



Under The Big Top

Glamping is so last season. A handful of new tented camps across the region is setting a new standard for conservationism, while spiritedly and whimsically redefining the luxury-resort experience.



Capella Ubud, in Bali. CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: The Pavilions Himalayas Lake View, Nepal; Shinta Mani Wild, Cambodia; and Yala National Park in Sri Lanka.



TENTED CAMPS ARE HAVING A MOMENT. In an era when existing hotels are all scrambling to rebrand themselves as green, new canvas-covered properties are busting out of the gate kind and preservationist to the communities and wildlife around them. “Tented structures touch Mother Earth at only six points, so you don’t change the patterns of drainage or migration. You make a really small footprint,” Bill Bensley told us. The beyond-prolific hotel designer is the de facto leader of this trend, creating the iconic Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle a dozen years ago and three of the new spots on the following pages.

Though their goal is to bring you back to nature, all of these camps are far from back-to-basics. Cuisine is big-city

in its refinement, but full of local flavors foraged from their backyards. Activities plunge you in Tomb Raider–style... but send as your sidekick a cold towel–bearing action-hero butler. Hand-carved doors, private pools, scenic bathtubs. They’re like a mash-up of African safari camps, South American trekking retreats and European Alpine lodges.

“I like having only this much material between you and the lions,” Bensley said, holding two fingers together. “In the Amazon, the birds were so loud we could barely hear across a king bed.” At his new camp in Cambodia, listen for the gibbon hoots—the endangered primates, among many other fauna, have found protection on lands of eco-retreats. Man and beast alike are getting a better night’s sleep.

Shinta Mani Wild

Come fly away to a luxe, cunningly conservationist jungle book in the heart of Cambodia.

BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY AARON JOEL SANTOS

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IT WAS ABOUT A YEAR AND A HALF AGO when Bill Bensley told me about his fantastical plans for Shinta Mani Wild, his first entirely home-grown resort. “You’re going to take a zipline from the highest point on the property, over the waterfall and back, to the welcome platform, where you’ll be handed a gin and tonic,” he laughed, “because by then you need it.” Obviously, I then proceeded to gush to everyone about the double ziplines—even though I didn’t fully believe it. Hoteliers tell you a lot of things pre-opening, and many of them don’t pan out. This was the nuttiest thing any hotelier had ever told me, so the sheer chutzpah of the idea was exciting enough to pique the imagination about what the real Shinta Mani Wild might include, whether or not sailing in above the southern Cambodian rainforest was a realistic way to hand over your passport.

So, when one of the first things my butler, Boren, says after he picks me up from the Phnom Penh airport in his camouflage vest is that he used to be a professional





Much of the fare at Shinta Mani Wild includes produce and herbs foraged on site. CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: The resort pool, in a break in the trees; Boren, one of the camp butlers; the room rate is inclusive of all spa treatments.

ziplining guide, I scan my brain for the other crazy promises Bensley had made me. Guests can go out on anti-poaching patrols: “You can pick up snares,” he said. (Sure, sounds safe.) The room rate includes all alcohol: “That’s how I like to travel. No nickel-and-diming.” (Oh, Bill, you might regret that when I get there.) But first things first. The fly-in entrance is real and I’m super excited. Maybe a little too excited—3½ hours later I find myself dangling in mid-air over a brook, waiting to be rescued from the middle of the second-longest zipline in Southeast Asia.

We had changed cars at the property line, from a new SUV to an old U.S. Army Jeep that’s part of the fleet the hotel acquired from the production of Angelina Jolie’s Khmer Rouge biopic, *First They Killed My Father*. We had bumped up a rutted dirt road to the tall zipline-takeoff tower. At the top, Boren stuck his finger up and declared there was no wind. “Make yourself small,” he told me, “if you don’t want to get stuck.” But, I wanted to let it hang all loose, kick my legs, and take 360-degree video above the trees. I wanted to milk the zipline for all it was worth. I did not make myself small. So here I am, having coasted to within two meters of the landing zone and then rolled ever so slowly back from whence I came, stuck.

No matter.

It’s a clear, sunny day. Maybe I should be scared, dangling 30 meters in the air, but what can I do? I lean back, I listen to the birds, I take in the view down the valley, I wave at a local guy passing below. Boren has sent one end of a rope with a ranger to Spiderman-shimmy down the cable to fetch me. I’m live-streaming it on Instagram and you can hear me crack up when he gets a

couple of arm lengths’ away and the rope runs out. Back he goes to the platform. Back he comes with a longer rope. He hooks us to each other, and Boren reels us in.

