



Left: Shinta Mani Wild's tents are built along a 1.5km stretch of river and waterfalls
Below: Enjoy a breezy picnic by the waterfalls

WILD WANDERINGS

Grace Ma hits the jungle at Bill Bensley's latest sustainable gem, ready for an adrenaline rush



The setting sun casts a romantic rosy glow on the treetops as I tighten my safety harness and put on my helmet. I envisioned a simple slide into renowned architect-designer Bill Bensley's newest 15-tented jungle baby Shinta Mani Wild in the heart of the Southern Cardamom National Park in Phnom Penh. But I'm about to step off a platform 30m from the ground and whizz 350m to a wooden platform so well camouflaged by lush trees that I can't see it from where I stand.

I arrive at the Landing Zone Bar to a waiting glass of icy home-made pineapple cordial with soda and ginger ale. "Some rum for your drink?" asked a Bensley Butler, one of many locals working at Shinta Mani Wild. But of course. After a four-hour drive from Phnom Penh airport, a jeep transfer to the zip-line platform and that Tarzan swing, some reward was definitely expected.

Since 1989, Bensley's striking projects – from the pioneering Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle to the sophisticated Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection in Siem Reap – have attracted design aficionados with their fastidious attention to details and touches of whimsy.

Shinta Mani Wild has all these, and then some. The land that the resort sits on lies in a 350ha valley surrounded by the Southern Cardamom, Kirirom and Bokor national parks. It was originally put on auction for a logging concession, and Bensley and his Cambodian business partner, Sokoun Chanpreda, Managing Director at Hospitality Management and Development Asia, which manages the Shinta Mani hotel collection, won the bid with the intention to conserve it.

In order to comply with the local government's requirement of economic development on the land, the duo decided to build a low-impact camp that would generate funds to conserve the greater area, including the surrounding Southern Cardamom National Park, and provide employment for the local communities.

This labour of love took nine years, with the majority of construction happening in the last two years. Five tents, all one-bedders, are open now, with the rest ready by May, including one that has two bedrooms. All were built on stilts along a 1.5km stretch of river and waterfalls to avoid disturbing existing animal trails or diverting natural waterways. A secondary interior ceiling membrane acts as an insulating layer to make them energy-efficient and individual waste-water treatment ensures that water output from the tents is treated to be safely channelled back into nature.

Undulating pathways connect the villas and the rest of the property, and at night, butlers with electric lamps guide the way to dinner at the only on-site restaurant and back. The villa is a dream pad with vintage

DETOUR



Bathtub soaks with wilderness views

finds decorating the interior and a spacious outdoor living area sparking hang-out joy with travel-themed murals, comfy armchairs, a fully stocked minibar and built-in hammocks. Vintage fans spin overhead while an old-fashioned bathtub sits in the corner, perfect for soaks to the soundtrack of birdsong and the roar of rushing waters.

From the moment breakfast is done, it's adventure in the great outdoors. I go foraging with sous chef Ly Lous, and find out that red ants and parts of the rattan plant are actually edible. I also learn how to fly-fish from Tolga, Bensley's personal fly-fishing guide whenever he goes to Mongolia, and who is at the resort only from December to January each year.

On a trek with patrollers from the non-profit Wildlife Alliance, we cut through thick undergrowth on a never-before-travelled route to search out signs of illegal poaching and logging. Shinta Mani's community arm, the Shinta Mani Foundation, works with Wildlife Alliance and the



A one-bedroom tent at Shinta Mani Wild

Cambodian government to conserve the surrounding national parks, which stretch over four million hectares. It is an arduous job that never ends and one fraught with danger, but it has reaped rewards – some of the resort's employees were villagers who used to chop down trees and trap animals for a living as they had nothing else to do.

My personal Bensley Butler Bong Mac is a buddy, teacher and cheerleader all rolled into one. Whenever I swelter, an aluminium flask of iced water and cold towels will suddenly appear. He teaches me how to spot brightly coloured orange tips and tailed jays on a butterfly walk, eggs me on to miraculously finish 5km of mountain biking on my maiden try, and chirpily gets us out of tight spots as we kayak along a tranquil mangrove river. There are also expedition boats with sunloungers, and a bar to ply wider and deeper waterways. At the end of each day, I know there's a massage waiting at the Boulder Spa, where my aching muscles would be eased by skilful kneading and my sun-blazed skin, repaired with gentle care.

Meals are stunners, with each dish containing elements of surprise and delight, such as foraged salad greens, crispy fried sea bass, sticky rice balls with yellow bean and grated coconut paste, and chocolate desserts made from cacao beans bought from the local market. Cocktails are themed after the different parts of a plant and are as edgy as

they are locally inspired. Never in my four days did I wish I were eating somewhere else.

"The traditional sense of luxury is no longer confined to marbled lobbies; people want authentic experiences," says Sangjay Choegyal, Wild's General Manager. "We want people to swim, ride a motorbike, get out of their comfort zones here. That's where the magic happens."

And with all the effort in conserving the forests and ensuring a sustainable livelihood for the locals, a stay at Shinta Mani Wild would definitely be meaningful magic. **P**



A salad of foraged greens