

INTO THE WILD

CAROLYN BEASLEY VENTURES DEEP INTO
THE CARDAMOM MOUNTAINS TO HELP
WITH WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

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he motorcycle slows as we approach a gaping chasm where a flood has claimed a bridge, and from here we proceed on foot. I'm on an anti-poaching patrol with four rangers from the not-for-profit wildlife conservation organisation Wildlife Alliance in Cambodia's Tmor Rung forest.

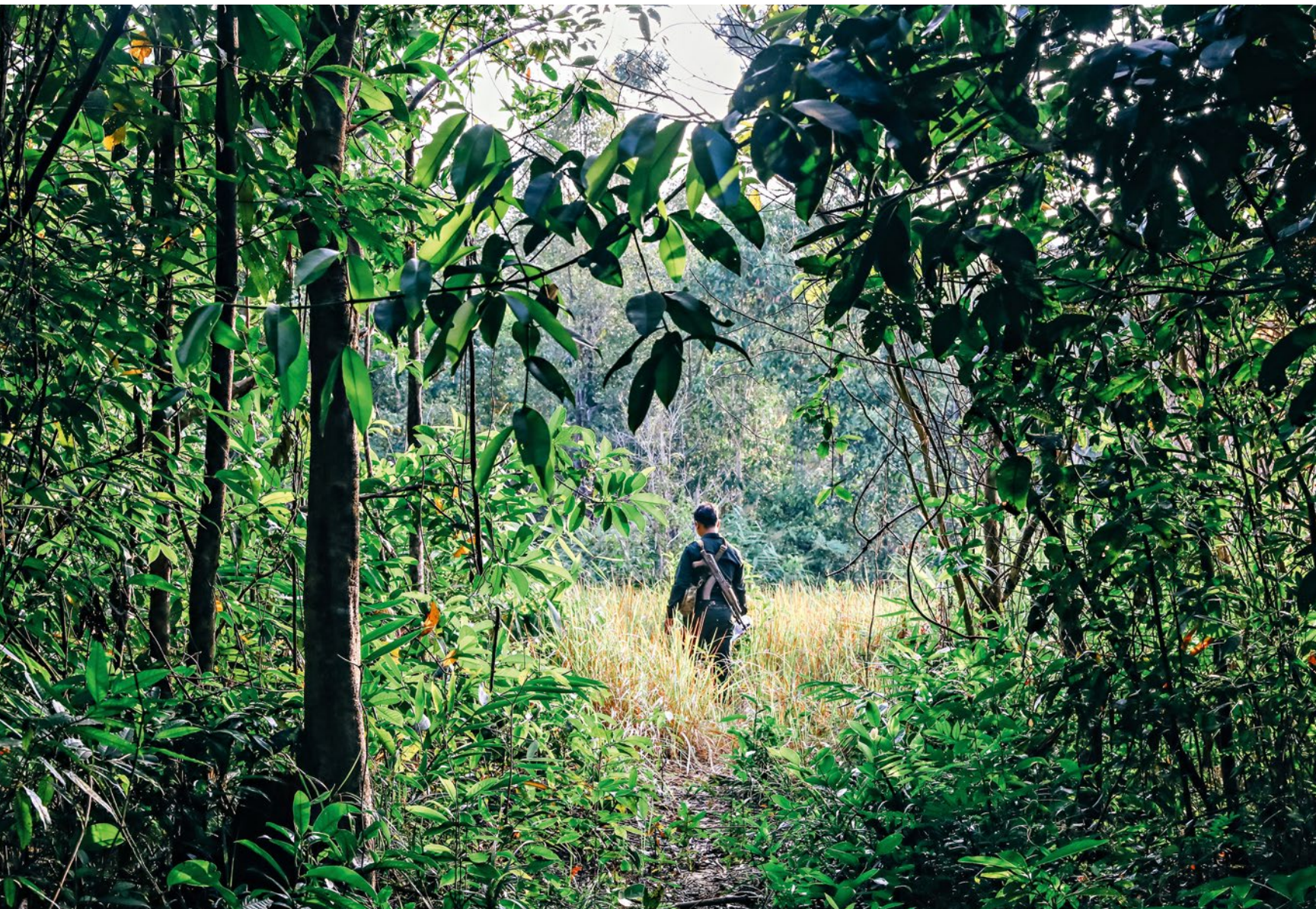
Team leader Rethy Sowath carries a very large knife strapped to his thigh, handy for cutting vines and, if needed, self defence. Less ambiguous is the AK-47 rifle carried by his colleague, which looks like a movie prop but is most certainly real.

