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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023 MALAYSIA



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OUTERWEAR,
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RM8.00



ESCAPE

My Cambodian ADVENTURE

From the chaos of a circus to the calm of the jungle, travel writer Crystal Woo opens up her travel journal as she chronicles her time in Cambodia.

BY CRYSTAL WOO EDITED BY ABDUL AZIZ DRAIM



Adventure awaits at Shinta Mani Angkor



Siem Reap, Cambodia

French art teacher following the cruel carnage of Khmer Rouge. They formed a school and pledged to shine light on to local arts, and to support underprivileged youth; all Phare performers are proud school alumni. Some say, old wounds cast long shadows, perhaps Phare performers found a way to heal better together, transmuting growing pains into art.

Under the Big Top, audiences are given a hand fan and I get the best seat in the house, right in the middle. Tonight's show, *Khmer Metal*, is set in a Phnom Penh bar and tells the story of love, desire, money, and a glimpse into the trials of modern-day Cambodians, expressed through various gravity-defying stunts, comedy, music and dance. An original masterful composition, the music is at times haunting, mixed with traditional Khmer rhythm and beats, adding layers to the overall experience. Switching from instrument to instrument—drums, electric guitar to xylophone—these talented musicians showcased their skill with great passion. This is indeed a different kind of circus, purposeful and visceral. (Ticket sales help to fund the school). pharecircus.org.

SATURDAY 7:00AM

A beautiful new day to venture out to the outskirts of town. A small village with big stories, I learn about the existing struggles of villagers in breaking the shackles of poverty and how Shinta Mani Foundation is

helping them to secure a better life. A young girl gets to go to school and runs a grocery stall in her village (a Netflix documentary waiting to be made). Here, there is a school, access to clean water and new shelters, the fundamentals that were missing for far too long. Meaningful and more than skin deep, this visit brings me down-to-earth, getting to know the people, giving back to the communities in small ways. I root for them. Shinta Mani means good hearts in Sanskrit, and at the risk of sounding cheesy, this heart is open. A portion of the nightly room rates from Shinta Mani Hotels keeps Shinta Mani Foundation alive and going further in improving the lives of the Khmer people. [Find out more at shintamanifoundation.org](http://shintamanifoundation.org).

2:00PM

Flying domestically from Siem Reap, I disembark at Sihanoukville International Airport, on my way to *Shinta Mani Wild*, the unnamed road. Thank my lucky stars that the brand-new expressway just started its operations days ago, bending the travel time to close to two hours and making the car journey smooth and pleasant.

4:00PM

Exiting the highway, the size of the roads I'm travelling on offer tale-tell signs that the elusive Shinta Mani Wild is near. Residing in the southern border of the Cardamon National Rainforest, Shinta Mani Wild

FRIDAY 3:30PM

The flight to Siem Reap, Cambodia from Kuala Lumpur is a breeze. Just a little over two hours and I am with the Khmer people. Siem Reap International Airport is modest in size yet unmistakably modern—I arrive without a hitch. Everyone likely knows Siem Reap as the seat of the legendary Angkor Wat (early 12th century), the largest religious monument in the world that continues to capture the imagination of many. This trip, however, is to discover Siem Reap's other sides. At the arrival hall, Chivoan (G1) from Bensley's Pool Villa is here for the pick-up right on time. Only a short drive away from the airport, and in the laid-back neighbourhood of colonial shophouses bearing French influences, Bensley's Pool Villas, Shinta Mani Angkor is ideal for a carefree getaway.

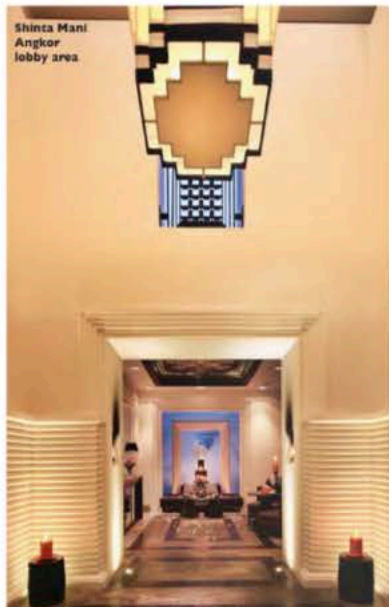
4:05PM

After a fast check-in, walking into a quiet corner the black door of Bensley's Pool Villa reveals itself. Two floors connected by a flight of stairs as pretty as a picture, and with one's own plunge pool to boot, the villa opens up to an interesting layout, with semi-outdoor walkways from the front yard to the shower at the back offering surprises at every turn. From the ancient Khmer art details of King Jayavarman's robes

