



Seeing the trees for the wood

New resorts that are making areas of the Cardamom Mountains more accessible, are also in the frontline in the fight to protect the region's forests for future generations to enjoy.

Story and photography by Marissa Carruthers

CHUM KHENG STANDS SOLEMNLY IN front of a cache of seized weapons. Rusting handmade rifles are propped against a wall inside Preak Tachan Rangers' Station. Next to them is a pile of chainsaws used to fell the area's rapidly dwindling forest. The wall outside is lined with tangled webs of green netting and wire: snares used to catch the endangered wildlife that call the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia home.

Kheng is one of just 12 rangers tasked with patrolling a 180-square-kilometre patch of the Botom Sakor National Park that was snapped up by NGO Wildlife Alliance in the mid-2000s when the Cambodian government broke the area up into concessions. To keep it from the clutches of rampant loggers, in 2013 the organisation started employing rangers to patrol the area. Now, tourists can take a hand too, helping to pay for the rangers by staying at the Cardamom Tented Camp (CTC), a partnership between Wildlife Alliance, Minor Hotels and travel company Yaana Ventures.

For the last few decades, the Cardamoms

have been pillaged by illegal loggers razing swathes of trees for luxury timber to sell abroad, and poachers hunting rare species to traffic. Precious woods command a hefty price tag – rosewood, for example, sells for between US\$5,000 and US\$8,000 a cubic metre. Land concessions have also been dished out to companies who replace the trees with agricultural development, including palm oil and rubber tree plantations.

NGO Open Development Cambodia says the country's forests are disappearing at a rate of 2,000 square kilometres a year. NGO Wildlife Alliance adds that Cambodia has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world.

Wildlife trafficking, estimated to be worth US\$19 billion annually worldwide, is also big business. Critically endangered Sunda pangolins – a locally occurring species of what is said to be the world's most trafficked mammal – can fetch up to US\$600 per kilogram on the black market.

This makes guarding the jungle a deadly game. Kheng's voice falls as he recalls a colleague

who was shot dead while sleeping next to him on a patrol of another area of the Cardamoms. "Poachers came and killed my friend in the night," he recalls. "They expected to kill me too, but they couldn't see me because my hammock was closed. I managed to run away."

Kheng, who has spent a decade protecting the forest, knew the risks involved. In his previous role, he worked alongside environmental activist Chutt Wutty. "We were friends. We worked together to patrol the jungle and protect the forest," he says. Wutty was killed in April 2012 while investigating illegal logging and land seizures in forest close to the Thai border.

"A lot of people don't like us because they don't like what we're doing to them," Kheng says. "I don't know when I will die because I live in the sun and other people live in the dark, but I don't care because I have already decided to protect the forest and will keep working."

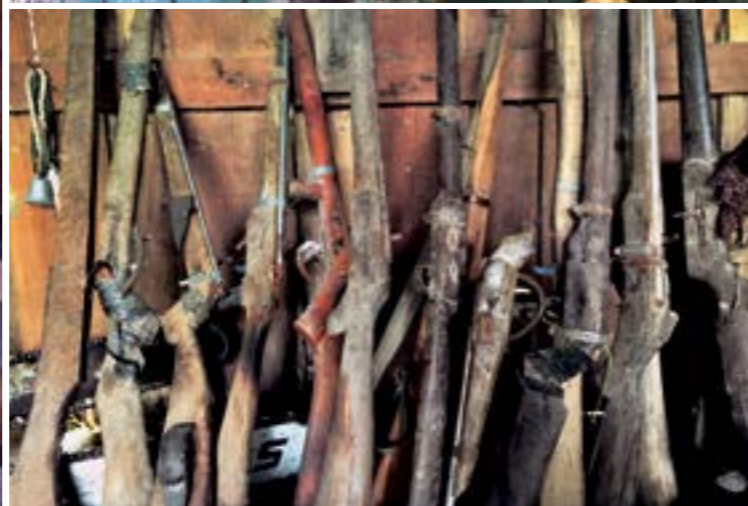
In the first year of patrols organised by Wildlife Alliance, 2,200 snares were removed and a huge number of chainsaws and homemade



NETTING A GOOD HAUL
Join ranger patrols to do your bit for the protection of the forest.



