

JUNGLE

Beyond the World Heritage treasures of Angkor, a new raft of jungle and beach adventures is launching in south-west Cambodia, writes HELEN ANDERSON.

BOOK



The humidity is rising on the jungle floor, and so is the adrenaline. What started as excitement at the base of a tower thrusting into the canopy teeters now, at the top, towards fear. The most anticipated new resort in Asia in the past year has a check-in procedure like no other. To enter the jungle-camp fantasy of Shinta Mani Wild, a traveller flies to the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, drives three hours, then jumps on a war-era Jeep for a short transit into the south-west wilderness. Hidden in the jungle is the aforementioned tower – climb it, throw on helmet and harness, and run right off that edge. My first experience of zip-lining is in this green void, hurtling along a 380-metre line. The treetops seem close; the river far below. There's a giddy pause on the penultimate platform, then I take the plunge again, hurling myself over a waterfall and towards the bar, aptly named the Landing Zone, and into the arms of the camp's general manager, Sangjay Choegyal, who unzips his guests from the zip-line and hands them a drink. There's a more conventional way to check in, of course, but the slug of tequila in the pineapple and bay-leaf soda on arrival won't seem so indispensable.

From aerial arrival to anti-poaching patrols with rangers, orchid-hunting to fly-fishing with gibbons, Bensley Collection – Shinta Mani Wild is built for adventure and extravagant fun, but also with uncommon purpose. The story begins in 2010 when the prolific resort designer, Bill Bensley, and his Cambodian business partner, Sokoun Chanpreda, bid at government auction and bought a 350-hectare logging concession surrounded by three national parks in south-west Cambodia, a highly vulnerable plot deep within the last relatively intact wilderness area in Southeast Asia. Bensley describes it as a “buy-first-think-later moment”. “We had no intentions of destroying it,” he says, “but without a clear vision of what to do with it.”

On frequent expeditions in the next few years they discovered the extent of illegal logging, mining and heavy poaching on their plot and in the surrounding Kirirom, Bokor and Cardamom parks. The wild idea of building a remote “high-yield, low-impact” camp took shape, with the primary aim of funding the protection and conservation of the forest.

Bensley and Chanpreda have been at the vanguard of sustainable tourism in Cambodia since the early 2000s, when Chanpreda opened a hospitality school in the grounds of his Shinta Mani Angkor hotel in Siem Reap. That school grew into the Shinta Mani Foundation, now with programs spanning education, micro-finance and healthcare. The foundation's running costs are covered by the owners and their four Shinta Mani hotels, and by donations from guests.

At Shinta Mani's latest project, the jungle camp funds a ranger station on the property, managed by ▶



Shinta Mani Wild tent interiors. Clockwise from top right: an outdoor bath tub; antique mirror and vintage luggage, all at Shinta Mani Wild. PREVIOUS PAGES A riverside tent at Shinta Mani Wild.

PHOTOGRAPHY ELSE HASSEY (MIRROR)





Clockwise from top left: Shinta Mani Wild orchid expert Bong Det; grilled marinated prawns and stir-fried water spinach at Alila Villas Koh Russey; a native plant; a Koh Russey local. Opposite: wildlife rangers patrolling for hunters and illegal loggers at Shinta Mani Wild.

the international non-government conservation organisation Wildlife Alliance and staffed by locals, some of whom were poachers and loggers. Rangers clear snares, arrest hunters and illegal loggers, and seize guns and gear. The results of surveillance of the area, says Choegyal, have been encouraging, with fewer snares set and animals killed in areas that once were heavily trapped. One afternoon, I hitch a ride on the back of a motorbike with a ranger. Though we find no poachers, the ranger's AK-47, I'm told, is not just for show.

The next morning I walk into the forest with the camp's head naturalist, Chanmunny "Munny" Van, to check his wildlife cameras, mainly for evidence of native cats: civet, pig-tailed, leopard. The whooping duets of courting pileated gibbons, an endangered species, echo around us, and his face lights up. "I explain to hunters and loggers we're not protecting the forest for ourselves, we're protecting it for their children and grandchildren," he says. "I give them a warning and normally they stop."

With help from personal "adventure butlers" assigned to each tent, the intrepid possibilities multiply: chasing butterflies with head butler Sarawut "Mac" Saikaew, birdwatching along the Srey Ambel estuary on a whimsically decorated "expedition" boat, foraging and hiking, riverbed cocktails at sunset and Japanese tenkara fly-fishing at dawn.

There are adventures, too, back at Headquarters, a camo-swathed open-air fantasy tent stuffed with Khmer objets d'art, vintage carousel horses, century-

practically defined the Asian-resort style – but possibly he's never had more fun than in this passion project. Not a single tree was cut down, Choegyal insists, during the construction of 15 guest tents spaced for privacy and raised for overwater ambience along a 1.5-kilometre stretch of the Tmor Rung river. The Raging Big Sister Falls thunder upstream, the soundtrack to drinks in the Landing Zone bar and dips in the long ridgetop swimming pool, painted black like a reflective jungle waterhole. The tents are built for good times – over-river decks, curtain-swathed living rooms with overstuffed sofas, fully stocked ice-chests, old-fashioned oscillating fans – and for meditation. Soak outdoors in a showpiece hammered-metal bathtub at dusk, or watch butterflies (or stars) from the hammock-nets suspended thrillingly from the railing-free deck edge. In the Cambodian Royalty tent, I wake on a campaign bed beneath golden umbrellas, surrounded by vintage luggage, an exquisite silver Khmer headdress, hand-painted frescoes and leather studded mirrors – maybe not imperial, but certainly fabulous.

