



#SHINTAMANIWILD #CAMBODIA

Call of the Wild

Deep in a pristine corridor of a national park in Cambodia, there's a new experiential adventure property that invites guests on a wild ride.

By Katrina Holden

M

Y HEART IS RACING WITH adrenalin as I prepare for an adventurous arrival into the new Cambodian luxury tented resort, Shinta Mani Wild, located in a national park alongside a waterfall. I'm standing on a platform five storeys high after ascending 100 steps, being buckled into a harness by Roth, who jokes it's his first time too. The zipline, although not mandatory for guests, is certainly the most thrill-seeking way to reach the secluded oasis, created and envisaged by renowned hotel designer Bill Bensley.

I don't look down at the 35-metre drop. Instead, I fix my gaze outward to the beautiful mountain range in South Cardamom National Park, sit back into my harness and follow instructions to 'walk' off the edge – and I let go. All my nerves fly away with the butterflies and birds, and out of my own mouth I hear a joyous 'yee-hah'

shrill that echoes throughout the valley as I whirl the 380 metres to the next platform, flying 35 metres above the ground. It's followed by the second and shorter zipline across a waterfall, being deposited safely at The Landing Bar where a cool towel and pineapple cider drink is handed to me while I'm still spinning in exhilaration.

Bensley, the designer of more than 200 international hotels for the likes of InterContinental, JW Marriott and Four Seasons, has developed his own personal Bensley Collection of properties. Exclusive to Shinta Mani Hotels, the first to open was Shinta Mani Angkor in Siem Reap in 2017, with 10 pool villas (see review on page 143), followed by Shinta Mani Wild, which opened in 2018.

For his own brand, Bensley created his unique vision, his creative juices literally running 'wild' here. His whimsical design and vintage-style pieces are still in harmony with the immediate environment. The property opened its first five tents in December, with the remaining 10 due to open in May this year. General manager Sanjay Choegyral says the property's goal was to not cut back or destroy any trees in the construction, which meant many items were carried in by hand or ox cart.



OPENING PAGE: Shinta Mani Wild is glamping at its best. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT: The black steel infinity pool; luxury air-conditioned glamping; Bensley Adventure Butler Yi cools down in the waterfall. NEXT PAGE: Ultra-comfortable tent bedding with tranquil views; Take a seat at The Landing Bar.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE
From Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, guests can take a Shinta Mani transfer service. We drive the three hours from the city, with the chaos of the city's streets and morning markets gradually giving way to quiet villages. We finally turn onto a sandy road, cross a precarious rickety wooden bridge, pass fields of mango and banana trees, and coconut palms, before meeting at the transfer zone, where my luggage disappears in one car and I jump into a vintage Jeep used in the America/Vietnam War. I take a further short, bumpy drive, and walk through a pebble-stone path in the jungle to reach the base of the zipline tower.

The zipline entry sets guests up for a stay that asks us to leave 'civilisation' behind and head into a natural sanctuary. For those not so bold, you can skip the zipline to arrive instead by car. Once safely within its seclusion, guests are wedded to their stunning surrounds. The sound of the trickling waterfalls provides the constant background soundtrack and the public lodge spaces are open to the elements. An adventure experience is the very essence of a stay here, with all guests having access to their own 'Bensley Adventures Butlers' – hand-picked and highly trained



adventures to get you back to nature.

My butler is the very fit and knowledgeable Yi. On my first morning, after a glorious sleep in my luxury air-conditioned tent and what feels like a 'daring' soak in the deck's deep bath, Yi is ready to take me on my next adventure.

"Good morning Bong," he says, the Cambodian salutation of respect, as he discusses the options for our morning hike, with all activities tailored to the guest's preferences. On our hike, we hear gibbons in the distance while we pass jackfruit and cashew trees and gnarled vines. We could be the only people on earth as our path winds through thick forest with morning sunshine breaking through the canopy before we move across stream beds and into open fields. Yi talks about his childhood, his family, his university studies and the daredevil explorations he got up to in his early years. Heading back, Yi asks, "Do you want to go back on the zipline?"