IN HARM'S WAY
Protecting the forests can be a dangerous business: many poachers and trappers apprehended by rangers are armed.



guns were confiscated. A diversity of wildlife was also rescued, including pangolins, deer, snakes and wild pigs. "In the last five years, poachers and loggers are 99% gone from this area," Kheng says with evident pride.

The previous day, I'd arrived at the small riverside village of Trapeang Rung after a five-hour taxi journey from the capital, Phnom Penh. Here, CTC manager Allan Michaud was waiting with the camp's brightly coloured motorised boat. We snaked up the Trapeang Rung River, then turned up its tributary, the narrower Preak Tachan River, where we began meandering through stands of mangroves dotted with palms.

Michaud is English but has been a Cambodian resident for almost 18 years, spending most of that time documenting wildlife. As we twist and turn up the river, he points out places where he recently spotted storks nesting, peacocks strutting and otters swimming. His stories draw on his wealth of experience with local wildlife and he tells me of the time he secured the first photo of the country's national bird, the Giant Ibis. That came on a gruelling 15-day expedition in northern Preah Vihear province in 2001, and provided incontestable proof that the bird was alive after decades of talk of it being extinct.

After about 40 minutes, we arrived at CTC and disembarked at a small wooden dock cum sun deck. I was shown to my temporary home, one of nine safari-style tents spaced through the tall grass

of a wide clearing, flanked by dense forest.

It was early September – the middle of monsoon season, when heavy rains hit pretty much daily. While it's my favourite time in Cambodia, when the countryside springs to life with colour, it's not the best time to be heading into the jungle.

"The jungle can be really tough when it's raining," said Michaud, noting that animals prefer to avoid the rain too and that my visit coincided with leech season.

At 5am, I awoke to apocalyptic claps of thunder and lightening flashes, signatures of the

monsoon season. A deafening hammering of rain on the tent's canvas quickly ensued. Thankfully, mid-way through breakfast the rain eased, and the sun started to elbow the angry clouds aside. By the time I climbed into the two-man kayak at 7am, only a few wisps remained amid a piercing blue sky.

Tina was my guide for the day. Hailing from the village of Chi Phatt about 40km away, the father-of-two told me stories of his childhood as we paddled about four kilometres along the tranquil Preak Tachan. Snake encounters featured heavily – the area is a-slitther with a



WATER VIEW
A gentle paddle on the Preak Tachan River.



GLAMP SITE
The Cardamom Tented Camp is perfectly sited for jungle excursions.

range of deadly serpents, with CTC's welcome book detailing eight of the most dangerous, including the king cobra, banded krait and Malayan pit viper – and there were also tales of dealings with pesky monkeys while scouring the forest for edible plants.

Within an hour, we arrived at Preak Tachan Rangers' Station, a makeshift wooden hut with a tin roof overlooking the river. The Cambodian national flag flew proudly outside and chickens scurried among a small garden of pineapples, herbs and other vegetables as we walked up. It is here I met Kheng. He invited me inside to show me their collection of seized weapons and chainsaws – just a fraction, he said, of the haul Wildlife Alliance's rangers have gathered over the last five years.

They manage a total of eight ranger stations across the Cardamoms, carrying out about 8,000 patrols a year, walking close to 20,000 kilometres in the process. Since 2002, the rangers have rescued almost 4,800 animals, seized 14,300 chainsaws, removed 155,000 snares and prosecuted more than 640 trespassers.

While they man the frontline of conservation, further support from tourism is to come in November 2018 in the shape of a five-star, low-impact resort from the Bensley

Collection – Shinta Mani Wild. The resort is in an area of strategic importance: a 350-hectare valley connecting Bokor and Kirirom national parks protected since 2016 as the Southern Cardamom National Park.

The site was snapped up by Bensley and his partner Sokoun Chanpreda during an auction where the government was selling off parcels of land for economic development concessions. Shinta Mani Wild's operations will fund one ranger station, adding to the existing handful in the national park.

