

PRIME LOCATION

Luxury hidden oasis is the best Kep secret

Swiss-born Dan Kreis and his wife Cheang have created a balance between luxury and wilderness on the south coast

JUST off the main road, down a winding laneway and snuggled cosily into the forested hills of Kep lies a hidden oasis called Kep Lodge.

The guesthouse is the brainchild of Dan Kreis, 39, from Switzerland and his Khmer wife Cheang, 29. Built a little over two years ago, it has quickly established itself as one of Kep's most popular resting spots.

"I would describe this place as a balance between luxury and wilderness," explains Dan. "The luxury comes in the form of comfortable rooms with hot water, WiFi, a swimming pool and delicious cuisine. The wilderness encircles the complex and comes in the form of forests, natural springs and an abundance of wildlife."

In keeping with its natural, rustic theme, the roofs are all made of thatch. Wood has been used as the main construction material for the six bungalows, restaurant and family home of the guesthouse.

The bungalows are spaced apart with unobscured views of the Gulf of Thailand and Bokor Mountain. But the best vantage point for coastal scenery is from the terrace of the family home.

"When I lived in Switzerland, my apartments were always very high up with nice views," reveals Dan. "I wanted to continue this trend and also combine it with the Khmer tradition of building atop stilts. I wanted my new home to be high. Super high!"

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With his home built on the highest section of the property more than 4 metres above the ground, Dan has certainly achieved his goal. Along with its stunning, elevated view, a sea breeze makes the large veranda a perfect relaxation spot.

"I purposely didn't cover the whole balcony with roofing," Dan said.

"Roofs spoil the view of the stars. In smog-free Kep, the nighttime light from the stars and the moon is absolutely breathtaking."

Down on ground level, six bungalows are scattered among lush vegetation along quaint stone paths.

"My main design aim with the bungalows was simplicity. No unnecessary contraptions, and no clutter," Dan said.

"I also wanted to create a place where guests would feel at home. A place where they can kick off their shoes and chill



Kep Lodge owner Dan Kreis says he spent a lot of time and energy trying to achieve a warm and inviting atmosphere – and this is apparent in the spacious simplicity of the restaurant.

out. All the rooms are spacious with large bathrooms, and all have balconies with chairs and hammocks."

The feeling of spacious simplicity is also apparent in the design of the focal point of the guesthouse – the restaurant.

An absence of walls on three of the building's four sides combine with the high ceiling to create an open, unconfined setting. Without any TV or booming stereo system, the restaurant encourages the art of conversation with its quiet ambience. And the lighting is kept simple through the use of strings of small, sphere-shaped lanterns.

"The lighting in any restaurant is one of the single most important aspects," Dan said. "I spent a lot of time and energy trying to achieve a warm and inviting atmosphere. Hopefully the soft red, orange and yellow lighting makes the guests feel welcomed and comfortable. Just like home."

The relaxed, homely mood is reflected in the lounging areas in the restaurant.

In one section, dining tables and chairs are replaced with low sofas and a hammock, while in the chill-out area next to the pool table and dartboard, comfy cushions complement the extended wooden seating to create a sloucher's paradise.

But the newest and most popular addition to the guesthouse is the sleek and stylish infinity pool.

"Swimming pools with corners seem so artificial and manmade," explains Dan. "I wanted a more curved natural design to suit the natural surroundings."

The salt-water pool has an adults' section and a kids' paddling area with protective canopy. Around the pool's edges, sun-chairs and umbrellas are interspersed



Rattan adds to the natural feel on the balcony of the guest bungalow.

with lush vegetation, potted plants, and overhanging palm and banana trees. And at night, the underwater lights create a scene of pure tranquility.

Since its construction eight months ago, the pool has been a big hit with Dan's family and guests alike.

"My 18-month-old son Alex loves playing in the pool," reveals Cheang. "Dan and I also like to relax in the pool and watch the sunset together."

"When the light starts to fade, all you can see is uninterrupted water. It appears as if water stretches from the pool, across the ocean and all the way to Bokor Mountain in the distance." **WORDS AND PICTURES BY CONOR WALL**



The infinity pool caters to the whole family.



One of the six thatched-roof bungalows with views to Bokor Mountain.

Making the hard choice in garden design

NOT so long ago, people wanted to get rid of rocks in their yards. Now they often request them as part of the trend toward



BY JOEL M LERNER

more natural-looking gardens.

Rocks are the easiest sculptural elements to incorporate into a garden to create a natural-looking landscape, adding colour, contrast and interest, and requiring no maintenance.

Strategically placed, they can even provide a security barrier, keeping even the smallest of vehicles from harming buildings.

Rocks come in every size, from Stonehenge-like slabs to pebbles the size of peas, and in a natural kaleidoscope of colours. But they can weigh a ton, so you will need equipment and assistance to transport them.

Repetition is important. In nature, rocks repeat effortlessly. If you have only one natural rock outcropping in the yard, add more to make stone a theme. Vary sizes and spread them throughout garden beds – two to three per bed at most. Arrange in random fashion to appear as though they jut from the earth, simulating nature. Smooth, flat rocks can be placed for natural seats.

Measure the space where you plan to include rocks so you know what size you are

looking for. Select stone as carefully as you would your plants. Look for size, colour, texture and shape.

Smaller rocks can be used in a variety of ways. Low rock retaining walls are charming additions that give a manicured look to rustic, natural gardens. Wall-sized flat rocks can be organised and stacked without mortar for low walls.

Rocks enhance water features. Stone coping around natural water features such as a lily pond fits the rockscaping theme. Stones can be used to create waterfalls or fountains, with water bubbling up out of or gently falling down them.

Stone can be used to imply a riverbed and at the same time serve as an effective and ornamental drainage swale. Cover soil surface of a meandering U-shaped or V-shaped depression with consistent aggregate material such as rounded river gravel. Mix varying sized larger rocks for a natural stream design. **THE WASHINGTON POST**

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