

Harvard-educated
Bensley wants
to transform the
travel industry one
hotel at a time



WILD AT HEART

Bill Bensley is the game-changing designer creating hotels with a difference all over the world, says **Emma Love**

A

fter 33 years of designing more than 200 hotels for some of the industry's biggest names – Four Seasons, Rosewood, Raffles, Marriott – globally-renowned, American-born and Bangkok-based architect and interiors visionary Bill Bensley launched the Bensley Collection hotel brand in Cambodia in 2017. Finally he had

a no-holds-barred outlet for his most wacky creative ideas. These include giving guests the option of zip lining into his latest project, Shinta Mani Wild, a 400-hectare private nature sanctuary with just 15 elevated luxury tents in the Cambodian wilderness. Do many choose to arrive by whizzing through the tree canopy? 'Everyone takes the zip line,' he grins, wearing his trademark natty bow tie and braces when we meet in a London hotel for coffee one grey autumn morning. 'My sister, who is 74, has the record for being the oldest. She was scared at first but we set up a gin and tonic bar at the top: then she loved it.'

Bensley describes the project, which took six years to complete, as 'an exercise in trying to show Cambodians that conservation is better than extraction'. One of his biggest ongoing problems is poaching. 'We operate a high-yield, low-impact model and it's just enough to be able to sustain the 110 army guards we employ to protect the forest.'

Together with his business partner, Sokoun Chanpreda, he has also set up the Shinta Mani Foundation to support the local community. As well as offering dental services and schooling for children it provides water wells and emergency food aid where needed. 'The future of hospitality should be that every single hotel has a purpose beyond putting heads on beds. Hoteliers have a responsibility to not just feed

guests pasta and margaritas but to inspire them to do the right thing in the places that they're visiting,' he continues.

Over the years Bensley has gained a reputation for persuading hotel companies to think more carefully about the environment. At Capella Ubud tented camp in Bali, for instance (which won Best Hotel Exterior 2019 at Prix Versailles, the prestigious international architecture and design awards), the original plan was for 120 rooms until he insisted on only 22, to lessen the impact. 'That large a number would have decimated this sensitive, beautiful jungle valley. I suggested we create fewer rooms, without chopping down a single tree, and charge a higher price per night,' he recalls. 'The longer I do this, the easier it becomes to convince companies to do hotels with a purpose that build in sustainability from the word go. People expect that from me now and I get very little argument.'

This eco-minded way of thinking stems from a childhood spent growing up on a farm in California. 'We were basically self-sufficient: we had chickens, quail, duck and all the vegetables we could eat. When I hear people talk about sustainability now, I think, is that a new concept?' Bensley's early love of gardening led to a degree in landscape architecture, which he followed up with a masters' degree in urban design at Harvard. 'I'm a gardener first – man, you should see our nursery in Chang Mai,' he enthuses, referring to the green space he owns with his husband, horticulturist Jirachai Rengthong. 'We have probably 40,000 plants, which include a hundred species of bromeliads, flowering pineapples. We plant them en masse and they look fantastic.'

If sustainable living is one of Bensley's passions, the other is storytelling. 'I think history is important and I think a story is important. Whether guests are staying for one night or a week, hotels have an opportunity to influence. I love to do that by teaching guests something new. That way they remember the hotel.' At Capella Ubud this means design inspired by the early European



Shinta Mani is paradise - with a social and environmental conscience



settlers in the 1800s (the narrative goes that each tent belongs to a different member of the Dutch Army, from the map maker to the captain). At JW Marriott Phu Quoc Emerald Bay Resort & Spa in Vietnam, the concept is a fictional Lamarck University, named after French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, where the Department of Physical Education is the trophy-lined gym and the Department of Chemistry is the bar. And at Rosewood Luang Prabang in Laos, guests discover a time capsule of Laotian history based around Bensley's find of some original lithographs – historical manuscripts relating to the explorers of the 1866 Mekong Expedition.

Rather than buying new, wherever possible Bensley likes to reuse secondhand furniture and objects found at auctions, flea markets and antiques fairs in Europe, which get shipped to Asia and stored. 'If you haven't been to the Newark Antiques & Collectors Fair in Nottinghamshire, you haven't lived,' he quips. 'The clients really like it: they get unique pieces, but it's recycling on a big scale.' As an example he cites the just-opened Fairmont Hanoi, which is themed around opera at the turn of the century. 'There are perhaps 3,000 vintage items; some from France, some from England. I've collected 120 pairs of opera glasses and 50 pairs of opera gloves that we've put together in a display.'

