

Captivating Kratie

Beyond cruising among the near-extinct Irrawaddy dolphins, **Liz Ledden** gives us the low-down on soaking up Kratie's old world atmosphere. Photographs by **Liz Ledden**.



100-pillar pagoda:
A touch more colour maybe?

"THE BEST RIVERFRONT IN Cambodia" is how long term Kratie expat Martin Leighfield describes the town's picturesque setting on a wide, blue expanse of the Mekong.

Certainly the town retains an atmospheric charm with its abundance of traditional Cambodian wooden houses and colonial architecture. It still has pony carts meandering along the riverfront and friendly, unaffected locals – you won't find any postcard-selling kids here!

The amicable Martin, who "keeps an eye on" Star Guesthouse while some young Khmer staff run the place, has noticed a shift in the type of traveller visiting the north-eastern city. Its

fledgling tourism industry was backpacker-oriented until late 2005, when a trickle of small tour groups started to arrive. Now more expats are venturing up from Phnom Penh.

The town's charming ambience provides a refreshing escape from Phnom Penh. But Martin advises to visit Kratie soon "while it's still quiet, hassle-free and cheap".

■ IN SEARCH OF IRRAWADDY DOLPHINS

The main tourist attraction in Kratie is undoubtedly the Irrawaddy dolphins. Despite facing extinction – there are less than 100 left in this part of the Mekong – they are surprisingly

easy to spot in a section of river named Kampi pool. About 15km north of Kratie, the pool can be reached by moto for US\$3-4 return, or by hiring your own bicycle or motorbike.

The dolphin watching boat service is well organised and hassle free, with fixed prices clearly displayed and no haggling. Entrance to Kampi pool is US\$2 for adults and US\$1 for under 15s. A one-hour boat cruise with driver is US\$2 per person for groups of three or more, or US\$3 per person if less. The prices are slightly higher in the wet season.

The pilots seem to realize the dolphins are Kratie's most precious commodity and are es-

sential to their tourism industry. They only use their motors when well clear of the dolphins, and then revert to paddling. It's an excellent example of a newly emerging focus on eco-tourism in Cambodia.

Out on the water, the dolphins are fascinating to watch as they dart around and leap slightly above the water's surface. Their speed creates a challenge for any amateur photographer. So maybe it's better to simply relax and observe rather than continually click away trying to get that elusive dolphin snap. In addition to the dolphins themselves, the trip offers a magnificent Mekong sunset in a peaceful, beautiful setting.

And if kitsch souvenirs are your thing, how about a carved wooden dolphin from the Kampi pool boat landing?

■ KRATIE MUST-SEES

Not far past the Kampi pool, Phnom Sambok is a hill housing a pagoda, monastery and home to an 86-year-old hermit monk. At the top of several long staircases lies a reward – beautiful views over the Mekong and lush countryside, albeit through some trees. An interesting diversion is a series of paintings depicting punishments for not adhering to the five main Buddhist dharmas (such as killing and stealing).

Well worth a visit is Wat Roka Kandal, the only preserved pagoda of its type in Cambodia. Built in the late 18th to early 19th century, Wat Roka Kandal has a red, black and gold interior much more traditional than the sometimes garish temple décor of today. A German organisation funded the restoration work of the temple, and it now houses a small craft centre selling wicker works by local artisans.

The 100-pillar pagoda at Sambor (which locals claim actually has 110 pillars) is a one hour drive from Kratie off the road to Stung Treng. A modern construction, the pagoda was built on the site of a 19th century wooden temple. A stupa said to contain the ashes of a princess from around 500 years ago is also on the site, painted a



Dolphin cruise

luminous gold on a bright candy pink base.

The large island in the Mekong visible from the main town is called Koh Trong. It represents a snapshot of rural Cambodian life, with its Chinese cemetery, Vietnamese pagoda, and traditional boat builders at work. 'Star Explorations' at Star Guesthouse offer day tours of the island (around US\$9 to 10 per person, depending on group size).

The market is a lively scene of activity, particularly in the morning when fish and fruit vendors line the surrounding pavements creating a dynamic atmosphere. It sells batik sarongs, an array



Golden stupa:
100-pillar pagoda

of local shoes and kitchenware, plus an abundance of colourful fresh produce. Wat Roka Kandal on the outskirts of town offers a selection of local crafts of the wicker variety (US\$1-6).

Kratie also offers bird watching opportunities and the surrounding countryside is a cyclist's dream. Simply walking around town checking out the wooden houses and local life on the rural outskirts is a fascinating way to spend an afternoon.

■ THE JOURNEY TO KRATIE

The recently improved road surface has slashed the travel time between Phnom Penh and Kratie. The 350km trip from Phnom Penh is about a six to seven hour drive or bus ride. Unfortunately this has meant that boat travel between Phnom Penh and Kratie has all but dried up, apart from a few charter boat services.

