

# SOUTH-EAST ASIA



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT** Cambodian rice farmers working in the fields

## Jungle chic and a dusting of animal magic

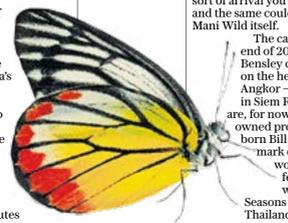
### CONSERVATION TOURISM

*In the wilds of Cambodia, Mary Lussiana gets back to nature in style, enjoying custom-designed tents and zip-line excitement*

I started with a zip line: 1,050ft long and 130ft above the ground. "I promise I won't let you go until you're ready," said Sangjay, the young general manager of Shinta Mani Wild, the much-admired tented camp by designer Bill Bensley, set deep in the wilderness of Cambodia's Southern Cardamom National Park. As he edged me ever closer to the drop, murmuring assurances of safety, the distant roar of the waterfall urged me on and adrenalin, getting the better of jet lag, carried me off over the rainforest canopy. Minutes

**IN A FLAP** A painted Jezebel butterfly, below

later, thoroughly exhilarated, I swung in (literally) to the Landing Bar to be handed an ice-filled goblet of home-made pineapple and bay leaf syrup, topped with soda water and a generous splash of tequila. It was the sort of arrival you would remember... and the same could be said of Shinta Mani Wild itself. The camp opened at the end of 2018, the second in the Bensley collection and hard on the heels of Shinta Mani Angkor - Bensley Collection, in Siem Reap. Although these are, for now, the only Bensley-owned properties, American-born Bill has long made his mark on this part of the world with his feel-good designs, whether at the Four Seasons tented camp in Thailand's Chiang Rai, a



game-changer of its time, or at the Rosewood in Luang Prabang, Laos. Strongly contrasting with the prevalent Asian Zen decor, Bensley's exuberant, colourful designs come woven through with a dusting of magic, adding to their heady escapist vibe. Here, 15 custom-designed tents perch along the edge of the thundering Tmor Rung river, some within sight of the Bagong Sister waterfalls. They are so far apart from each other that a bath tub sits on the edge of the open deck. It provides an experience not to be missed. Lying in it just after sunrise, I was wrapped in a cloak of jungle sights and sounds; the chatter of the birds, the rush of the river beneath me, the croaks of the frogs and butterflies - from painted Jezebels and peacock pansies to the common albatross, which makes up for its simple colouring by flying en-masse in a delicate, eye-catching, kaleidoscope.

The decks themselves are vast, with bold animal-print sofas, plush trunks, suitcases and lanterns that lend a feeling of colonial-style glamour. Step inside the tents and their interiors are warmly opulent: ancient books, polished wooden shelves with gold inlay, a retro Fifties telephone, even an old radio that has been adapted to house a USB port. Photographs of Jackie Kennedy's visit to Cambodia in the Sixties grace the walls, an event that inspired Bensley's vision of what the camp should be like. Everything is generous: the cut of the cloth of a dressing gown, the size of a towel, the weight of a crystal glass in the bar, the sumptuous beds, enveloped in the smoothest of sheets.

This noticeable generosity is an echo of a greater, more personal munificence that underpins Bensley's work in Cambodia. He co-founded the Shinta Mani foundation in 2004 as a reaction to seeing a family with six children in the countryside living on sticks to keep them off the damp ground; no roof, no father, no food. A house was built for them; they were given bikes for the children to get to school, plus pigs to farm and seeds to plant. The foundation educates underprivileged children, preparing many of them for roles in the burgeoning hospitality industry. Bong Vuthy, the pastry chef at the camp - whose home-made croissants can compete with Paris's best - is testimony to the success of the scheme. Empowering rural communities came next, but bringing Shinta Mani Wild to fruition is the sum of all the parts of Bensley's mission.

He had heard about this unprotected wildlife corridor, connecting the national parks of Kirirum, Bokor and Cardamom Mountains in the south west of the



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country. The 800-acre river valley was a rare example of pristine wilderness in a country where logging, mining and poaching encroach daily on supposedly protected areas. Bensley's answer was to build Shinta Mani Wild,

**THE REALLY WILD SHOW** An Asian palm civet, above; grilled squid at Tree restaurant, right

ensuring the preservation of the surroundings, giving much-needed work to locals and working hand in hand with the Wildlife Alliance, which operates a small ranger's station on site.

The non-profit organisation, set up by the courageous, American-born conservationist Siwanna Gaumlett, monitors poaching and logging in the Cardamom Mountains. "It's one of the last unfragmented elephant corridors," she told me, over passion fruit martinis at Rosewood's Sora Sky Bar in Phnom Penh. At Shinta Mani Wild, guests are encouraged to ride out on motorbikes with the rangers (plus a soldier and a policeman for protection) to witness their work. Here, civet cats are the main target and the snares are endless, constructed to catch them alive in order to sell them on to coffee plantations in Vietnam (\$100 is the going price) where they are fed coffee

cherries, neatly expelling only the beans. But hunting and land grabbing are also rife. It is an overwhelming task for these rangers, who know that, even when they do catch the perpetrators, a bribe might have them released in hours.

