

Route 2 – Phnom Pehn to Sihanoukville loop

Ride from the Cambodian capital through the laid back seaside resorts of Kampot and Kep, then past traditional fishing villages to trendy Sihanoukville and back to Phnom Pehn over one of Cambodia's few mountain passes. Well, it's really more of a small hill but in Cambodian terms the climb is just about as big as they come. After your seaside holiday, a couple long days on the bike will take you back into the bustling capital.

Distance: 500km

Duration: 7 days

Terrain: Entirely paved. Mostly flat but with some proper hills around Sihanoukville and on Route 4 back into Phnom Penh.

Accommodation: Guesthouses all the way.

Highlights: The ride from Kampot to Sihanoukville. Chilling on the beach and eating great seafood.

Lowlights: Long distances between accommodation.

Tips: Give yourself lots of time so you can relax in Kampot and Sihanoukville. These are fun places to spend a few days.

Section 1 – Phnom Penh to Takeo (80km)

Head south out of Phnom Penh on Norodom Boulevard, following signs to Takeo. The whole way to Takeo on Route 2 is lined with food and drink sellers, including plenty of sugar cane juice and tukaluk vendors. Refreshment is rarely more than a couple minutes away. The road can be quite busy on weekends if people are heading to the seaside. Soon after you reach the junction where you turn left towards Takeo, you'll see several guesthouses before you reach the town. Here we found a modern, clean room for \$5 U.S. including cable television and an ensuite bathroom. You can also find accommodation in the town itself.

Section 2 – Takeo to Kampot (90km)

From Takeo, you follow a small crossroad to reach Route 3, turning left once you reach the main road. Like yesterday, there are villages along the length of the road and you're never far from someone selling something to eat or drink. You will pass through a couple Muslim villages, very noticeable from the change in dress of the people. If you shout 'salam alaykum' - the traditional Muslim greeting - to the kids in reply to their cries of 'hello' you'll get some pleasantly surprised giggles in return.

The town of Chhuk is as good a place as any to have lunch with its choice of a few food stalls and restaurants. You'll also see a guesthouse and a village homestay marked before you arrive in Chhuk, perhaps an option if you decide to put in a long day from Phnom Penh and don't stay in Takeo.

Kampot has a range of accommodation options from the \$5 U.S. a night basic guesthouses to atmospheric hotels costing \$30-40 U.S. a night. Many of the hotels and guesthouses are on the riverfront. The Bokor Mountain Lodge has a bar called Hakiri where you can go for happy hour draft Anchor for just \$0.75 U.S. and use their free wireless internet connection. Around the town you'll find the usual selection of street food and tukaluk stalls. We particularly recommend one man on the riverfront who does a roaring trade in fried vegetarian noodles with an egg on top for just 2,000 Riels.

If you have time to spend, consider staying in Kampot and doing a loop out to Kep for the day or you could spend the night in Kep at the guesthouses and hotels there. There's also the possibility to ride out to some waterfalls 7km from town on the opposite side of the river (cross the bridge and turn right), a popular picnic and swimming spot with locals.

Section 3 – Kampot to Sihanoukville (105km)

This is the most beautiful section of the trip. Even in the rain we enjoyed it! The road is in superb condition with a paved shoulder until you reach the junction with Route 4 to Sihanoukville. Villages are a bit more spread out than the previous two days but there are still plenty of opportunities to pick up food and water. The little fishing ports make great pictures and keep an eye out for shrimp drying by the side of the road. Just don't run over them!

You bear left onto Route 4 in Veal Renh. There is a dreary looking guesthouse in Veal Renh, although it's hard to spot. Only a small sign with the word 'guesthouse' marks the way. If you just want to eat, watch for a Chinese restaurant on your right as you turn from Route 3 onto Route 4. There you can get decent fried noodles.

You lose your shoulder for the rest of the way to Sihanoukville but it's not a big deal as most traffic is respectful. About 15km before Sihanoukville there are a few sizable hills and no shops so make sure your water bottles are full. It's not immediately clear when you arrive near Sihanoukville which way to go to reach the downtown area, although a few of the beaches are marked. You may have to ask directions or better yet try to pick up a map of Sihanoukville in one of the numerous free magazines before you arrive. You should be able to get this in just about any bar in Kampot.

In the peak season, staying near the beach is an attractive option but in the low season you're better off staying in town where more things are open. If you want cheap street food, you'll also want to stay in the downtown area. Everything on the beach is relatively expensive where food is concerned.

Section 4 – Sihanoukville to Phnom Penh (230km)

Retrace your steps out of Sihanoukville, over the hills and back to the junction town of Veal Renh. Stock up on any water and food you might want here because the villages thin out quickly after Veal Renh.

Traffic has the potential to be heavy on Route 4 so keep an eye on what's coming up behind you and don't hesitate to pull over onto the dirt shoulder if vehicles are coming in both directions. The first day we found traffic quite manageable but we finished relatively early in the day. The second day, we cycled later into the afternoon and the trucks returning from the port to Phnom Penh can be a real pain. Happily the dirt shoulder is surprisingly rideable if it hasn't been too wet and about 30km before Phnom Penh a paved shoulder returns. The road was built by the Americans and is in excellent shape.

Once you leave Veal Renh you go through some palm oil trees and after the first few villages there's very little to eat or drink. What villages and markets you do see tend to be more widely spaced than elsewhere in Cambodia. Pick up cold drinks and snacks when you see them as it may be 10km or more before you get another chance to buy refreshments. The town of Stung Chhay, around 75km out, is a good spot for lunch, with a couple restaurants and street stalls around. For a novel experience, look for the town gambling den and have lunch there.

About 86km from Sihanoukville is the town of Chamkar Luong where you can also get food and drinks. There's no accommodation here but if you continue down the road you'll soon see huge signs for the Picnic Retreat with bungalows and restaurant, around the 95km mark. The bungalows cost \$10 U.S. and are quite nice, with their own little balconies overlooking the countryside. The restaurant is outrageously priced so you'd be wise to bring your own provisions for dinner and breakfast as there's nothing around the resort. Maybe pick up some fruit and snacks from the roadside stalls a few kilometers before the Picnic Retreat.

There is a small stall run by a family across from the entrance to the Picnic Retreat and if you've got a stove you can buy eggs and fresh herbs there to make a cracking omelette or just buy the ice cold beer and have a liquid supper.

Heading out from the resort, there's a town 10km away and another around the 20km mark. At just over 30km the road climbs to a peak, although the ascent is just a couple kilometers long. At the top are many shrines to offer prayers. Going down the other side, there are quite a few places to eat and this side of the mountain is generally more populated.

You can get a guesthouse in Kampong Speu (there are three clustered together as you exit the town towards Phnom Penh) or carry on into Phnom Penh for a long day. Route 4 takes you down to the riverfront. Just keep going straight and it will loop round and drop you right at the water.