

Falling for Cambodia

Deep in the heart of a forest in Cambodia lies the proof that tourism and conservation needn't be mutually exclusive. Shinta Mani Wild is just one of a number of luxury openings in the region taking responsibility to another level



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I clambered through the bushes to see a clearing with the ashes of a fire, plastic water bottles cut in half, a used tin of tuna, a pink flowery china plate and a solitary beige sock, seemingly all that remained of a poachers' careless camp. Just 24 hours ago, this could have been the base for these desperate locals coming into the jungle on an illegal search for wild boar, civet cats or even to chop down "luxury wood" such as rosewood or teak, still occasionally found in the foothills of the south Cardamom mountains.

It had been an eventful morning. Sat on the back of a moped, I'd clung onto the shoulders of a total stranger, Mr Rithy, a ranger from the Wildlife Alliance, as he navigated us over undulating dirt tracks and deeper into the woods. We were escorted by two military police totting vintage AK47s – but their mobile phones were clearly modern as they sat scrolling through Facebook while we waited for the ranger to return from his sorties into the jungle; sometimes he beckoned us to follow him, other times it was best we held back, which was fine by me, as he and my "adventure butler", Yi, knew best.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you more about what he is doing, as often he's not sure what he's going to find, or how far we will go," Yi explained.

I felt safe under his care, though.

The rangers can spend as much as three-and-a-half weeks out of every month away from their families, dedicating themselves to stopping deforestation – one of the major drivers of carbon emissions – dismantling wildlife snares, several of which we saw, and often catching

poachers and loggers in the act. It was disregard for the environment that incensed two heroes of a different kind to put in the highest bid to save the vast piece of land where Shinta Mani Wild – my base for three nights – now sits.

Hearing it was an unprotected wildlife area that vitally connects the Bokor national park with the Kirirom park, they set out to secure a 350-hectare river valley, home to one of only seven remaining elephant corridors in Asia.

The heroic duo of Bill Bensley, Bangkok-based interior designer, landscape architect and all-round larger-than-life character, and Sokoun Chanpreda, a Cambodian businessman who returned from overseas to invest in the future of his country and create the Shinta Mani brand, are now an example of one of the most forward-thinking eco-luxe hoteliers of our time. Working together with Wildlife Alliance, The Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government, the team is in the process of bringing a new conservation model to life.

Bensley has said he wants to create a "utopia of sustainability", and he is going the right way about it. The camp he imagined had its soft opening towards the end of last year and there will eventually be 15 of the most glamorous "tents" you could ever visualise, stretched out along a 1.5km private stretch of wild river, with mesmerising waterfalls, mountain views and the power of nature all around you. On my visit, just five tents were ready – the others will be online by June.

Adventure central

Guest experiences are orchestrated by the team of "adventure butlers" like Yi – who are enthusiastic to be doing what they love (basically anything to do with adventure and adrenaline) for an actual living – and Sangjay Choegyal, who

manages this magnificent camp in the middle of nowhere.

Upon arrival, he unrolled what looked like a parchment scroll with the details of my itinerary on – it was all very Indiana Jones. But sensing I must be tired following a flight from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh and the subsequent four-hour drive (we hit rush hour: try to avoid that on itineraries if you can!), Sangjay suggested I dine in my tent; well, on its vast wooden deck over the riverbed at any rate.

So dine there I did, enjoying a stunning fish supper with part of a bottle of wine I discovered in my giant chest freezer – more maxi than mini-bar.

The pathways from the main arrival and social area are winding and dark, so a ranger is assigned whenever you head back at night. So it wasn't until the morning that I got my first real glorious glimpse of my surroundings, and started to

