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## DESIGN

## WHERE CAMBODIA



# CANVASSING A CONTINENT

Asia's most lauded hotel designer takes to the jungle, writes **Ute Junker**.

For a glimpse of how the other half holidays, just follow Bill Bensley's Instagram account. You will be in good company: almost 11,000 people have already signed up for their daily dose of Bensley magic. The designer responsible for many of Asia's most luxurious resorts – about 200 of them, including lavish hotels in Thailand, Bali and India – posts eye-catching details from a different property each day, only occasionally interspersing them with shots of his clutch of adorable jack russell terriers.

A quick flip through Bensley's feed reveals his boundless creativity. Bathrooms, for instance, can be dramatic – a boudoir-style vanity at the Intercontinental Danang features black stone sinks, black flooring and black latticework framing the mirror; all set off by flaming scarlet lamps – or they can be tranquil. The wooden Japanese-style tub at the Rosewood Luang Prabang, for instance, elegantly positioned against a golden plumeria mural, offers a serene outdoor soaking opportunity.

In the three decades since Bensley opened his own studio in Bangkok, where he is still based, the American-born designer has established himself as a leader in resort design, known for his commitment to reflecting local culture as well as for his sense of humour.

"He has had a major impact on resort design in Asia through his bold ideas and the

whole notion of sensuality," says Tan Hock Beng, the author of *Tropical Paradise*, a book on the work of Bensley and his former partner, Lek Bunnag. "He blur[s] the lines between architecture, interiors and landscape in a way no other designer is able to do."

Bensley's latest project is set to shake up things up even further by taking luxury deep into the wilderness. While cashed-up, comfort-loving travellers in Africa and South America have long had a rich range of remote lodges to choose from, Asia has lagged behind. The just-opened Shinta Mani Wild – Bensley Collection is set to change that.

At this exclusive tented camp in the Cambodian jungle, three hours' drive from Phnom Penh, guests can not only enjoy unlimited spa treatments, gourmet food and personal butler service; they can also go exploring on kayaks or on hikes, or join local rangers as they head into the jungle on motorbikes on their anti-poaching patrols.

Bensley has done tented camps before, including the much-loved Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle and the new Capella Ubud, but Shinta Mani Wild is markedly more ambitious than any of his previous projects. The combination of indulgence and no-holds-barred adventure, Bensley says, is "based on how I like to travel".

At present, just five of the planned 15 tents are operating, making for an exceedingly intimate experience. Guests are encouraged to enter the camp via a 380-metre zip line, although those who balk at the idea of flying over the tree tops can stage a more conventional arrival by road. Each tent measures 100 square metres and sits in tree-fringed privacy overlooking a series of river rapids. The tent's most appealing feature is the expansive deck, kitted out with a sofa, a dining table and chairs, a fully stocked – and complimentary – bar and, best of all, a gorgeous bath tub overlooking the river.

Every element, from the battered vintage suitcases decorating the tents and the moustache-backed leather armchairs in the camp's bar to the camouflage netting that hangs above the restaurant, has been carefully put together by Bensley and his staff, which now numbers more than 150. In an industry where several different firms often work on the same hotel – one group focused on the rooms, another on the public spaces, a third doing the gardens – Bensley is unique in operating his studio as a one-stop shop. The designer, who originally trained in landscape architecture and urban design, supervises an in-house team that includes architects, interior designers, landscape architects and fine artists.

Each of Bensley's hotels has its own

Clockwise from main: Shinta Mani Wild offers a wilderness experience with all the mod cons; shrouded in trees, each tent offers complete privacy; hotel designer Bill Bensley; an expansive deck is the highlight of every tent.



aesthetic. Shinta Mani Wild's vintage stylings stand in contrast to the contemporary vibe at its sister property, Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection, a five-star hotel in Siem Reap that caters to guests visiting Angkor Wat on their way to the jungle camp.

Despite its location in the heart of Siem Reap, each of the hotel's 10 villas has expansive and private outdoor areas including a courtyard with a private pool, another courtyard separating the bedroom pavilion from the bathing pavilion, an outdoor bathing area and a rooftop lounge. Motifs include Khmer-inspired geometric patterns and fluid three-dimensional wall murals inspired by depictions of Khmer king Jayavarman and his rippling tunic.

Shinta Mani Wild is more than just a hotel; it is also a conservation project. The camp sits on 350 hectares of land, sandwiched in between national parks. By introducing sustainable tourism into the area, Bensley hopes to protect Cambodia's wilderness from incursions by loggers and poachers.

"Shinta Mani Wild is, for me, a way to teach Cambodians that conservation is more valuable than extraction," Bensley says.

Both Bensley Collection hotels are linked to the Shinta Mani Foundation, a social enterprise that is powered by Bensley and his business partner, Sokoun Chanpedra.

"I remember one of my first trips into the [Cambodian] countryside with Sokoun," Bensley says. "We met a young single mum with six children living on a pile of sticks and eating roots from the forest to survive. Seeing that kicked me in the gut. Here I was living in Bangkok just around the corner, in virtual luxury ... Life ain't fair."

The Shinta Mani Foundation originally focused on training disadvantaged locals for hospitality roles. In addition to providing hospitality training and teaching English, the school also helps instil general life skills. Demand is huge.

"We were getting a thousand applicants for just 30 seats in our school, but we do what we can," Bensley says.

Fourteen years on, the Shinta Mani Foundation has launched 270 students into new careers; many of them now work at the Shinta Mani properties. The foundation has also diversified and now provides educational, health and development programs such as well-building, as well as micro-finance. Administration costs are underwritten by Shinta Mani Hotels, which donates 5 per cent of the room rate from every stay. (In addition to the Bensley Collection hotels, the company operates two other properties in Siem Reap.)

Shinta Mani Wild is likely to be the last Bensley Collection hotel for a while. "We have bitten off a big chunk here in the park,"



Bensley says. "The goal is to be able to control the poaching and logging in an ever-expanding direction, as we are just a postage stamp in the greater scheme of things."

His enthusiasm for this project is palpable. "My big thrill in all of this is not about owning some fluffy beds, or creating a new hotel brand with my name on it; we just did that because we thought [it] might gain a bit of traction. It is about using hospitality to help folks that need it in a sustainable fashion."

Meanwhile, Bensley remains an in-demand designer. Although most of the properties he has created lie in Asia – "I speak the languages, both architecturally and verbally" – he certainly doesn't rule out working in other parts of the world.

"I have another 30 years of good designing in me and I have only been to 92 countries, so that leaves about 110 countries where I would like to work," he says cheerily. "Top of that list would be Iceland, New Zealand, Mongolia, Madagascar, Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, Ghana, Morocco, Brazil, Peru and Kyoto. Oh, and Patagonia."

What links many of those destinations is the wilderness element. "That is where my heart is," Bensley confides. He enjoys working on projects in sensitive environments – "I know how to make that work" – but says that another consideration often comes into play. "I like to do projects that have the potential of stirring the pot."

## TRIP NOTES

### TRANSFER

Road transfers from Sihanoukville or Phnom Penh take between two and three hours and are included in the room rate. Helicopter transfers are available at an additional cost.

### STAY

Rates start at \$US1900 a night inclusive of all food and beverages; all private guided activities and excursions; unlimited spa treatments; and personal Shinta Mani Butler. A minimum three-night stay is required. Guests aged 13 years and over are welcome. See [shintamani.com/wild](http://shintamani.com/wild)

### MORE

[traveller.com.au/cambodia](http://traveller.com.au/cambodia)

*Ute Junker was a guest of Shinta Mani Hotels.*

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