

CAMBODIA
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BOKOR

DREARIEST CASINO IN THE WORLD

By PETER HANN

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CAMBODIA is probably the only country in the world that runs a full-scale gambling casino at a loss. The casino is at Bokor, a newly-opened resort 3,500 feet up in the southern coastal hills, about 100 miles south of the capital of Phnom Penh.

Two years ago, Cambodia's affable head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, decided that Bokor should be turned into a tourist attraction second only to the famed Angkor Wat.

"We want it to be a place where everyone, Cambodian or foreigner, rich or poor, can relax and enjoy the fresh air," he declared.

Sihanouk accordingly ordered that the road from the nearest town, Kampot, be widened and paved; and that a number of half-derelict French villas at the site be rebuilt.

A GOOD VIEW

The largest of these villas became Bokor Palace Hotel — a richly-furnished, well-appointed hostelry with elaborate facilities and a breathtaking view of the ocean and headlands 3,000 feet below.

Plans were also laid for what the Prince called "a modest township" at Bokor. Two other villas were turned into a town hall and an army rest centre.

But the *piece de resistance* of Bokor was the erection of Cambodia's first and only gambling casino.

This was a two-storey brick and flagstone building whose heady delights, the Prince indicated, would attract a stream of tourists. To guard local morals, however, he decreed that the gambling would only be for foreigners. No Cambodians were to be allowed.

By January of 1962, construction at Bokor was considered advanced enough for Prince Sihanouk officially to open the resort. To mark the event, the diplomatic corps was invited to a gala celebration at Bokor Palace, where the Prince was as effervescent as the champagne.

"I hope that Bokor may become one of those little hill stations

which holiday-makers leave with regret and the determination one day to return," he beamed.

But today, more than a year later, the holiday-maker will find his determination thoroughly sapped in merely trying to reach Bokor.

The National Tourist Office has no information on the resort and apparently cannot help anyone who wants to go there. Until last year they ran cars regularly to the casino, but these have been discontinued. Now they suggest hiring a private limousine for 1,500 riels. (Officially, 35.08 riels equal one American dollar.)

A persistent search, however, will disclose that there are taxis which go to Kampot every hour for 60 riels. It is a hot, uncomfortable ride; but from Kampot the visitor can get to the resort in a brand-new minibus for only another 10 riels.

The first view of the casino is disappointing. It is an unpretentious building, about the size of a large house. Round about there are parking lots, a reservoir and a scattering of nondescript structures in various stages of construction or decay.

At the entrance to the casino is a sign in Khmer, Vietnamese and



Chinese announcing that no Cambodians are allowed inside to gamble. Just inside the doorway, behind a board which announces "Police Controle" in letters a foot high, sit two policemen displaying large revolvers. Their job is to keep the Cambodians out.

Gambling takes place in two large rooms, each about 40 feet by 20, and four smaller ones. Over the doorway of each, there are signs saying "Poker Russe" or "Domino" or "Majong" or "Douze Bete." Inside there are plain tables and chairs — and a limit of 20,000 riels. The star attraction of Bokor casino is one of the larger rooms, which is labelled "La Roulette" in red neon and contains a single roulette wheel. Here the house limit is 35,000 riels.

There is no music in any of the six rooms. No drinks are served. And while the girl attendants look neat in their light blue skirts and blouses, they are far from pretty.

FEW VISITORS

On an average weekday, about 20 people make the long, difficult journey up the mountain to Bokor. The great majority are not, as the Prince hoped, foreigners. They are some of the many Chinese and Vietnamese who live in Cambodia but do not have citizenship. The few truly "foreign" visitors are usually French residents of the country.

Bokor's biggest time is at weekends. Then from 100 to 300 gamblers visit the casino to risk their money on the turn of a card or the spin of a wheel. At such times, the Bokor Palace may have as many as 40 overnight guests.

But neither the hotel nor the casino has ever played host to the crowd it did when the Prince spoke of his hopes for Bokor with such enthusiasm. Most of the time the resort's staff far outnumber its visitors. Most nights the ball at "La Roulette" spins only to amuse the bored croupiers themselves.

Cambodia runs the world's most unsuccessful casino, because it is the dreariest casino in the world. ■