



FROM OUR ARCHIVE 

In the Wilds of Cambodia, a Legendary Hotel Designer Finds the Mission of a Lifetime

BY GISELA WILLIAMS, PUBLISHED ON 09/11/2018

ST READ TRAVEL

I was gripping the shoulder of my driver as he navigated through the Cambodian jungle on an old moped, skidding down a narrow path and bumping over gnarled roots. Ahead of me on another moped was American Bill Bensley, one of the most celebrated hotel designers in the world.

Just as I was starting to think I might die here on a rarely visited mountaintop, Bensley let out a joyous yodel.

Dismounting our bikes, I hobbled in pursuit of Bensley— a highly energetic 59 years of age—down a path between two colossal sandstone sculptures, an elephant and a lion. We were alone at Sra Damrei, a



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rarely visited site on Phnom Kulen, a mountain said to be where King Jayavarman II of Cambodia founded the Khmer empire in the ninth century.

"I like dangerous journeys and off-the-grid places," Bensley enthused. "It makes the moment more meaningful." We wandered around the elephant. "There is so much to see in the world, and I want to experience every corner."

You may not know his name, but if you've stayed at a luxury hotel in this part of the world, chances are you've seen Bensley's work. Over the past 35 years, since graduating from Harvard's School of Landscape Architecture and moving to [Bali](#), Bensley has left his signature on hundreds of hotels and resorts, mainly in Southeast Asia.

His portfolio includes the iconic Siam hotel in Bangkok, the [InterContinental Danang](#), the [St. Regis Langkawi](#), and the [Oberoi Udaivilas](#). He designed the [JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay](#), the [Park Hyatt Siem Reap](#), and more than a dozen hotels for the Four Seasons alone, from Hangzhou to Hualalai. Currently, his office is working on 45 different projects, including the recently opened [Capella Ubud Bali](#) and Rosewood Luang Prabang.

Bensley designed his first hotel in Cambodia in 2003, in Siem Reap, the resort town that serves as a portal to the temples of Angkor. Over the next decade he partnered with Sokoun Chanpreda, a Cambodian entrepreneur with a philanthropic bent, on the 39-room [Shinta Mani Angkor](#) (rooms from \$177) and the 66-room [Shinta Mani Shack](#) (rooms from \$132), both Siem Reap boutique hotels with typical Bensley flair: lavish gardens, extravagant accommodations, and vibrant decor in high Cambodia style.

Tourism is vital to Cambodia, a country devastated by genocide only a generation ago, and with a still-fragile economy. However, many tourists visit only one location, Angkor Wat, which cannot take larger numbers of visitors without damaging its 900-year-old ruins, according to UNESCO.

In recent years, efforts have been made to promote travel to less visited parts of the country, but those areas, which include newly protected rain forests that contain Asia's last remaining elephant corridors, face the risk of damage as well.

Now Bensley is adding two new hotels aimed at bringing a new generation of tourism to the country: [Shinta Mani Wild— Bensley Collection](#), a tented property in the Cardamom Mountains (*rooms from \$1,900*), which will debut in late December; and [Shinta Mani Angkor—Bensley Collection](#) (*rooms from \$450*), a boutique resort in Siem Reap that opened this past winter.

As always with Bensley, they include an unparalleled level of luxury—perhaps even higher than his other projects. That's because his Cambodia properties are the only hotels that he owns himself.

In Southern Cambodia, the remote Cardamom Mountains hold one of the least spoiled rainforests in Asia. A refuge for elephants, clouded leopards, and sun bears, the Connecticut-size area was given national-park status two years ago, but its rangers face an uphill battle against logging and poachers.

One morning earlier this year I was driven at dawn into the Cardamoms by Bensley's team. At the Preaek Piphot River we boarded a tiny wooden launch, and after ferrying across, we hopped on the back of several

mopeds, which took us to the semisecret outpost of Wildlife Alliance, an American-run conservation organization with programs in Cambodia.

“This area used to be made up of hunting villages,” explained wildlife programs director Nick Marx. “Now it’s booming with ecotourism projects.” We were sitting on the porch of one of three bungalows at the outpost, now a release station for rescued animals.

Marx has worked for the Wildlife Alliance for 16 years, during which time he has seen notable progress. However, he says his rangers still find snares intended for animals like wild boars that end up killing elephant calves instead. Having part of the Cardamoms declared a national park was a huge victory, according to Marx, but for now “it is a reality only on paper.”

Not far away in the park is Shinta Mani Wild. As you approach the site, you hear the sound of rushing water—one of three nearby waterfalls. Perched near and in places over a fast-moving river, the guest quarters are luxuriously tented, a model Bensley pioneered in Asia.

Each tent—there are only 15 in total, minimizing the human impact—measures 1,076 square feet and comes with amenities like hammered-metal bathtubs, rain showers, and vintage furniture. There is also a spa, a restaurant, and a bar to which guests can arrive via zip line, all spread out along the river.

Bensley is always passionate about what he does, but clearly Shinta Mani Wild is a labor of love. The camp sits in an 800-acre valley that connects to Phnum Bokor and Kirirom national parks, creating a corridor for migrating wildlife as well as a private sanctuary

for guests, who are invited to accompany Wildlife Alliance rangers as they monitor the forest and its inhabitants.

