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HOTEL



# Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection

SIEM REAP

Bill Bensley teams up with Shinta Mani Hotels to open an all-villa retreat in Cambodia’s temple town, where luxury with a conscience takes centrestage.

Words: Catherine Martin | Photography: Courtesy of Bensley Design Group (unless otherwise stated)

As the creative force behind many of Asia’s luxury resorts, Bill Bensley is known the world over for his distinctive and often whimsical designs. With over 200 projects to his name – from JW Marriott Phu Quoc to InterContinental Danang – he’s the go-to guy for brands looking to bring character to their properties. And while Bensley is undoubtedly proud of his accomplishments, it’s his latest venture in Cambodia that is closest to his heart.

Shinta Mani Hotels is a growing collection of boutique properties that not only provide luxury lodgings, but give back to the local community through a dedicated foundation. It is the brainchild of Sokoun Chanpreda, a Cambodian businessman who returned from overseas to invest in the future of his country, developing and operating a number of independent hotels, bars and restaurants. “Sokoun first commissioned us to design Hotel de la Paix [now Park Hyatt] in Siem Reap,” says Bensley of the beginnings of their relationship, back in 2005. “At that time, there were not many trained folk to employ, so Sokoun started a hospitality school. I helped a bit, and then a bit more, and now we’re equal partners in what I think is a life-changing experience to be able to really help people much less fortunate.”

The partnership has led to a portfolio-wide rebrand, taking in two facing properties in Siem Reap, now refurbished by Bensley; the launch of a super-luxe sub-brand bearing the designer’s name; and an undisclosed pipeline of new hotels across the country.

The debut of The Bensley Collection came in January this year with the opening of an all-villa resort within the grounds of Shinta Mani Angkor. Naturally, Bensley was responsible for the design scheme, overseeing every detail from the music to the interiors to the uniforms. And he’s clearly relished in the freedom of crafting his own brand, letting his creative spirit run wild.

On arrival, guests are ushered into the lounge, where check-in takes place beneath a painted sky and ceremonial spears. A small cocktail bar serves a selection of wines and spirits and is the only public space to speak of. Facilities at Shinta Mani Angkor and Shinta Mani Shack, adjacent and opposite, offer the full gamut, from a spa and swimming pools, to Bensley’s Bar and Kroya restaurant, where signature dishes include sun-fried fish, crispy fermented pork and Khmer favourite fish amok.

While guests are free to use these facilities, many favour the seclusion of their own private sanctuary. Each of the ten self-contained





Above: Each villa's poolside terrace is clad in mesmerising black and white tiles surrounded by an abundance of plant life

villas offer 156m<sup>2</sup> of living space across two pavilions and reflect how Bensley himself likes to live; in complete privacy and surrounded by lush tropical gardens. “Often I’m asked what is the most important design aspect to building a resort,” he explains. “For me, it’s about completely private outdoor spaces. It is a glorious luxury. Think about it; where can you go and be outside, next to your room and be completely private? Shinta Mani Angkor Bensley Collection is about that, and about providing the best accommodation in Cambodia.”

A traditional brass key and padlock opens the door to each oasis, revealing a veranda clad in mesmerising black and white tiles surrounded by an abundance of verdant plant life – grasses line the poolside, palms grow from every corner, and vines cascade down from above. The outdoor living space extends upstairs to the roof terrace, where a huge daybed looking out to the ancient tree canopy of Siem Reap’s palace awaits.

A well thought-out site plan along with high walls enveloping each compound promise the total privacy that Bensley talks of. And the walls themselves add interest to the space, featuring a three-dimensional carving that portrays the rippling robes of Jayavarman – a Khmer king known for his powerful, pioneering spirit. The ripples extend inside the villa, as does the greenery thanks to floor-to-ceiling

windows offering direct sightlines to the gardens. In fact, a sliding door from the guestroom makes it possible to leap straight from the bed to the pool.

Interiors are regal yet residential, inspired by Cambodia’s Khmer culture. Stately armchairs are upholstered in plush fabrics; carved wood casegoods feature brass detailing; and artwork depicts national sights as well as old Asia. The scheme is dominated by monochromatic tiling to striking effect, with pops of Khmer orange adding colour to the soft furnishings.

Rest and relaxation takes centre stage in the first pavilion, while the second – accessed via a partially covered pathway – houses the bathroom and dressing room. Here, carved light fixtures hang over twin basins kitted out with polished gold faucets, while mirrors are framed in bamboo canes that fan outwards to mimic the palms. Almost entirely glazed, the space offers a one-of-a-kind bathing experience where guests can take a refreshing shower overlooking the tropical garden, or an al fresco bath in the splendid stone tub; truly at-one with nature in their own private sanctuary.

In creating his own brand, Bensley has also paid due care and attention to the service aspect, employing Bensley Butlers – trained at the hotel’s own hospitality school – to cater to a guest’s every whim.







**Above:** Guestrooms feature a three-dimensional wall carving that portrays the rippling robes of a Khmer king

Yes, they can arrange a poolside BBQ or organise guided tours of nearby Angkor Wat, but it's the personalised, intuitive touches, such as remembering how you like your morning coffee, or magically appearing with a glass of freshly-squeezed fruit juice when in need of a pick-me-up that really sets them apart, bringing a new level of luxury to this part of the world.

But it's not all about self-indulgence. This is luxury with a conscience. Bensley's desire to be personally involved in Shinta Mani Hotels stems largely from the group's philanthropic spirit. Since the hotel school opened in 2004, hundreds of Khmer students have graduated to secure employment in the hospitality industry, and Chanpreda has since expanded the Shinta Mani Foundation to give back to the wider community. A proportion of the daily room rate is donated to the cause to support health, education and development programmes, and guests are encouraged to head out into the countryside to see the sanitation systems, schooling and small businesses that have benefitted.

"People crave experiences that are emotional and visceral;

experiences that feel real and authentic," says Bensley of the guests' wish to help. "In Siem Reap we have been working with local communities for 15 years and have done a world of good."

The next chapter for Shinta Mani will take both the hotel brand and the foundation to the Cambodian wilderness in the form of a luxury tented camp in the Cardamom Mountains. "We are now trying to understand the community at Shinta Mani Wild and have them work with us," Bensley continues. "It's not an easy task as their livelihood for generations has been based on hunting. Now that has virtually all been consumed, they are realising that farming is a more viable, sustainable source of income."

Set to open later this year, the ambitious project will see custom designed tents elevated over moving water, where guests can feast on delicacies grown and foraged from the surrounding land and encounter extraordinary wildlife. The low-impact resort – 'a utopia of sustainability' as Bensley describes it – will double as a research and conservation centre that not only protects the threatened landscape, but creates new opportunities for the people that call it home.

**EXPRESS CHECK-OUT:** 10 villas | [www.shintamani.com](http://www.shintamani.com)

**Owner:** Sokoun Chanpreda and Bill Bensley | **Operator:** HMD Asia | **Architecture and Interior Design:** Bensley Design Studios

**Contractors:** KOKI Engineering; Pido Cambodia; Ralys Group