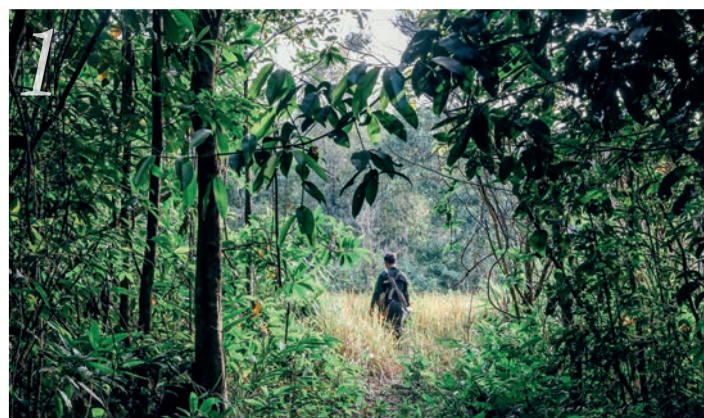
grasp the scale of this incredible project, given its location miles from any tarmac roads. Add into the mix Bensley's fondness for antiques – he regularly stocks up in the UK – and you have one hell of a camp on your hands.

Everything is larger than life here – incredible antique furniture, the canvas awnings, and beds so huge you need a run-up or a little stool to climb onboard. Plus the vanity area with dual basins sitting on what seems to be one long tactile piece of worn timber; a hand-painted, pastel-tinged map of Cambodia and its surrounds on an external wall of my tent; and a freestanding bath tub looking out to the river.

It's truly a radical new concept – and then layer on top the fact you're in Cambodia, a fledgling player on the luxury travel map, and it all makes for a fascinating, magical dream.

Every morning, a smile as broad as a banana and a "hello

Eco-retreat



bong” – a friendly, polite greeting in Khmer – awaited me down at Waterfall Restaurant, well-named, given it looks over a handful of large daybeds, a little lawn, and then the raucous water spilling down.

Even closer to the waterfalls – the biggest ones within Shinta Mani’s wild corner of Cambodia – is Landing Zone Bar, where yes, guests arrive by zip wire looking thrilled/terrified, soon to be handed a cocktail to calm their nerves.

One of Shinta Mani Wild’s many claims to fame does indeed include a 320-metre custom-made zip wire ride, the longest in Cambodia and second longest in south-east Asia. And it is pretty scary. Always ahead of me, of course, Yi zipped first and was quick to prepare me not a cocktail, but a cold drink packed with electrolytes to perk me up by the time I reached the platform – I must have been looking spent, given we’d also been on a two-hour hike prior to the zip wire.

Three Bensley Expedition boats are also being built – one is ready, the others will arrive by the summer – and will be located in the Srey Ambel estuary, moved around depending on water levels and guests’ desire for adventure.

The team have come up with so many innovative and fun activities – some more adventurous than others, some surprisingly calming, including Tenkara, the Japanese

meditative art of fly fishing, which I tried with Tulga Tumenjargal, a young Mongolian master fisherman at the camp. You could also spend time foraging in the forest with the chef; go mountain biking on wild trails; kayak cool river waters and swim in waterfalls; head off to set camera traps with head naturalist Munny; discover wild orchids; or even just head to the Boulders Spa for a massage administered with genuine care.

It was such a wrench to check out here. I felt so genuinely sad to leave a place where the staff are as beautiful as the surroundings, and so keen, sweet, curious and

funny – just as I’ve always found Khmer people to be.

Caring touch

Through its foundation and its hospitality training school in Siem Reap – where Shinta Mani started life – the company hopes to be able to provide opportunities for education and training, so that the camp’s neighbours can become well-paid hospitality professionals, should they choose to. There’s also ongoing community outreach and environmental education programmes.

Around 245 students have already graduated from the

hospitality school and gained employment in Shinta Mani’s hotels or others locally. Separately, the foundation offers interest-free loans to local entrepreneurs and assistance to families in need by digging water wells, giving mosquito nets and bikes, building solid homes, and providing dental clinics or emergency food aid, all of which I discovered when I went for a drive to villages around Siem Reap with foundation director Brad Akins and Phillip, my butler from Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection.

Opened in January 2018, this 10-villa property is positioned as a “resort within a resort”, given it sits on the same side of the road as big sister Shinta Mani Shack, a 62-room hotel with a stunning pool, and opposite upscale boutique hotel Shinta Mani Angkor, with 39 rooms. Both the little Shinta Mani Angkor and Shinta Mani Wild are branded as part of the “super luxe” Bensley Collection, the first hotels to ever bear Bill’s name, despite him having designed hotels for everyone from Rosewood to Four Seasons over the years.