“You should live your life big,” Boren says to me. “But sometimes you have to make yourself small.” Everyone is laughing. I’m loving the nonchalance of the whole situation. Zipline No. 2 is a seven-second breeze. And then someone indeed hands me a drink (Bloody Mary, pre-radioed in by Boren) as soon as I drop in. I’m not sure of our exact GPS positioning, but I do know that we are light years removed from your typical five-star.

NOT A MAN KNOWN TO BE CONSTRAINED by realism, Bensley acquired the rights to this land by subterfuge: posing as an aw-shucks, cowboy boots-wearing capitalist, he won a 99-year concession and logging rights to 350 hectares in the Southern Cardamom Mountains, left it untouched for 15 years, and has now opened the most ambitious, luxury eco-resort in the region. Its all-inclusive rate covers multi-course meals prepared at the chef’s discretion or your request, all-you-can-spa treatments, all activities, and the salaries, room and board for the team of park rangers who live on-site. “This is an extension of all the good work we are doing with the Shinta Mani Foundation,” Bensley said of the Siem Reap-based organization he’s affiliated with that runs a hospitality school, issues micro-loans, covers tuitions, funds healthcare and promotes sustainable farming to help lift rural Cambodians out of poverty.

At Wild, there are only 15 guest tents dotting a 1½-kilometer stretch of river, meaning you’ll often have the staff’s undivided attention. Because it’s a baby boutique brand, and probably also because it’s middle-of-nowhere Cambodia, normal hotel rules do not apply. Zipline as much as you want: your butler will grab any of his pals who are available—they’re all trained for flying—to do the 320-meter run with you. Most nice hotels are wary of calling you a motorbike taxi, but this one has as an official activity climbing on pillion behind the rangers to go out on patrol. Did I mention Boren brought me cliff jumping?

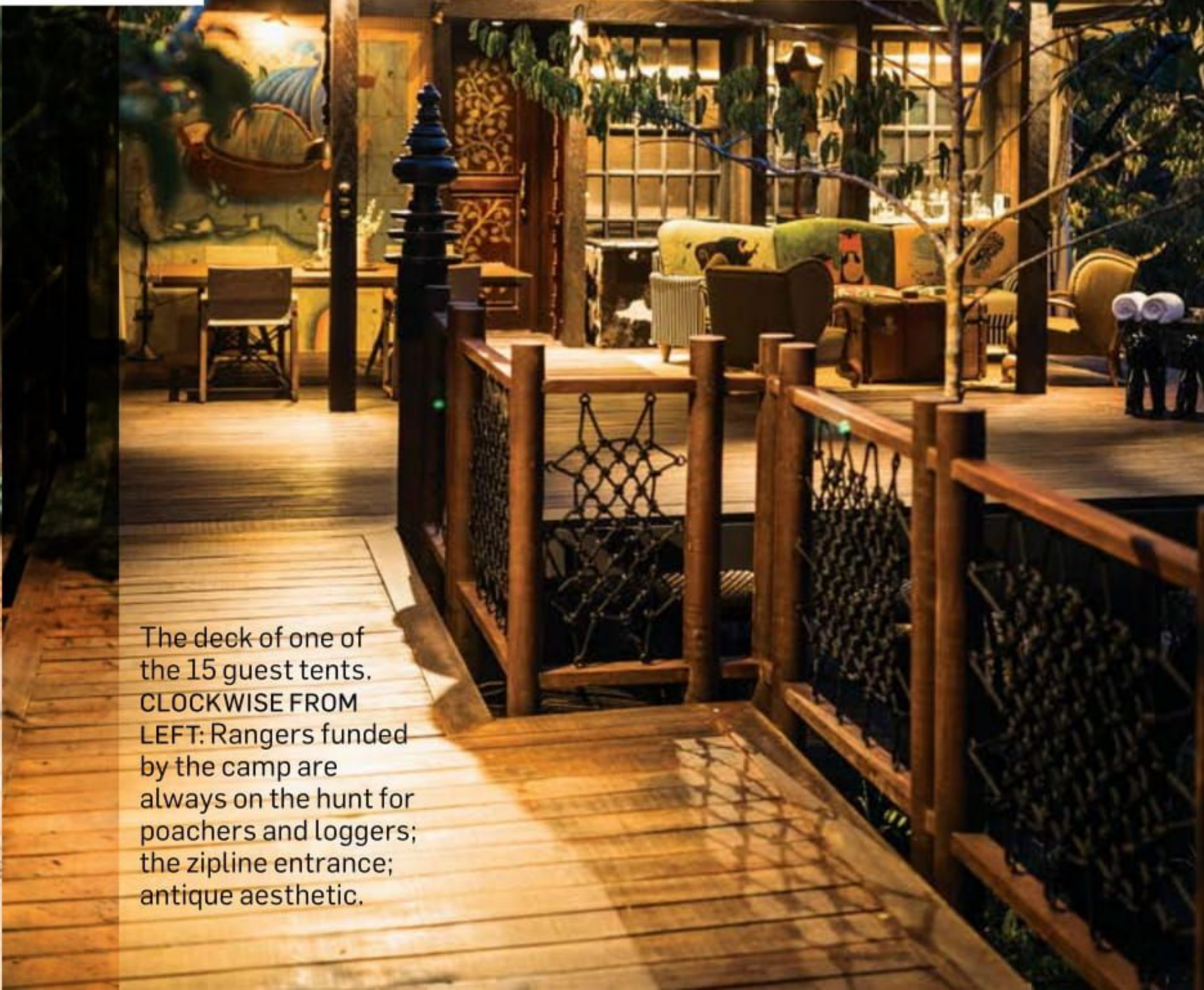
“My dad took me camping all over America,” Bensley said. “This place is fulfilling my childhood dreams and reliving my memories.” Which perhaps explains why the

