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Photo from <http://parksociety-cambodia>

Kirirom NATIONAL PARK KOMPONG SPEU PROVINCE, CAMBODIA

“Mountain of joy” or “Happy Mountain”, is the English meaning of Kirirom, a name suggested to the King by a monk from Phnom Penh. Kirirom was then a mountain resort (675 m asl), known for its pine-tree covered hills, waterfalls, and small lakes, and quite popular with Phnom Penh’s rich and famous as well as a favourite retreat for King Sihanouk himself in the 1960s. The plateau then was a large recreational complex, but the villas, road and other infrastructure were all destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era. The area was declared a National Park soon after Government troops won it back in 1992. Some buildings have been rehabilitated, and the National Park has again become a popular weekend location for nearby urban dwellers and residents of Phnom Penh.

Kirirom National Park, a high altitude plateau, is more famous for its unique,

high elevation pine forest, which forms the headwaters for numerous streams feeding Kompong Speu Town. The Park is situated 120 km west of Phnom Penh, Phnom Sruoch, District, Kampong Speu province (Cambodia Travel Guide), and abuts Koh Kong Province. It covers a total area of 35,000 hectares (350 km²), all of which is estimated to be composed of natural or semi-natural vegetation.

Kirirom or Preah Suramarit Kossamak (Preah Suramarith-Kosomak) as it is officially called in Cambodian was declared a national park in 1993 under IUCN Category II. The Park is part of the “South-West Cluster Protected Areas” that include the Phnom Bokor, Preah Sihanouk (Ream) and Kep National Parks, all of which covers an area of some 201,000 hectares.

The southwest coastal ranges and marine zone is defined as one of seven biodiversity conservation regions (IUCN

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Spotted linsang (*Prionodon pardicolor*)



Pileated gibbon

1997a) on the basis of its biological resources, geology and soils, and past and present use. This region includes wet tropical forest, coastal formations and marine areas generally associated with sandstones. It has low population densities and is dominated by natural and modified landscapes used for forestry, fisheries and the maintenance of biodiversity. This is considered to be one of the three highest priority regions for biodiversity conservation in the country (IUCN 1997a).

The mean annual total rainfall exceeds 5,000 mm in the Emerald Valley near Bokor in the Elephant Range. Kirirom, which is more distant from the coast in this range, receives about 2,000 mm annually. These ranges are largely Mesozoic sandstone, with localised areas of limestone and volcanic rock. Younger basalts in these ranges have produced rich supplies of gemstones (rubies, sapphires, and zircons).

The Plant and Animal Life

The rolling hills of the park are dotted with waterfalls, lakes and colourful wild plants. It is also an important wildlife sanctuary of many endangered species

The Park protects the largest *Pinus merkusii* forest, about 13,000 hectares, in the country. Other forest types include lowland evergreen and deciduous forests, as well as some medium altitude ever-

green forest. The area is connected to Phnom Bokor National Park by the forests of Pechnil Mountain, and shares a number of endangered species with it such as the tiger, sun bear and pileated gibbon. Banteng cattle and Elk's deer have also been recorded, and, in 1994, an unknown species of rhinoceros was reported from the forests north-west of the Park. There is a small tea plantation (1,500 ha) within the park, and also a small hydro-power dam on the headwaters of Prek Kampong Leu.

Although Kirirom has few larger types of wildlife, it is still an ideal spot to glimpse some of the Kingdom's unique birdlife; birdwatchers from other countries continue to visit the Park.

Cambodian researchers aided by the World Wildlife Fund and the Wildlife Conservation Society had photographed rare species for the first time in Cambodia at Kirirom (WWF, 12 January 2002). They have sighted the elusive spotted linsang, a slender cat-like carnivore. Tigers and leopards, clouded leopards, marbled cats, sun bears, Asian elephants, Asian wild dogs, and two species of wild cattle - gaur and banteng - were among the species caught in the camera traps.

A prominent area of *Pinus merkusii* occurs on the Kirirom Plateau in the Elephant Range, where *P. merkusii* grows with *Dipterocarpus obtusifolius*,

Rhodomyrtus tomentosa, *Phyllanthus officinalis*, and a variety of Melastomataceae and Rubiaceae species.