Until recently, the majestic 12th-century temple-complex at Angkor, on the outskirts of Siem Reap, was the single most popular attraction for travellers to Cambodia. In 2018, 2.6 million visitors marvelled at its remarkable bas-reliefs and monuments. A fraction

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would head to the riverside capital Phnom Penh to see Tuol Sleng Prison and the Killing Fields, monuments to the genocide inflicted by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s; some two million people were murdered or died of starvation in the regime's four-year rule. Cambodia remains one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, with threadbare infrastructure.

Until recently, there were few other reasons for most travellers to linger before heading to the beaches of Thailand. Itineraries are being rewritten, however, as new bars and boutique hotels open in Phnom Penh, notably the Rosewood Phnom Penh, and the game-

changing Shinta Mani Wild and a handful of new luxury island resorts in the south-west.

In 2006 former Sydney couple Rory and Melita Hunter were sailing in the Koh Rong archipelago, off the south-west port city of Sihanoukville, when they noticed an island for sale and bought it on impulse. In 2012 they opened the nation's first private-island resort, Song Saa. Barefoot luxury in 27 villas is delivered with a pioneering ethos of sustainability and community collaboration, underpinned by a charitable foundation.

"We didn't set out to buy the island... or to build a hotel," Rory told me a few years ago. "We were just as excited about the philanthropic opportunities as the commercial ones." In late 2018, the Hunters ►





Dining at Alila Villas Koh Russey. Below, from left: the arrival jetty at Koh Russey; geometric wood panelling in the lobby of Alila Villas Koh Russey.



announced a new sustainable-tourism venture, Song Saa Reserve, near the Angkor temple of Banteay Srei, with hotels, villas, education centres and nature reserves planned around a 35-hectare lake.

Another two glamorous island resorts in Koh Rong have opened recently: Six Senses Krabey Island, with 40 pool villas on a 12-hectare jungle island with rocky coastline; and Alila Villas Koh Russey, where my suite looks over a beach. The two islands are accessible in 10 minutes by speedboat from private jetties on the outskirts of Sihanoukville. The region is being promoted as “the new Cambodian Riviera”, a reference to the French colonial elite, then the international jet set, who once partied in beachfront villas along the coast, and to a new jet set drawn to the laid-back island vibe of Koh Rong. Most will use Sihanoukville as their gateway – Thai

Getting there

Luxury travel company Lightfoot Travel arranges bespoke trips throughout the world. Lightfoot arranged *GT*'s travel to Cambodia, including stays at Bensley Collection - Shinta Mani Wild and Alila Villas Koh Russey. A seven-night itinerary costs from \$8500 per person including return flights between Sydney and Phnom Penh, accommodation, transfers and experiences. Extensions to visit the temples of Angkor and nearby Siem Reap are highly recommended. lightfoottravel.com/en

AirAsia recently launched direct flights from Bangkok, and Bangkok Airways launched in January – though the city's reputation as an overdeveloped enclave of Chinese casinos and industrial zones means many travellers will head offshore quickly.

Alila Villas Koh Russey is a serene parallel universe. The transit from the mainland to barefoot lunch at The Beach Shack is swift, the effect of sand, sun and coconut palms immediately soothing. The geometric wood panelling in the lofty lobby pavilion exemplifies the resort's style: sleek, contemporary and influenced by Cambodian craft traditions, in this case the chequered pattern of a traditional cotton krama scarf. The main restaurant, facing the showpiece lagoon pool and the beach beyond, has similar DNA, its huge feature wall studded by recycled offcuts of timber.

Certified by EarthCheck, a Brisbane-based tourism advisory body, the resort occupies a beachfront plot surrounded by bamboo forest on the 24-hectare island of Koh Russey. Its 50 pavilions and 13 two- and four-bedroom pool villas are spacious and private. Guests can practise morning yoga beneath a banyan tree, head to a private cove for a beach picnic, and arrange day trips to Kep, known for its crab market, and the pepper farms of Kampot. I catch a longtail boat from Koh Russey's jetty one sultry afternoon and hop between neighbouring islands – tiny, bristling with jungle and, like Cambodia itself, adventures waiting to happen. ●



Extend your stay

Now more than ever, travel is a true luxury so it's important to take considered, sustainably-minded trips where possible. To make the most of the air miles, pack more into your Cambodian adventure with these stopover suggestions and add-ons.



1. STOP OVER IN SINGAPORE

It's well worth carving out time to make the most of your layover beyond the airport at this island city-state. Explore the street-food markets, world-class bars and restaurants before checking into the recently revamped Raffles Singapore (pictured), and find out why the grande dame is still the ultimate place to drink a Singapore Sling.

2. VISIT KUALA LUMPUR

This metropolis is ideal for a one- or two-night stopover. Explore the shopping centre at Bukit Bintang and navigate the rest of the city via the convenient monorail. Eat charcoal hokkien mee from Lot 10 for lunch and head to Jalan Alor for abundant street-food options (pictured) in the evening, before retiring to the elegant Four Seasons Hotel.

3. DRIVE TO HO CHI MINH CITY

Located a five-hour drive from Phnom Penh is bustling Ho Chi Minh City (pictured). Rise above the chaos to Rex's Rooftop for cocktails or Vo Roof Garden for views and bun bo hue. For pho, try Pho 1954, which has been in business for over 50 years. And for craft beer, head to Pasteur Street Brewing and sample local brews.



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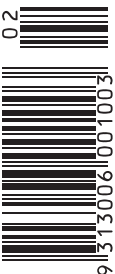
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