custom boat on which I am lucky enough to take the maiden voyage (two more are under construction), is so damn cute. It looks like a little boy hand-built a toy model then put it under an expando-ray. Boren pours champagne on the upper deck as we sail the Srey Ambel Estuary, through a serene side of Cambodia I've never seen. The banks are pristine. The only people we encounter are uniformed school kids and dudes on motorbikes crossing on wooden barges with poles. There are beaches of white sand that my feet melt into like cookie dough.

The sense of freedom is liberating. And the little boy's sense of adventure is contagious. When I'm visiting in late January, the area has just eased into dry season, a state of affairs that ordinarily might preclude kayaking, but Boren is stoked for it. "It's so fun," he enthuses. "I love dragging the kayaks out when you get stuck." Out, I soon find out he means, of tangled masses of roots that have broken the waterline, over muddy embankments that sporadically ground us, and under awkwardly positioned branches that require me to do an in-boat limbo. With Boren hopping in and out of the kayak so much, I have a front-row seat to my own personal Ironman Challenge.

Det, the resident naturalist, is a shier soul whose true passion is for forest bathing. Bensley had told me that he had found 11 kinds of edible mushrooms on the property. During my visit, I learn that Det also discovered a species of vanilla there that was previously unseen in Cambodia. He is a keen orchid hunter. A nature stroll with him is utter serenity, largely because of his own sweet nature.

An excursion with the rangers can be a little more harrowing. Poaching, logging and squatting remain big problems and big business, even though the surrounding region was made a national park shortly after Bensley got his land. A live civet can fetch US\$100 on its way, often, to an inhumane *kopi luwak* farm. Mainland Chinese, in the Cambodian land-grab, offer locals US\$500 a hectare for illegal clearings, so they can claim squatters' rights



The deck of one of the 15 guest tents. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rangers funded by the camp are always on the hunt for poachers and loggers; the zipline entrance; antique aesthetic.

and build developments. The Wildlife Alliance-Shinta Mani Wild rangers are fighting an uphill battle with every trapped wild boar they free or logger they arrest. After a multi-day sting in January, for example, they impounded an excavator and marched the workers to court, only to have the case thrown out and the evidence returned. Still, when you see the rudimentary snares, often hand-made of split branches and twine, dotting forest paths, it's hard to lose faith in the good fight.

While the camp's concept is extraordinary—"I'm never going to make any money off of this," Bensley tells me. "This is purely feel-good"—the aesthetic is actually quite understated for his standards. Tents contain old hardbacks, steamer trunks and *Princess-and-the-Pea* beds that you sink into like a fluffy hug. On the porch is the living area with your big minibar; custom murals and couches provide color, and several old brass fans keep things cool—as does the river that I'm told rushes under my tent during rainy season. Canvas flaps can be lowered around this area, but then you'd be walling yourself off from the already Insta-famous, corner-perched faux-ivory tub and the hammocks next to it that hang over the gully.

It's tempting to laze here in my bathrobe, but Boren and Det are waiting to take me ziplining one final time. It's my last morning in this summer camp for grown-ups, and I should live my life big, right? It goes without saying that I get stuck again. No matter. I'm not quite ready to pick up my passport yet.

shintamani.com; doubles from US\$1,900, inclusive of board, alcohol, spa, activities, and airport transfers to and from Phnom Penh (three hours) and Sihanoukville (two hours).



