

Escape

ELSEWHERE

Edited by ELLE McCLURE



A guest tent at Shinta Mani Wild, Cambodia.

COURTESY OF SHINTA MANI WILD

ESCAPE

TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

Remote yet ravishing
in every detail, Cambodia's
Shinta Mani Wild is the
radical luxury retreat just
that bit closer to nature.
By Rachel Lees

COURTESY OF SHINTA MANI WILD



Opposite page: a guest tent at Shinta Mani Wild, Cambodia. This page, from top: Bill Bensley's collection of Khmer objets d'art are on display throughout the resort; day beds at the Waterfall Restaurant; bathroom furnishings.



As I look up at the portrait of an immaculate Jackie Kennedy that hangs in the open-air dining room of Shinta Mani Wild, I'm suddenly very conscious of my dishevelled hair, damp skin and dusty hiking boots. Cambodia would have been blazing hot when she visited, and the country's rust red earth tends to cling to visitors amid the sultry air. Yet Kennedy was flawless, the embodiment of casual elegance in high-waisted chinos and a pale blue shirt, as she fulfilled "a lifelong dream of seeing Angkor Wat".

But Siem Reap this is not, and my journey hasn't exactly been a gentle stroll through an archaeological site. After landing in Phnom Penh, I got in a taxi to make the three-hour drive to Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains — the latter part of which was a turbulent rattle over unsealed, potholed roads. Once on resort grounds, there was a bumpy ride in a Vietnam War-era jeep, and a brief walk through the jungle, before scaling a multi-storey tower to strap on a harness and helmet.

As I stood on the zip line platform, high above the treetops, the pristine view — and last-minute nerves about the impending descent — was breathtaking. It was impossible to see where the zip line cable ended: it seemed to vanish into the lush jungle canopy. I inhaled deeply and launched off the platform. The 380-metre-long ride skimmed past branches and over rivers and waterfalls, before depositing me safely in the bar of arguably the most anticipated resort to open in Asia in recent months.

Of course, I could have driven down the driveway. But that wasn't the arrival intended by Bill Bensley, the Bangkok-based American architect, designer and resort owner who created Shinta Mani Wild. For intrepid travellers who seek off-the-beaten-path adventure, few properties in the world are as exciting or luxurious as this one. It's the sort of place you'd expect to find Lara Croft and Indiana Jones swapping tales over a craft cocktail — so why does Kennedy's likeness take pride of place? ►

“It’s the sort of place you’d expect to find *Lara Croft* and *Indiana Jones* swapping tales over a craft cocktail.”



From top: jungle views from the resort; plush bedding in a guest tent; the Landing Zone Bar; bathroom details.



Bensley, who has designed some 200 hotels and resorts around the world, has a vivid imagination and a penchant for storytelling. In this case, he drew on Kennedy’s real-life visit to Cambodia, hosted by King Norodom Sihanouk — musing, what might it have looked like if the King had taken Kennedy on a jungle safari?

The answer is a tented experience befitting both royalty and fashionable first ladies, with wooden floors and natural, local fabrics accented by a rich palette of gold, saffron and slate grey — and about 5000 unique pieces, each personally approved by Bensley, from day beds to authentic Khmer *objets d’art*.

Each of the 15 elevated tents juts out over a 1.5 kilometre-stretch of river, on a mountain range that borders three of Cambodia’s oldest and most important parks: Kirirom, Bokor and Cardamom. It is one of the last great wilderness areas in Southeast Asia, and among the country’s few remaining habitats for wildlife. The stilted wood-and-canvas structures blend seamlessly into the surrounding jungle and allow the natural migratory movements of its inhabitants — including wild elephants, gibbons and civets — to continue undisturbed below. The designer adhered to a minimum intervention policy when constructing the resort, even building tents around existing trees. Views of waterfalls, lush greenery and mountains envelope each tent’s expansive deck, on which stands a decadent, hammered-metal freestanding outdoor bathtub. It’s the ideal place to soak after a day spent in the wilderness.

To help you navigate this natural playground and the resort’s roster of adventurous pursuits, guests are assigned a personal butler, who accompanies you on all activities — 26-year-old Boren proves a great sport, and seems to anticipate needs before I have them. Whether it’s making sure there’s a fresh coconut waiting for me at the end of the zip line or leaping into a waterfall before I do to prove there’s no danger.