And that is the Cambodia of today - a place of endemic corruption and poverty, with a huge influx of Chinese whose buying power is visible on



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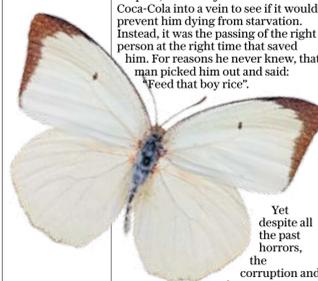
### ESSENTIALS

Wix Squared (020 3808 6383; wixsquared.com) offers a 10-night tailor-made Cambodia trip from £4,550 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes three nights at Shinta Mani Wild, three at Alila Koh Russey, two at Six Senses Krabey Island and two at the Rosewood in Phnom Penh, plus transfers between hotels, a street food tour and an afternoon architectural tour by bicycle in Phnom Penh, but not flights. Return economy fares from London to Phnom Penh with Thai Airways (thairways.com) via Bangkok start at £600.

every street corner. But it also feels more carefree than when I was first there in 2011. The tragedy of the Khmer Rouge years, which cloaked the population so heavily then, is a little lighter. The young I talked to had all, inevitably, been affected one way or another. Many had been brought up in orphanages, though they had not witnessed the terror.

On my first visit, the majority of people I spoke to had first-hand stories to tell of the inhumanity. One related how, as a boy in a Khmer Rouge hospital, he was injected with Coca-Cola into a vein to see if it would prevent him dying from starvation. Instead, it was the passing of the right person at the right time that saved him. For reasons he never knew, that man picked him out and said: "Feed that boy rice".

Yet despite all the past horrors, the corruption and the current authoritarian government, Cambodia still enchants. It manages to get under the visitor's skin in a way few other countries do. A swathe of new hotels has opened in previously unvisited parts of the country, rendering them more accessible - but Shinta Mani Wild is the first luxury hotel to allow exploration of the rural wonders of the Cardamom Mountains, from the impressive butterflies and the noisy white-

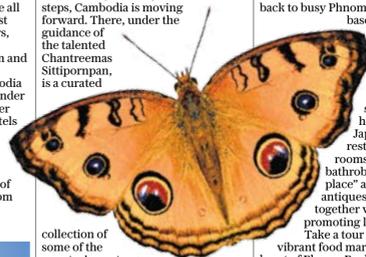


**AU NATUREL** The dramatic view from a room in Shinta Mani Wild, main; a common albatross butterfly, above; a peacock pansy, right; the setting of the Alila Villas, below



throated laughing thrushes and hornbills, to the magnificent waterfalls set within the rainforest.

Off the coast of Cambodia - some two and a half hours' drive from Shinta Mani Wild, then a 10-minute speedboat ride - is Alila Villas, set on Koh Russey island beside a long, sandy beach. The somewhat urban mix of villas and pavilions draws on the design of the Khmer krama, the checked cloth traditionally worn by Cambodians. A visit to the hotel shop reveals how, in small, but valuable steps, Cambodia is moving forward. There, under the guidance of the talented Chantreemas Sittipornpan, is a curated



collection of some of the country's most enterprising companies. One of them is Amboh, set up recently by a Frenchman and employing a team of nine, which makes espadrilles in local cloth with krama patches and jute soles. Another is Smateria, which takes old fishing nets and repurposes them to make laptop bags.

Across the water - mere minutes away - is the island of Krabey, the setting for a Six Senses resort. The terrain is all jungle, with just a lick of a beach skirting the craggy rocks - and the resort is nothing short of sensational. Its 40 villas come with a private pool and sea views, at their most remarkable when the sun sets over the Gulf of Thailand. Mine boasts a roomy sitting room; a bedroom with a billowing, muslin-clad bed; and a bathroom, its egg-shaped tub pressed up against a window.

The food, courtesy of Australian chef Todd Adams, was the best I have had in Cambodia. The restaurant, with its wooden ceiling of "leaves" and lights suspended in wooden "weavers' nests", serves mainly Khmer dishes with a modern twist. These include traditional amok (curry steamed in a banana leaf) refashioned with local mud crab and a scattering of Khmer spices. Aha restaurant - which could take its moniker from the involuntary intake of breath on seeing sashimi of cobia (a local fish) with spicy koh long sauce, ginger and lime leaves - is actually named after the Khmer word for "food" and offers all-day dining with breakfasts of banh chiao (turmeric coconut crepe, free-range pork, flowering chives, bean sprouts and fresh herbs). The 27m (89ft) main pool lies beneath you, while the bar, lobby and observatory are high above. The spa, always a pillar of the Six Senses philosophy, has Dr Anand at the helm, efficiently diagnosing your state of health as well as being a dab hand at aerial yoga in the gentle breeze of early morning.

After all that tranquility, it was back to busy Phnom Penh. There I based myself at the Rosewood - famous for its Sora Sky Bar overlooking the city, the ideal place for a sundowner. The hotel boasts a Japanese restaurant, sleek rooms with Frette bathrobes and "sense of place" artefacts - books, antiques, paintings - together with a gallery promoting local talent. Take a tour of the city's vibrant food markets, the beating heart of Phnom Penh, before climbing on a cyclo to follow an architectural student on a tour of the old Chinese shophouses, late 19th- and early 20th-century French colonial buildings and examples of the New Khmer Architecture that blossomed throughout the Fifties and Sixties.

As I wove in and out of the tuk-tuks, I heard of heritage buildings being destroyed to make way for new Chinese development. I thought of the pace of change that I had witnessed in my four visits and reflected on how the new wave of eco-hotels and lodges was a force for good. They allow us to see more of this country with a tragic past and an uncertain future, but a present filled with butterflies, sunsets, that famous Khmer smile and a deep feeling of peace.

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