An almost empty highway connects the Cardamom Mountains with the seaside resort of Kep, once known as the St.-Tropez of the Far East. During Cambodia's period of French rule and in the decades after decolonization, Kep was the favored hangout of the elite, both French and Cambodian, who built striking Art Deco and midcentury modern villas. When the Khmer Rouge came to power, they destroyed much of Kep's treasure trove of architecture. What remained was left to the jungle.

Bensley recommended that I see Kep because of its tourism potential—and, indeed, though bullet holes remain visible in the façades, the town is seeing a slow recovery. Kep's numerous fish shacks serve the excellent local crabs in dozens of delicious ways, and modernist villas overrun by vines or split open by gnarled trees are nothing if not Instagrammable. After lunch, I checked in to the impossibly stylish **Knai Bang Chatt** (*rooms from \$190*), a complex of restored villas facing the Gulf of Thailand.

Jef Moons, the owner, gave me a tour, then showed me an abandoned villa next door called Butterfly House, which he purchased two years ago and which soon will be redeveloped as a sustainable lifestyle resort. Like Bensley, Moons sees charity and conservation as coextensive with running a successful hotel in this country. "It's not about how much you have," he says, "it's about how much you can share."

Thus, in addition to helping restore Kep's much-needed flow of tourists, Moons founded a school for 400 children in a nearby village and has been working

on a marine national park around an island not far from his hotel.

Twenty years ago, Angkor Wat, the ruins of the capital of the ancient Khmer empire, which dominated Southeast Asia, received about 80,000 visitors per year. Last year the number was 2.5 million. It's nearly impossible to experience the monumental temple complex without navigating hordes of tourists hoisting selfie sticks.

Bensley believes that as magisterial as Angkor Wat is, it shouldn't be the only reason you visit Siem Reap, let alone Cambodia as a whole. So he enlisted his "adventure butlers" to show me why, first taking me to Angkor Thom, one of the "big three" archaeological sites in Cambodia, along with Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm. Our first stop was one of the Prasat Chrung temples—an intimate, moss-covered ruin we had completely to ourselves.

For the next two hours, we were able to escape the huge tour groups, then take a dramatic drive through the Death Gate along a dusty path in the jungle toward Ta Nei Temple.

This was followed by a visit to Shinta Mani Angkor, the designer's other new property in Cambodia. The hotel features only ten walled compounds, each completely private yet emphasizing exposure both to the open air (via bathtubs ensconced within lush gardens and "sky beds" on starlit decks) and to the riches of Siem Reap—its artists, restaurants, musicians, and adventures—rather than just the glory of its ancient civilizations.

Most important of all to Bensley, he says, the hotel furthers the mission he has committed to in

Cambodia—responsible tourism. Some 15 years ago, Bensley and Chanpreda decided that in order to hire as many locals as possible, they needed a hospitality training program.

Now known as the [Shinta Mani School of Hospitality](#), the school, based in Siem Reap, graduates 30 students a year, at least half of whom are women and virtually all of whom are immediately employed after graduation—in a country with one of the largest populations of unskilled youth in Asia. Tuition is free.

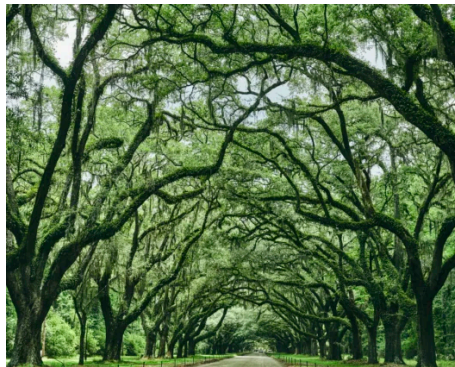
Moreover, the foundation, now a registered charity, also builds homes and digs wells (more than 1,500 so far) and recently founded an experimental farm, in addition to providing microloans, healthcare, and direct assistance. “We do a million dollars a year in aid,” said Brad Akins, the Shinta Mani Foundation’s director.

On my last day in Cambodia, we drove to a village outside Siem Reap to observe volunteers for [Global Dental Relief](#), an organization that brings free dental care to children in the developing world. (In Cambodia, Shinta Mani helps with logistics and accommodation.)

We watched as a line of children carrying dental charts around their necks awaited half a dozen dentists. This is the reason to build hotels, according to Bensley. In the future, he says, “I’ll be happy to break even and make enough to support the foundation.”

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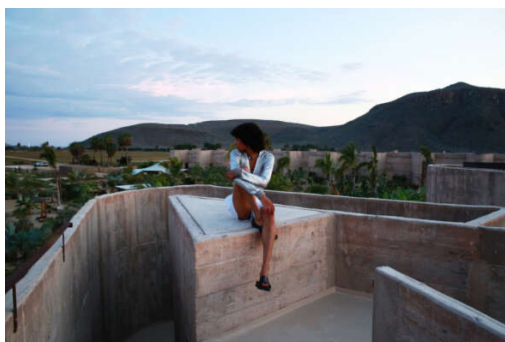
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