



Wooden fishing boats bob around the Con Son harbour, overseen by rocky outcrops.

FROM PRISON TO

paradise

Vietnam's island archipelago of Con Dao — once a penal colony, now a holiday destination boasting great natural beauty — is a soothing balm for the senses.

WORDS / JOCELYN PRIDE

“I come here when things go wrong,” says our guide Huong, the vibrancy in her youthful eyes glistening in the darkness. “It gives me strength.”

Cemeteries, stereotyped in horror movies, are meant to be creepy at night. But joining the nightly pilgrimage to honour the 20,000 prisoners who died as martyrs on Con Son island, a former “hell on earth” penal colony, is strangely uplifting.

We follow the evocative sound of chanting and heady scent of incense mingled with floral tributes,

meandering along the pathways of Hang Duong Cemetery amid towering trees entwined with dripping vines to a grassy clearing. Among rows of modest stone graves, we gather around one elaborate circular headstone where the face of a young girl etched in white marble is bathed in moonlight. The words engraved simply say: “Vo Thi Sau born 1933, died 1952, aged 19.”

To the Vietnamese, Sau is a symbol of patriotism. From age 14, she was a bold revolution fighter against the French rulers and executed before her 20th birthday. As we stand gazing at Sau’s grave laden with fruits, flowers and large stone pots stuffed with incense sticks twinkling as mini beacons of hope, tears start to drizzle down my cheeks. I’m not alone. It’s a universal thing — raw emotion to pay homage to those who fought for a better future.

Testament to respecting history, yet moving forward, Con Dao — a chain of 16 islands of which Con Son is the largest — flies in the face of its notorious past. Nowadays it’s a place to escape to, not from; a place of solace, healing and jaw-dropping beauty.

SOOTHING THE SENSES

Earlier in the day, we’d flown 45 minutes from Ho Chi Minh City to Con Dao’s central (and only inhabited) island. With one road, two sets of traffic lights and a population of around 7000, it’s a welcome relief from the constant honking horns and choking fumes of the mainland. Craggy rocky outcrops dip into the azure sea that even under cloud looks iridescent, kilometres of silky white sand stretch over deserted beaches, macaque monkeys swing through entangled rainforests smudged with flame trees and swampy ponds are filled with Vietnam’s national flower, the lotus.

Although the number of international visitors is on the rise (especially after Angelina and Brad holidayed here), there’s only a scattering of hotels and guest houses. Conservation is at the core of the archipelago. More than 80 per cent of Con Dao’s land and water is national park.

Seamlessly melting into the sand dunes along a two-kilometre footprint-free, jungle-fringed beach, Sixth Senses is our home for four nights. Committed to sustainability, the resort has 50 villas built from local timbers and recycled materials that pack a high wow factor in elegance yet simplicity.

Inside our beachfront villa, I feel like a castaway who has stumbled into

utopia: wooden-lined walls, white soft furnishings, mosquito nets draped across the bed, all overlooking a private pool that blurs into the glassy sea. Wooden boardwalks and laneways lined with bamboo fences wind through the resort linking the central “marketplace” (aka restaurants, activity centre and a very cool ice-cream parlour) with a sky observatory, kitchen garden and wellness centre.

Community spirit is the soul of Con Dao’s first eco-luxe resort, however, as it employs 300 people. Like Huong, many of the staff were born on the island. “When they started to build the resort, it was my goal to get a job here,” says Huong. “I knew I needed to learn English, so I hung around bars and cafes and listened and practised.” Huong is the perfect guide — a lifetime of anecdotes, quick witted and loyal to her birthplace. Everywhere we go, people greet her as part of their family.

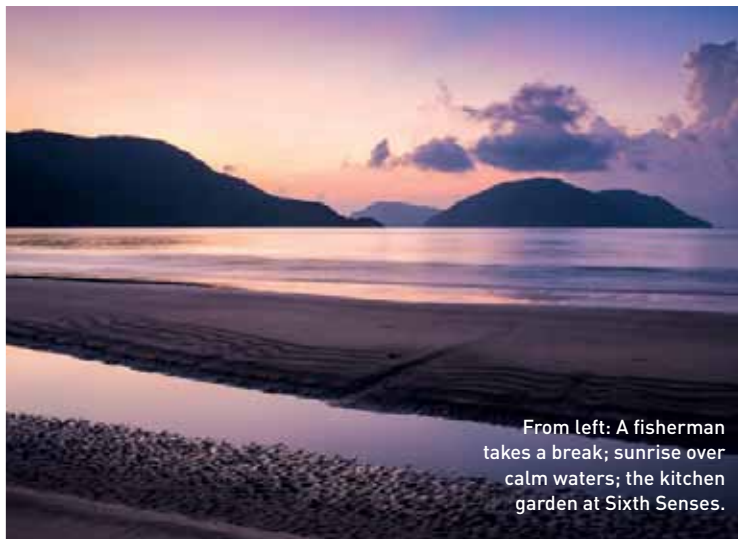
VILLAGE LIFE

One morning, Huong takes us to her old primary school to see part of the Sixth Senses’ “giving back” program. Excited faces of children dressed in crisp white shirts and red ties high-five Huong and crowd around us wanting to catch a glimpse of the Australian animal book and koala puppet I’ve brought for the school. Within a few minutes, shyness vanishes and small hands tug at my fingers and heartstrings. “How high does a kangaroo jump?” “Have you cuddled a koala?” “Are there snakes in Australia?”