"[Tourism] plays a huge and growing role in conserving the environment," says Bensley. "In many places, the government cannot afford to pay for the protection of natural areas, management of parks and for scientific research. High yield, low volume tourism can provide minimum impact solutions that can easily provide a financial lifeline to protect and manage natural areas sustainably. Tourists are willing to pay dollars to see and experience these beautiful areas in intimate ways without crowds."

The upmarket camp brings with it a taste of the high life, aiming to evoke a sense of accompanying Jacky Onassis on a luxury jungle safari. The former First Lady travelled throughout Cambodia with former King Sihanouk in 1967.



After arriving at the reception lounge via road or helicopter, guests reach the resort proper via a 380-metre zip line across the fast-flowing river. Jeep transfers are available for those not wanting such an adrenaline-fuelled arrival.

As with CTC, Shinta Mani Wild is intended as a base for exploring the forest on waterways and trails, perhaps accompanying Wildlife Alliance rangers and researchers on patrols to check camera traps and conduct wildlife studies. One team of naturalists from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, for instance, have developed a network of hikes over the last two years as they have studied the flora and fauna.

After wrapping up our time with Kheng, one of his colleagues emerged from the back of the hut. A tall, stern-looking Cambodian sporting full camouflage gear, Ray Ban sunglasses and a rifle, he was to be our escort back through the forest to camp.

Sadly, the damp kept most of the wildlife out of view, but the forest was alive with sound, and Tina picked out bird calls, gibbons chattering from the treetops and the buzz of cicadas. There was one local inhabitant we were pleased to not encounter too – arriving back at camp, miraculously leech-free.

Distant rumbles and a threatening sky swept

in by early afternoon, but I wasn't about to let the weather dampen my spirits. Despite the ominous air, Tina and I headed back out on the kayak to explore more of the area's spiderweb of waterways. "We're going to get wet," he warned. Again though, the weather was on my side and the rain held off.

One pay-off for visiting during rainy season is the water, which is deliciously clear. Even in deeper stretches, I could clearly trace the gnarled puzzle of roots down to the white sand of the riverbed. The water was absolutely motionless, disturbed only by insects dancing on the surface. Perfectly reflecting the lush foliage that hugged its banks, it became disorienting at times, like we were afloat the air and not water. The only sounds were those of nature at work and the gentle swish of our paddles.

Besides a red squirrel darting through the trees, I wasn't fortunate enough to spot much wildlife, but we know there's plenty lurking about. In late 2016, the rangers set up 40 camera traps and captured images of sun bears, clouded leopards, dhole (wild dog) and the greater hog badger – all listed as vulnerable or endangered species. More common wild pigs, civets, macaques and several species of deer were also caught on camera.

Birders have plenty to enjoy too. Malayan night heron, rarely seen in the area, have been caught on camera. The endangered Asian woolly necked stork, the red-listed lesser adjutant and

green peafowl also roam the area, and colourful stork-billed kingfishers, great hornbill and oriental pied hornbills have often been seen flying close to camp.

Thanks to initiatives such as CTC and Shinta Mani Wild, and the tireless work of the rangers of Wildlife Alliance, there's renewed hope that the patchwork of forests that remain in the Cardamoms can be preserved for future generations to enjoy. "When people come into the jungle, they come to poach or cut trees," Kheng told me. "They rarely come here to do good things." With time, these eco-resorts could help change his mind. **AA**



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The best time to visit the Cardamoms is during the dry months, which run from November to February. March to May is hot but remains relatively dry.

How to get there

The Cardamoms lie in the country's southwest, running along the coast and backed by the Thai border. Check with the resorts mentioned to arrange a private transfer from the capital, Phnom Penh, or use public transport in the direction of Koh Kong.

Further info

Guests are advised to pack lightweight long trousers and a sleeved top in muted colours, closed-toe hiking shoes, sunhat and insect repellent. CTC has temperamental wifi in public areas and tents have solar-powered sockets for charging electrical items.

Contact

Cardamom Tented Camp
www.cardamomtentedcamp.com
Shinta Mani Wild
www.shintamani.com/wild.php



ROOM WITH A VIEW
At the Shinta Mani Wild, nature is close enough to touch.