

One of the 15
riverside tents at
Shinta Mani Wild,
Bill Bensley's
new luxury jungle
camp in Southern
Cardamom
National Park.



CAMBODIA

FROM THE CARDAMOM MOUNTAINS TO THE STREETS OF SIEM REAP, ONE OF THE REGION'S BEST-KNOWN HOTEL DESIGNERS IS HELPING TO RAISE THE BAR FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER WISE

WITH A CAUSE

MY ARRIVAL

AT SHINTA MANI WILD, a new tented camp in the forests of southern Cambodia, requires a leap of faith—quite literally. Still wobbly from the three-hour drive from Phnom Penh International Airport, I'm led up 100 knee-shaking steps to the top of a steel-girdered tower, strapped into a harness, and invited to step into the abyss, trusting that the zip line will carry me all 380 meters to the landing platform in the hazy green distance. It almost does. Alas, my exhilarating soar over the forest canopy comes to a slow, shameful stop just short of the mark, leaving me dangling in mid-air and obliging one of the waiting crew to pull himself across the cable to collect me. ("The wind is perhaps not right," he suggests kindly, saying nothing about my less-than-aerodynamic girth.) I am then hooked on to a much shorter zip line, one that carries me over the pool of a waterfall and onto the deck of the camp's thatch-roofed bar—named, appropriately enough, the Landing Zone—where a smiling butler hands me a pineapple-clove shrub with a shot of tequila. And I haven't even checked in yet.

If this doesn't sound like your typical hotel arrival experience, that's because this is no typical hotel. With just 15 luxury tents strung out for one and a half kilometers along a boulder-strewn stretch of the Tmor Rung River, Shinta Mani Wild is the brainchild of Bill Bensley, a California-born architect, designer, and landscaper who has left his stamp on more than 200 hotels and resorts—mostly around Southeast Asia—since he opened his own practice in Bangkok in 1989. You've probably stayed at one or more: Bensley's portfolio includes such marquee properties as The St. Regis Bali, JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay and InterContinental Danang in Vietnam, The Siam in Bangkok, Capella Ubud, and Rosewood Luang Prabang. Unlike those places, however, Shinta Mani Wild is co-owned by Bensley and—as the sophomore property of his exclusive Bensley Collection brand—even bears his name. A passion project with a serious conservation mission, it's a remarkable and ambitious resort that impresses long after you've sailed in on the zip line.

Almost the size of Manhattan's Central Park, the thickly forested property stretches across 375 hectares of river valley in the southern foothills of the Cardamom Mountains, which encompass the single largest tract of unbroken rain forest in Southeast Asia. Bensley and his business partner Sokoun Chanpreda purchased the land a decade ago when it was put up for auction as a timber concession. At the time, they had no plans to build a hotel there; they just wanted to keep it out of the hands of loggers.

"We bought it for the sheer beauty of the place, even though we had no idea what to do with it," Bensley recalls. "It was one of those great 'buy first, think later' moments that seem to have occurred frequently throughout my life."



But land concessions in Cambodia must be developed for economic use; if not, the government can repossess them. So in 2012, Bensley and Chanpreda decided to create a private nature sanctuary that would support a series of community outreach and conservation initiatives—no easy task, given the logistical challenges of building in such a remote location. "I can laugh about it all now," Bensley says, "but seriously, this has been the hardest project I have ever done in 30-plus years of building resorts." Finally opened last December, Shinta Mani Wild is being billed as a "utopia of sustainability" that the designer hopes will "help Cambodians understand that when it comes to the forest, conservation offers a smarter future than extraction."

To that end, villagers living in the vicinity will receive job training, employment opportunities, environmental education, and microfinancing through the Shinta Mani Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Bensley and Chanpreda's Siem Reap-based Shinta Mani Hotels. Built without felling a single tree, the camp has also partnered with international conservation NGO Wildlife Alliance to help protect its surrounding forests from illegal logging and poaching. Founded by American environmentalist Suwanna Gauntlett, Wildlife Alliance has been on the ground in this part of Cambodia since 2002, spearheading ecotourism projects and operating ranger stations that patrol a vast swath of wilderness in the Southern Cardamoms. The stakes are high. Not only do these mountains support dozens of threatened species such as pileated gibbons, Sunda pangolins, clouded leopards, and dholes (a type of wild dog), but they also contain one of Asia's last remaining elephant corridors. According to a counter on its website, Wildlife Alliance, which successfully lobbied the government to declare 810,000 hectares of the



The animal-print sofas and steamer trunks bring a touch of safari-chic to the tented decks at Shinta Mani Wild. Opposite: The camp's head butler, Sararwut "Mac" Saikaew.



