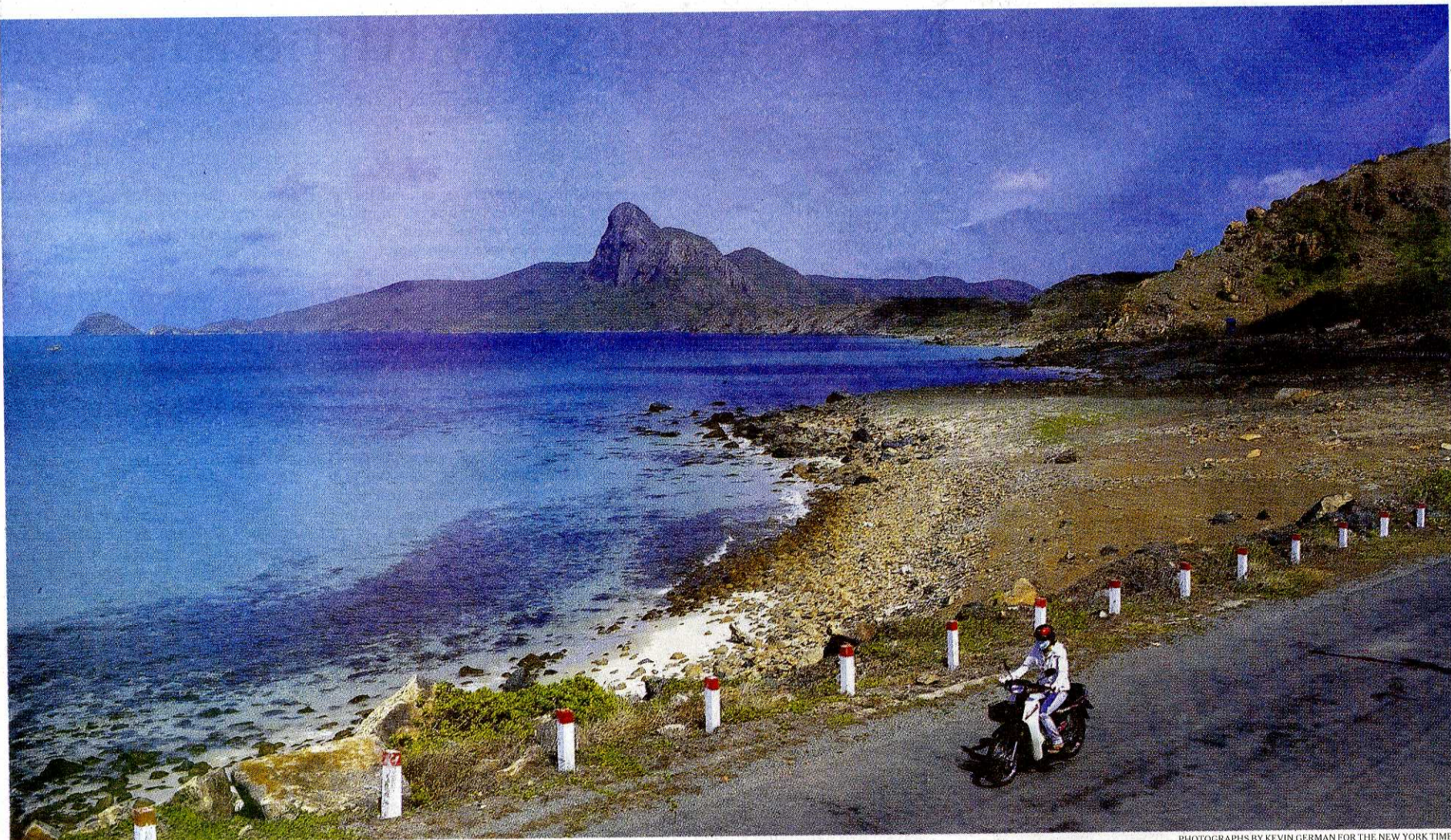
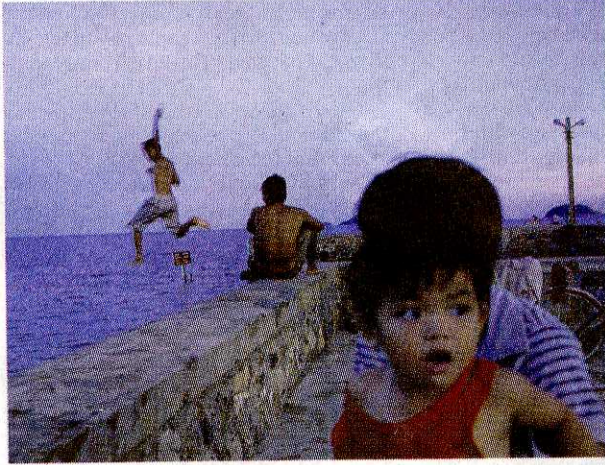
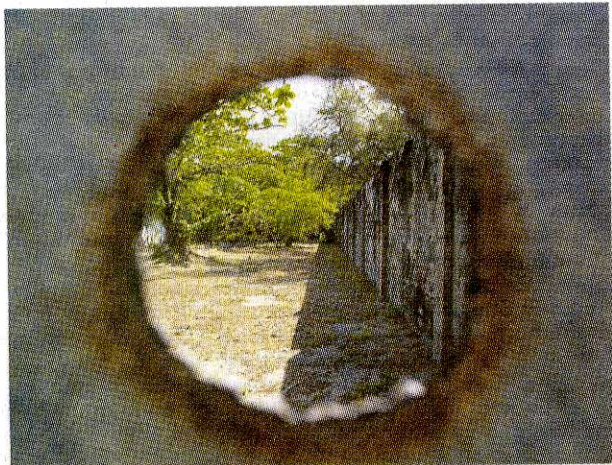