In another part of the school, mums with babes in arms are lined up at a large stainless-steel tank filling up water bottles. Huong explains the Crystal Water system was installed through donations from guests of Sixth Senses. “It gives the 350 children in the school fresh drinking water,” she says. “Their parents can come and collect water to take home.”

Away from the school, village life centres on the sea and marketplace. The harbour is filled with spearmint and bright blue wooden fishing boats bobbing around while fishermen clean the morning’s catch, mend nets and splice ropes. Ice is king to prepare the seafood for export to mainland Vietnam. We watch as wiry bare-chested men make blocks of ice look like polystyrene bricks as they throw them from the wharf onto the boats.

Closer to shore, tiny round basket boats called coracles are dotted throughout the harbour. Fishermen



From left: A fisherman takes a break; sunrise over calm waters; the kitchen garden at Sixth Senses.



spin around manoeuvring these strong, quaint-looking boats woven from bamboo and waterproofed with cow dung to tend to the maintenance of the fleet and carry fishing gear.

While fishing on the island is predominately male orientated, the market is traditionally the women's domain. Colourful stalls sprawl amid French colonial buildings, many restored, others tumbling down. It's early morning and the market is buzzing. Huong excitedly whisks us from one stall to the next.

"Oh, you have to try this," she says a hundred times over as we devour the freshness of everything from dragon fruit and mangoes to steaming noodle soup and delicate, scrummy rice-paper rolls. After a couple of hours of fast-paced eating and chatting with the forever-smiling stall holders, we collapse in the shade of an ancient Cay Bang tree. As the namesakes of this village, Thi Tran Cay Bang "Malabar almond tree town", bang trees tower over its pretty streets and wide boulevards.

Local recipes are also the signature of Sixth Senses. One afternoon, we don chefs' hats and aprons and learn the nuances of Vietnamese cooking from No, a quietly spoken chef with a flair for giving traditional recipes a modern twist. "All my dishes start as recipes that have been passed down to me," No says. "The secret is to take time to make good stock and cook straight from the garden."

We pluck herbs and vegetables from the kitchen garden and stand around benches in the outdoor kitchen creating delicacies such as hand rolls stuffed with prawns, crispy rice pancakes and a rainbow of clay-pot flavours using ingredients with the lowest of food miles: fish straight from the wharf.

MIND, BODY, SOUL

In addition to appearing in its food, fresh produce from the garden features in the Sixth Senses' wellness centre. Massage oils, hair products and toiletries are made with herbs, fruits, nuts and tropical plants using traditional recipes inspired by Dr Arneesh, an Indian-born yoga master who's made Con Dao his home and leads a program of beauty and wellness therapies including Vietnamese rituals, massage and yoga.

I've never had a knack for yoga (I'm usually at the back of the class, trying to cajole my ramrod-type knees to perform an impossible contortionist trick) but after a few sessions with Dr Arneesh I'm a convert — maybe even a yogini. In the open-walled studio overlooking the sea, Dr Arneesh's gentle voice guides me through an introduction to yoga. And I get it. Really get it. For the first time, I realise I don't need the flexibility of an Olympic gymnast to enjoy yoga. It's ironic it takes a trip to a tiny island I've barely heard of to make this discovery.

A further life-changing experience starts on our last afternoon with four words from the activities co-ordinator: "Conditions tonight are perfect."

Like kids getting ready for their first party, we scramble our "any weather" gear together and meet Huong, a couple more guides and other excited guests on the foreshore at precisely 5pm. All piling into a small speed boat, we chug for an hour across to Bay Canh, a vivid green land mass jutting straight out of the sea. Dragging the boat into the shallows, we splash through the water, clambering over twisted mangroves onto a track through an impenetrable-looking forest to reach one of the jewels of the South China Sea, with turquoise water gently caressing the milky white sand of a perfectly curved cove.

"No one really knows why this beach is one of the best places in Southeast Asia for sea turtles," says Huong. "Around 2 million eggs have been laid here even since I was born." It's an astonishing figure — but, with poaching an omnipresent threat, protecting the turtles and their eggs is serious business. Thanks to a team of rangers within the national parks and a volunteer scheme aimed at Vietnamese citizens aged between 21 and 45, the turtle egg incubation program has a 90 per cent hatching success rate.

Before the light fades, we set up deckchairs overlooking the beach and get the rundown on the program from one of the smartly uniformed rangers. Turtle HQ is a concrete shack with a large outdoor area where the rangers sleep in hammocks under a bamboo-thatched roof. "We live here for two months then take a break," our host ranger says.

