

Designed by Bill Bensley and located in the beautiful Khao Yai National Park, just northeast of Bangkok, the InterContinental Khao Yai Resort is every train lover's dream: a five-star hotel where every detail is inspired by the golden age of railroads.

By Chris Schalkx
Images by WBB & Co.

All Aboard



It's easy to be fooled into thinking an actual train once rolled through the jungled hills around the InterContinental Khao Yai Resort, which opened in August 2022. Just north of Thailand's oldest and third-largest national park, a three-hour drive northeast from Bangkok, the hotel has railway tracks cutting through its gardens — they look timeworn, as if they've lain there forever, and there are weeds growing between their crossties. At the hotel entrance, stacks of vintage travel trunks balance next to old wooden trolleys.

But it's all make-believe, spun from the mind of eccentric Bangkok-based hotel designer Bill Bensley. Bensley drew inspiration from the King Rama V-era Pak Chong railway station, forty minutes north, and concocted a story around a fictional train conductor, Somsak, whose passion for rail travel resulted in a small enclave of buildings inspired by Thailand's 19th-century train stations. For Bensley, it was this unique story that would make Khao Yai a destination in and of itself.

As with all his projects, Bensley committed fully to the tale and melded fact with fiction. He designed each of the rooms to resemble the interior of a railway carriage: narrow hallways, clerestory ceilings, sliding cabin doors, and so on. Glass-fronted cut-outs on the walls frame hand-painted landscapes, while vintage-looking station signboards conceal flat-screen TVs. Even the tiniest details fit the theme, including the overhead luggage racks and classic KOHLER Artifacts and Components faucets finished in oil-rubbed bronze to fit the old-timey look.

The rooms are intentionally snug, but comfortable. "On trains, it's all about scale and proportion," Bensley says. "The narrow spaces are all the charm of this hotel. In essence, that's what a train is all about."

Previous spread

A For the new InterContinental Khao Yai Resort, Bill Bensley imagined a property that harks back to the golden age of railroads

This spread and next spread

B-C Guestrooms were designed to evoke the interior of a railway carriage, with details like clerestory ceilings and window-like cut-outs on the walls, while oil-rubbed bronze KOHLER fixtures in the bathrooms add to the historic feel

D In designing the property, Bensley drew inspiration from the historic Pak Chong railway station



B



C

The hotel's showpieces, however, stand around a lake at the back of the property. Recycled railroad carriages, salvaged from train graveyards where they were being consumed by the snake-like roots of ficus trees, have been transformed into "train car suites." The suites transport guests back to the golden age of rail travel, with marble-clad bathrooms, Victorian bathtubs, and furnishings upholstered in jewel-hued velvet. "Every single carriage has been named, designed, and accessorized to express a different train journey around the world," Bensley says. "So even though guests all have the train experience, no two are alike."

Beyond the rooms and suites, Bensley further elaborates his story through the communal areas. The check-in area is built like a classic stationmaster's house, and supposedly there are vintage *Playboy* magazines hidden under Khun Somsak's bunk bed. Somying's Kitchen, the hotel's Thai restaurant, is named after the protagonist's mother and looks like a station diner from bygone times, replete with Formica tabletops and leather chairs in kitschy Tiffany blue.

With the proverbial stamp of approval from a renowned global hospitality brand, the InterContinental Khao Yai ushers in a new era for the region's hotel scene. Moving away from being merely a gateway to the eponymous national park, experiential projects like these invite travelers to linger and explore the wineries, cafes, and art galleries in the hills outside the park entrance. Meanwhile, the idiosyncratic Bensley is already fantasizing about his next upcycling project. A decommissioned plane? A stranded ship? "We're breathing new life into garbage," he says. "It's magic."



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