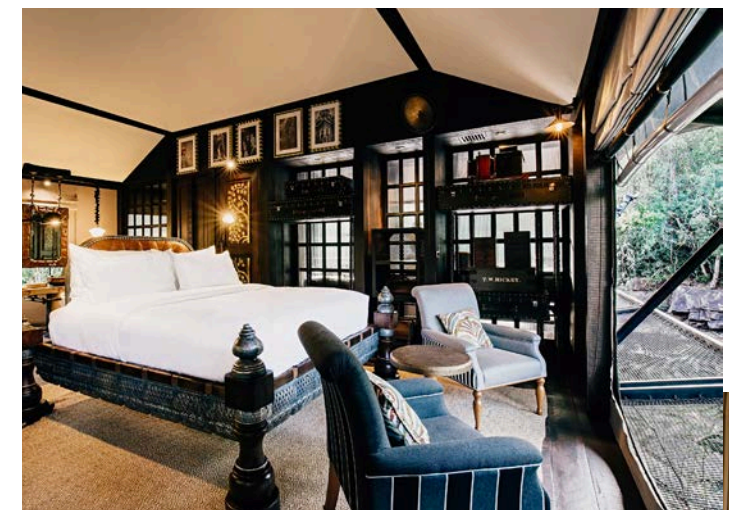
I try *tenkara*, a meditative Japanese form of catch-and-release fly fishing — and while the fish weren’t biting, my two hours flew by under the patient and encouraging tutelage of Bensley’s personal fly-fishing guide, Tulga Tumenjargal. (Tumenjargal teaches guests in December and January; the resort’s general manager, Sangjay Choegyal, takes over for the rest of the year.) Another highlight was a morning spent mountain biking, then kayaking a stretch of

the Tmor Rung river. Kingfishers and herons darted ahead of our canoe, leading the way through pristine jungle.