FOUR OTHER TENTED TRIUMPHS

WA ALE ISLAND RESORT, BURMA

Lanbi Island next door is home to Burma's only national marine park—convenient whether you're staying in one of the 11 luxury tented villas on one-kilometer Turtle Beach, named for the sea turtles whose nests the resort carefully protects, or one of the two whimsical treetop villas made of recycled timber. A rustic yet elegant open-air pavilion contains the main dining area. Chef Ray Wyatt, a veteran of African safari camps, creates mouthwatering and dynamic menus using resort garden produce, sustainably caught seafood from the archipelago, and graded fresh meats from Thailand. The hotel naturalist doubles as a guide for cross-island treks and kayaking. *waaleresort.com; from US\$400 per night, per person sharing.* — JOE CUMMINGS

THE BEIGE, CAMBODIA

Last year, nearly 2.5 million people visited Angkor Wat, most of them ferried back and forth by bus from hotel clusters in nearby Siem Reap. You can escape the clogged roadway by staying at The Beige, situated on 10 hectares of tranquil farmland north of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat. Boasting "no traces of vinyl or plastic," the resort offers eight tented villas made with wood and durable organic sailcloth, which are up to 112 square meters inside and fitted out with colonial-style furniture. Air-con equipment is carefully concealed; private terraces and indoor-outdoor baths ensure plenty of close contact with nature. Cool off in the infinity pool, mounted on the roof of the library and reception building and surrounded by jungle views; in cooler months, take a lounge chair by the outdoor firepit. Local chefs prepare innovative dishes inspired by Khmer regional cuisine using all-organic ingredients, many grown on the resort's own farm. Each

residence includes a car and private driver. *the-beige.com; from US\$355.* — J.C.

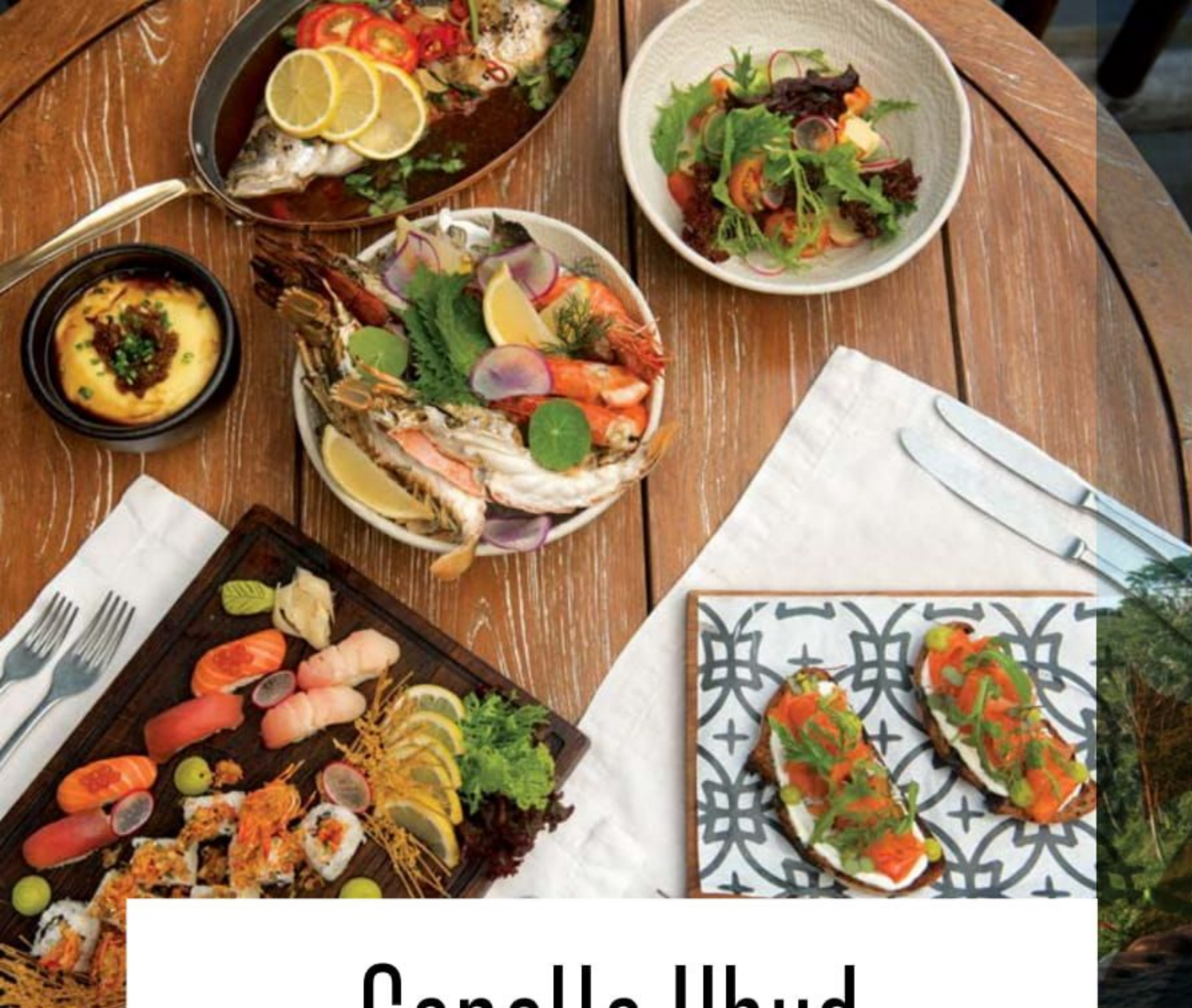
ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG HILLTOP TENTS, LAOS

