



Bensley Flair



Bill Bensley has designed some of the most incredible hotels in the world, with his signature Bensley flair. We recently chatted to one of the most prolific, distinctive hotel designers in the world.

Bill, you've had a long, distinguished career in developing some of the world's most fascinating hotels. When you were training as an architect at Harvard, were you interested in hotel design, or did that come later?

When I was at Harvard I could not afford to stay at Motel 6, so no, that came later. Just after graduation, I landed a job in Singapore and a week later I was on a plane to Bali to design a pool and the gardens for the Bali Hyatt. I was smitten.

What first drew you to Southeast Asia, and how did you decide to make Bangkok your home?

On graduation day in 1984 at Harvard I asked my classmate, Lek Bunnag, where he was bound. Singapore was his answer, and as that sounded so very exotic I asked if I could go too, and just on a lark, I did, and never left.

What defines 'luxury' these days, in your opinion?

Luxury is experiencing something for the very first time. Luxury is comfortably enjoying a jungle environment all by yourself. Luxury is waking up to the roar of birds of the jungle. Luxury is being loved by

dogs. But a real luxury is the ability to help others, as my Dad said, "Charity begins at home."

You are quoted as saying, "Nature is the ultimate designer." How does philosophy feature in your hotels?

I don't think of nature as "featuring" in our hotels. I think that if we can build our hotels within a natural environment with minimal impact to that environment, we have already done what many unfortunately fail to do. When I am working within a natural environment I know I can only make things worse, because Mother Nature is the ultimate designer. No matter how beautiful my hotel is, it can never compete with nature, so the key is damage control. This, I think, I have learnt to do very well over the past 35 years.

Which hotel would you recommend a first-time client stay at to get a true sense of the Bensley style?

Shinta Mani Wild for sure. This hotel presses all the BENSLEY buttons. Conservation, wildlife protection, social responsibility, education of both guests and villagers, employment, and romantic story-telling!

Give us a scoop! Are there any new or developing directions you're embarking on that you could give us an advance insight into?

We have a fantastic hotel in Siem Reap called Shinta Mani Bensley collection and another in the Cardamon National forest called Shinta Mani Wild... Bensley Collection also. But the "by road" connection between the two hotels is arduous at best. So I am buying a couple of vintage Airstream trailers (Upcycling!) to allow our more adventurous guests to make that journey in total unabashed luxury, stopping at the most remote temples, pre Angkor sites, natural wonders, that literally nobody bothers with these days. I will dub this adventure "Wild Wheels", and send our wild butlers and cooks on the road into secret places very few outsiders have seen.

One of my favorite things about Cambodia are the people. What is the community aspect to Shinta Mani Wild?

Our neighboring village is Tmor Rung. Seventy percent of our staff comes from this village and many had a history of poaching and logging. That is changing slowly now as they learn that extraction has limits, and conservation does not.

What are your thoughts on what's next for Cambodia?

I pray that we can protect the Cardamons enough so that the endangered species can make a come back. Last week we spotted a Dhole (wild endangered dog) on our new camera traps for the first time - that was thrilling! I even got a photo.

