

## **"City in the Clouds" Cambodia.**

The old French resort at Bokor Hill sits at an altitude of 1080 metres on the southern tip of the Cambodian Elephant mountains about 40km from the coastal town of Kampot. Built in the 1920s as a getaway from the capital Phnom Penh and the surrounding hot plains, it was frequented by the French colonialists and Cambodian elite. It was anticipated that the attraction would complement the seaside resort at Kep that had been established further up the coast.

Bokor Hill was abandoned first by the French in the late 1940s during the first Indochina war, then again in 1972 by Cambodians as Khmer Rouge seized the area. During the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, Khmer Rouge entrenched themselves on the mountain and held on tightly for months. Up until the early 90s the area was still a no go area, land mines, poachers and bandits still being a danger.

Today, though dilapidated, most of the old buildings still stand. The once centre piece colonial Grand Palace Hotel stands proud overlooking Kampot bay and the surrounding hills of Bokor national park. The site is owned by the government but is under a 99 year lease to the richest man in Cambodia, Mr Sok Kong (Sokimex Sokha company). The Sokha conglomerate is currently redeveloping the area into an elaborate resort and city that has been referred to as a "City in the Clouds" that is said to be completed in 13 years.

Development has been progressing steadily since the opening of the new road early 2012 that was once a 32km bone jarring ride through the jungle. Now probably the best quality road in the country can be driven in less than an hour, wide enough to accommodate luxury double decker gambling bus tours. The brand new garish Bokor Casino Resort rises above the hills on approach to the top, a mass of concrete car parking space and other amenities surround the new building. Mostly Vietnamese and Chinese make the visit to the casino, gambling is otherwise illegal to Cambodians.

Planned are also a five-star hotel resort of huge proportions, a cable car system and an 18-hole golf course, as well as shopping malls, condos, villas and complete suburban real estate complex'. The plans are perhaps overly ambitious, an impressive scaled model depicting Sokha's paradise vision for the two plateaus can be viewed at a visitors centre en route to the top.

Away from the new developments, the hill station still holds an air of an abandoned ghost town surrounded by nature. With the cooler temperatures, stunning views and now easy access to Populvul water fall and Wat Sampeau pagoda, Bokor has become a popular picnic spot at weekends and public holidays with middle class and nouveau-riche Cambodian families. Where before it was mostly popular with foreign tourists seeking nature and adventure. Since the recent opening of the new casino resort Bokor Hill Station has been free to visit any day of the year.