WEEKEND ARTS TRAVEL



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN GERMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Clockwise from above, on Con Son Island, part of the Con Dao archipelago: Bai An Beach; the Six Senses resort, set to open in December; children at Pier 914; and the remains of the prison camp Phu Binh.



Vietnam's unsung island treasures

CON DAO, VIETNAM

Archipelago once home to brutal prison system now has tourist potential

BY NAOMI LINDT

As the sun's last rays streaked the sky bubble-gum pink and tangerine, the residents of Con Dao Island were calling it a day, and the sprawling beachfront promenade that serves as this small Vietnamese island's social hub was filling up as the heat of the day finally relented.

Teenage boys pulled up on Honda scooters, kicking off their shoes and rolling up their jeans to play soccer on the white sand; young mothers led small charges by the hand into the gently lapping aquamarine water; an elderly woman, her teeth lacquered black in the style of her ancestors, watched a group of children fly colorful, animal-shaped kites on the pier, built in 1873.

If not for the Communist slogans being piped out of the town's loudspeakers, it would have been hard to believe this was Vietnam. Where, after all, were the motorbikes, the honking horns, the shiny high-rises, and the constant activity that has come to characterize this rapidly developing country?

Until recently, the isolated 16-island archipelago of Con Dao (its largest is-

land, Con Son, is commonly called Con Dao Island), 180 kilometers, or 110 miles, off the mainland's southeastern coast, was a place most Vietnamese wanted to forget. For 113 years, this island was home to one of the country's harshest prison systems, established by French colonists in 1862 and later ruled by South Vietnamese and American forces until Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese in 1975, at which point the prisons were closed.

These days, officials on government-sponsored group tours make pilgrimages to the crumbling stone prisons, which have been turned into museums that depict the suffering endured by their comrades.

Other buildings constructed by the French have been converted into cafes and private homes in the main town, which consists of little more than a daily market, a few seafood restaurants and a couple of souvenir shops selling shells, carved wooden canes, and Ho Chi Minh paraphernalia. The few signs along the quiet streets lined with flame trees and bougainvillea tout pearls of wisdom such as "With the party comes peace, comfort, and happiness."

