

InterContinental Khao Yai Resort

THAILAND

Bill Bensley recalls the romance of train travel in Thailand's Pak Chong district, which served as a transportation gateway during King Rama V's reign.

Words: Neena Dhillon
Photography: Courtesy of InterContinental Khao Yai Resort

"I have always been a lover of trains, it's a fetish of mine," reveals architect and designer Bill Bensley. "I've taken all sorts of train journeys; I even had a summer job taking groups of ladies coast-to-coast across Canada on a train." Fast forward a few decades to more recent times when Bensley was travelling on the highway in his adopted home of Thailand, and noticed rusting train carriages seemingly abandoned in a yard. "That was when the idea struck me – how cool would it be to upcycle these carriages?" he recalls.

Having previously worked with the Managing Director of Elysian Hotel Management on Rosewood Luang Prabang, Bensley once more approached his friend Rena Udomkunnatum, on this occasion with the concept of a train-inspired hotel. Soon, they set about envisioning the destination and collecting the rare items that would be needed to evoke the adventure of train travel in a 19-hectare site on the edge of Khao Yai National Park. "You would think the unused carriages would just be sitting there but actually no, within Thai society, they are very coveted and cost a lot more than they are really worth," says Bensley of their search to source sufficient numbers of the cars. "So we had to navigate the Old Boys Train Club, if you will, at public auctions; it was a real scavenger hunt across Thailand."





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While Bensley's design studio is renowned in the hotel world for its fantastical creations, the destination of Khao Yai provided a historical hook from which to spin the more imaginative elements of the resort's backstory. Setting the scene is Pak Chong Railway Station, which, under King Rama V's reign, was part of a thriving transport system connecting to northeast Thailand. At the hands of the Bensley team, the destination has become a natural extension of that network, with the fictional character of Somsak, a conductor, the main protagonist. He is the one who has searched far and wide to collect the memorabilia, signage, maps and machinery that weave their way around the resort, not least in the Station Master's House – which serves as the reception – and the 19 upcycled Heritage Railcar Suites that form part of the 64-key hotel's accommodation.

"For the interiors to work on a train, you need a practical use for every single square-inch of space," Bensley says of the challenge of transforming 2.5-metre wide carriages into luxury suites. "Knowing the ceilings were already head-bangingly low, we ran the air-conditioning through the undercarriage,

bringing the vents through the floor. I was tempted to purchase antique Burmese handcarved wooden ducts as they were so beautiful, but it wouldn't have worked because most of our guests are much taller than the average Burmese of 1910."

While the sophisticated façades are painted in historically accurate hues, interiors vary wildly from one carriage to the next, taking inspiration from the voyages to destinations after which they are named; various regions of Thailand are represented, as well as the nearby countries of Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. Rich wood panelling, cleverly carved to mimic train windows, is complemented by patterned and scenic wallpapers – backlit to evoke natural landscapes – and even lining the ceilings. Jim Thompson silks are another recurring feature, seen across soft furnishings in rainbow shades that speak of Southeast Asia's tropics, temples and terrains. In the same vein, the headboards of the low-lying beds call to mind the architectural language of provinces and states such as Hua Hin, Sukhothai and Uthai Thani or capitals further afield including Phnom Penh and Yangon. Given that space-saving was key,





storage comes in the form of high-level luggage racks – like those on a functioning train – while velvet and leather banquettes curve around compartments, each custom-made to fit.

Artefacts, ceramics and paintings are carefully arranged to build up the thematic interiors, with striated marbles and tiles in bathrooms reflecting the chosen colour combinations. Of course, the Bensley team can always be relied upon to pay attention to detail, so each of the railcars announces its themed destination on a brass plaque fixed to the façade.

The exteriors throw up more surprises. “As you know, the British were very influential in India and Burma, and while less so in Thailand, they still brought with them a tradition of tents and campaign furniture,” explains Bensley as he describes the concept for the spacious terraces outside each suite. “They made-do with what they had, stopping for the night, erecting a tent, filling up a portable bath and breaking out the gin-and-tonic. While InterContinental Khao Yai is head-and-shoulders above this level of

comfort, the roots of the external design spring from the same soil.” Canopied, some with plunge pools, but all with outdoor bathtubs, the terraces are equipped with day loungers from which to enjoy the vistas.

Carriages not only accommodate guests but three of the F&B experiences too, including the Tea Carriage with its tiled tabletops, overlooking the lake. Papillon Bar is an intimate space seductively lit at night, while neighbouring Poirot serves French cuisine in a sophisticated environment characterised by memorabilia relating to the famed detective. Elsewhere in the hotel, artefacts, posters, vintage trunks and station machinery – lots sourced from antiques fairs – remind visitors of railroad adventures. There are even tracks built into the site, which may well spring into use soon, with plans for a hand-pumped maintenance car to become operational to transport guests from reception to their suites. So what would the King have made of it all? “Rama V would have loved it,” concludes Bensley.



ON DECK

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