Park Management

The Ministry of Environment is responsible for the management and protection of all national parks and also for the development of eco-tourism in these parks. However, due to financial problems, recreational infrastructure and services are not yet in place (Chamrouen, 2000). The Ministry's Department of Nature Conservation and Protection directly manages Kirirom.

In Kirirom, officials of the Ministry of Environment have allowed villagers living near the Park to manage and harvest 400 hectares of the Park's forest. Some 548 families of the Chambak commune in Kompong Speu province have been given permission to harvest the timber for construction and private household needs, said Chay Smith, director of the Conservation Department at the Environment Ministry.

Amanda Bradley, coordinator of MLUP Baitong (Green Shadow), a local environment NGO that supports park management in increasing environmental awareness and conservation through education, training and advocacy, said, "At the moment, we are dealing with a captive audience, but in the future we'd like to see the rangers attracting non-captive audiences as well, and making outreach and environmental education a standard feature at the park." Bradley also reported that Kirirom now receives over 10,000 visitors a year.

The Park has deployed about 29 rangers, operating from three Park stations strategically located around the area. Through its Park and Ranger programme, MLUP Baitong trains rangers in interpretation, running a Visitor Education Center, maintaining nature trails, organising weekly educational trips for students in local schools, and supporting community outreach by the Park staff. MLUP Baitong also acts as an advisor on new Protected Areas legislation.

In terms of general park management, Kirirom has been supported by the

Cambodia Environmental Management Programme (1997), and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (1998-1999). The Wildlife Conservation Society conducted bird and mammal surveys in 1998, and the MLUP Baitong continues to implement environmental awareness activities.

For more information, contact: Nhal Thoun, Director of Kirirom National Park, Department of Nature Conservation and Protection, Ministry of Environment

How to get there

Kirirom is the only park accessible to Phnom Penh in a day trip, or as a stop-over on the way to the coast from the city.

The Park can be reached through a serviceable access road, which is off the main road known as **Route 4 (or Highway 4 as some websites describe it.)**

A large new concrete sign on the right as one drives from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville makes finding the turnoff very easy. The road rises steeply but is paved and in quite good condition.

Route 4 to the Sihanoukville port is reportedly the best road in the country, built in the early 1960s with American money before King Norodom Sihanouk severed relations with the United States. It would take three and a half hours to reach the port in a chartered bus. It is 112km southwest of Phnom Penh in the Elephant Mountains.

Park fees and facilities

The Park complex includes a visitor's centre built on land donated by the King and also a guest house.

Park rangers charge foreigners a 20,000 riel (\$5) entrance fee.

Best time to visit

Tourists began to visit Kirirom only in 1997. Tourists or visitors usually come during the weekends and public holidays; from May to October, visitor arrivals decrease due to the rainy season.

What to see and do

Kirirom has great potential for visitors. The primary activity of visitors has been to drive to a set of waterfalls, swim in one of the small lakes, and have a picnic around

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the lakes.

It also offers great potential for hiking to the thickly forested mountains dotted with lakes, rivers and waterfalls

Other Places of Interest

Phnom Penh

The Royal Palace and the **Silver Pagoda** (sometimes closed if the King is in residence). The Palace is a magnificent example of Khmer architecture, that was built in 1866. Here, one can see the Throne Hall and Napoleon III Pavilion.

Silver Pagoda is one of the richest shrines in the world – some 5, 000 silver tiles reportedly make up the floor.

Cambodia Angkor Tours (at No. 56 National Road 6, Siem Reap, Cambodia; Telephone: (855) 12-912 005; Fax; (855) 63-963 721; Email: procambodia@yahoo.com) recommends the following activities or places of interest close to Kirirom National Park.

There are endless possibilities for the adventurers, around the Sihanoukville area. These include island trips, scuba diving, ocean fishing, nature walks and riverboat trips to Ream and Kirirom National Parks, exploring fishing villages and secluded beaches, waterfall trips, and overnight stays at Bokor Hill Station, Kep and Kampot. Facilities are still pretty

basic. For island and ocean trips using local fishing boats, arrangements should be made at least 24 hours or more in advance. Several, if not most, of the western-managed guesthouses and hotels arrange boat trips and island picnics, waterfall trips and treks to the national parks and Bokor. Guesthouses such as Les Feuilles, Melting Pot, Mealy Chenda, Chez Mari-Yan, Marlin Bar, and Chez Claude can make reasonably priced arrangements. But only Chez Claude provides scuba trips; it has a good collection of fishing gear, and offers a wide variety of services including fishing, scuba and snorkeling excursions and equipment rental, island tours and picnicking, and sailboarding. Contact Chez Claude at Tel: 012-824870, Fax: 034-320032.

