

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

HOTEL MAESTRO **BILL BENSLEY**
UNVEILS THE GAME-CHANGER
TURNING HEADS THE WORLD
OVER: SHINTA MANI WILD,
AN ULTRA-EXTRAVAGANT TENTED
CAMP DEEP IN THE CAMBODIAN
RAINFOREST THAT FUSES LUXURY
AND CONSERVATION

WORDS BY **RON GLUCKMAN**



“We are the first Asian hotel company to completely wean ourselves from all single-use plastics”

Saving the Planet is a nifty slogan, with widespread appeal among environmentalists, officials at lipstick manufacturers and luxury companies alike. Yet few organisations offer substantive ways to do this; forsaking straws at the cocktail bar of your beachside resort represents but a tiny drop in a sea of fish-choking plastic. The problem with a potentially catastrophic challenge on the scale of climate change is always the same – how to have a genuine impact, and where to start.

Architect and hotel designer extraordinaire Bill Bensley offers a quantum leap with his new Shinta Mani Wild, a luxurious resort in southern Cambodia. With 15 out-of-this-world villas tucked amongst pristine jungle along the raging Thmor Rung River, this is the ultimate fantasy nature resort for upscale travellers. It’s also classic Bensley, as villas abound with antiques and art, and each boasts a unique theme, from botanical and explorer motifs to a quirky riff on Jackie Kennedy, who visited Cambodia in the 1960s. One spectacular option for checking in is to soar over the rainforest and a waterfall on one of Southeast Asia’s longest zipline, right into the lodge’s lounge area.

Combining luxury trappings with genuine sustainability concerns may seem an odd marriage, much like the very contradictory precepts of eco-tourism. But this is all part of Bensley’s overriding and ambitious aim – to Save the Planet.

Travel writers wrangle with this contradiction constantly, and I’ve often noted that the best protection for the ecological virtues of any place is to not write about it, don’t consume vast amounts of fossil fuel to fly then drive to the planet’s most precious outposts, and don’t promote their development.

Of course, the reality of globalisation means that now virtually everywhere is connected, and reachable from almost everywhere else. Since nowhere can stay in isolation anymore, the responsibility for protection falls on everyone, everywhere. And few are offering new approaches as bold as Bensley.

“Nothing makes me more mad than greenwashing,” he says of businesses that make unsubstantiated claims about the positive environmental impact of their services or products. We caught up with Bensley at his design studio in Bangkok – his home for three decades, after stints in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia – where he shows off a massive warehouse filled with historical treasures – books, art and antiques – collected from every corner of the planet.

“We hear it all the time from our esteemed hotel community. Shinta Mani Wild ticks every box that I stand for. We are the first Asian hotel company to completely wean ourselves from all single-use plastics, including the supply chain (that is the hard part) – tick. We have a serious purpose of protecting a huge swath of the southern Cardamoms from illegal logging and poachers – tick. In doing so we have given the local villagers a choice of a better life – tick.”

Bensley has long been an environmental advocate, renowned for resorts like the Four Seasons Tented Camp and Anantara Golden Triangle, both in northern Thailand, the Capella Ubud in Bali, the InterContinental Danang and J. W. Marriott in Vietnam, and

Vista of jungle: (clockwise from right) Shinta Mani Wild is a playground for the lucky few; one of the resort’s quirky luxury tents; hotel maestro Bill Bensley; a thrill ride which ends in a cocktail; (bottom) guests bask in the majesty of the roaring Thmor Rung River



the Rosewood in Luang Prabang, Laos. Visitors are often mesmerised by his extravagantly colourful designs, but his properties all demonstrate a keen appreciation of local culture, history and tradition.

Over the course of his career, Bensley has risen from lush gardens as an accomplished landscape architect to an overall hotel maestro, handling everything from overall architecture to hotel interiors, restaurant decor and even hotel uniforms. Through it all, he’s been an environmental warrior and champion of local culture and causes. His battles with developers to spare the cutting of trees, whatever the cost, are exemplary in an industry that typically espouses environmental causes only after construction is complete.

And Bensley is the rare hospitality leader who is putting his own time, and money, where his mouth is. He is a benefactor of the Shinta Mani Foundation, which provides community assistance, clean water and hospitality training in Siem Reap. Bensley has created several hotels in the city, best known as the gateway to the ancient Angkor capital. Shinta Mani offers vital vocational training in hospitality, one of the few growth industries in what is among the world’s poorest

countries. The Bensley-designed hotels help maintain the foundation’s near 100% placement ratio for graduates. The hotels also operate as clever charities, delivering great service and guest experience, with all profits going to the foundation.

Still, Bensley took things to the next level with Shinta Mani Wild. Set on 400 hectares of land he purchased a decade ago, Bensley has invested \$15 million in this unique retreat located in the unlikeliest of locations – lush jungle near the Kirirom and Cardamom Mountains parks. Visitors can trek in the wilderness, opt for boat rides, or soak under the stars in a massive tub on a terrace where they may as well be all alone in the universe.

“I love the fact that we have created one of the world’s top adventure destinations and have had virtually zero impact on the land,” he says. “It disappears as it should, into the forest.”

The property has launched Cambodia onto all the World’s Best lists, and *Time* magazine went further, naming Shinta Mani Wild as one of the World’s Great Places: “I believe if you build something good, people will come. And if you build something good that has a real purpose for making the world a better place, even better.”

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