

# destination

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# P WELCOME TO PARADISE

FEW DESTINATIONS IN VIETNAM CAN CLAIM THE MANTLE OF TROPICAL PARADISE. CON DAO CAN AND DOES — ESPECIALLY NOW. WORDS BY NICK ROSS. PHOTOS BY AARON JOEL SANTOS



"THERE'S NOTHING HERE," SAYS A middle aged man sitting directly in front of me. We're peering out of the windows of our twin propeller plane as it prepares to land in Con Dao. He's correct. Looking down at the jungle-covered islands from our vantage point in the sky, there really is nothing here.

The lack of development is striking. As we leave Con Dao Archipelago's tiny airport, the road twists through paddy fields and mangrove before winding its way round promontories as it follows the line of the sea. Sign posts for Cau Suoi Ot (Chilli Springs Bridge) and then Mui Tau Be (Smashed Boat Point) pop up specifying not just landmarks but also the possibility of habitation. But even still, there's nothing. Literally. Nothing. Not a house, not a soul on the street, not even the tiniest of shacks. Just a road, the flora inland, an uninhibited wildness and the majesty of the sea. Silence.

This is Con Son, the largest island in the Con Dao Archipelago, 230km from Ho Chi Minh City off the southeast coast of Vietnam. It was once the Devil's Island of this country — a penitentiary colony — but these days it is being touted as the latest tourist destination; the next big thing.

And it's a safe bet. As a national park, the majority of the islands here are uninhabited and remain untouched. There are over 1,300 species of animal life and the oceanic area is home to some of the rarest sea life in the world, including the almost-extinct dugong — a large, ocean mammal that grazes on the sea bed. Then there is the jungle trekking, white sand beaches, diving, snorkeling and the remains of the French town and prison colony.

But all of this has been accessible for travellers for years. It has reasonable accommodation and transportation to and from the mainland. So why only now is Con Dao becoming the place to go?

The answer is two fold. First, until recently there were only three return flights a week. Now there are four daily.

More importantly is the arrival of the first five-star property, Six Senses Con Dao. With its magic pairing of uncluttered, white sand beach and well-kitted out rustic, wooden pool villas, it opens up the islands to a more international, jet-setting market.

It does it so well, too. In its attempt to create a luxurious slice of paradise, the resort is sandwiched between mangrove, rainforest, mountains and sand. The effect





“WITH ITS OVERHANGING TREES WITH AUBURN-COLOURED LEAVES AND DENSE — EVERY-SHADE-OF-GREEN — FOLIAGE AND TADPOLES, THE FRESHWATER POOL COULD BE AN IMAGE OUT OF A TROPICAL THEMED SCREENSAVER. AND YET NO-ONE COMES HERE”



of the environment is instantaneous. Not only do you feel that you're in a resort, but you also sense that you are part of the island itself. And then there is the intimacy. Each bamboo-clad villa is enclosed, with its own pool and outdoor shower area, and yet each villa faces the beach. Waking up to an unimpeded, private view of the horizon is priceless.

### ◦ Build It, They Will Come

We're leaving one of the penitentiary buildings, Phu Tuong, and only now catch a glimpse of other visitors. For the past hour we have been exploring this complex of dilapidated prison cells by ourselves. Filled with lifelike models of humans that recreate the gruesome experience of incarceration, the place is eerie — a stark reminder of a darker past. And yet it is surprisingly serene. Large parts of the grounds are unkempt and many of the outer buildings are untouched. Here you can wander at will and open doors that have long been shut. The vestiges are at your fingertips.

We drive through town and discover a

place that is both typically Vietnamese *and* a world apart. A recently paved grid system has been created, but it's an infrastructure for a town that has yet to be fully built. The street names are up but many streets have no houses on them.

Towards the town's two piers we come across colonial-built houses, neglected villas, more prison complexes and a house, now transformed into the seafront Con Son Café. It's a mini version of Hoi An but French, and without the bustling market and rows of tailors. Open a few restaurants and cafes to bring in the tourists and the place will surely come alive. But for now it's a quiet but charming outpost in a country that thrives on frenetic activity.

Further down the coast toward Ben Dam port, Army bases are everywhere. Besides the blue and red dragon boats in the main harbour, there is no other evidence of the fishing trade out here. At Ben Dam port we find it. Or at least, a small-scale version of it. A pier-like construction with a criss-cross of three, retail-outlet blocks jutting out into the sea, this tiny space is home to

market stalls, grocers and a host of female-run karaoke-touting cafes full of rough looking, red-faced sailors. It's midway through the afternoon when we arrive and half of them are drunk. It's a friendly drunk and they are more than happy to welcome us on board.

I go for a wonder. Despite all the activity, few places seem to sell produce from the sea. It's odd. On Phu Quoc, a bigger and more densely populated island, much of the day's catch avoids mainland demand. This makes Phu Quoc a place to find some of the best seafood in Vietnam. But here it seems that everything goes to the mainland. On the whole island we only find two seafood restaurants. While the grouper and mackerel are excellent, the food is overpriced.

### ◦ The Unexplored

Despite the lack of seafood, the sea itself is quite the attraction. Friends hire local boats for a raucous two-day fishing trip and come back raving. Others navigate their way out to the outlying islands and secluded


beaches. And then there's the diving and snorkeling.

