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30

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secluded secret spot

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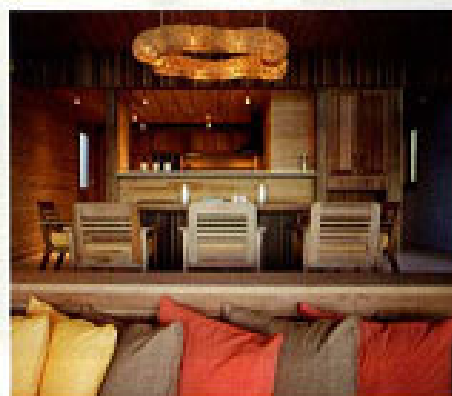
Vietnam's Secret

A former penal colony, Con Dao is as isolated as ever and that seclusion, along with unspoiled scenery, remains its charm, writes NAOMI LINDT

WHEN A LARGE, WILD BLACK PIG lumbers down the runway—the welcoming committee, it turns out—my husband Dustin and I know we're in for something entirely different. We've just arrived on Con Dao Island off the southeast coast of Vietnam when the porker appears.

Boarding a shuttle bus reconfirms this sentiment. Besides a film crew who have come to shoot an upcoming season of the French version of *Survivor*—which really makes me wonder exactly what I'm getting myself into—all the other passengers on board are Vietnamese, many of them retirees who stare blankly at the foreigners. When was the last time in Vietnam I wasn't surrounded

Quiet Isles Clockwise from far left: Snorkeling Con Dao; the South China Sea's catch of the day; above the remote archipelago; inside Six Senses Hideaway.



by vacationers nose deep in their Lonely Planets, conical hats strapped to their backs?

Cultural observations aside, my attention soon switches to the scenery. Like something out of *The Lord of the Rings*, jagged peaks soar into the bright blue sky before plunging into turquoise water dozens of meters below. Goats clamor along rocky cliffs, hot pink bougainvilleas and orange-red flame trees dotting the landscape. And though this is Vietnam in 2010, we pass no more than a handful of motorbikes.

In town, the island's sleepy beauty doesn't dissipate: narrow streets are virtually traffic-free and lined with single-story, red-roofed buildings built by the French more than a century ago. After a somewhat awkward check-in (the Saigon Con Dao is recommended for the comfort of its new rooms, not the ambience or service), Dustin and I stroll along the seafront promenade, which overlooks a beach of clean, white sand and is bookended by lush hills, rather than the obnoxious high-rises common in many of the country's seaside towns.

We stop for a *cà phê sữa đá* (iced coffee with sweet milk) at the Con Son Café, Con Dao's only café-bar, a breezy place housed in a French colonial mansion and shaded by huge trees. Like she does every afternoon, a vendor of *bánh mì chả cá* (fish-cake sandwiches) parks her stall in front of the café. She's

It's difficult to *believe* that places like this—full of smiling locals, empty beaches—still EXIST

more than patient with us as we grapple with our order. As the sun drops behind the hills to the west, the sky turns a brilliant shade of peach. It's utter bliss, and we can't believe our good fortune in discovering this gem.

CON DAO, A 16-ISLAND ARCHIPELAGO, IS undoubtedly one of the country's best-kept secrets. Given Vietnam's unstoppable growth over the last decade, it's difficult to believe that places like this—full of smiling locals, empty beaches and quiet primordial forests—still exist. There are a handful of hotels and restaurants scattered about town and along the beach. I soon learn that the archipelago's pristine beauty and lack of development is no coincidence.

In 1862, due to Con Dao's remote location 180 kilometers off of Vietnam's coast in the South China Sea, the French colonialists established a »

penal colony for political dissidents here, turning it into one of the country's most feared prisons. Their brutal tiger cages and forced labor would endure until the mid-1950s, when the South Vietnamese and American forces took over. With North Vietnam's victory in 1975, the jails were finally closed and became a symbol of the hardship endured in the long war for independence.

State-sponsored tour groups, largely government and military officials, have been Con Dao's key source of income in recent years. The prisons have been converted into museums, the cemetery, which contains nearly 2,000 graves, a reminder of Vietnam's struggles. A must-visit tomb contains Vo Thi Sau's remains, a brave young woman who joined the fight against the French at the age of 14 and was the first female to be sent to Con Dao. She was executed five years later.

Evidence of the brutality is scattered throughout Con Dao. For starters, we check our e-mail in Internet cafés housed in former prison guards' homes. But the island is so gorgeous and peaceful that any anxiety about the past is quickly swept away by sheer awe.

