

WILD BILL



WORDS TONY WATTS
PHOTOS BILL BENSLEY

Famed landscape architect and renowned hotel designer Bill Bensley describes himself as “a gardener, a conservationist, a naturalist, an architect of hospitality and a lover of animals.” These interests shine through in almost everything he does. Bensley, whose latest work includes two hotels that come under the Bensley Collection (Shinta Mani Siem Reap and Shinta Mani Wild), tells Davison more about what drives him

“I grew up with a great love for the wilderness and certainly learnt how to sustain our family with food.”

Where were you born and raised?

— I was born in Anaheim, Orange County, California just steps from Disneyland, the same year it opened. My family had a small farm where we were pretty much self-sustaining. I raised bees, quails, chickens, ducks, rabbits, mushrooms, a huge variety of veggies, and of course a compost heap.

I grew up with a great love for the wilderness and certainly learnt how to sustain our family with food. It makes me smile to hear the word ‘sustainability’ used so frequently these days as though it is a new idea.

What brought you to Asia in the first instance?

— On graduation day [Bensley has a Bachelor of Science in Landscape Architecture from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and a Master of Landscape Architecture in Urban Design from Harvard], I asked my Thai classmate Lek Bunnag where he was going. He said Singapore. I asked if I could join, not really knowing where Singapore was... the rest is history.

How did that experience in Singapore influence your design aesthetic?

— My time in Singapore – from 1984 to 1987 – certainly did shape my design aesthetic as I became a Bali-ophile. I learnt the languages, both spoken and architectural. Read everything I could get my hands on. Visited monthly and walked much of the island. I learnt of the myths, the culture, and their art. I am still a great fan.

When did you relocate to Bangkok?

— I started BENSLEY in 1989 from a windowless parking lot on Soi Asoke in Bangkok with four people who are still with me today, but we are some 150-plus graphic designers, artists, architects, landscape architects and interior designers now.



What are some of your memorable projects?

— I think, at the Four Seasons elephant camp we did good with the purchase and export of elephants from the dangerous streets of Bangkok to the green forests of the Golden Triangle. This was paid for by the insightful owner Bill Heinecke.

Kittian Hill in St. Kitts was just brilliant. In Val Kempadoo's social initiative, the villagers of St. Kitts actually built the hotel bit by bit, one bungalow at a time, with teams from the various villages around the island. This is contrary to the usual Caribbean method of hiring a Chinese contractor build it all.

We also had the plans to share - by way of seeds and cuttings - our huge base of food-producing plants with the locals, a great idea from both Val and his father. Since then I have borrowed their Johnny Appleseed idea and followed up successfully at the Shinta Mani Foundation Farm by distributing thousands of food-producing plants to the farmers of Siem Reap.

Both Four Seasons Koh Samui and Capella Ubud were built without felling a single tree and with respect for Mother Nature. The charming owner of Capella Ubud, Suwito, was happily convinced to ditch a potentially more profitable four-star 120-room hotel on the same site in order to do what I thought was the right thing to do, and build a low impact, high yield, truly unique property.



Bensley's designs take shape around the natural landscape. The outcome? Low impact, high yield, truly unique property.

**“A sense of place is most obvious;
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Was there a particular desire to design hotels? — I realised long ago that only high-end resorts could maintain my gardens designs the way I thought fit. Gardens were and are my living portfolio. Residential gardens can go south real quick if not maintained. I love designing hotels because there can be huge budgets to create what are essentially dreams.

Is there something you think most hotels get wrong, something they're missing? — Yes I do and what is missing is so doable. I strive to work towards at least one of the following attributes: A sense of place is most obvious; then some sort of environmental or social consciousness; a storyline; and an attempt to teach guests something new. Big or small, it doesn't matter.

How should travellers strive to minimise their impact? — The traveller can have an impact on the what is built in the future by being selective and asking the right questions about social and environment sustainability. At any hint of greenwash, run away!

What are some projects that have got you all fired up with inspiration? — I am working on a super cool project in China where I am designing a wild animal park. The animals run free while people are caged up... stay tuned!

I am also working on a fantastic UNESCO protected wilderness park, again in China with just 45 rooms in total. There is a three night stay minimum because travellers stay the first night over an estuary in a stilted Chinese home. The second night is on a houseboat with a butler and a cook and one sails along a river valley to a Ming Dynasty village where guests spend their third night.

My wheelhouse is migrating from architecture to the designing of experiences, and they tend to be those that I would love to do myself. There are too few projects in China that are low impact (environmentally), high yield. I want to change that.

In the Maldives we are creating a village I call Crossroads. It is a hotel, lots of F+B and shops essentially, but the spin is adding culture, something the Maldives does not really shine at. The Maldivian history goes back more than 2,000 years, and as the crossroads of the Laccadive Sea a whole lot of cultures have passed through. I am bringing to light a truly interesting history by way of a game I call the Quest. It involves treasure maps, rubbings, using a compass for way-finding, and best yet Maldivian school children will receive credit for completing the Quest.

As a self-confessed “serious enemy of blank walls” and “antagonist to minimalism”, what would you say to Marie Kondo if you met her? — I think we have a great deal in common. At home, and in some of the hotels I design that are unapologetically maximalist, there is a hidden layer of organisation where everything is neatly kept. Maximalism does not mean messy. For Maximalism to be really good, one must be monumentally well ordered; even much more so than Ms. Kondo! **📍**

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