While the 100 or so stairs that lead to Rosewood Luang Prabang's hilltop tents sound like a schlep, you'll hardly notice. Built on a former rice terrace, the brick path to your sky-high canvas palace is lined with trickling streams, bamboo groves, gardens and banana palms—a verdant playground for butterflies, dragonflies and bees. The six 75-square-meter tents are each named and designed after regional hill tribes. Example: as the Lisu are known for their colorful tunics, their tent has the traditional garments on wall hangings and on a mannequin, and a tasseled headpiece crowns the king-sized bed—which looks out onto a balcony giving way to views of fog-shrouded mountains, distant Luang Prabang, and the rest of the Bill Bensley-designed, French hill station-inspired property. Tents also form the Sense Spa, which is perched right above Rosewood's section of the Nauea River. Glass squares in the floor provide a calming peephole to the flowing water below. *rosewoodhotels.com; tents from US\$932.* — ELOISE BASUKI

THE PAVILIONS HIMALAYAS LAKE VIEW, NEPAL

Tented camps have been a safari-standard in India for generations; now neighboring Nepal has its first luxury eco-camp. Ensnared in rice fields and accessible only by paddleboat, the eight tented villas have fully retractable wraparound glass doors, which means you can count on Himalayan views for days. The wellness cred here is as high as the altitude: the pool is filled by a natural spring, the spa therapists are Ayurvedic, and the resort's organic farm supplies your produce. Best of all, The Pavilions dedicates half of its profits to improving the lives of children and young people in neighboring Pokhara. *pavilionshotels.com; doubles from US\$332.* — J.L.S.J.





Capella Ubud

Channel explorers from a different era, find Zen in unlikely places, oh, and tone those glutes in Bali.

BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEPHAN KOTAS

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WHETHER OR NOT CAPELLA UBUD is for you depends on whether or not pratfalling into a cow patty could be your idea of a hilarious time. During a “get acclimated” walk through the farming hamlet adjacent to the resort property, our guide, Arya, suggests we might want to feed an adorable calf in a little hollow. Faster than I can say *moo*, my friend Alisa steps forward off a rice terrace, loses her balance and is knee-deep in dung. Arya is racing to help her up but I’m doubled over with laughter—and

soon so are they. Farming is optional at the jungle-nestled Capella Ubud, but when your guide knows all the neighbors of both the two- and four-legged varieties, your best bet is to just dive in to these organic experiences no matter where they lead. Not to worry, laundry is included.

Another brainchild of Bill Bensley, this historical-fantasy resort that opened last summer on the outskirts of Keliki village 20 minutes from downtown Ubud takes as its inspiration the European settlers of the 1800s; the 23 tents are themed on members of an old-world expedition party—the Baker’s Tent and the Cartographer’s Tent, for example. Floors are made of dimpled teak in Central Java, doors and headboards are hand-carved masterworks, umbrellas are tasseled silk



saffron, tubs are copper, and toilets are antler-topped thrones. As soon we arrive, I get social media anxiety anticipating all the photogenic everything everywhere: the striped Cistern in the valley, for one, ringed by tall U-shaped pipes gushing water into the pool, is industrial steampunk that manages to look of the place.

But the hotel is much more than skin-deep beautiful. There’s a feeling of magic that pervades the property—and overrides any protestations from one’s, say, calves, from repeatedly hiking up from one’s farthest-flung tent. Capella Ubud is super green (no trees were harmed nor irrigation channels diverted in the building of this resort), intensely local, spiritually grounded, endearingly personable, and a little bit weird. In the pre-dawn, your private sherpas will get you up and down Mount Batur with smiles, safety and lots of selfies; come dusk, head for cocktail hour in the Officers’ Tent, a custom-wallpapered Wes Anderson set adorned by Edison-era bulbs, leather arm chairs and carved deer heads, in which general manager Simon Dornan and executive chef Matt McCool have an on-going billiards competition. Where else can you follow up an eight-course chef’s-table tasting menu with s’mores at a campfire to the background of black-and-white Indonesian movies? Where else does slipping in a cow patty count as a luxury experience?