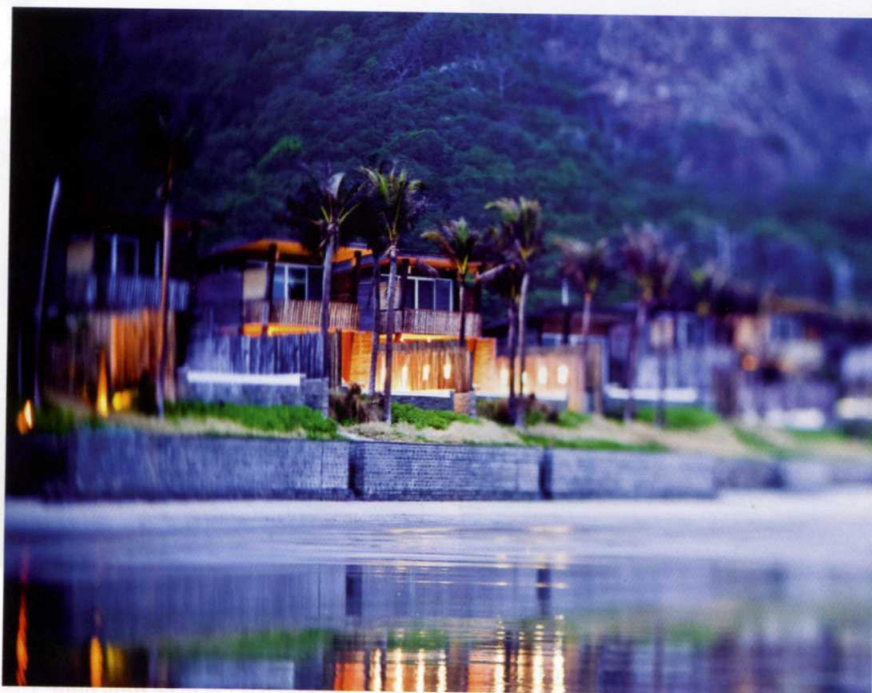
We go out into the sea with Rainbow Divers and I venture on my first fun dive in eight years. The site by Hon Tai Lon is deliberately shallow — 10m to 12m — and is perfect for someone trying to rediscover their aqualungs. It also has its own secluded beach and enough marine life, hidden crevices and coral to make it a reasonable dive. According to Rainbow Divers' George Shoemith and Ross Farmer, though, this is just the start of the diving experience here. At present they are diving 20 sites, some of them full of world class walls, corals and marine life. But they are about to be given access to one of the islands' three shipwrecks and they think there may be a total of 50 sites up for underwater exploration.

This sense of the unexplored isn't just the reserve of the marine park. It also runs through the island itself. We find a track leading to the paradise-perfect Dam Trau Beach next to the airport. The boy selling coconuts tells us of a freshwater pool a 20-minute walk over the rocks. We climb up, traverse through the edge of the national park, and on the other side find a deserted white-sand beach with a pool running to its edge. With its overhanging trees with auburn-coloured leaves and dense — every-shade-of-green — foliage and tadpoles, the pool could be an image out of a tropical themed screensaver. And yet no-one comes here.

Back around the cliffs at Mui Tau Be we find a collection of French-built fort bunkers, now bricked up but surrounded by barren weather-beaten scrub plants and with searing views over the sea. Later, when we venture into the National Park, we find paths leading to three more beaches on the opposite side of the island — Ong Dung, Bang and Da Tham. My guess is that these stretches of bleach-white sand have few visitors, too.

On my final morning I wake up to the sea roaring outside my villa. I lie there and look out past the beach into the deep blue. In my half-conscious state I'm totally relaxed — the noise of the ocean is calming. It's an indulgence and I love it. The resort and these islands feel like a world away from everyday life and yet they are only two-and-a-half hours door to door from the big city. Simply put, I don't want to leave. Between serene nights sat around the private pool, early morning walks along the resort's empty beach, a diving excursion and incessant motorbike drives around the island, this has been a trip to remember. In my few short days I've done lots but there is still so much more that is undiscovered. Most striking is how unexpected it is — this is one of Vietnam's last remaining idylls.

On the plane, we climb higher and higher as we make our way back to Ho Chi Minh City. And as Con Dao gets smaller and smaller, I start to work out the exact date I'll be able return. 



## THINGS TO KNOW

### ▶ GETTING THERE

**VASCO AIRLINES** ([vasco.com.vn](http://vasco.com.vn)) now runs three daily flights to and from the islands. Check their website for promotions. **AIR MEKONG** ([airmekong.com.vn](http://airmekong.com.vn)) also has a daily return flight to Con Dao. There is also a boat to the islands from Vung Tau. The trip takes 11 hours.

### ▶ EXPLORATION & ACTIVITIES

Six Senses Resort has a number of activities available including trekking to the lighthouse, island tours, kayaking, snorkeling, diving, tai chi, catamaran sailing, windsurfing and much more. They have also just opened their top-

end spa facilities. Check their website for details.

The islands have two certified diving schools, **RAINBOW DIVERS** (Tel: 0905 577671, [www.divevietnam.com/conda](http://www.divevietnam.com/conda)) and **DIVE DIVE DIVE** (Tel: 064 383 0701, [www.dive-conda.com](http://www.dive-conda.com)). Contact them directly for details of snorkeling and diving.

Motorbikes can be hired through the resort or in town for VND250,000 a day. There is one petrol station on the islands which is located in town.

For conservation information and

information on the national park go to [www.condaopark.com.vn](http://www.condaopark.com.vn).

### ▶ ACCOMMODATION

**SIX SENSES CON DAO**

[www.sixsenses.com/sixsensesconda](http://www.sixsenses.com/sixsensesconda)

**CON DAO RESORT**

[www.condaoresort.vn](http://www.condaoresort.vn)

**CON DAO SEA TRAVEL**

[www.condaoseatravel.com](http://www.condaoseatravel.com)

**SAIGON CON DAO**

[www.saigonconda.com](http://www.saigonconda.com)

To view a detailed map of Con Dao, visit our website at: [www.wordhcmc.com/maps](http://www.wordhcmc.com/maps)