Shinta Mani Wild sits within a Cambodian jungle that Bensley bought to stop it being logged

A WORLD *away*

The Willy Wonka of hotel design, Bill Bensley is transforming luxury tourism in south-east Asia

Words: Rachel Ingram

When I first met Bill Bensley, he was giving a tour of JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort & Spa – a five-star hotel he turned into his own desert island 'university'. As he told make-believe stories of former students, I was so taken by his childlike enthusiasm that I was tempted to believe his tales. When we meet several months later, during a trip to London, his passion is still indisputable, but the undertone is different. Since our last encounter, Bensley has spent months in Cambodia, the poorest country in southeast Asia, where he's been busy building a luxury tent camp in a very special patch of Cambodian jungle.

There are moments during our interview that the Bangkok-based hotel designer becomes visibly upset, the pain in his heart reflected on his face as he speaks of the poverty he's encountered – a contrast to the excitement that lights up his entire aura as he talks of his design projects: a Buddhist village in Vietnam, a French Colonial resort in Laos.

Professionally, Bensley's known for his Willy Wonka-style creativity. He's a design genius with a wild eye who, rumour has it, will only agree to a project with an unlimited budget. It's easy to see why the American is the go-to designer for leading hotel groups such as Rosewood, Four Seasons and Oberoi. But behind the big personality, Bensley is deep and considered, he's a man who spent his personal fortune on a forest to stop loggers chopping it down, and formed a foundation which adopts and protects children in need.

Perhaps the reason for the designer's shift in mood is that the tent project in Cambodia is not for hotel clients, but for himself – it's the second property in the eponymous Bensley Collection portfolio. We tied him down during a whirlwind tour of London to find out more about this truly personal project and to discover what makes Bensley one of the most prolific hotel designers of our generation. »

Tempus: Rumour has it that when you agree to a project, you have two stipulations – free creative reign and unlimited budget. Is this true?

Bill Bensley: Not necessarily unlimited budget but free reign. I think it's important that the client says, 'I've got this budget, don't spend any more than that,' and I'm fine with that as long as they give me free reign. At this Buddhist project I'm doing [Yen Tu], part of it is for monks so I had to do one room that's 12sqm with four beds. The budget was $20,000 a room, which is nothing. I can work with any type of budget as long as I'm dictating how the bunk beds look.

What's the story behind this project?

If you go south an hour from Halong Bay, there's a place called Yen Tu. A 13th century king of Vietnam left his palace and riches behind and this is where he settled. It's also where he's buried. About five million Vietnamese and Korean come here every year. What we're doing is a hotel in the 14th century style, so there's no visible glass anywhere – all you see is mud and ceramics. We're creating a 14th century village, too, so it's a real step back in time. The village is full of retail shops selling things from the 14th century, but as the 14th century had no language – Vietnamese language only came to be in 1910 – I'm doing a whole series of pictograms. Throughout the entire project there's no words. No words and no glass. I wish it was a Bensley Collection hotel but they're good because they let me do whatever the hell I want to do.

Tell us about first Bensley Collection hotel, Shinta Mani, that's recently opened in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

We've done 10 gorgeous pool villas next to the King's Palace. They're very ethereal and Cambodian. Everything is under these 200-year-old rain trees, that are just so pretty. There's no barrier between the inside and the outside because I wanted to be able to sleep in the garden. There's a sky bed upstairs, too, because in winter time it's wonderful to lie in bed and look at the stars. The fun part about this room is the bathroom is through the garden on the other side.

We also have eight Bensley butlers – you can imagine what they look like (laughs) – and they are great, great kids. They'll take you all around to the back doors of the temples. We've found places that nobody else can go, because you know Siam Reap can get a little bit inundated with tourists, so we've found lots of places to go and bring our guests and make them feel very special.

What is the 'Bensley Experience', offered at Bensley Collection hotels?

A Bensley Experience is all in – all the spa you want, all the wine you want, all the experiences, the transportation… whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it. One of the things that really pisses me off about travelling, especially in an all-inclusive deal, is that it's not. They always charge you for extras – oh you want that whisky? That's another £4. We don't have any of that with the Bensley Collection. Wherever you want to go, wherever you want to eat in town, we'll take you out and pick up the bill.

How do you put a cost on that, considering some people may take push the limits?

There will be that but we're just going to take it. For the most part, people who travel at that level don't need to drink seven bottles of wine a day. At $1,000 a night, people don't act like that.

> "JUST LIKE THE AFRICAN SAFARI CAMPS, WHEN YOU COME TO SHINTA MANI WILD, YOU HAVE TO SIGN YOUR LIFE AWAY"

Your second Bensley Collection project, Shinta Mani Wild, which opens in November, is in quite a different location. How did it you pick it?