On the way, you can stop by Skuon (spider-town) and Kampong Cham with the latter doubling up as a relaxing place to stay the night if time permits.

There are two alternative routes between Kampong Cham and Kratie. National Highway 7 (NH7) is the best paved road of the two. It curves around near the Vietnamese border and is the preferred option for public



Touch of the past:
Colonial Kratie



buses. A one-way ticket should cost US\$4.50.

The alternative route is both more direct and more popular for motorbike riders seeking a challenge. Rubber plantations and Cham villages dot the countryside and the small town of Chhlong is a picturesque place to stop and look around before reaching Kratie. One of the old

colonial buildings is being given new life as a boutique hotel, Le Relais de Chhlong, although it is not yet completed.

EATING AND DRINKING

No dining experience in Kratie will break the bank – it's all cheap and cheerful local fare with a few western options. For delicious Khmer food, look no

further than the riverfront beer stalls lining the Mekong in the evening. For a few dollars a dish, try some char kroeung beef or a smoked fish salad to accompany a sunset beverage.

Red Sun Falling is a well-established western-run café and bar on the riverfront offering tasty food and is one of the few bustling places in the evening. Both the chicken and chips (US\$2.50) and the coconut curry with vegetables and rice (US\$1.50) come recommended. Decadent cocktails are also available – particularly impressive is the Muddy Mekong a snip at US\$1.50.

The menu at Star Guesthouse promises a mind boggling 400 different combinations of sandwiches. The juice and shake menu offers unique concoctions (US\$1.25 each), and the ice-cream sundaes (US\$1.75), some including liqueurs such as Baileys, are a rare treat in provincial Cambodia. They can also arrange packed lunches for US\$3.

le Relais de Chhlong is the first boutique hotel on the mythic Mekong river

40 mn from the hiradawy dolphins
This 1916 building is perfectly located between Mundolkiri and Rattanakiri provinces in Chhlong

le Relais de Chhlong



6 rooms with elegant decor
Swimming pool
bar, restaurant
Tours can be arranged

Mekong riverside, 100m from the Pagoda, Chhlong, Kratie province
012 501 742 - 012 617 586, e-mail : champeyinn@mobil.com.kh

Information

GETTING THERE:

Buses to Kratie depart from Central Bus Station, near Central Market.

Hua Lian Transportation Co. Ltd. Phnom Penh:

Street 230, in Mondial Centre
Tel: 012 376 807 or 023 223 025
Departs at 7.30am daily, US\$4.50

Kratie:

Ph 9, just off the riverfront
Tel: 012 535 387

Rith Mony Transport Phnom Penh:

137CD, Street 109
Tel: 023 991 329
Departs at 7am and 9am daily, US\$5

Kratie:

along the riverfront
Tel: 012 991 663

Sorya Transport Phnom Penh:

Cnr. Street 217 & Street 67
Tel: 023 210 359
Departs between 7am and 7.30am daily, 21,000 riel

Kratie:

next to Mekong Restaurant
Tel: 012 355 764

For private tours to Kratie with driver and guide:

Travel Indochina

43-44 Street 108, Phnom Penh
Tel: 023 991 978
cambodiasales@travelindochina.com

ACCOMMODATION:

Mekong Dolphin Resort

Behind Wat Roka Kandal
Tel: 072 971 729 or 023 982154
mekong_dolphin@online.com.kh
www.mekong-dolphin.com
Situated right on the Mekong with river-facing balconies, several traditional Khmer wooden houses turned into guest houses with bathroom and hot water. Rooms are US\$8 to US\$15.

Santepheap Hotel

Rue Preah Sumarit (the riverfront)
016 703 580 or 072 971 537
santepheapotel@yahoo.com
Conveniently located facing the Mekong. Rooms are US\$10 to US\$15 per night.

Sen Sok Guesthouse

South of market, near post office
Tel: 012 732 185 or 016 884 588
saratheam@yahoo.com

Small, friendly guesthouse with English-speaking staff and views over the countryside. A quiet haven away from the town centre, the rooftop area offers a place to relax and enjoy the scenery. Rooms are US\$4 to US\$10 a night.

Star Guesthouse

Opposite the market
Tel: 012 753 401
kratiestar@hotmail.com

A hub for arranging transportation and getting advice on travel to Ratanakiri. Also arranges trips to see the dolphins. Cheery, colourful and clean rooms cost either US\$3 or US\$4 a night.

When to Go

The **dry season** (Jan to May) is considered the ideal time to visit Kratie. Due to the improvements in National Highway 7, it is now possible to travel to Kratie in the wet season. Khmer public holidays are to be avoided as local visitors fill the hotels so rooms can be hard to come by.

The dolphin cruises are best undertaken in the morning or late afternoon, and it's easier to spot the dolphins in the dry season.