I joined the patrol at Shinta Mani Wild, a new luxury camp which opened in December and is owned and conceived by hotel architect Bill Bensley. Three hours' drive west of Phnom Penh in the remote Cardamom Mountains, Shinta Mani Wild sits on 865 acres of wilderness between Kirirom, Phnom Bokor and Southern Cardamom National Parks, forests plagued by illegal poaching for live animals, wildlife meat and ingredients for traditional Asian medicines.

More than just minimising its impact, Shinta Mani Wild aims to benefit the forest and local communities, and this is the very reason for its existence. Working with Wildlife Alliance, the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian Government, Bensley aims to help protect the wildlife and preserve the region.

He realised the best way to achieve this was to provide jobs for the locals as an alternative to poaching, and so he created this luxurious, quirky camp. Two-thirds of the hotel's staff now comes from surrounding villages. "My big thrill in all of this is not about owning some fluffy beds or creating a hotel brand with my name on it," Bensley says. "It's a way to show Cambodians that conservation is more valuable than extraction."

The resort is designed to be low-volume and low-impact, with only 15 tents and a maximum occupancy of 32 guests. Spaced along one-and-a-half kilometres of cascading river, the 100-square-metre tents are supported on stilts, to facilitate wildlife passage and incorporate outdoor living room decks with private cocktail bars.



Inside, my room is a mini museum, with eccentric antiques that include a vintage Singer sewing machine, a botanical press and travelling chests. Canvas walls are fitted with zippered plastic windows, and my river view is punctuated by trees dripping with forest orchids. Soaking in the claw-foot verandah bath, I watch evening clouds drift overhead.

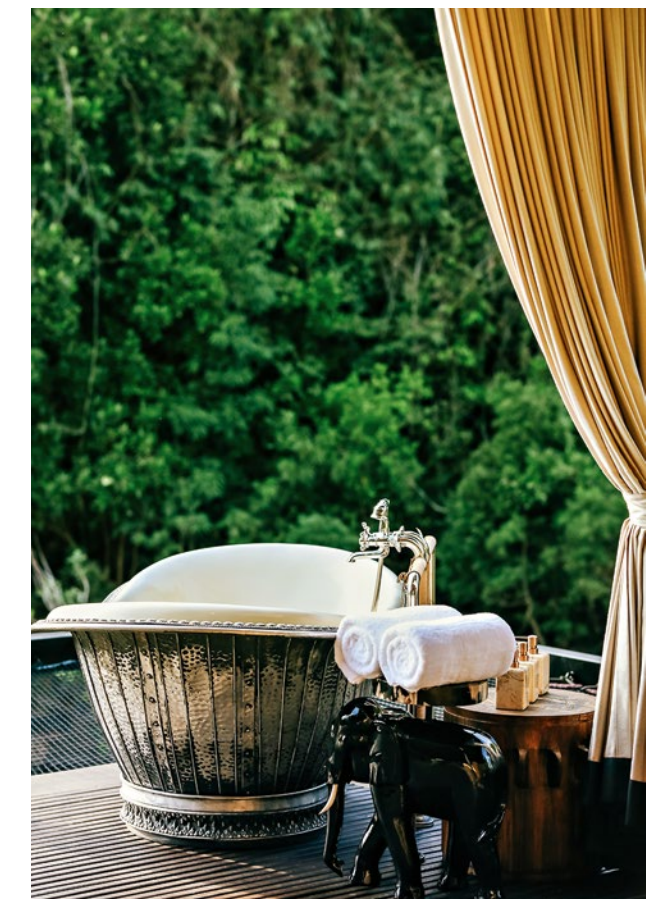
WILDLIFE WARRIORS

Shinta Mani funds rangers, at a cost of more than AU\$100,000 a year, and supplies vehicles and a purpose-built base inside the resort. Rangers patrol the property and adjacent national parks all year round, and it's an experience they encourage guests to join.

