





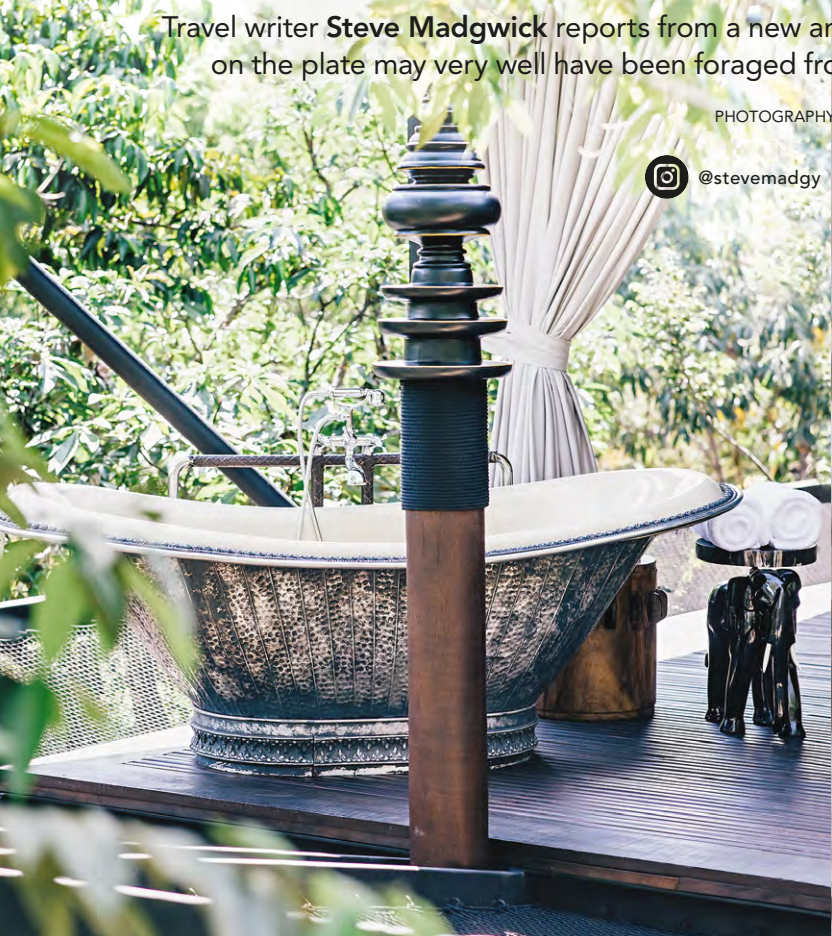
FRUITS OF THE FOREST

Travel writer **Steve Madgwick** reports from a new and luxurious Cambodian jungle retreat, where what's on the plate may very well have been foraged from your verdant surroundings that very morning.

PHOTOGRAPHY ELISE HASSEY

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IT'S LESS THAN three hours' drive from frenetic Phnom Penh to forest-ensconced Shinta Mani Wild, but thanks to a couple of lofty quirks, your feet needn't touch

the earth before your lips grace one of the newborn boutique retreat's forest-themed signature cocktails.

The chopper-transfer option from Cambodia's capital city is *de rigueur* for such high-end properties, but how you cover the final 320 metres is anything but.

Secured onto one of the Southern Hemisphere's longest ziplines, glide through the copious canopy of Southern Cardamom National Park, over the bubbling rapids of the Thmor Rung River, where a signature cocktail, such as the light and floral 'leaf', awaits in The Landing Zone bar.

It's an artfully adventurous arrival to an adventurous concept in luxury accommodation. Shinta Mani Wild's 14 one-bedroom and single two-bedroom luxury tents are generously spaced out over a 1.5-kilometre stretch of jungle that follows an energetic river through all its moods, from gushing waterfalls to serene eddies. Opened a shade before Christmas

last year, the private nature sanctuary is the second property in The Bensley Collection, a collaboration between illustrious architect, designer and artist Bill Bensley and Shinta Mani Hotels (the other being Shinta Mani Angkor).

The prolific Bangkok-based American doesn't 'do' cookie-cutter hotels. He is the devilishly imaginative force behind some of the globe's most charismatic luxury properties, most in Southeast Asia, each with its own robust narrative connected to the locality and the local culture.

"Hotels and movies both need a strong compelling storyline," says Bensley, who in 2018 completed a Netflix documentary series, *Escapism*, based around lost crafts and craftsmen/women.

