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Khmer Collection

In Siem Reap, the new Bill Bensley-designed villas at the Shinta Mani Angkor hotel aren't just a lesson in luxury, but also offer guests a dose of history and humanity.

BY ELOISE BASUKI. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEIGH GRIFFITHS



FROM LEFT:
Butler Sreysor;
jump straight into
the private pool
from the villa
bedroom.



IT'S NOT UNCOMMON TO BE treated like royalty at a five-star hotel. Butler service, the finest furnishings, luxury spa treatments and high-end dining all come together to make us ordinary folk feel like kings and queens for a few days. At a new brood of five-star-plus villas in Siem Reap, architect Bill Bensley creates a majestic retreat that also takes pride in Cambodian culture. "I need to ensure that our guests, when they wake up in the morning, know *exactly* where they are," Bensley says. It's dark and rainy when I check in to my villa for the weekend, but, as the sun rises, I wake to a Khmer kingdom.

Opened in December, the 10 two-story Shinta Mani Angkor Bensley Collection villas are set within a private compound bordered by Angkor-inspired stone walls and a canopy of

palm trees. A lush oasis in the center of Siem Reap's dusty, dry streets, the villas share their green patch of land with the Shinta Mani Shack, the four-star sister hotel to the six-year-old, five-star Shinta Mani Angkor across the road. Bensley's studio has designed all three properties, but at the villas, the Bangkok-based designer has personally overseen every detail to ensure indulgence is infused with creative cultural elements.

"The doors and windows in the front of the villa's courtyard, while wood, are patterned after those found in stone at Angkor," Bensley says. The bold stripes he mentions also feature on black-and-white lounge pillows, brass lines interspersed between bedroom floorboards and the tiling of my villa's nine-meter private lap pool. "Some have described [the villas] as

being Art Deco in nature—they're not," Bensley says. "The Khmer understood the power of repetitive geometric lines hundreds of years before architects of Europe. Our architecture interprets that of the Khmer in a new way, extending their culture, their legacy, into 2020."

The most dramatic element is the feature wall that runs from the bedroom to the edge of the pool. The entire wall is covered in a three-dimensional depiction of the rippled, flowing robes of King Jayavarman II, the Cambodian king who founded the Angkor period. "We wanted guests to feel the power and magic that the king of Cambodia would have felt when arriving at his Siem Reap palace," Bensley says.

My villa feels fit for a king *and* queen, and there's definitely plenty of room for both. The double vanities, walk-in-wardrobe and outdoor shower and stone bathtub are located in their own separate quarters behind the bedroom, and the poolside courtyard and upstairs rooftop lounge offer ample options for a sundowner space. It's up on the roof that Sreysor, my personal butler, organizes a bountiful breakfast spread for me on my second morning.

The round-the-clock butlers can tailor your stay to your specific needs and interests, and can schedule temple tours, market visits, artisan workshops, transportation and restaurant reservations. Not only does Sreysor book me a last-minute tuk-tuk tour of Angkor Wat during jam-packed peak season, but she goes to the ticket office with my passport to line up for my ticket in my place, something most tourists waste hours of their vacation time doing themselves.

While I'm being treated like royalty, my stay here isn't all about self-indulgence, and guests have the chance to venture beyond the temples and tourist-run streets to gain deeper insight into rural Cambodian life. The Shinta Mani hotels give a portion of their profits and 100 percent of any guest donations to the nonprofit Shinta Mani Foundation (shintamanifoundation.org), founded by the hotels' owner. The foundation not only helps to redevelop more than 100 rural villages, but also offers free hospitality training to underprivileged locals, as well as loans for students who want to go to university or locals with a small business idea. "The loans have no interest. They can pay it back in small amounts—US\$5 or \$10—whatever they can afford each month," says Neat Chhunnin, the Shinta Mani Foundation's community coordinator, who is taking us to see exactly who the donations benefit.

FROM LEFT:
The entrance to the villas is modeled on the old stone walls of Angkor Wat; folded lotus flowers and fish ponds bring color to the hotel's grounds.



/ checking in /



FROM LEFT:
The villa's glass
bathroom; follow
the lines to the
Shinta Mani
Angkor's pool bar.



We head to Prey, a village in the Banteay Srei district of Siem Reap province, where the foundation has helped locals gain access to water, flushing toilets and permanent housing. We meet one couple with six children who now have their own brick house and water well. "The father built the water well himself. We trained him to do it, and then paid him to do the job here. Now he can do the job for other families and earn some money," Chhunnin says. We also meet Yous Ny, who asked for a loan to start a small shop that sells food and daily necessities to the locals of the village. It's a success. "I feel so proud of her. People here look at her and are really motivated to be like her," Chhunnin says.

On our way back we brave the heat of the midday sun to walk through the Shinta Mani organic farm; thriving crops of tomatoes, eggplants, beans, herbs, fruit and more are all sold back to the hotel for use at Kroya, the hotel's high-end Khmer restaurant. The aim of the farm is to teach the villagers how to set up and nurture their own sustainable plots, giving them a source of income and food for their families. "Our goal is about education," Chhunnin says. "We are helping the families because we want their kids at school."

The foundation has helped more than 200 students graduate from its hospitality program, some—like the Shinta Mani Shack's front office manager—have even scored jobs at the hotels. Sreysor herself has been a part of the success; many of the students she helped train at Kroya have gone on to manage other restaurants in town. While the foundation's

message is prevalent, it's not forced upon you, although it's hard not to leave without feeling the need to be a little more altruistic. The new Bensley Collection gives guests the chance to be treated like the ancient Khmer kings, but seeing how your visit can benefit the community is an even richer reward. ⊕

shintamani.com; villa B&B package from US\$450 per night; all-inclusive package from US\$750 per night includes all meals, free-flow mini bar, temple tour and more. Bill Bensley's next project in Cambodia, Shinta Mani Wild, a luxury tented camp, will open in the Southern Cardamom National Park later this year.