"Yes!" I exclaim, surprising even myself with my enthusiasm, as I become one of the many guests who go back for second and third zipline entrances. The second time is even better – I'm not so much clinging on but instead I feel totally safe, able to absorb the views in more detail. I wave to workers

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below me; I notice the corridor of treetops that I must have zipped through first time around, but my laughter returns for an encore. “I thought I saw you whizzing by on the zipline,” a fellow guest says to me later, having heard my shrieks from the pool.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

After lunch, I am escorted to the base of the waterfall. We clamber over rocks holding a safety rope on the descent. I plunge into the pure waters alone feeling like Jane of the Jungle as I swim beneath the sprouting flow of water. Yi and fellow staff member Net appear, carrying champagne in an ice bucket. I sit on the rocks sipping my bubbles, while Yi dives in fully dressed to retrieve an object that has previously fallen into the water, hurls himself onto the waterfall ledge and stands beneath the water spray while Net talks about the parties and drinks that are set up down here for guests – it’s just that kind of place.

The next day we plan an early start for a cruise up the Tachaya River on board the Bensley expedition boat. We drive along earth-red dirt roads as the sun rises over the mountains, passing school children and fields of cows. The boat is a simple vessel decked out with all the Bensley-style trimmings. A camping chair is set up for me with prime views for bird watching. Yi opens up a Kato tin to reveal my breakfast of fruit, salads and pastries. As I sip on watermelon juice, Yi’s eagle eye spots kingfisher, heron and many other species of birds. We pass a girl washing her hair on the banks of the river, but otherwise our group is more or less alone out here with a chorus of birdsong and the glassy surface of the waters forming spectacular reflections. It’s so hypnotic watching the calm waters that I’m sure I nod off a couple of times.

Other activities include cycling trips and kayaking, but I’m keen to accompany the anti-poaching rangers from Wildlife

THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Arriving by zipline; The rustic bridge on approach through the village; Vintage seating at The Landing Bar
NEXT PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Staff set up picnics in fabulous places to connect guests with nature; wild and free – bathing in the outdoor bath tubs



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
From Australia, Vietnam Airlines has daily flights from Sydney to Ho Chi Minh city, and a same-day connection flight to Phnom Penh. vietnamairlines.com/au
To reach Shinta Mani Wild, guests can fly into either Phnom Penh or Sihanoukville airports and travel by transfer car.
STAYING THERE
Rates start from US\$1900 (about A\$2671) per night and are all inclusive of food and beverage, activities, spa treatments and land transfers. There is a minimum three-night stay and an age limit of 13 years. Due to the nature of the adventure activities and the walks along non-flat pebbled pathways to the tents, a reasonable level of fitness and mobility is recommended for guests to enjoy their stay. shintamani.com

Alliance which the not-for-profit Shinta Mani Foundation supports. After a moped ride through the mountains, we arrive at the Wildlife Alliance station to follow rangers through deep jungle, hanging on at times to rocks on narrow pathways in what feels like a true Indiana Jones mission. Poachers in these parts are illegally hunting birds and other animals, and setting traps for animals – as well as cutting down protected trees for the timber. The rangers check a number of camera stations set up throughout the jungle. A proportion of the daily room rate from all Shinta Mani Hotels is donated to the Bensley Foundation to continue its conservation efforts, community outreach programs and provide work opportunities where there is minimal infrastructure.

LUCKY DIP

Back at the property, the food is prepared fresh using native ingredients. I sip on fabulous cocktails through bamboo straws created by the talented Sreyneang in The Landing Bar, reclining on vintage leather lounges while I get lost in the

consistent thrum of the waterfall.

The pool beckons when all the adventuring has taken its toll, as does the Boulders Spa featuring chemical-free products by Bensley’s Khmer Tonics.

At breakfast one morning, general manager Sanjay Choegyul interrupts our chat for us to catch a glimpse of a monkey in a nearby branch. Talking about the zipline and the resort’s activities, Sanjay says, “We try and push people out of their comfort zones because I believe that’s when the magic happens.”

Back in my tent, number one – the most private on the property (also an eight-minute walk from the lodge) – I vow to make the most of the outdoor tub, bathing in the wild each morning. On day one, I remove my robe cautiously, nervous at the unlikely prospect that someone might see me. On day two, I’ve worked up slightly more bravado. On my final morning, my inhibitions drop to the deck floor with my robe as I step into the bath unperturbed by the nine cries of a nearby gecko. Yes, there really is magic to be found in the wild. 🐸

