

NEXT-LEVEL RETREATS

Cambodia is shaping up as the next eco-adventure and luxury island hotspot

Writer Angela Goh



Long known for its ancient wonders, Siem Reap, Cambodia has unfurled its natural beauty, transforming itself into an emerging destination for beach and jungle hideaways. And a number of luxury hospitality brands have taken notice.

This year alone, a string of luxury eco-conscious resorts have taken shape at its off-the-radar islands and coastal

tropical jungles.

Meanwhile, the hotel scene in Phnom Penh has also caught up a few notches against neighbouring capitals with a smart modern high-rise hotel. That and other upcoming properties in the Cambodian capital will make the dreaded stopover a thing of the past. From the budget-friendly to the ultra-posh, these are the latest stays away from touristy Angkor.

WILD INTERIOR CARDAMOM TENTED CAMP

As our small motorboat slices through the mirror-like stillness of Preak Tachan River deep in the wilderness of western Cambodia – the only route to Cardamom Tented Camp – a plume of smoke rises near the riverbank. Likely a poacher's indiscriminate disposal of a lit cigarette, according to Sokhan Yung,

the lodge's assistant manager who promptly alerts forest rangers by radio.

"When I was here in 2002, the only sound was of chainsaws," says Sokhan, describing the scale of plunder since the 1990s by illegal loggers in what is now Botum Sakor National Park. Wildlife traffickers and hunters were equally active then such that crocodiles were wiped out from this river. But today the jungle has regrown evidenced

PREVIOUS PAGE: Shinta Mani Wild is set to be one of the year's hottest openings. THIS PAGE: Cardamom Tented Camp's proceeds are used for conservation including supplementing the income of rangers on full-time patrol of the concession



by hums of birds, macaques and the barking deer. Conservationists are hopeful that with continued protection, wildlife will thrive again. Such is the driving force behind the year-old not-for-profit camp, a confluence of conservation and affordable lodging.

Spearheaded by Minor Hotels (the group behind the Anantara and Avani brands), responsible tourism group Yaana Ventures and conservation organisation

Wildlife Alliance, all the camp's proceeds are used for conservation including supplementing the income of 12 rangers on full-time patrol of the 180sqkm concession. Hence, its tagline: Your stay keeps the forest standing.

In a natural clearing of low wispy grass ringed by thick woodland, a boardwalk connects nine safari style tents, each kitted out with a plush bed and fully appointed

bathroom. Its three-star amenities include a simple dining and lounge area. This sustainably built outfit is fully solar powered and can be removed without scarring the landscape.

Guests get to kayak, trek and accompany rangers on their patrol, and visit a ranger's station where snares, homemade rifles and chainsaws confiscated from poachers are on display. "I am glad to earn a living while helping in conservation for the next generation, such as my sons," says staff guide Tina Duong. Its all-inclusive packages offer transfers from Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville and Trat, Thailand.
www.cardamomtentedcamp.com

SHINTA MANI WILD – BENSLEY COLLECTION

Along the same environmental ethos as Cardamom Tented Camp but with an upscale proposition is Shinta Mani Wild, which scheduled to open in December. Located deep within South Cardamom National Park, it's cradled in a photogenic valley, three hours west of Phnom Penh.



Shinta Mani Wild marries style with substance, protecting the surrounding habitat while offering guests chic luxury accommodation and jungle adventures



Shinta Mani Wild is located deep within the South Cardamom National Park

Adventure begins right from the start. Guests take a 380m zip-line to the property, touching down at the aptly named Landing Zone Bar where a warm reception and cool refreshments await. Those not keen on an adventurous entrance can opt for the conventional arrival by vehicle.

Designed and owned by acclaimed designer and architect Bill Bensley, this super-luxurious resort also sets a new benchmark for responsible luxury marrying style with substance. The resort protects the surrounding habitat in collaboration with Wildlife Alliance, The Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government. Meanwhile, its philanthropic arm Shinta Mani Foundation focuses on community outreach offering villagers long-term employment, education and training.