But despite, or perhaps because of, its ugly history, Con Dao is one of Southeast Asia's most untouched and breathtaking getaways. Its past, coupled with its remoteness, have spared it from the million-plus hordes that descend on coastal boomtowns like Nha Trang and Danang every year. (According to gov-

ernment figures, in 2008 Con Dao received 20,000 visitors, only 2,600 of whom were foreign.)

A lack of development and, until recently, of access (the number of 45-minute flights from Ho Chi Minh City has gradually increased from a handful per week four years ago to three times a day now) has also helped to keep the islands' beaches empty and immaculate. The azure waters are brimming with Vietnam's best coral reefs, and the forests bustle with macaque monkeys and

The azure waters of Con Dao are brimming with Vietnam's best coral reefs, and the forests bustle with macaque monkeys and black squirrels.

black squirrels, one of several species indigenous to Con Dao.

Indeed, efforts to preserve Con Dao's natural beauty are unrivaled in the rest of Vietnam. Of the archipelago's total area, 83 percent is protected by the Con Dao National Park, including over 130 square kilometers, or 50 square miles, that make up the country's first marine reserve.

With help from organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Development Program, the park has just won approval for a \$16.5 million development plan through 2020, which will finance natural resource protection,

research and eco-tourism.

Though the government hopes to more than double the islands' population to 13,500 by 2013 through a series of ambitious residential and tourism projects, for now, Con Dao's slow, friendly rhythms and spectacular beauty remain largely undisturbed.

On a recent visit, except for a film crew shooting a coming season of "Koh-Lanta," the French adaptation of "Survivor," foreign tourists were scarce. One of them was Fred Burke, a 51-year-old managing partner of Baker & McKenzie, an international law firm with offices in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

"This feels like some sort of secret Tahiti," he said, referring to the lush, rolling hills and sharp cliffs that abut the sea. "Most of the popular seaside destinations in Vietnam are being degraded with trash on the beach, inadequate waste-water treatment, noisy motorbikes and Jet Skis. It's a complete surprise to find an amazingly beautiful place like Con Dao with almost nobody here."

Despite its rich beauty, Con Dao is still far from being a luxury destination. Right now there is only a smattering of simple, Vietnamese-run lodgings and restaurants. But the much anticipated arrival late this year of a Six Senses resort, from the Bangkok-based company known for introducing eco-luxury to the region's most unspoiled up-and-coming locales, suggests that Con Dao might soon become part of the international travel scene.

Though English is not widely spoken and most places cater to Vietnamese tour groups, independent travelers can still partake of the islands' treasures. The Con Dao National Park arranges guided treks through dense tropical jungle and to remote beaches like Dam Tre Bay, a deep, sheltered cove that is home to golden fields of swaying seaweed and giant clams with electric blue lips. There are also snorkeling trips to Bay Canh islet, where fine sand lures endangered hawksbill and green sea turtles during the May to September nesting season.

But cruising the winding cliffside roads on a rented scooter might be the most memorable way to experience Con Dao, where the only traffic is the occasional black-haired goat or wild pig. Hidden down a sandy track marked "Mieu Cau," about 12 kilometers north-east of town, is Dam Trau Beach, a crescent-shaped expanse of golden sand and sapphire fringed by feathery casuarinas, the peace disrupted only by the arrival of flights from Ho Chi Minh City.

Head west to encounter rolling dunes and Con Dao's main port, Ben Dam, where spearmint-green, sun-beaten fishing boats bob in the turquoise water. The island's prettiest beach, the boulder-peppered Bai Nhat, emerges only with the low tide. If you're lucky, that will happen in late afternoon when the sun drops behind the 300-meter, or 1,000-foot, Love Peak, so called because it looks like two heads nestled together. Chances are you'll have the beach to yourself.