Known as the “Willy Wonka of hotels”, there was certainly nothing hindering his imagination in Siem Reap, with high-walled facades at the villas that reference Khmer culture, featuring the supposed rippling robes of 12th-century Khmer king Jayvarman. There is even a rooftop terrace, with more of Bensley’s green-fingered touches, such as lush ferns in hanging baskets. Each of the villas starts with a courtyard in classic Bensley monochrome tiles, with a 30ft pool tiled in a recurring pattern ■





that's drawn from the layout of the temples of Angkor. Those famous temples are just a tuk-tuk (or car) ride away, but do also suggest clients take a quick walk to Kandal Village, which is increasingly full of cool cafes and shops mainly selling ethical clothes, bags, homeware and souvenirs.

Responsible travel and sustainability are growing interests in Cambodian tourism, so it makes sense that two hotel brands who follow these principles have now opened resorts in the country – and almost right next door to each other too, Alila Villas Koh Russey and Six Senses Krabey Island.

Six Senses is set on a 30-acre private island three miles off Ream national park in southern Cambodia, which I reached in around 2.5 hours from Shinta Mani Wild, including a 15-minute boat trip over from Six Senses' stylish guest lounge and

jetty; you could also fly into Sihanouk International airport.

Clever landscape architecture means you can't really see much of what's on the island from the sea, certainly you would have no idea there were 40 free-standing pool villas, an extensive Six Senses Spa and central Khmer House with restaurant, sunset bar and lap pool hidden among the trees on this rocky outcrop in the Gulf of Siam.

Thanks to the island owner's strict desire to protect the jungle environment of Krabey, there is a deeply natural environment wherever you look. The nestling-in of the villas is helped by their low-rise proportions and green living roofs; inside, sustainable materials were selected for the wall finishes, while furniture legs were inspired by the shape of romdoul blossom, the national flower of Cambodia and native to Krabey.

Of course, central to the villa is the bed, draped in a mosquito net (more for romantic effect) and topped by a Naturalmat organic Emperor mattress, made and shipped over from Devon.

For those who plan to spend a great deal of time at the spa; suggest a villa close to it, given the 2,000sqm Six Senses Spa's multi-level buildings are at the highest point of the island.

I checked in for my assessment under the Six Senses Integrated Wellness initiative, which takes guests as deep as they want to go – from a quick top-to-toe health update to full-on programmes designed to combat key concerns. I also spent time at The Alchemy Bar, with its chalkboards listing the benefits of certain ingredients. I whipped up a Kampot salt foot soak (just smelling the ingredients makes you feel great); a detox face mask with clay, honey, charcoal and essential oils; and a Kampot pepper scrub with coconut oil.

Other resort features include a sky observatory, while sport and leisure options include snorkelling, kayaking, stand-up paddle-boarding and island-hopping excursions. This will not become a resort known for its beach – but there is a small one nonetheless, as well as a "sea breeze walk", a boardwalk created around the rocks for those who like a bracing stroll; a couple of the top villas do benefit from a private stretch of beach.

The resort also features The Nest, a cool kids' club for four- to 12-year-olds, while Khmer House, a large sunset-facing building, will inevitably be the magnet for much of the social life on the island and home of Aha Restaurant, the all-day dining venue, as well as an ice cream parlour and deli.

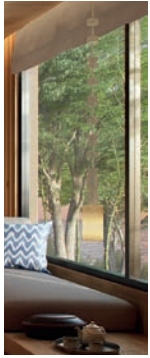
Meanwhile Tree restaurant, at the other end of the island, is something even more special, where the jungle becomes the star again, seen through all-glass walls that also afford guests a glimpse of the ocean, as the team whip up modern Khmer, south-east Asian and Mediterranean dishes. I so enjoyed the yellow curry, rich with turmeric root and lemongrass during dinner, that I asked if it could be the focus of my Khmer cooking class the next day, along with the coconut sambal it was served with, and a piece of pan-fried fresh snapper.

Neighbourhood watch

For those who really do like to retreat to a nice long beach however, the nearby private island resort of Alila Villas Koh Russey, which boasts a deserted 1.2km beach, might be the better choice.