Capella Ubud is hidden in deep in the jungle. CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Chef Matt McCool and general manager Simon Dornan have a nightly billiards game; international cuisine with Balinese twists; tents come with private pools; the resort's traditional healer, Pak Budi.



BY NOW IT SHOULD BE CLEAR THAT Capella Ubud is not your average luxe life of leisure. It's built into a cliff, so even if you're rooming higher on the grounds, you've got to walk uphill a bit to reach any of the facilities. If, like I am, you're down below, in the Temple Tent, ostensibly so you can hear the dulcet sound of the Wos River and get a better sense of how enmeshed the resort is in its community—smile and wave at the local residents bringing offerings to the altar in the valley from which this room takes its name—but possibly because your friends at Capella are gas-lighting you, it's a literal hike to anywhere else on the property. I start counting how many steps up it takes to get to breakfast and keep losing track around 300. I'm not complaining; I don't need to go to the gym all week. Toss in a trek to the top of an active volcano and my fitness needs are sorted.

It does require a fair amount of willpower to say yes to a 3 a.m. wake-up call, but I had been wanting to hike Mount Batur, one of Bali's four sacred peaks, for years, and during a stay at a resort inspired by expedition parties seemed like an apropos time. Capella minimizes the hardship: our SUV is filled with blankets and pillows for the hour ride, and they're one of a handful of hotels with a license to drive all the way to the foot of the trail. It's not just the smugness inherent in line-skipping that's such a perk of getting this head start; when you're hiking to a summit 1,717 meters above sea level, every step matters, and when you're trying to get there by sunrise, so does every extra minute of sleep. So, after a quick pit-stop at the base where everyone else has to leave their cars and minivans, we keep driving up a long twisting road, passing all the less fortunate souls forced to start hiking before the actual hike begins.

It's cold in the pre-dawn. Alisa and I are bundled up in layers of athletic gear, sweaters and parkas, and our butler-guides, Arya and Sundana, have put headlamps over our knit hats. The trail is steep, but lined, luckily, with branches and shrubs to grasp for leverage. If I start to even consider feeling winded, I look at the three happy superhero guides, the pair from the hotel and a local tour guide, watching out for us. They're tasked with carrying a massive picnic basket, a first-aid kit, extra gear, lots of water, our backpacks when they become awkward... plus making sure we don't fall off the mountain. The rest point is about two-thirds of the way up, but, Arya warns us, less than halfway in terms of exertion. Indeed, no longer solid ground, the new trail is loose volcanic dirt. It feels like quicksand and requires all my core strength not to lose my balance with each step. The occasional glance backwards reveals a twinkling daisy chain of flashlights snaking from far down in the valley. I wonder if the folks at the way bottom will possibly make it up by sunrise.

And then, when my glutes are about ready to call it, we're at the summit. The guys beeline it to their perfect spot on the ridgeline and make quick work of spreading out a big gingham blanket and unpacking tiffin boxes of breakfast sandwiches, fresh pastries and fruit. They pour us coffee, wrap throws around our shoulders, and go off for their own repast. As the sky starts to lighten, the ridge becomes more crowded and everyone who

passes by wearing not enough clothes, carrying not enough sustenance and lacking their own butler, to say nothing of three, looks at our five-star oasis longingly. I offer a sandwich to a particularly pitiful Frenchman.

Thanks to thick haze, there isn't much of a sunrise; think more a blurry clementine hiding in hollandaise sauce. But that's beside the point. We made it to the top with time to spare, bonded with our guide buddies, and, giddy from over exhaustion, all five of us basically skip down the other, less steep, side of the mountain back to our car, pristine Lake Batur shimmering in the distance.

SOME PEOPLE GO TO UBUD FOR THE YOGA. I go for the shamans. Capella has their own in house, Pak Budi, and in one of the spa tents under a wall covered by a Bill Bensley—original painting of a Balinese offering basket, he floats his hands over me conducting an energy-healing session that rebalances my chi flow and somehow alleviates the nausea and stomach cramps that had hit me in the middle of the night. Alisa, meanwhile, had arrived at the resort with a chronic pain that after two sessions with Budi seems to be working its way out of her system.

