



A SENSE OF PLACE

When one of the world's most prolific hotel designers turns his hand to being a hotelier himself, guests are in for a treat. FRANÇOIS OOSTHUIZEN checks in at SHINTAMANI ANGKOR – BENSLEY COLLECTION

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES. That's the time it took – from landing at Siem Reap-Angkor International Airport, obtaining a visa, through customs and collecting my luggage – before reaching the airconditioned SUV arranged for the transfer to the hotel. The normally tedious airport formalities were expertly expediated by a representative from Shinta Mani, with a Bensley Butler waiting in the arrivals hall – armed with a cold towel, bottle of water and broad smile.

Over the next three days, I would discover that this rock star service is extended to all guests staying at Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection's 10 super-luxe pool villas. The butler, brilliantly equipped with insider destination knowledge and graciously attending to any whims of guests, would appear as if from nowhere whenever I stepped outside the villa – whether at the crack of dawn as I set out for an early-morning stroll, or late into the night when I returned from a spot of shopping in the night bazaar. In between, he took care of all sorts of other arrangements; from local tours, restaurant reservations and whatever else to ensure my stay is as comfortable as it can possibly be.

Too many hotels these days claim to offer a "butler service" when in reality they fall very short on delivery. At Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection, the return of an authentic, dedicated butler service can be hailed with a "hallelujah". This bespoke service, I am told, is indeed a hallmark of Bensley Collection.

Also deeply ingrained into the DNA of the Bensley Collection portfolio is a visionary concept with extraordinary design. For Bill Bensley – founder of Bensley Design Studios and the creator of over 200 hotels and resorts across the world



– wowing guests with his particular brand of hotel design is to flaunt historical reverence and contemporary styling all at once.

Stepping into the expansive two-level pool villa (156 square metres) is somewhat of a jaw-dropping moment – no matter how blasé one likes to be about these things. There's a sense of *drama, drama, drama* wherever you look. A colour palette of black and white with Art Deco motifs prevail. Carved into the wall of the bedroom and

extending to the outside area along the sparkling, nine-metre lap pool is an oversized, three-dimensional mural relief portraying the rippling folds of Jayavarman's robe (a Khmer king who reigned from 1181-1218 and who was known for his powerful, pioneering spirit).

A floor-to-ceiling glassed bathroom offers views of a super-chic



bath set in a small garden. The outdoor area extends up a steep little staircase to a *sala* with a daybed and a table counter with chairs.

A personal favourite feature must be the bed... the most comfortable and fluffiest I have experienced in ages. It comes with Khmer-inspired bedsheets and a pillow menu to ensure the sweetest of dreams.

Apart from the standard amenities and services, a plethora of little extras continue to reinforce every guest's VIP experience with an all-inclusive package: daily high tea with canapés; laundry service; around the clock *remork* (local tuk-tuk) transportation within Siem Reap; breakfast, lunch and dinner; free-flow of mini bar and snacks replenished daily; daily sunset cocktails; and a sightseeing tour with private car, driver and tour guide to Angkor Wat and other major temples, including a sunrise tour with champagne breakfast or sunset at Pre Rup Temple.

It's evident that every little detail has been thought of, and that no stone has been left unturned for an unrivalled experience. Utmost privacy is at the order of the day, with the 10 pool villas ensconced within the walls of a compound – on the same grounds as the already established Shinta Mani Resort and Shinta Mani Shack,



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a classroom on the Shinta Mani premises – equipping them with valuable skills. Three times a year, voluntary dentists from Global Dental Relief also fly in from the USA to provide free oral hygiene for underprivileged Cambodian children, while no-interest business loans are provided to local entrepreneurs.

As I have visited the famous temples of Angkor on several previous occasions, I opted to explore some of Siem Reap's alternative attractions this time. I had heard of Phare, the Cambodian Circus – a circus school established in 1994 by the Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPSA) NGO – and what an impressive project it is! It's a free training center for Cambodian youths; combining theatre, dance, live music, and storytelling with scripts written by the young students – portraying social issues, their perspectives on history, folklore and other issues close to their heart.

Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection leaves lasting memories in the hearts and minds of guests – and it's obviously very much intended. ■



where villa guests are spoiled with several choices of restaurants and bars. The pool villas are a new addition that debuted in December last year, and by all means the star of the show.

A brilliant downtown location means close proximity to many

sights and a charming insight of local life.

To be lapped up in all this luxury doesn't have to come with any guilt, as a percentage of the daily room rate is donated to the non-profit Shinta Mani Foundation (SMF), committed to enhance the lives of Cambodians living in poverty. SMF provides free hospitality education to promising youths through the School of Hospitality – in