This 63-key hotel opened last year on the island of Russey, which in Khmer means bamboo, something mainland locals used to sail over here to collect. It's a 10-minute boat ride off the country's south coast, and you can also hop fairly easily between





Alila and Six Senses. Both islands are near Sihanoukville – but don't let that put you off.

Tragically, Sihanoukville has been rampantly overdeveloped in just a couple of years, with casinos and high-rise hotels designed for the Chinese market. Luckily, it's far enough away from the islands not to be a real bother, and villas and public areas at Alila – and importantly the beach – face away from the mainland.

The resort occupies just 15% of the island, leaving a wild feel to the landscape. Of course the gardens around the public areas are beautifully manicured, and lots of low-level *Artemisia Scoparia* gives wonderful light-green shrubbery borders everywhere you walk. That gorgeous beach is peppered with giant beanbags and loungers, with just a handful of people on it during my January stay enjoying sorbets and cold towels as

the afternoon drifted on.

There is a bit of an issue with refuse, and I picked up several bottles and assorted bits of plastic, amplifying the current issue around ocean waste, which means staff must be extra vigilant and more frequent with clean-ups.

Designed by Singapore firm Studiogoto, the overarching influence of the Alila is the *krama*, the traditional Cambodian checked scarf you see all sorts of people wearing. Its geometrical patterns inspired the lattice pattern of the hotel's very grand entrance, and the checked motif is also reflected in the impressive pool area, which has a staggered design, both at lounge-seating level and inside the pool itself. The rows of dual-level flat-roofed "pavilions" clustered together looking at the ocean are home to the bulk of the resort's rooms, 50 of them, with calming, minimalist interiors and outside

seating areas. Ranging from one to four bedrooms in size, there are also 13 swanky villas with private pools and generous gardens.

Poolside restaurant Horizon continues the stylish, low-rise vibe, while over at Beach Shack, it's a toes-in-the-sand dining experience. The Alila Spa is another place to spend time, and there is also a yoga studio with complimentary classes, while more contemplative sessions can be taken under a giant banyan tree at one end of the beach, also home to the organic garden. Beach picnics, sunset cruises on vintage long-tail boats in the Gulf of Thailand, and day trips back to the mainland can also be arranged, including the riverside town of Kampot and its surrounding pepper plantations; seaside Kep, known for its fresh crab; or Bokor national park.

Combining Cambodia with Thailand could also be a wider option, with Bangkok Airways (bangkokair.com) flying regularly between Bangkok and Siem Reap or Phnom Penh, with a Business Class service on some flights, including separate check-in, priority baggage and lounge access at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi airport.

But actually, placing the island retreat at the end of what will be a culturally stimulating, yet hectic, trip could be the best option – affording the chance to really chill out and reflect on a tour of fascinating Cambodia, a place that

really gets under your skin.

I'd been twice before and I knew at the end of the second trip I'd be back. But little did I know then that not one, but five (if you also include Rosewood Phnom Penh) luxury openings would hail "the new Cambodia" as one of the most talked-about destinations of 2019. Bring it on, I say. This shy little country has been in the shadows for too long.

How to book it

Red Savannah offers 10 nights from £6,518pp, with two nights in a pool villa at Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection; one night at Rosewood Phnom Penh; three nights at Shinta Mani Wild on all-inclusive basis; two nights at Six Senses Krabey in an ocean pool villa; and two nights at Alila Koh Russey in a garden pavilion. Includes daily breakfast, all meals at Shinta Mani Wild, all transfers, guiding and entrance fees, return flights with Thai Airways from Heathrow to Siem Reap and from Phnom Penh, via Bangkok.

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Pictured

1. Wildlife Alliance ranger, Shinta Mani Wild
2. Tent interior, Shinta Mani Wild
3. Tent with river view, Shinta Mani Wild
4. Butler's Lounge, Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection
5. Fly fishing at Shinta Mani Wild
6. Pool villa at Six Senses Krabey Island
7. Six Senses Spa, Krabey Island
8. Two-bedroom villa, Alila Villas Koh Russey
9. The pool at Alila Villas Koh Russey
10. Buddhist monks, Siem Reap