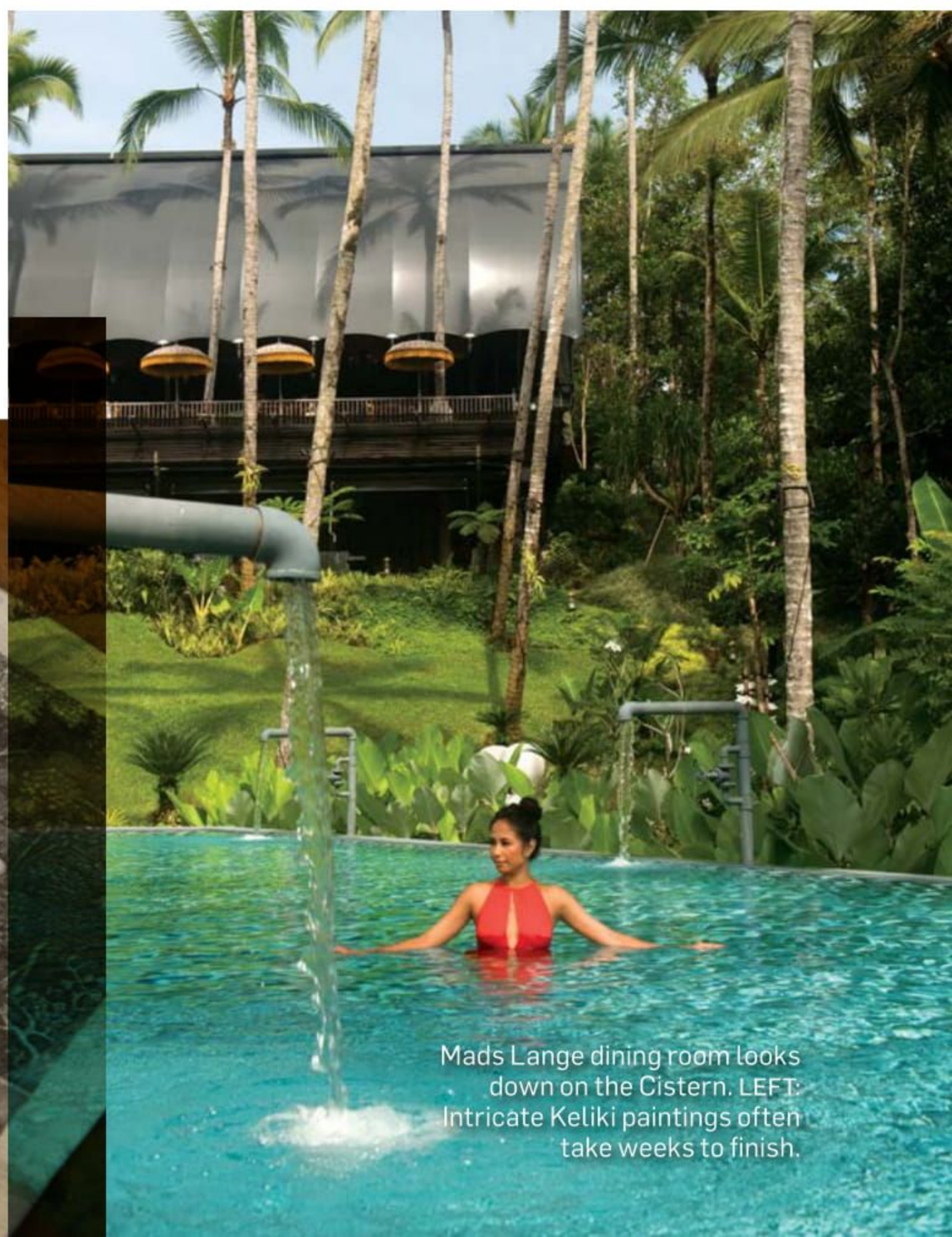
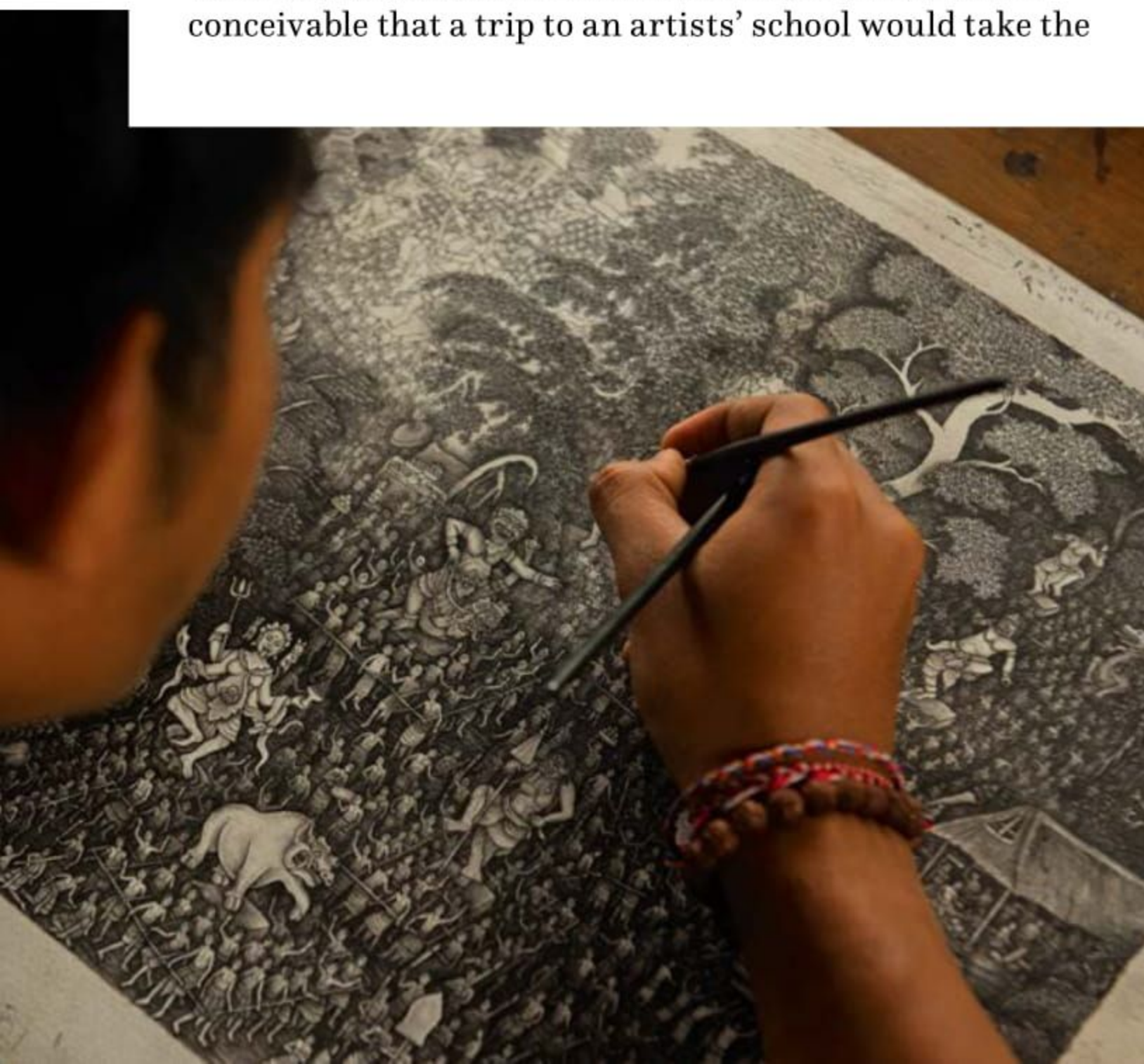
We find another kind of soulful rejuvenation at the Keliki Arts School. The intricate style of drawing and painting looks ancient but was only developed in the 1970s. The imagery generally depicts idyllic scenes of traditional Balinese life or mythology. Keliki artists once anchored the economy here, until tourism plummeted after the 2002 terrorist bombings.