Fifteen chic luxury tents elevated over the edge of a rushing boulder-strewn river are infused with a whimsical take on a jungle safari. Soak in the wilderness from a bathtub on the private terrace or let the river's torrent lull you to sleep. The interiors

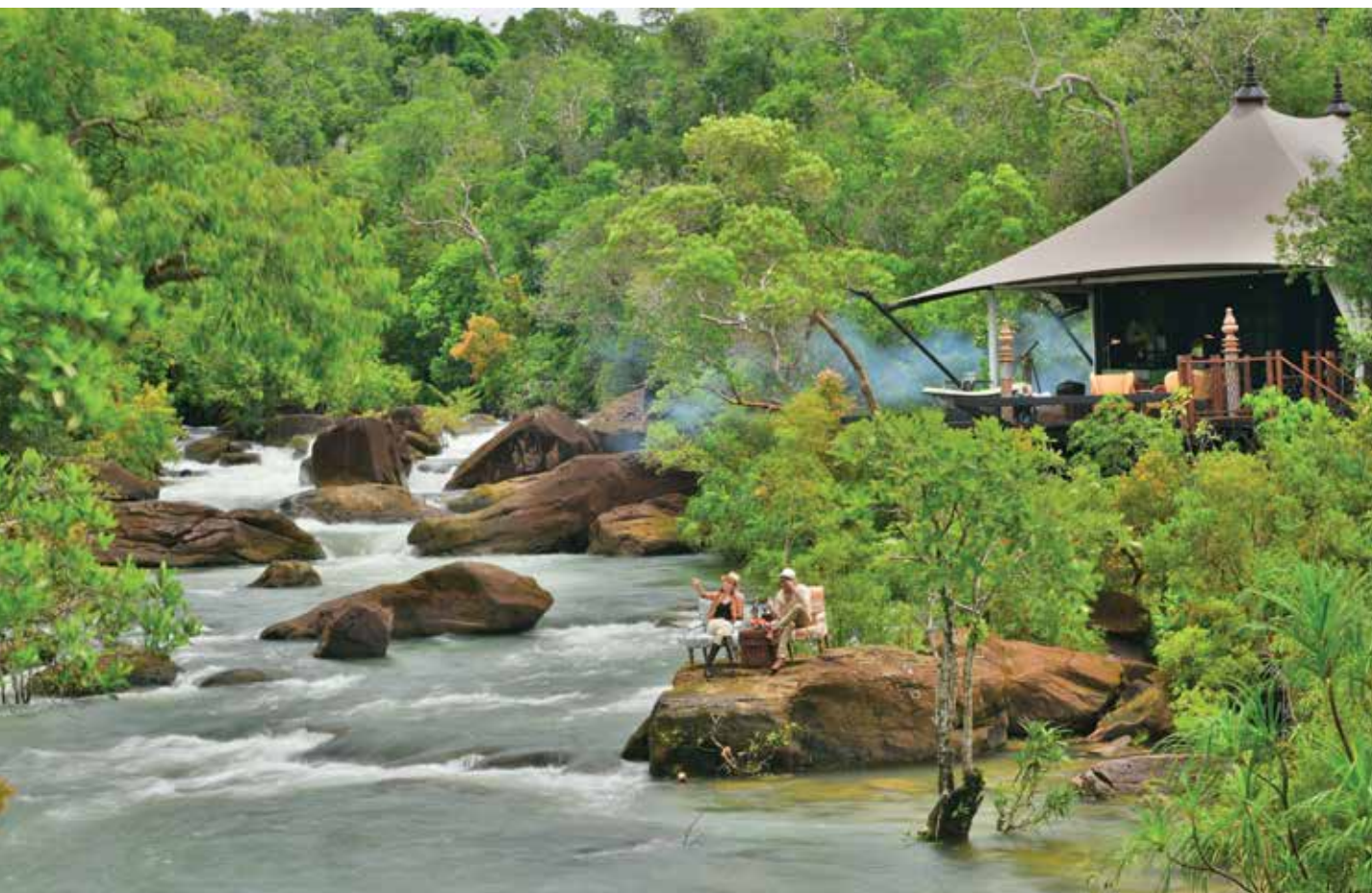


feature eclectic furnishings of antiques and custom-designed pieces within an ample living space of 100sqm.

