing beach clean-ups, and implementing eco-friendly practices in tourism ventures on the island. Additionally, both the public and private sectors are increasingly collaborating on initiatives, said Rebibo, including waste management programs, and promoting responsible tourism practices.

These initiatives are crucial if the island is to remain the place of beauty that it is today, he concluded.

Koh Rong Sanloem

Koh Rong Sanloem is another island off the coast of Sihanoukville, four kilometres south of Koh Rong.

Alongside its larger sister island Koh Rong, Koh Rong Sanloem has developed into a popular holiday destination for travellers seeking untouched white sand beaches, warm crystal waters and vibrant sea life that resides around its coast.

According to Binici, most guests to the Koh Rong mainland will also make a visit to the smaller island, Koh Kong Sanloem, either for a day trip or overnight stay, as the distance between these two islands is around ten minutes by speed boat.

Koh Rong Saloem accommodation options are generally more expensive than those on Koh Rong, and have fewer options for budget travellers such as backpackers as of 2024, he said.

While the island has seen increasing guests this year compared to previous periods, it still remains a secondary consideration to most travellers who prefer to stay on one of Koh Rong's beaches for the majority of their stay due to more options and amenities, he said.

Despite traditionally seeing slower tourism arrivals than its neighbour Koh Rong, Binici said that the future of Koh Rong Sanloem is bright, given considerable investment trends ongoing across the island in terms of infrastructure, along with large development entities ready to invest in major tourism resorts across the island.

Broadly there are three areas in Koh Rong Sanloem undergoing investment, noted Binici. Firstly, private property, which

Binici said that outside of the confirmed concession zones, private investors are able to purchase land or take on long-term leases in order to launch hotels and other hospitality ventures on Koh Rong Sanloem, a trend that is increasing.

Now that land is available for development, he expects to see an influx of new hospitality offerings to boost visitor stay numbers on the island in years to come.

Infrastructure is also moving forward quickly, increasing the island's capacity and convenience for guests and investors.

"The island's electric grid and a solar power plant is being built by Total Group," he said, meanwhile, the island's road network construction has begun already and is expected to be complete in just a few years.

While Koh Rong Sanloem still has various changes afoot to improve the capacity of the island for luxury tourism arrivals, its pristine landscape guarantees a bright future.

Along with improved infrastructure, Binici also noted that the island has some big investors looking to begin new projects on the island in the coming years.

"I think Koh Rong Sanloem will be a hotspot for high-end tourists once these various projects take shape, along with the key infrastructures to support tourism vendors," he said.

The new airport in Koh Rong mainland will also offer a considerable boost to the sister island Sanloem, he said, as people prefer direct flights to a destination rather than several means of transport, which is now the case for Sanloem.

Song Saa Private Island

Song Saa Private Island, located just off the coast of Koh Rong mainland, has become a great example of a Cambodian private island resort development that is gaining worldwide attention, and seemingly setting the bar high for other luxury ecotourism ventures in the surrounding area.

The private resort encompasses the entire two-piece island and offers 24 spacious luxury villas, each featuring a private pool, spectacular ocean views and world-class cuisine and spa services for guests. It has become particularly well known as a honeymooners haven.

Perfect for guests seeking total privacy in an idyllic island setting, the resort has won numerous international travel awards since it opened in 2012, including accolades such as Condé Nast Traveller's Gold Standard, Condé Nast Traveller's World's Best Resort Hotel, National Geographic's Leaders in Sustainable Tourism and Winner of the Eco Award.

The island resort has also been designed and managed with considerable attention paid to preserving the natural environment in which it is built, environmental sustainability being a key consideration for the project's development.

The island has thus proven to be a great success since its opening due to several factors, said Binici, including "top-level marketing, great scenery, its unique private island setting, ultra-luxury accommodation and services, along with unique guest services such as transporting them from Phnom Penh by helicopter."

Binici said that the island continues to attract more and more travellers seeking luxury and privacy, including business people and high-income international and local tourists from Cambodia, Singapore, Hong Kong, the US, the UK and Australia, among many other destinations.

The island represents one of the most successful resort developments nationwide, he said, and he hopes to see more of its type and quality as the other areas off the coast of Sihanoukville see similar development for luxury tourism in years to come.

Lesser-known islands

Some other islands off Sihanoukville's coast are also expected to become part of the beach-tourism trail in years to come, as logistics and accommodation development moves forward upon them.

“Here, already, investors can buy waterside mansions, and gain concessions for land for 99 years, with the ability to extend concessions after that period,” he said.

Another island near Sihanoukville is Koh Thas. While the whole island is open to concession for development, explained Binici, as of now we have seen no projects launched here yet.

Koh Mano is another island near Koh Rong that he believes will be an important tourism destination in the future, due to its unique nature and scenery.

Meanwhile, he said that Koh Sramaoch and Koh Rousey are both currently under development, and half of Koh Ta Kiev has been allotted by concession and will also be developed in upcoming years.

Binici is confident that these various islands off the coast of Sihanoukville will eventually become as frequented by tourists as islands such as Koh Rong and Song Saa are today, once tourism entities are established on them, along with increasing arrivals to the region at large.

In the meantime, he suggests that many opportunities exist for tourism businesses considering the many islands off of the Sihanoukville coast for their next tourism investment projects.



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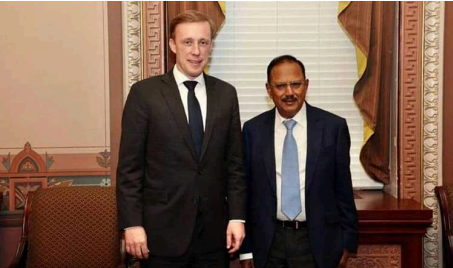


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Opinion



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