Seven years ago, the best route to Con Dao was by helicopter from Vung Tau. That's when Rick Mayo Smith, a developer, first visited. "I was immediately struck by the immense beauty of the island and the pristine environment. It's just so rare these days," he says. "I fell in love with the pure natural beauty of the place, the charming French architecture and the unique history. But more than anything, it was the peaceful and relaxing feeling that you succumb to when you get off the plane that does not leave until you head home."

For the past three years, Mayo Smith has been working on the island's first luxury resort, the Six Senses Hideaway Con Dao, which is slated to open in December. In Southeast Asia, there's really no better guarantee of a place's untouched charms than the presence of an eco-friendly resort. The property, which will feature 49 villas all with private pools and built largely from local materials, is the first hotel in Asia to get the Green Globe for environmentally friendly construction.

This environmental ethos is key in a place that is home to some 1,000 plant varieties, 1,300 marine species and 160 types of animals. In fact, more than four-fifths of the archipelago is protected by the Con Dao National Park, encompassing some 6,000 forested hectares and 14,000 hectares of marine areas, making it one of the country's strongest conservation programs. Over the past decade,



Sleepy Beauty Above: Bai An Beach, on the southern tip of Con Son Island. Left: Some local greenery.

We *encounter* stunning beaches where the only footprints in the glassy white sand are OURS

organizations like the WWF and the United National Development Program have stepped in to provide additional support toward environmental preservation and education.

"The National Park is generally well protected, and works to keep the park land out of new development plans," says Julianne Becker, a WWF spokesperson in Vietnam, which completed its three-year, US\$500,000 conservation program on Con Dao last December. "The forest and mangrove systems on the islands of the archipelago are very well intact and still harbor endemic species such as the black giant squirrel. The reefs around Con »

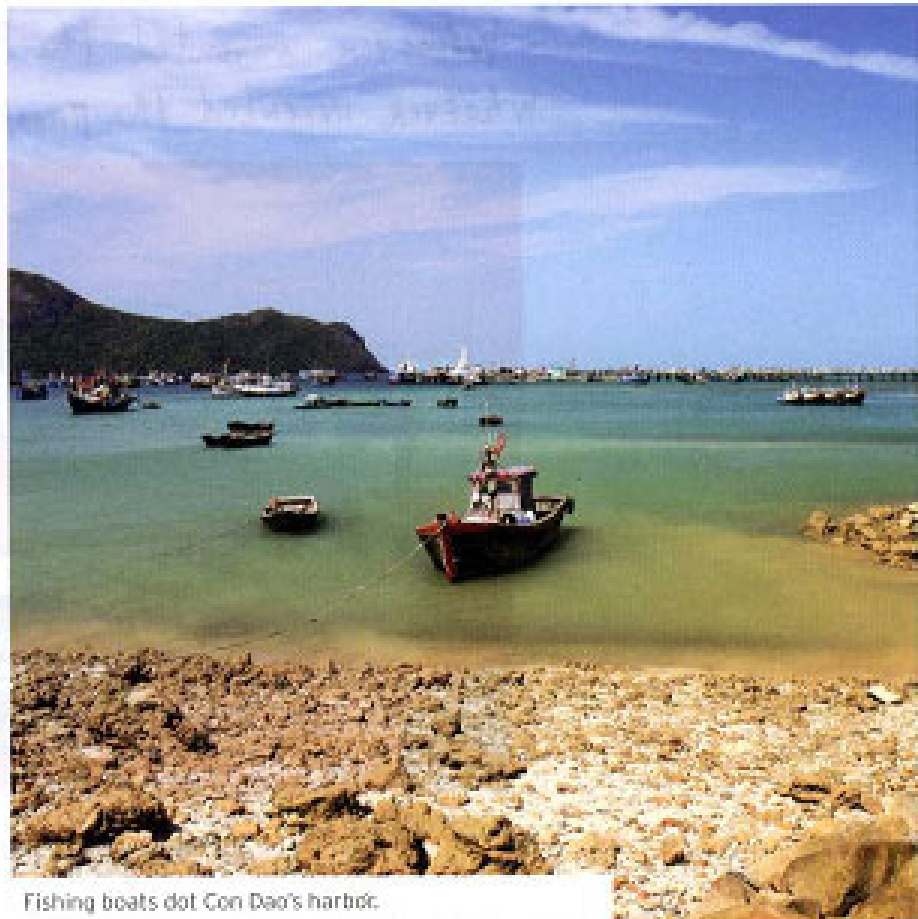
Dao are often referred to as the best preserved in Vietnam. The rangers on Con Dao take a sense of pride in being a part of the conservation program and there has been little evidence of poaching in recent years.”