I Wayan Gama opened a free school within his placid family compound to keep the tradition alive, and so when we visit one afternoon, about 10 boys (girls are welcome, but we are told they prefer dancing lessons) are hunched over low tables, concentrating on their original works, which might take a few weeks to complete depending on the size. The school sells the pictures, starting from US\$15 and going much higher, and gives the proceeds entirely to the young artists. Art supplies are paid for with donations from visitors and hotels. It didn't seem conceivable that a trip to an artists' school would take the

five hours Capella had blocked off on our itinerary—until we got there and tried being artists. The drawings are so small, detailed, often symmetrical, you'd think they were based on stencils. We keep I Wayan Gama and his cousin I Wayan Ariana until well past sunset, teaching us about stroke order and proportionality, interrupted every so often by real pupils seeking advice on their progress.

Alisa and I finally leave, more for their sake than for ours. The practice was meditative and, on the shaded veranda in their family home, we felt a part of the community. I'm pretty sure that is the primary purpose of every detail we encounter during this stay at this hotel—a Balinese deep-dive. In the guest tents, the tree-shaded outdoor showers and private pools make for nature-immersion water ablutions, and there are no TVs because they would drown out the nightly soundtrack of the jungle-animal squawks from the treetops. I love it, and falling asleep each evening I wish I had a bedside wildlife curator to tell me who was making every noise. I guess next time I'll check in to the Naturalist's Tent.

capellahotels.com; doubles from US\$838 inclusive of daily breakfast, nightly cocktails and canapes, in-room minibar, smart phone for data and international calls, certain activities, and, for stays of two nights or more, roundtrip transfers from Denpasar airport (two hours). The omakase restaurant, Api Jiwa, is open to the public, with chef Matt curating an 80-percent locally sourced eight- to 10-course menu based on guest preferences; US\$90 per person.



Mads Lange dining room looks down on the Cistern. LEFT: Intricate Keliki paintings often take weeks to finish.

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

APRIL 2019

Back to Basics

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