Southern Cardamoms region a national park in 2016, has removed more than 155,000 snares, confiscated over 14,300 chainsaws, and rescued almost 5,000 animals from hunters since it began its ranger program in the Cardamoms. And not a single elephant has been poached since 2006.

Shinta Mani Wild, for its part, has built a ranger station just up the track from the main camp. The outpost supports a small team of Wildlife Alliance and Ministry of Environment personnel, who spend their days hacking through tangled forest trails in search of snares and other signs of illegal activity. Guests are invited to join them on patrol to witness their conservation work first-hand.

I do just that the morning after my arrival, hopping on the back of a 100 cc motorbike behind Yurn Vonn, Wildlife Alliance's assistant station supervisor at Tmor Rung. Accompanying us are a couple of camouflaged army rangers and a blue-uniformed military policeman, all shouldering antiquated AK-47s. One of the camp's immaculately coiffed "adventure" butlers, Sebea, is also along for the ride. We head north across dirt tracks, crossing a stretch of savanna before scrabbling our way up a dry riverbed to the edge of a dense forest. Sebea tells me the rangers have learned that timber fellers passed through the area recently, and they wanted to have a look. Leaving the bikes behind with one of the guards, we head into the trees, Yurn leading the way. As we duck under low-hanging branches and take care not to trip over vines and roots, he points to the remains of dozens of handmade spring snares. They're crude devices, but effective enough to trap a wild boar or any smaller animal that steps into them.

About an hour into our walk we find what we are looking for: a patch of forest that has been stripped of most of its trees. Kicking at the ash of a long-cold campfire, Yurn and his colleagues pull a bunch of tin signs from their backpacks and proceed to post them along the perimeter of the clearing. The message on the signs is in Khmer; Sebea says it warns people they could face 10 years in jail if they're caught cutting down trees or hunting. "Is that going to stop anyone?" I ask. He shrugs. "I don't know. People come here because they need food or money. They're poor. But one day, maybe, things will get better and they'll learn to love the forest like we do."

Back at Shinta Mani Wild, I cool off with a dip in the camp's iron-sided swimming pool—it's perched above the waterfall like an enormous black bathtub—and then head to the nearby spa for a muscle-melting Khmer massage. Conservation may be at the heart of the property, but luxury is taken just as seriously. It has to be: with tents costing from US\$1,900 a night—that's all-inclusive, mind you—Bensley is courting a discriminating clientele. It's a "high yield, low volume" model that he believes is best able to provide the necessary financial support for the Shinta Mani Foundation's local initiatives. "We're not looking to make profits here; this is about protecting the natural environment—and giving guests authentic and original experiences they're going to remember."

The accommodations here are certainly hard to forget. Set well apart along a winding gravel path and propped up on stilts to allow wildlife (and, during the rainy season, the river itself) to pass underneath, the tents are as spacious as they are private. Bensley has been designing tented resorts for years now—previous projects include Four Seasons Tented Camp in Thailand's Golden Triangle and Capella Ubud in Bali—and he's clearly got the formula down pat. Also in evidence is his signature design style, variously described as maximalist, whimsical, eclectic, and tropical baroque. Whatever it is, it's impressive. Big covered patios feature retro hand-painted

Right: Inside a tent at Shinta Mani Wild. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The bar at Shinta Mani Wild's Landing Zone; pork belly with foraged greens and breakfast service at the camp's restaurant; a villa courtyard at Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection in Siem Reap.



murals, sofas with '60s-inspired prints of local animals, and saucy freestanding bathtubs positioned to make the most of the river views. Inside, centered on a huge and supremely comfortable bed, vintage safari touches include leather suitcases and other travel paraphernalia collected by Bensley over the years—all told, he reckons the resort has upward of 5,000 unique items on display, everything from the antique bellows camera in my room to the vintage French club chairs and Burmese sculptures that grace the tented restaurant.

