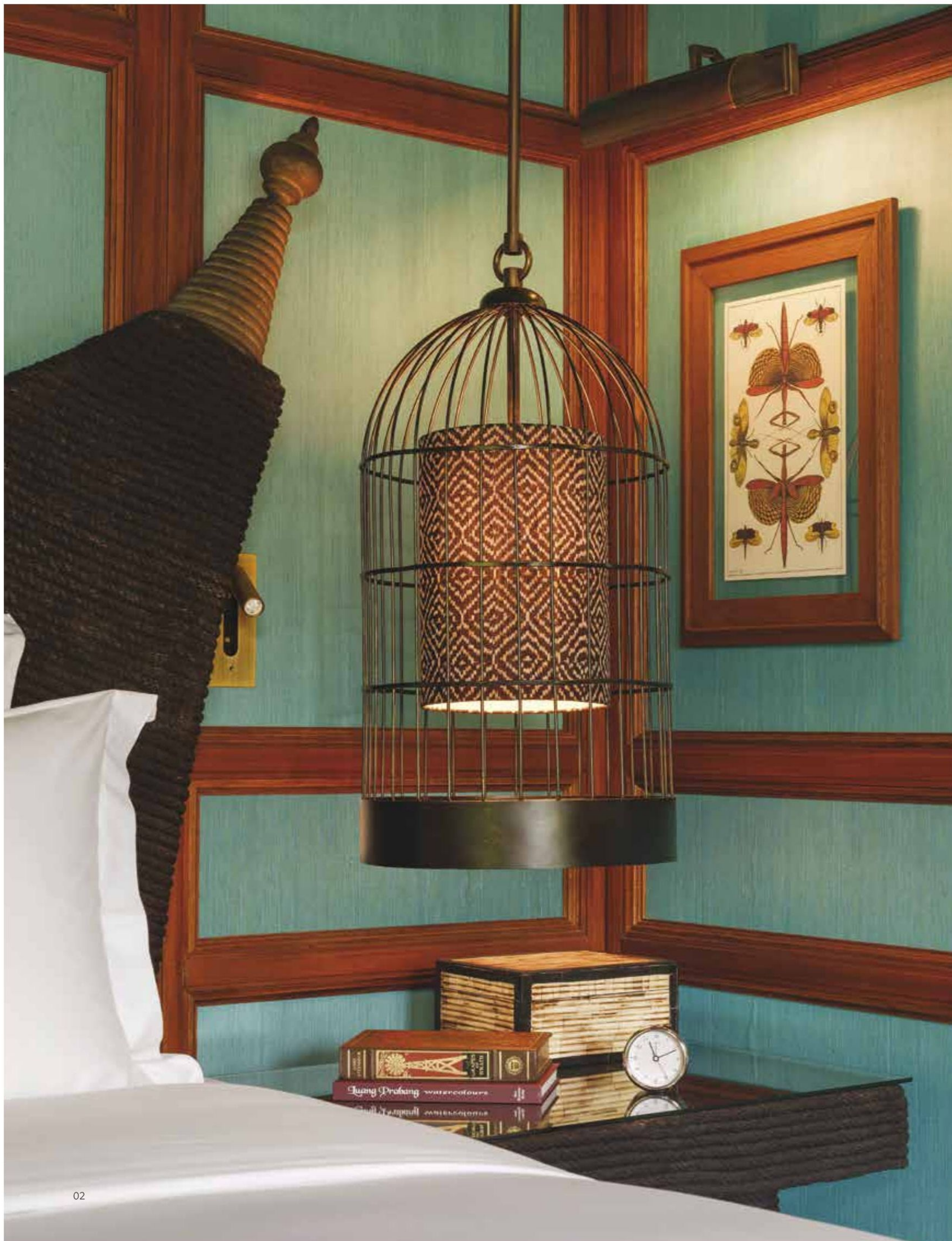


WILD AT HEART

One thing's for certain when you stay in a Bill Bensley-designed hotel or resort: expect the unexpected, writes Catharine Nicol.







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Walking into one of Rosewood Luang Prabang's riverside guest rooms for the first time is like visiting a Lao museum on steroids crossed with a quirky treasure trove of artefacts.

From the collage of exotic artworks on the walls and the bold and bright surfaces to the rustic alfresco Laotian tub and the orange-and-black faux tiger bathmat that elicits an instant smile, it's a kaleidoscope of colour, culture and kitsch. When you're staying in a Bill Bensley-designed retreat, look around – and up – and down. You're in for a wild ride.

"I have evolved into a serious maximalist," he says unapologetically. "Not that every project we have is of maximalist ilk – I'm just about to open a Raffles on Cham Island in Vietnam that surely will be mistaken for an Aman in its simplicity. It's just my personality craves layer upon layer of quirkiness and colour."