The adventurous streak extends into dining as well. Eschewing a menu, Chef

Kien Wagner's dishes include wild edible plants foraged daily (guests can join him). The area is also a source of large succulent mud crabs, a local delicacy.

www.shintamani.com



ISLAND IDYLL

ALILA VILLAS KOH RUSSEY

Forget typical beach cabanas and thatched roofs. This recently launched eco-luxe resort is a stylish island getaway. Cubic-shaped buildings lend themselves to clean lines juxtaposed with the chequered and striped motifs patterned after Cambodian krama scarves. The 63 pool villas are a haven of minimalist, unpretentious ease with sleek contemporary design. Guests are enveloped in the airy, immersive feel of the picturesque outdoors through high-ceiling windows and outdoor terraces.

Set on lush Koh Russey, a 10-minute boat ride from the south coast of Cambodia in the Gulf of Thailand, Alila Villas occupies a 1.2km stretch of private beach.

As for the 'eco' part of this resort, water and energy efficient features are adopted throughout the property. This includes operating its own water bottling plant and farm-to-table approach at its restaurants,



Alila Villas Koh Russey features minimalist, sleek design



which are supplied from its organic garden as well as surrounding areas. French fusion cuisine can be enjoyed at main restaurant Horizon. The oceanfront Beach Shack is a casual all-day dining spot with a sand-floor central bar and open grill. It serves Khmer and Asian favourites alongside Western comfort food with a Caribbean twist.

When not savouring delicious fare, pass time at the beachfront swimming pool, boutique, spa and gym. Guests can venture further on excursions to the mainland to explore Bokor National Park besides soaking up the local town life in Kampot and Kep. Complimentary perks include airport and mainland transfers, breakfast, yoga, tai chi and beach cinema.

www.alilahotels.com

SIX SENSES KRABEY ISLAND

This exclusive Six Senses wellness retreat ticks the boxes – secluded on a private island lapped by clear emerald waters, set against a lush jungle interior and a mere 15-minute private speedboat ride from the mainland. The intimate set-up entices with just 40 pool villas bathed in earthy tones and natural light.

If you were taken in by Angkor's charm you will be delighted with the spa inspired by the carved riverbed of the sacred Kbal Spean River (also known as 'River of a Thousand Lingas') in Siem Reap. Abstract shapes of water, light reflections, bubbles and ripple exude an otherworldly feel.

Just as entrancing are the treatments, starting off with a Khmer herbal steam sauna or *chupong*. The herbs help clear skin and improve circulation. A Khmer wellness practitioner is available for consultations on traditional local treatments, Integrated Wellness and rejuvenating journeys.

Rest assured the dining is stupendous with its taste and panorama. Dominating the menu are Khmer and Southeast Asian delights prepared with fresh produce from its on-site farm. On the lighter side are house-made gelatos and sorbets served poolside, delivering relief after a long day in the sun. Guests can also participate in cooking classes or watch a movie under the stars.

www.sixsenses.com



URBAN RETREAT ROSEWOOD PHNOM PENH

Cambodia's fast-developing capital is expanding skyward. Towering above the centre of the business district is a shiny 39-storey skyscraper – Phnom Penh's tallest (for now) and most iconic, resembling the arched back of a dragon. Rosewood Phnom Penh occupies the top 14 floors, encapsulating the nation's modern face. The sleek luxurious high-rise hotel which debuted in February exudes contemporary opulence imbued with Khmer grace and French finesse.

Its 175 guest rooms are the largest in the city, onwards of 50sqm, offering floor-to-ceiling, wrap-around windows framing uninterrupted views of the Tonle Sap and Mekong Rivers. On a clear day, distant hills appear in the horizon. Five tantalising restaurants and lounges take dining to new levels. The main restaurant

Brasserie Louis serves French comfort food as well as Cambodian classics while Cuts is a steakhouse. Specially crafted beers are among the highlights at the Japanese gastropub-style restaurant, Iza, where seafood dishes hit the right notes. There is also a fancy patisserie but the swankiest of them all – and creating the most buzz in town – is the sky bar Sora hovering 37 storeys high on a cantilevered terrace.

Beyond such lofty sophistication the brand prides itself on highlighting the location's cultural essence. An art gallery showcases quarterly exhibits of Cambodian artists while the spa's signature Khmer treatments aim to revive ancient massage techniques using traditional healing herbs. Classic Khmer massage shares some similarities with traditional Thai massage, such as not using oil. But the former uses mainly palms and thumbs, with less stretching leaving you feeling invigorated. www.rosewoodhotels.com