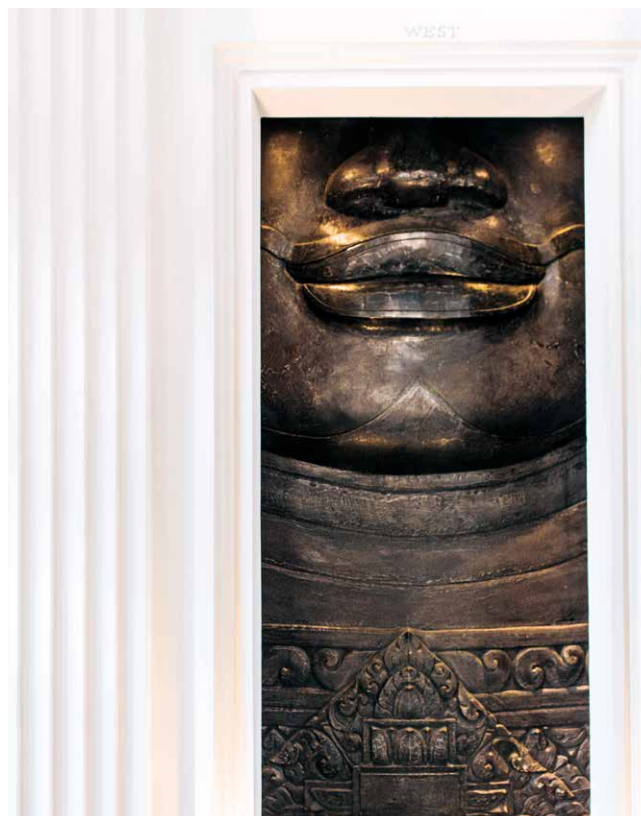
Meals here are another highlight—just as well, as there's nowhere else to eat. Shinta Mani Hotels' culinary director, Patricia Yeo, an accomplished Malaysia-born American chef, has worked with the two on-site chefs to devise menus that showcase the best available produce and ingredients—lemongrass-cured salmon with green papaya salad, say, or sous-vide pork belly with foraged water lily. There's a curry-and-crab night during my stay that features big local mud crabs bathed in a variety of curries. Another evening, the kitchen cooks up a feast of grilled meats and vegetables over a campfire. The wine flows freely, as do the botanically inspired cocktails over at the Landing Zone, where the playlist favors 1960s Cambodian pop. And for those who prefer to DIY their booze, there's an all-day Bloody Mary bar with housemade fixings like charred garlic and bacon dusted with palm sugar. The camp's minimum-three-night-stay requirement notwithstanding, no one's likely to get tired of the gustatory offerings during their visit.

Nor is there any shortage of diversions to keep guests busy: mountain biking, hiking, and *tenkara*—a meditative form of Japanese catch-and-release fly-fishing—are just some of the options on the activities menu. You can join head butler Sararwut "Mac" Saikaew for a morning of butterfly watching, or accompany resident orchid expert Det Song—a graduate in biodiversity conservation from the Royal University of Phnom Penh—on an hour-long forest walk to see the two dozen wild orchid species that grow in the area. Or head off in one of the camp's green army-style Land Rovers for a safari-style excursion with head naturalist Munny Van, whose own research activities include monitoring the movements of local wildlife with camera traps.

On my last afternoon at Shinta Mani Wild, Sangjay Choegyal, the



Each tent at Shinta Mani Wild comes with an alfresco bathtub. Opposite: A beatific likeness of Khmer king Jayavarman VII smiles from an alcove in the reception lounge at Shinta Mani Angkor—Bensley Collection.



THE DETAILS

Shinta Mani Wild – Bensley Collection
Prey Praseth Village, Southern Cardamom National Park; 855-63/964-123; shintamani.com; doubles from US\$1,900, all-inclusive, for a minimum three-night stay.
Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection
Oum Khun St., Siem Reap; 855-63/969-234; shintamani.com; doubles from US\$990.