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01 Tent interiors at Shinta Mani Wild
02 & 03 Waterfall Pool Villa at
Rosewood Luang Prabang 04 Bill
Bensley and his dogs 05 Villa Living
Room at JW Marriott Phu Quoc
06 Shinta Mani Wild's bold blues and
yellows 07 Bathroom at Capella Ubud
© Dewandra Djelantik

The renowned American architect, interior designer and landscape architect and his team have worked with more than 200 properties around the world, leaving in their wake a cult of fans as dedicated to his whimsy as 'Aman-junkies' are to symmetry and minimalism.

"I think artefacts from your travels reflect who you are, and I encourage friends and clients to incorporate them into their home schemes,"

he advises. "If not thought about carefully, a collection of artefacts can look like a hot mess. Group, organise, reorganise, rethink, reshuffle, take photos, study the photos for composition, adjust, then show. Our home in Bangkok has been going through a constant reshuffle over the past 25 years as we bring in new treasures from faraway places."

During the 30-plus years of his professional life, Bensley's career-changing moments illustrate increasing creative audacity. In the early years, he competed against his college professor's company to design Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, Hawaii's landscape, and won (of course) by submitting stunning renderings drawn by Thai and Balinese artists.

He slipped in uncommissioned interior designs with his landscape proposal for Four Seasons Resort Langkawi, Malaysia, which went on to be realised. And, finally, he got to design the whole of the Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui, Thailand, "from soup to nuts", and Bensley of Bangkok and Bali (tagline "The odder, the better") was fully born.

His designs have evolved into ambitious tellers of captivating stories. The JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort & Spa in Vietnam reveres, subject by subject, its former life as Lamarck University. The Turquoise Suite, formerly the

Department of Botany, is decorated with delicate plant pictures and old seed packets, and don't miss the 'timetable of student activities'.

Phuket's tin mining past at The Slate is retold to create an unusual yet winning formula: industrial rough-luxe times tropical nature equals heady romance. And Rosewood Luang Prabang's rooms curate the lives of different personalities who influenced Laos' history. "I love the idea that even a small hotel can be designed to be a historically accurate capsule story of a whole country," he says.

His latest resort opening, Bensley Collection – Shinta Mani Wild, serves up storytelling, quirkiness and conservation in one of Cambodia's most endangered forests. It sounds jarring, but the result is pure Bensley.

With 'Wild' as he affectionately calls it, Bensley is gradually rescuing 350 hectares of the poaching-, mining- and logging-endangered Cardamom National Park and its village communities. With only 15 uber-luxury tents pitched at the junction of one of its boulder-strewn rivers, he employs the villagers and local Wildlife Alliance team to staff and patrol.

"I have evolved to really understand how to work with nature and deliver minimal impact, and as a result have become a determined conservationist," he says, describing his low-impact, high-yield concept.

Wild's military chic-meets-whimsy results in an entertaining ride. It starts with a double zipline arrival – you grab a tequila cocktail from the camouflage-clad waiter almost before you're unclipped. Wheezing former army jeeps drive you between experiences; the restaurant and bar is part-ode to Jackie Kennedy and part-stable



08 Lobby library. Images 05 & 08 © JW Marriott Phu Quoc 09 Luxury meets nature. Images 01, 06 & 08 © Shinta Mani Wild 10 Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle 11 Hilltop Tent at Rosewood Luang Prabang



for whimsical merry-go-round horses; and each luxury tent comes with a Swiss Army penknife room-key fob and a vivid 'animal' sofa in the alfresco living area.

"Pick your battles," Bensley advises. "If you have a star piece like the wild animal sofas at Wild, then you need to give them space to breathe. You have to be really good to be able to make pattern-on-pattern-on pattern visually pleasing." He adds, characteristically self-deprecatingly, "I am still working on that and might 'cut the mustard' in another decade or so."

Set amid pristine wilderness, Wild's colourful animal sofas definitely have enough space to breathe and are supremely comfortable. But is this luxury?

"Luxury is waking up to the roar of birds in the jungle," he answers. At Wild, that's a firm tick. At the stunning 22-tent (plus luxe lodge) Capella Ubud also, where vintage meets campfire,



suspension bridges, throne toilets (literally) and a stripy pool, and guests arrive to welcome drinks and 'survival kits'.

Wildlife is a running thread through Bensley's highly creative life, whether rescued or designed. And he adds endearingly, "Luxury is being loved by dogs."

"Playfulness and creativity come naturally to me and I think that is why I like my five Jack Russells so much," he adds. "I can be as daffy as I like, bounce as many weird ideas off of them as I have energy for, and not one of them, ever, admits to being bored."

Bored? With Bill Bensley around? Can you imagine? ♦

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