It's hard to imagine how Bensley finds time to source these pieces himself – his 120-strong team usually has

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around 40 hotels on the go at once – let alone stick to his daily routine, which involves leaving the office at 5.30pm, taking his five Jack Russells on a five-kilometre run, followed by a two-hour Thai massage while he checks his emails. Somehow he also manages to find time for his new hobby of drawing portraits (around 20 pastel sketches are strewn around the floor of his suite during our chat), and to go on holiday for three months of the year. He goes fishing in Mongolia annually and in April plans to tour Central Asia by train.

Bensley's current game-changing proposals include working with the Saudi Arabian royal family on creating more than 2,000 hotel rooms across three sites, as part of the country's new push to attract international tourists. He is also hoping to set up a school there, to teach girls about working in hospitality.

But in China he's planning one of his most ambitious ideas yet: a zoo where the visitors are contained and the animals roam free. 'Oh this is wacky, this is really good,' he says excitedly. 'The client gave us six square kilometres and asked me to build a zoo. But I hate traditional zoos. So we are going to work with the zoos in China to release animals into this big park; then, on the periphery there will be seven hotels themed around Asian, Australian and African animals.' Visitors will also be able to take a train around the park, stopping at seven conservation stations

to learn about the value of having animals in the wild. 'We're going to be able to influence between five and ten million Chinese visitors per year on the idea of conservation and wildlife. Isn't that cool?' It is, he concludes, his dream project. 'If I can get this off the ground, I'm going to be a happy Billie.'

bensley.com ■

GAME CHANGERS

SHINTA MANI WILD, CAMBODIA

'When I go on vacation I don't sit by the pool and drink gin and tonics. At Shinta Mani Wild, guests can do something different and active every day, from foraging for pink mushrooms in the acacia forest to kayaking and bird spotting.'
shintamani.com

ROSEWOOD LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

'This is a favourite because it's a time capsule of Laotian history, and I think that's what I'm most pleased about.'
rosewoodhotels.com

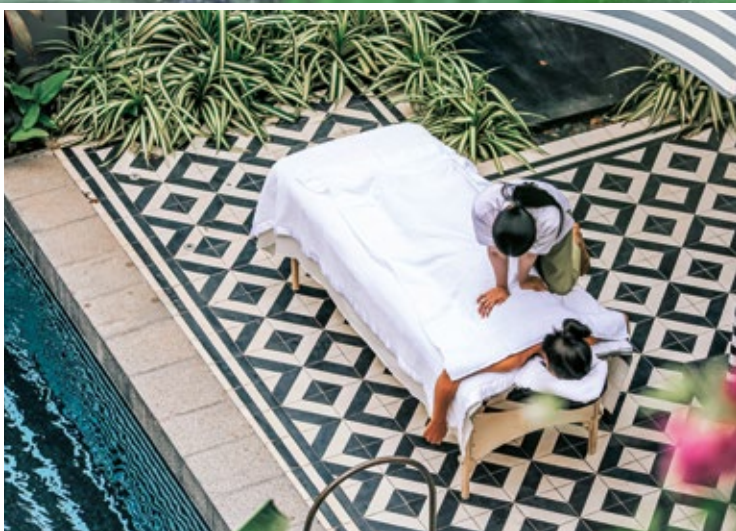
THE SIAM, THAILAND

'At this hotel I have tried to transport guests back to the golden era of what Bangkok was like under King Rama V at the turn of the 20th century. There are 39 rooms, each one different, and the space is filled with around 7,000 antiques.'
thesiamhotel.com

CAPELLA UBUD, BALI

'The design here broke ground in that it put conservation at the fore. It respects the environment and at the same time gives guests an insight into the history of the European settlers who came to Bali.'
capellahotels.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A private villa at Shinta Mani, Siem Reap; exploring local temples; a Shinta Mani bedroom; nature and conservation are at the heart of each Shinta Mani hotel; spa treatments riff on traditional Khmer herbs and wisdom; an outdoor bath; the Butler's Lounge is filled with art and artefacts hand-picked by Bensley and his team



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Travel issue

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