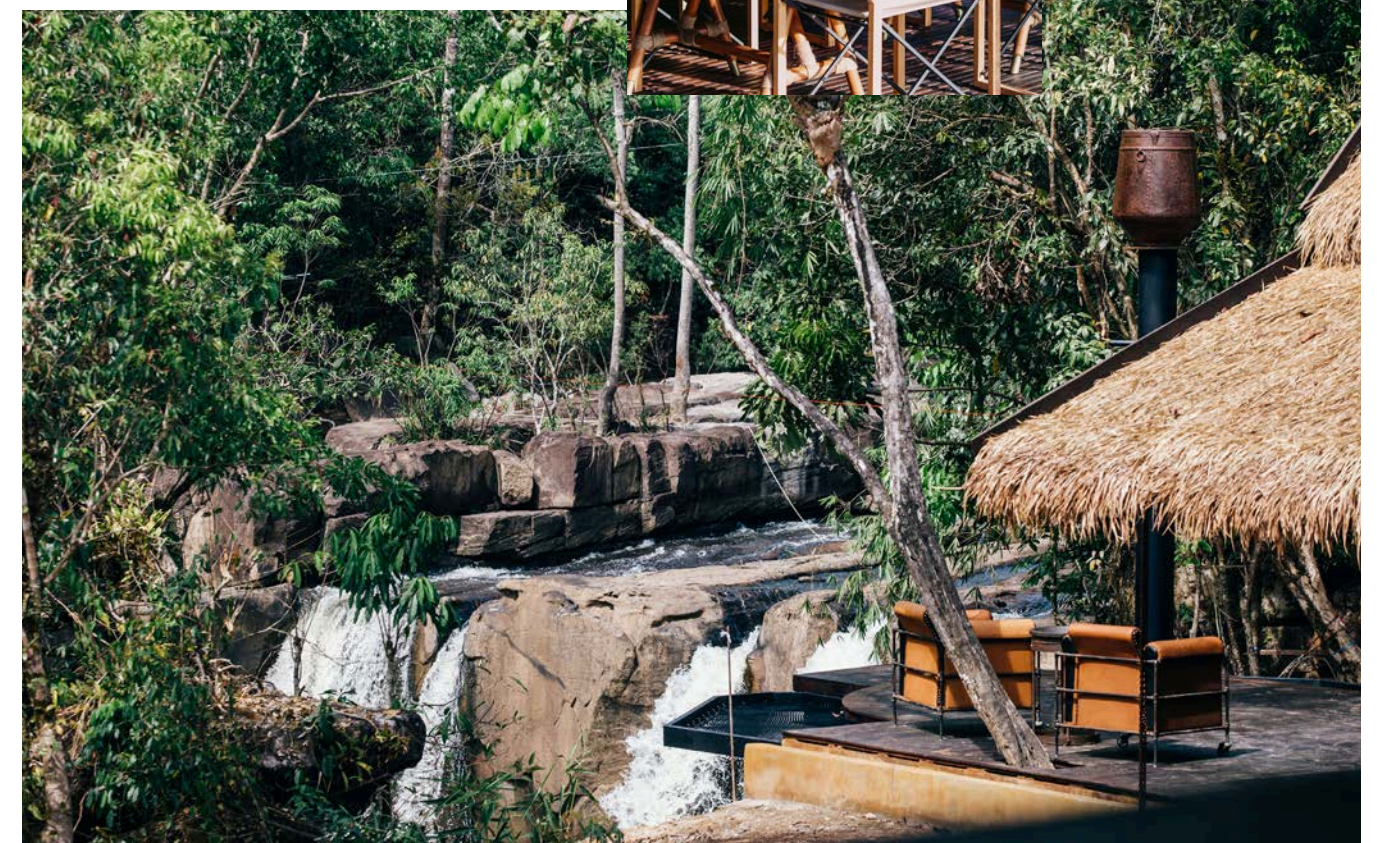
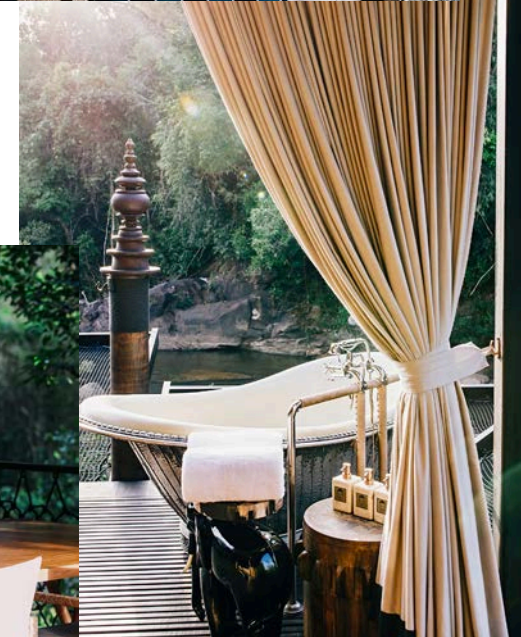
Those keen to gain insight into the important work the Shinta Mani Foundation is doing to help conserve and protect the local area can join Wildlife Alliance rangers on motorbike for anti-poaching patrols and help track previously unrecorded wildlife activity. Alternatively, naturalists lead guests through the forest in search of butterflies, birds and plants — one of the resident botanists recently discovered a new species of orchid — or foraging for wild fungi and moringa, used in the dishes served by the restaurant.

Malaysia-born Patricia Yeo, corporate chef of the Shinta Mani hotel group, performs small culinary miracles at the remote resort, far from the fresh food markets of Phnom Penh. With her team of Khmer chefs, Yeo turns out exquisite plates such as duck with mashed potato and jus, and prawn and mango salad. But don’t be fooled by the simplicity of the dishes or their ingredients, of which only the best pass Yeo’s high standards — they are Michelin quality. In the case of my salad, prawns were poached to perfection then cubed along with mango, cucumber and capsicum, doused in a piquant passionfruit sauce and artfully arranged in a cylindrical stack on the plate. If it’s a burger you crave, Yeo will send out what may be the best you’ve ever tasted — so moreish were they that two fellow resortgoers ordered a second round, before lapsing into what can only be described as a food coma for the remainder of the afternoon.

On my last day at the resort, I tell Yeo I’d like to pack her in my suitcase and take her home. Alas, she declines. Before heading back to the airport, I decide to spend my last hour doing something to recharge. I could take a dip in the giant steel-clad saltwater pool. Or head to the spa ringed by boulders, where a skilled masseuse kneads knots into oblivion using chemical-free, herb-based tonics. Or take one last soak in that heavenly tub on my deck. And I can’t help but wonder: what would Jackie have done? ■



From top: tents are designed to evoke the feel of a luxury safari; an outdoor bath overlooking the river; a sun-drenched tent interior; the Landing Zone Bar surrounded by waterfalls.



KRISHNA ADITHYA PRAJOGO; COURTESY OF SHINTA MANI WILD