The inspiration behind Shinta Mani Wild's concept and design hails from an extravagant jungle safari undertaken in 1967 by JFK's widow, Jacqueline Kennedy, a guest of Cambodia's then monarch, King Sihanouk. Bensley's "utopia of sustainability" philosophy seeks to embrace the Cambodian wilderness rather than reign over it.

"Only mother nature creates paradise on earth," he says. "We should learn how to build without destroying mother nature, by way of designing smaller architectural footprints that fit between the trees as opposed to cutting them."

CHECK IN.

While its luxury tents barely interrupt the jungle-scape, Wild's opulent yet tactile interiors aren't willing to be wallflowers; intense reflections on both that fabled trip and other indistinct adventures of yesteryear, too. Inside, authentic Khmer and antique Western furniture are subtly juxtaposed, alongside a diverse meld of charming trunks and old-school cameras. The walls are adorned with vintage Khmer photographs and evocative hand-painted illustrations. Front and centre, a generous Khmer-style wooden-framed bed commands attention. When the tent doors are open, you survey the river below, and immerse yourself in the calming chorus of Southern Cardamom's gurgling water, cicadas and birdsong.

Out on the stately koki hardwood deck, a free-standing hand-beaten-steel bathtub places you closer to both the action and inaction. The netted safety hammocks at the deck's edge add to the genial Cambodian-village vibe.

Outside, animal sculptures metaphorically prowl around the shared



A luxury tent in its riverside setting. **OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left):** a Phnom Penh temple; monk at a traditional blessing; regional Cambodian produce; one of the custom-made baths at Shinta Mani Wild.

CHECK IN.

FROM LEFT: fishermen on the Thmor Rung River; the jungle is a “natural larder”; pork belly, foraged greens and crackling.

spaces, demarcating the transition from luxury resort to luxury safari.

The Southern Cardamom National Park, an important elephant migration corridor, is ripe for exploration. Your options include cruising the unbridled Srey Ambel Estuary aboard a Bensley-designed expedition vessel and joining an anti-poaching patrol headed by Wildlife Alliance rangers.

On-site restaurant Headquarters combines contemporary Cambodian and international fare with traditional Khmer recipes. From the ever-shifting menu, expect dishes such as pork belly with foraged greens and crackling, hot and sour river fish consommé, and rice flake-crusted line-caught sea bass in kokor sauce. For a classic fusion finish, there’s the likes of cardamom mountain wild vanilla creme caramel with tropical fruits and lichen. You can literally see and taste the seasonality for yourself, with many of the herbs, vegetables and decorative flowers foraged from the surrounding forest’s “natural larder”.

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Angkor Wat, Cambodia’s legendary temple complex.

“When we are hungry, everything is available in the jungle to eat,” says chef Ly Lous.

“When I was young, I was in an orphanage where the girls cooked and the boys went into the jungle to take the food.”

Chef Lous learned his skills in Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant School, in Siem Reap, then worked his way up from a small restaurant in the town’s night market to positions with Sofitel and Anantara. You can join him to source stocks of *praw prass* (sour leaf often eaten crudité style); samrong seeds (used to absorb and retain flavours); and wild pandan, cherished for its vibrant colour, flavour and aroma.

“My people like food with strong flavours, like fermented fish or sun-dried fish/beef, which we keep on stand-by at home,” says Lous. “Then we go to the jungle where we have everything else.

In the dry season it is more difficult to find food. Even then, we always have something, like wild potatoes.”

Yes, there’s always a colourful and textured plant ready to work its way into one of the dishes, and your belly, from crunchy wild figs to 63 varieties of edible wild orchids, which can all be found on the property.

Shinta Mani Wild is only a couple of months young, barely stretching its legs, but already it feels equal parts wild and decadent, just like the fruits which you will find in its forest.

SPOILS OF THE WILD

Just because you’re deep in the Cambodian jungle is no reason not to be spoiled rotten. Hang out in your tent and be doted on by your personal Bensley Butler. Or head to the Boulder Spa for a river-stone foot massage in a peaceful waterfall pool. If you’re feeling culinary curious, learn how to make Khmer curry paste and rice-wine-infused dressings in a private cooking class.

Rates for Shinta Mani Wild start at USD\$2345 a night (approx A\$3250; minimum three nights), which includes meals, drinks and guided activities. Road transfers from Phnom Penh or Sihanoukville airports are included. Helicopter transfers additional. Minimum guest age is 13 years. ✕



CLOCKWISE (from top left): the lounge area at Shinta Mani Wild; local lychees; Headquarters restaurant; sleep on an authentic Khmer bed; gathering produce and orchids; tent bathrooms open to the jungle.