To learn more about the **Shinta Mani Foundation**, visit shintamanifoundation.org.



camp's charismatic young general manager, invites me for a sunset cruise on their recently christened pontoon boat. It takes about an hour to reach its jetty in the upper reaches of the Srey Ambol Estuary, where Sebea and a couple of crewmates welcome us onboard with champagne and canapés. Choegyal, who grew up at a Nepalese jungle lodge and who co-owns a safari camp in Sri Lanka's Gal Oya National Park, is perfectly in his element on this wild stretch of river, pointing out the passing birdlife—spotted Chinese herons, red-wattled lapwings, crow-beaked drongos—as we putter downstream. When the setting sun engulfs the water in an orange glow, we retire to loungers on the boat's rooftop. A chorus of cicadas serenades us from the riverbanks. Sebea tops up our drinks. Choegyal grins. “Can you imagine a better place to be, right now?” he asks. I can't.

Before leaving Cambodia, I fly north to Siem Reap to see where Bensley's passion for the country began. It was here, more than a decade and a half ago, that the designer embarked on one of his first full-scale hotel projects, Hôtel de la Paix (now the Park Hyatt Siem Reap). It's also where he first met Sokoun Chanpreda, a successful Bangkok-based Cambodian entrepreneur whose father owned the property. While working on Hôtel de la Paix, Bensley and his team stayed at a modest 18-room guesthouse called Shinta Mani (the name means “good heart” in Sanskrit), which Chanpreda had recently launched as a vehicle for community outreach programs and a much-needed hospitality training school. He also learned firsthand about the extent of Cambodia's rural poverty.

“On one of my first trips into the countryside with Sokoun,”

Bensley recalls, “we met this very poor family with six undernourished children. Seeing that kicked me in the gut and made me cry. I had been happily living in Thailand for many years and hadn't realized just how hard things were across the border. Life isn't fair. I wanted to do something to help.”

In 2011, the hotel's community activities were formalized under the nonprofit Shinta Mani Foundation, which, apart from running the on-site hospitality training school (it graduates about 30 students a year), provides small-business loans, healthcare, and other assistance to disadvantaged families in the surrounding province. Bensley then came on board to help transform the guesthouse into the swankier 39-room property that it is today—Shinta Mani Angkor. The following year, they acquired the courtyard-style inn across the street and renovated it into what is now known as Shinta Mani Shack, a 66-room resort that further expanded the group's ability to provide jobs and underwrite the foundation's operational expenses.

Newer still is Shinta Mani Angkor—Bensley Collection, the first hotel under Shinta Mani's top-shelf brand. It debuted in late 2017 right next door to the Shack, with just 10 walled villa compounds featuring fern-hung rooftop living areas and nine-meter lap pools. They're beautifully done. The design is urban chic, with gorgeous brass-inlaid hardwood floors, stone bathtubs set in lush internal gardens, and feature walls molded to evoke the rippling robes of Jayavarman VII, the Khmer king who built the ancient walled city of Angkor Thom.

As at Shinta Mani Wild, a team of eager young butlers is on hand to arrange and accompany you on tours or assist with dinner reservations (Kroya, across the road at Shinta Mani Angkor, serves an excellent seven-course Khmer tasting menu). When I ask my ever-attendant butler Salas Sun to recommend an uncrowded Angkorian temple, he immediately organizes a jaunt to a 12th-century sanctuary called Ta Nei. He also escorts me to an evening performance of Phare, The Cambodian Circus. Staged in a big top some 15 minutes by tuk-tuk from the hotel, the show combines acrobatics, juggling, modern dance, contortion, and a good dose of humor into what could be the most entertaining hour in Siem Reap.

Phare's captivating young performers are graduates of a nonprofit arts school in the city of Battambang, a circuitous three-hour drive to the west. More than that, they demonstrate what feats Cambodians of their generation are capable of given the right amount of support.

Bensley, who turned 60 in February, knows this all too well. “After Myanmar, Cambodia is the second-poorest country in Southeast Asia. They need a helping hand. And hospitality is a great and sustainable way to ensure they get it.” ●