

DREAM DESTINATION

Jungle talk

A new wilderness retreat is set to reshape Cambodian tourism, writes **UTE JUNKER**.

You don't need an alarm clock in the jungle. As the sun steals above the horizon, the jungle's inhabitants greet the new day. Above the rushing of the river, the trill of the yellow-bellied warbler mixes with the uncanny calls of gibbons.

If that sounds like a nicer way to wake up than the buzz of an alarm, then Shinta Mani Wild is for you. Cambodia's newest luxury retreat, set to open before the end of the year, showcases a very different side of this ancient kingdom. Thus far, tourists to Cambodia have largely been drawn to its ancient monuments and magnificent beaches. Now, the spotlight is shifting to its underexplored wilderness, thanks to one of the hotel industry's most famous figures.

Bill Bensley is known for designing some of the world's most luxurious resorts, including properties for the likes of One & Only, Mandarin-Oriental, the Four Seasons, and St Regis. Recently, he launched his own hotel portfolio, the Bensley Collection, which debuted with a hotel in Angkor Wat. His next property, the luxury tented camp known as Shinta Mani Wild, is located in the southwest of the country. "We are opening up a part of Cambodia that few have seen," Bensley says.

Shinta Mani Wild is as much a conservation project as it is a luxury retreat. In a corner of the country that is home to some of Cambodia's most important national parks, including Bokor and Kirirom, where

wild elephants roam freely, Bensley identified an unprotected wildlife corridor at risk from poachers, miners and loggers. He promptly decided the 160-hectare valley would be the site of his next venture, and enlisted the help of key organisations such as the Wildlife Alliance, Fauna & Flora International, the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Cambodian government, to create a conservation plan for the area.

Bensley has long practised low-impact design – positioning buildings between existing trees rather than cutting them down, and allowing for natural drainage patterns – and Shinta Mani Wild is no exception. The luxurious tents are cleverly ensconced within the embrace of the forest, allowing the landscape to be the star of the show.

The setting, ranged along a fast-flowing river, is spectacular; but then, so are the tents themselves. Each one measures 100 square metres and is packed with eye-catching furnishings, from carved wooden beds and overstuffed armchairs to colourful fabrics and antique pieces including vintage telephones. Bensley derived his design inspiration from an event that never took place. "Imagine King Sihanouk has invited Jackie Onassis to explore the wilds of Cambodia in the early 1960s," says Bensley. "What would that experience have been like?"

It is hard to imagine Jackie O ziplining her way into camp, as guests

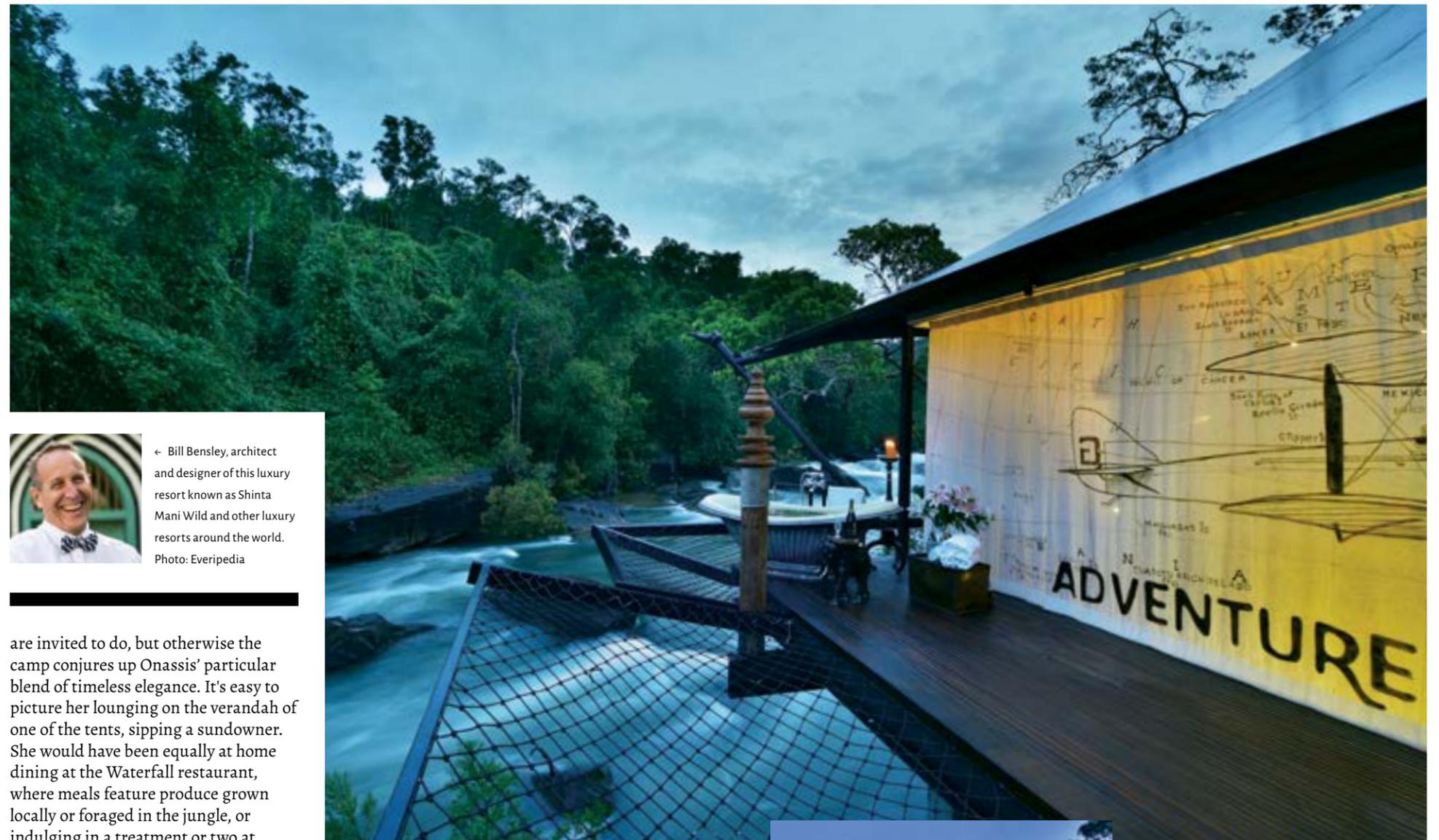


← Bill Bensley, architect and designer of this luxury resort known as Shinta Mani Wild and other luxury resorts around the world. Photo: Everipedia

are invited to do, but otherwise the camp conjures up Onassis' particular blend of timeless elegance. It's easy to picture her lounging on the verandah of one of the tents, sipping a sundowner. She would have been equally at home dining at the Waterfall restaurant, where meals feature produce grown locally or foraged in the jungle, or indulging in a treatment or two at the Boulders Spa, which uses local chemical-free brand Khmer Tonics.

The main point of a stay at Shinta Mani Wild, however, is to explore the area. Meander through the Srae Ambel estuary in one of the luxury expedition boats, designed by Bensley himself; each one comes equipped with kayaks, so guests can go exploring down narrow tributaries.

Alternatively, you can head out on foot. Join rangers on anti-poaching patrols, or take a hike with one of the lodge's naturalists. They have developed a series of trails that highlight the many natural treasures of this complex eco-system. From mighty elephant footprints to tiny orchids peeping out among the greenery, your guides will reveal a world of natural wonders. ●



Shinta Mani Wild is as much a conservation project as it is a luxury retreat and is near some of Cambodia's most important national parks. All inclusive rates from US\$1,900.

See shintamani.com