Red Snappers Tours specialises in national park tours, Bokor/Kep trips and other local adventures such as boat trips. Call tel: 012-808222

Ses-Samooth Tourism arranges organised tours to the town, the parks, waterfalls, etc. Contact Mr. Soun Sophal at the Department of Tourism in Sihanoukville. Tel: 012-808222.

Sihanoukville

Miles of lazy white sand beaches, warm surf, tropical sun and salty air. This is Sihanoukville, Cambodia's premier



Royal Palace



Sihanoukville

beach town. Only a 30-minute flight or a 3-hour drive from Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville's pristine beaches and easy access draw more visitors every year.

Most of the shoreline surrounding the town is beautifully unspoiled, a place where secluded beaches and picturesque little seafood restaurants can be found.

Sihanoukville is home to Cambodia's only deep-water commercial port; it has a more international and commercial atmosphere than most provincial cities. And as a recently rediscovered tourist destination, Sihanoukville offers a surprising 900-room hotel and some of the country's finest dining and nightlife outside of Phnom Penh.

One can also do some sightseeing in the following areas:

Cambrew Brewery. The government operated the brewery from 1967-1975 and produced Angkor and Bayon Beer. In 1991, it was refurbished and Cambrew started producing the same products. The brewery is open to the public only by advanced request. It is located 2.5km west of the port on Route 4.

Fisherman's Pagoda. This is an informal collection of spirit houses and a concrete altar set in the rocks close to at least two bat caves, south of Otres beach. It is said that monks live out there sometimes. To get there, drive to the south end of Otres beach where you will find a

small river, a police station and a fisherman's house. For a nominal fee, the fisherman sometimes ferries people to the pagoda.

Fishing Port (Kampong Pier Nep Lok): The port sits at the end of the long jetty about 2km north of the main port. Its wooden quay and surrounding village are a continual whirl of color and activity. The blue and orange boats and the movement of goods and people are perfect shots for photographers.

Independence Square. Constructed in 1985 to commemorate the independence and sovereignty of Cambodia, the Square features an open meeting hall, the Independence Monument (Vimean

Ekareach) and a small garden. Ceremonies are held there every 7th of January.

Minority Village: The village of Samrong, about 38km north of Sihanoukville on Route 4, is occupied primarily by the Sa-Och, an ethnic minority people.

Port of Sihanoukville: The port was constructed from 1955-60. It can be seen from Victory Beach and from Phe St. The port waters are 11-13 meters deep except for an 8-9 meters point in the channel near Koh Pos. The older quay can be seen from Victory Beach jutting 290m into the ocean. The new section to the north consists of a 350-m quay and 3117-m of breakwater. Ships approach from the west or between Koh Pos and the mainland.

Sihanoukville Mountain (Phnom Krong Preah Sihanouk). This 135-m high peak offers a spectacular view of the area. Take Route 4 about 2.5km northwest of the port. Make a hard right turn at Cambrew and follow the road up the hill, about 200m pass Wat Leu to the rocks.

Places of Worship

Wat Chotynieng: Commonly known as Wat Leu (Upper Wat), it overlooks the town from the top of Sihanoukville Mountain. It currently houses 54 monks and a primary school. The interior is painted with panels depicting the life of Buddha. At the rear are portraits of the founder, Prince

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Junot, and Ok Om who is the leader of the Buddhist community in this area. In front of the chapel is a statue of Ok Om, erected in 1966.

Wat Khrom: Lower Wat sits on a small hill on Santipheap St. overlooking the ocean.

St. Michael's Church: Constructed in 1960, this church serves the local Catholics in the area. This church serves about 50 Vietnamese and Khmer families in the area. Services are held in Khmer every second Sunday at: 8:00. It is located just off of Boray Kamakor St. near the intersection with Mitapheap Kampuchea-Soviet St. ■

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