I witness these efforts across the island. One day, I hire a guide from the park for a trek to Dam Tre Bay, where Dustin and I take a languorous, hour-long swim after a sweaty hike through the forest. The only other person we encounter along the way is a young forest ranger hiking to meet his girlfriend at the airport. Other guided hikes lead visitors to century-old fruit plantations, sheltered coves and remote snorkeling spots.

After hopping on rented scooters and cruising the island’s quiet roads, we encounter stunning beaches with crystal clear aquamarine water like Bai Nhat, where the only footprints in the glassy white sand are ours. Further down the road, on Con Dao’s western edge, we find the main harbor of Ben Dam, whose colorful wooden fishing boats bring in the daily catch—grouper, snapper, crab, squid, prawn—that we feast on every evening.

While checking out the wooden beach bungalows at the newly opened Con Dao Seatravel Resort, we meet a 46-year-old American, Eric McHenry, who’s been on the road the past eight months. Though McHenry has seen much of Southeast Asia, he’s found something totally different on this island. “Con Dao is a place where you can sit with a cup of coffee, good conversation, and enjoy the pace and the way of life,” he says. “Where else in Vietnam can you sit on a retaining wall, drink a beer and watch the locals gather at the same time every day for a game of football on the beach? This place affords you the opportunity to see how the people really live and play. And it’s more beautiful than I imagined. I know it won’t look this way in the next five or 10 years.”

That night, McHenry and his travel buddy, Nick, coax the hotel staff into building a fire on the sand so they can grill their freshly caught grouper on the beach. We spend the evening eating the delicate fish, sipping chilled white wine from Dalat beneath a sky so thick with stars it’s difficult to believe it’s real. I realize that I, too, have completely succumbed to the island’s intoxicating solitude. The next day, we board the flight back to Ho Chi Minh City and brace ourselves for the real world. And I’m honored to be sent off by a bevy of goats and pigs. +



Fishing boats dot Con Dao’s harbor.

GUIDE TO CON DAO

GETTING THERE

It’s a 45-minute flight from Ho Chi Minh City to Con Dao. Vietnam Airlines (vietnamairlines.com.vn) operates three departures daily, with one-way tickets from US\$45.

WHERE TO STAY

Saligon Con Dao Resort Ask for one of the new superior rooms, which cover the basics. 18-24 Ton Duc Thang St.; 84-64/383-0155; saligoncondao.com; rooms from US\$60.

Con Dao Seatravel The 12 beachfront bungalows feature basic furniture and terraces. 6 Nguyen Duc Thuan St.; 84-64/363-0768; condaoatravel.com; rooms from US\$60.

Six Senses Hideaway Con Dao The resort is slated to open by year-end, with eco-chic villas with private plunge pools along a two-kilometer stretch of private beach. 66-2/631-9777; sixsenses.com.

WHERE TO EAT

Thu Ba Offers an abundance of fresh seafood. Expect metal tables, plastic chairs and bright lighting. Duong Pham Van Dong; 84-64/383-0255; lunch or dinner for two VND200,000.

Try Ky Similar to Thu Ba but even more popular. Nguyen Duc Thuan St.; 84-64/383-0294; lunch or dinner for two VND200,000.

Café Con Son Sea-facing outdoor café. 2 Ton Duc Thang St.; 84-64/363-0670; drinks for two VND50,000.

Try Con Son Market Best in the early morning or late afternoon for noodles, *bahn mi* and other tasty street snacks. Lunch or dinner for two VND30,000.

WHAT TO DO

Tour the island by motorbike, which rent for US\$8 per day. Head northeast to reach Dam Trau beach. On the west coast are more spectacular beaches.

Con Dao National Park Book guided treks and boat trips to the islands at the park office. Helpful office staff speak English, guides Vietnamese only. 29 Vo Thi Sau; 84-64/383-0669; condaopark.com.vn; treks from VND150,000 per person; boats about VND1.2 million per day.

Rainbow Divers Vietnam’s largest dive operator plans to reopen its Con Dao office in November and offers a range of outings throughout the archipelago. 84-908/781-756; divevietnam.com; dives from US\$90.