



PERSONALITIES

WILD at HEART

DESIGNER **BILL BENSLEY** SHARES HIS
HOSPITALITY DREAMS AS WELL AS
THOUGHTS ON WHAT'S NEXT IN LUXURY.

By JEFF WEINSTEIN, EDITOR IN CHIEF



Opened in December 2018, Bensley's Shinta Mani Wild in Cambodia is located in the remote jungle terrain of the South Cardamom National Park.

You have to love renowned interior designer Bill Bensley's passion and belief that the future of the hotel industry includes everyone doing more of the right things.

"Being an environmentalist, we have to start solving the problems. I'm going to be an optimist and say hospitality is going to save the world," he told *HOTELS* during a recent telephone interview from his "jungle-like" Bangkok office.

The man who drives a VW, has five dogs, a very happy relationship and has designed everything from Four Seasons' Tented Camp Golden Triangle in Thailand and the Rosewood Luang Prabang in Laos to his own Shinta Mani retreats in Cambodia wants to bring a bigger heart to hospitality. "I'd really like to see everyone bring heart and feeling into what hospitality should be," he says. "Providing warmth and a friendly place to stay when not at home."

It's not that the hotel industry doesn't already do that, Bensley acknowledges, but he thinks the industry isn't going

deep enough on sustainability efforts and suggests the vast majority of projects are all about making more money.

"Anything that anyone says about ecology is mostly a bunch of greenwash," he says. "We don't use plastic straws but we will serve it to you in a plastic cup — it gets me so pissed off sometimes... So many problems in the world could be improved through hospitality. Hospitality can help society."

Bensley warns that hoteliers should be more aware of the innate value of Mother Nature. Perhaps that explains the development of his Shinta Mani properties, in Siem Reap and the remote South Cardamom National Park in Cambodia, as well as the Shinta Mani Foundation, which seeks to enhance the lives of the individuals in the communities where the resorts operate by increasing their human capital and providing them the tools to overcome the constraints of poverty. To that end, his school has graduated some 300 hospitality students.

His next goal is to create a night school

for Cambodians in entry-level management positions to help them reach upper management. "For me, later in life, the greatest luxury is being able to give and make other's lives better."

Among other Shinta Mani projects in the works: a samurai safari camp in Okinawa and 300 high-end tents on an old eucalyptus grove called World Wild in China, part of a "zoo" where he says the animals will roam free.

THE THREE ES

What truly works for Bensley is any project that incorporates his 3 Es: environmental, educational and experiential.

Whether it is the physical or social respect for the environment, building in places of great natural beauty with minimal intervention is an imperative. "If you can't get that right you are not going to get anything right," he says.

The educational component is delivered through storytelling, Bensley adds. "In any hotel you can find interesting stories,

and if guests can learn something they will remember your hotel."

As a designer, a lot of what Bensley does today is design experiences. "I was just sketching out the samurai junk [ship] for Okinawa," he says. "Every hotel should be able to provide an experience. I don't see enough engagement."

Recruited to do multiple luxury properties — among his latest is the Capella Ubud in Bali — today he says a big trend is being able to provide outdoor space that is perfectly private and gives guests the ability to be very comfortable in a wild space that pushes them beyond their norm and out of their comfort zone.

"Trusting the host to help do that is a huge luxury right now. That is the next luxury — 're-wilding,'" Bensley says. "I grew up backpacking and camping, and my house and office in Bangkok are like a big jungle," says the man who goes to Mongolia for three weeks each year and returns so invigorated he feels like he can jump over a house. "Spending hours each



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day in the wild, shutting off the phone and being with nature is now accepted as a better health method, and a doctor calls it 're-wilding.'"

THE FUN PARTS

Bensley says he can find inspiration anywhere as "the imagination is infinite, endless," but he often finds it shopping around the world and near locations where he is building. "About four years ago shopping in Paris, I found a Vietnamese bamboo hat covered in white and pink polka dot fabric — clearly from the 1920s. It showed very clearly how Indochine hill tribe people inspired the couture of France in the early part of the last century. That one little shopping trip inspired a new hotel — an M Gallery in Sapa, north Vietnam. The entire hotel's story and design is about the relationship between tribes people and the French colonists. It turned out really cool."

Bensley adds, "You have to look and use your head. That is the fun part of this game we are playing, especially shopping. My motto about shopping is buy first and think later."

With a lot of his projects about upcycling (creative reuse), Bensley says he is always on the lookout for beautiful objects he will never be able to find again. "I do a lot of shopping in England and France, fill up containers and bring them to my warehouse. I'll buy something for US\$100 and sell it to my clients for the same. I like that a lot. It gives me the flexibility to do many things perhaps others cannot."

A lingering question is how Bensley will outfit an upcoming project, a W-branded hotel in Phuket, Thailand. Admittedly, he has not been a fan of the brand and wants to point it in the right direction. "Out here [in Asia Pacific] W is trying too hard, trying to be so trendy that even before they get built they are out of date," he says. "They are trying to be so high energy. But, in fact, when you walk in the front door they are so annoying... Now I have to figure out what to do. I think it can be sexy but it doesn't have to try so damn hard to be trendy."

Sounds like another shopping trip or a hunt in the warehouse is in order.

BENSLEY HEROES

Suwanna Gauntlett, founder and CEO, Wildlife Alliance: Bensley says Gauntlett has been spending her personal fortune for some 20 years to protect wildlife in the national parks of South Cambodia. His Shinta Mani Wild project and Shinta Mani Foundation is working closely with the Wildlife Alliance and has arranged for former poachers to become rangers and protect the animals.

Designer Kelly Wearstler: She has worked with Viceroy Hotels and is currently working on Proper Hotels and Residences properties in California and Austin, Texas. "She is my design goddess," Bensley says. "She is not afraid of anything and doesn't get nearly as much credit as she should. I wish she would do more."



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DESIGNER BILL BENSLEY

Bill Bensley's energy for new projects and new approaches is matched only by his imagination — and his heart. Bangkok-based Bensley's Shina Mani Wild, in Cambodia, aims to provide a unique and beautiful experience for guests, while its nonprofit arm has trained more than 300 local community members for careers in hospitality. He's focusing on how hotels can address environmental concerns, as well. "I'm going to be an optimist and say hospitality is going to save the world," he tells HOTELS.

PASSION FOR HOSPITALITY

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