We're guided to a large, hefty, cyclone-fenced compound watched over by rangers 24/7. Peering through the fencing, it looks like a plant nursery: rows of small mounds marked with garden stakes. But, instead of seeds, each mound contains turtle eggs — hundreds of them. We're told how, after the female turtle lays her eggs, rangers carefully transfer them from the beach to the ground in the incubation area in order to protect them from poachers.

One section of the nursery is for females and the other for males. "The sex of a turtle is decided by the temperature of the sand," the ranger says. "It needs to be warmer for females so we dig shallower nests." As we gaze at the mounds, a tiny head pushes out of the sand followed by the body of a hatchling. "It's a girl!"



From left: Counting sea turtle eggs is all in a night's work; one of Con Dao's pristine coastlines; offerings of honour at the grave of political prisoner Vo Thi Sau.



Usually the rangers wait to gather up a few hatchlings and release them nearer the water's edge but "our girl" is independent and in a hurry to explore her world. Somehow wriggling herself under the fence, she's away. Keeping a safe distance, we follow her down the sandy slope. One small step for a reptile alone in the world, one giant step for nature guiding her to the shore. Sensing the water, she speeds up, launches in, floats over the ripples and discovers her "feet" are ready-made flippers. Within seconds she's gone, leaving nothing more than a precious memory in her wake.

HELPING HANDS

Although with nature there's no guarantee, as nightfall approaches the rangers are hopeful of some turtle egg-laying action. "There's very little wind, moon and the sea is calm," says our host ranger. It's a waiting game. A quiet one. "Please, no loud laughter or voices; turtles scare easily and won't build a nest if something frightens them." We devour our picnic dinner and speak in whispers to vote on a name for "our" turtle: Destiny. A strong name for a strong turtle that we hope will be the one in a thousand that makes it to maturity.

Just after midnight, a ranger comes to announce there's a turtle on the beach preparing her nest. We remain totally silent and wait for the signal that it's OK to join the other rangers. In a tight-knit group, we steal down the slope onto the sand. Slivers of moonlight dance across the water and the gentle breeze is a relief from the humidity.

"Once the turtle starts to lay her eggs we can go closer," says the ranger, pointing to a black blob about 20 metres away. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I make out the shape of the turtle flicking

sand into the air at a feverish rate.

Guided by our host, we creep towards the nest until we're within a couple of metres. The turtle is now oblivious to anything other than her goal — laying eggs. And plenty of them. Pop, pop, pop: perfectly round table-tennis-ball-sized eggs fall into the nest with the precision of a rapid-fire tennis-ball machine. With a final push to squeeze out the last egg, the turtle covers the nest, draws breath and meanders back to the water. She will have no further contact with the nest. Her mission's accomplished — all in less than half an hour.

After the ranger uncovers the nest, he lays the eggs out in rows and we count in unison. The total equals a staggering 122. Gently lifting each egg, we place them into baskets ready to carry the precious cargo to the nursery compound. Still warm, the mathematically perfect spheres feel slimy and rubbery. Digging replicas of the turtle's nest, we place 80 of the eggs in the female nursery and 42 in the male.

"The eggs will stay in here for 45–60 days," says Huong. As we cover the nest I think of Destiny starting her life journey. If she makes it to sexual maturity, in 30 years' time, somehow she'll find this beach, lay her eggs and the circle of life will continue.

Vo Thi Sau's "circle" was tragically broken, but the legacy she and the other political prisoners left behind on this exquisite and intriguing speck in the South China Sea cocoons the islands in goodness, respect and honour. 🍌

■ *The writer travelled with assistance from Sixth Senses resorts.*

Jocelyn Pride is an award-winning freelance travel writer and photographer based in Melbourne. In 2016, she was awarded Best Responsible Travel story by the Australian Society of Travel Writers for an earlier article in WellBeing. W: jocelynpride.com.au.

ESCAPE ROUTES

■ Getting there

Con Dao airport (on the island of Con Son) is a 45-minute flight from Ho Chi Minh City. VASCO, a subsidiary of Vietnam Airlines, offers several flights daily. See vietnamairlines.com.

■ Staying there

The limited choice of accommodation adds to Con Dao's beauty. For full-on pampering in an eco-luxe setting, Sixth Senses ticks all the boxes. sixsenses.com/resorts/con-dao/destination

There are also several inexpensive and midrange guest houses scattered throughout the main town. Visit hotels-in-vietnam.com for all listings.

■ When to go

Being close to the equator, Con Dao is a year-round sort of place. If you're a diver, the visibility is best from February to July. The wet season is from May to September with usually half an hour of heavy rain each afternoon. This coincides with the turtle season and is also when the island is at its greenest. Between November and February, expect winds and loads of sunshine. The average yearly temperature hovers around 27 degrees Celsius.

■ What to take

Vietnamese dong is the local currency. American dollars are also usually accepted. Con Dao is not considered in a malaria zone; however, it's always best to check with your health professional. If you are easily bitten by insects, pack a good natural insect repellent for potential sand flies. To dive, you might like to take some of your own gear (there's a PADI dive centre on the island). To hike, you need boots; to relax, a hat and casual clothes.