Accompanied by Rethy's team and noisy cicadas, I cross into Southern Cardamom National Park on a narrow trail. Inside the park, a mighty hardwood tree lies gutted like a fish amid fresh sawdust, the best timber already hauled away by oxcart. Nearby, we find two more.

Next we discover four civet traps, made from a piece of branch threaded with pineapple and a cable that tightens. A live civet (a small nocturnal mammal) is worth AU\$140, and they are usually kept caged to produce the world's most expensive coffee, kopi luwak, made from coffee cherries digested and defecated by the civet.

As Rethy's rangers dismantle the traps, a man unexpectedly appears from the forest and the team runs to confront him, searching his bag for evidence. He is a known poacher, but today he has no animals and is released. The need for these patrols is made abundantly clear.



Top: Sunset over the Cardamom Mountains. Above: Each villa has an outdoor bath perched over the river or waterfalls. Left: One of the wildlife rangers patrolling the forest around Shinta Mani.



ALTERNATIVE ADVENTURES

For those who don't want to join the patrols, there are plenty of alternatives in and around the property and by simply staying at Shinta Mani you are helping to invest in a worthwhile cause. My butler Boren doubles as an adventure curator, ready to create bespoke activities just for me. Boren and I grab gleaming mountain bikes and explore the forest and waterfalls, duly returning them covered in mud. I learn from them how to eat red ants (yes, I tried them) and, post-ride, I relish a cooling dip in the pristine river.

While I swim my fishing guide, Tolgah, sets up equipment. We laugh that I'm an Australian learning Japanese fly-fishing from a Mongolian guide in a Cambodian river. Although the fish evade us,

patiently flipping the fly into this wild river has a meditative quality.

The land species can be elusive too and Munny, an in-house naturalist, shows me his favourite images of the endangered fox-like dhole, leopard cats, civets, porcupines and tiny mouse deer are all at risk from poaching. Endangered pileated gibbons frequent the area and elephants occasionally steal mangoes from the villagers. The birdlife is also spectacular.

There is always a unique twist here and, as I stumble out of my tent, sleepy in post-dawn greyness, Boren and head butler Mac beam at me, proffering another mountain bike, this time for a bird-watching trip. As we cycle across farm access lanes, green bee-eaters, kingfishers and black-crested bulbuls flit between trees. Birds aside, it's a joy

Left: There are 1.5 kilometres of river to explore. Above: Inside one of the 15 luxurious tents, which all feature carefully placed antiques.



Cycling provides a great opportunity to birdwatch and explore waterfalls.



CONNECT

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to greet bemused farmers and cycle through rural Cambodian scenes as the sun hits the Cardamom Mountains.

As we talk, it turns out Boren is also a zipline expert, skills that will be handy here as guests are able to arrive at reception via a 380-metre line, touching down in the Landing Zone Bar, where they can calm their pounding hearts with an enormous gin and tonic.

I ask Bensley how a zipline arrival fits with a luxury hotel. "Wild is meant to ease guests out of their comfort zone, into a place of exploration and learning," he explains. "It is important to step off that zip platform some 12 storeys in the air and sail above a canopy of rainforest and waterfall, because you will remember that for as long as you live!"

While I'm here finishing touches were also being applied to other experiences, too, including estuary expedition boats incorporating kayaking, crab fishing and onboard barbeques. Pop-up sunset drinks are also planned to be served beside a waterfall, or atop a mountain from a WWII Land Rover-cum bar. Unlimited treatments at the canopy-level Boulders Spa will feature Shinta Mani's own all-natural products, while foodies can join the Khmer chef to forage for edible forest plants.

Bensley has taken an expensive and challenging gamble, and he says it's all to ensure many more future generations can explore this incredible part of the world: "My dream is that more people will be doing what we're doing, to grow Wildlife Alliance, and increase the protection of these forests."

▶ GETTING THERE

Fly to Phnom Penh International Airport from Australian capital cities via Singapore, Ho Chi Minh, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur. It's a three-hour drive to Shinta Mani Wild from the airport.

Rates are around AU\$2,600 plus taxes and service charges a night, per couple, including transfers, food and drinks, activities and unlimited spa treatments. A minimum three-night stay is required.

🏠 STAY

Shinta Mani Wild
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