About 90% of the tourists in Cambodia go to Siem Reap and don't see anything else. What we're doing is linking the country together. I bought 3,000 acres of forested land from a logging auction and they sold me five kilometres along a river. I could go in there and chop everything down and make a lot of money, but do I look like a lumberjack? No.

I have 200 acres per tent. You feel like you're on your own. When you come to the site, where wild elephants pushed over our garden house last month, you get out of the car into an ATV, then you follow this tiny trail to the biggest tree we have on site – you climb up the tree and you zipline 400m across the tree tops and across a waterfall to the landing zone, the bar. That's how you arrive to the resort. We have many of the tents over the river, so you can feel the power of the rapids and the mist coming up through the floors. It's really nice.

We're going to offer a three-night minimum stay at $1,800 per couple, which includes all the activities – it's the Bensley Experience again. We're got a programme for up to 10 days that includes things like foraging. We have naturalists that have been on site now for nine months that have identified about 185 edible species of plants, including 12 mushrooms – the pink mushrooms are my favourite. We send people out in the forest to collect these things, bring them back and then teach them how to cook them. So, you can learn survival in Cambodia.

And that's helpful considering you have to sign quite a serious zero responsibility form when checking in!

(Laughs) Just like the African safari camps, when you come to Shinta Mani Wild, you have to sign your life away. I'm serious! Because if you fall into that river you're dust. We did this also at the Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle because the tents are way up in the air – if you've had too many drinks you could topple over. And there's all sorts of ways you can fall off an elephant. They're wild animals. It's dangerous. it's the wild, wild west out there. It ain't London.

You mentioned wild elephants – how can guests get involved with the local wildlife?

This whole area is policed by a 200-man army armed with AK47s who are trying to keep together the integrity of this forest. There's illegal logging and illegal animal trade happening here every single day – a couple of months ago, I was out on site and took down 17 snares! And these snares will catch baby elephants. So, some of our guests can elect to go out with the rangers on patrol.

It's great that you're so involved with local organisations in Cambodia…

There's all sorts of things that Cambodia needs. The nearby land that was sold to the Chinese at the same time I bought this land is now clear cut. Everything has gone. All the trees have gone. And the run off is going into the ocean now and killing all of the coral.

I've got a 99-year lease on this land and it's all about finding a sustainable way of doing something that's low impact/high yield that's hopefully going to be a way of sustaining this as a piece of national park that the government can't take away, and that the Cambodians can't log illegally. If we have enough money to police it correctly, it will at least remain green for as long as I live. And that's the idea, I want it to be green way after I'm gone.

Why's it so important to you to give back to the local community?

I think because I have too damn much myself. I think if I were struggling to make ends meet, it wouldn't be nearly as important – I'm being perfectly honest with you. I think that the reason that it's important to put this energy in is because I can. It's as simple as that. And why Cambodia? Because clearly, it's the poorest and least organised country of all of Asia. You know the average Cambodian makes 80% less than the average Thai? And still now, out of the new-borns in Cambodia, 5% die because they're not getting proper water.

When I first got there in the 1990s, I came across this family. The dad had left and the mother and seven kids were living on top of a pile of sticks about as high as a table, with no roof. The kids had extended stomachs because of malnutrition. I just started crying at the sight of this. And I thought, gosh, I've got to help these people, and we did. The youngest, whom we adopted through the foundation, we called Happy Boy.

Tell us about the Shinta Mani Foundation.

I pay for all the administration stuff out of my pocket and any donations that come in go straight to the field. In the past 15 years, we've built 2,000 homes and 1,500 wells for people here, and this year alone we've done $1.5m worth of free dental work for kids. Cambodia is where my heart and soul is. My home is Thailand, but this is where people need help. Ⓣ

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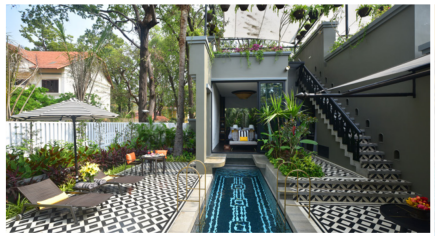

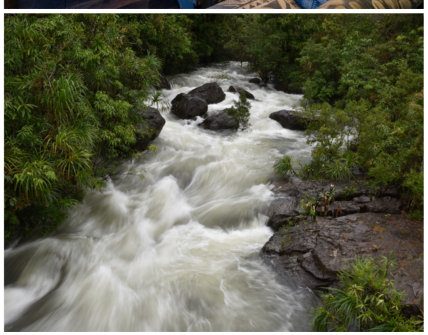

Left column: Shinta Mani Angkor

Right column: Shinta Mani Wild