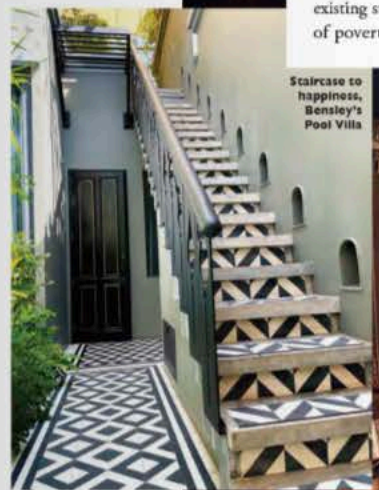
to the striking black and white floor tiles, the design is very fetching; instead of occupying maximum horizontal space, Bensley's Villa plays more with vertical height, bringing to life a certain kind of swag. In the upper floor, soft yellow flowers dangle like chandeliers, complete with an inviting daybed and a bar counter to host friends. In the bedroom downstairs, a king-sized bed shares space with a tropical garden. Plus, the espresso machine and I become best friends overnight. But as amazing as the villa is, I need to get going. The circus is in town.

6:00PM

At the tailend of Sok San Road, after rows of pubs and bars with neon lights, I turn up at the Big Top. Home to Phare, the Cambodian Circus, this location is easy to find and only a short tuk tuk away from Bensley's Villa. The show starts at 8pm but the crowd is here early for the one dollar beer and local street food. Backstage, Phare performers are getting ready. Trained in the art of acrobatics, aerial acts, body contortion, tightrope walking, music and dance, more than your usual circus folks, Phare (pronounced as 'far') is French for 'lighthouse', and Phare, the Cambodian Circus is an extension of what began in 1994 between nine Cambodian art students and their



Shinta Mani Angkor lobby area



Staircase to happiness, Bensley's Pool Villa



Phare, the Cambodian Circus

IMAGES: CRYSTAL WOO, SHINTA MANI ANGKOR & SETHI NALES

ESCAPE

observes 15 low-impact tents gently placed in a massive 865 acres river valley. (Imagine the size of Central Park, more or less).

Entering deeper into Cardamon National Forest, the largest in Cambodia and the second largest virgin rainforest in Southeast Asia, I'm eager to check-in but felt a little daunted. Shinta Mani Wild has abandoned conventional desk formalities, and guests simply check-in via a 400-metre zip line, which just happens to be the longest in Cambodia.

When the driver pulls to a stop, I meet Masin, my Alfred Pennyworth, for the first time. Still in a daze, Masin leads me to the Eastern Tower with its many steps. On our way up, the high view takes my breath away and foregoing better judgement, I look down for a nano second and vertigo slips in...but giving up is not an option. So 102 steps later, we reach the top, smiling. Wasting no time, Masin briefs me on safety as he straps me into the zip line harness. "Ready...go!" His calm words echo away from me as I zip down nervously. Flying across tree tops, gushing rivers and waterfalls, fear and excitement take hold, but the experience? Priceless. Finally touching down at the **Landing Zone Bar**, a refreshing tequila drink is served to calm the nerves. With that, I'm officially checked-in.

6:30PM

It takes a little bit of walking to get to my tent but I don't mind. Along the narrow gravel path, wild butterflies swoop in as if welcoming my presence, as do some squirrels. I wonder if Absolem is nearby. Shy gibbons are known to hang around this part of the jungle, not to mention a long list of endangered animals that count on the Cardamon National Rainforest for survival, among them the Sunda Pangolins, Clouded Leopards and Sun Bears. It's as if David Attenborough's voice is narrating in my head.

My Wild tent is a sight for sore eyes. A Goliath-size wooden table perfect for writing (or daydreaming) sits on a deluxe front porch. With vintage fans, books and manuscripts, comfy seatings with bright whimsical art prints, and a well-stocked beast of a fridge, everything here encourages one to stay outside to enjoy the river view, open-air and Cardamon jungle charms.

Turning the key, I enter my perched nest, which is a hybrid cabin-tent made from hardwood and high quality canvas. There's a leatherbound headboard in vintage tobacco on the king-sized bed, a rotary dial phone, a long double-vanity with charming chrome details and a petite reading area that looks out to the jungle. The sun is about to set and there's nothing more inviting than rays of sunlight that bathe the room in a golden glow. I am in for a most comfortable slumber tonight.



Turmeric Chicken Rice



Shinta Mani Wild

SUNDAY 7:30AM

After a big breakfast (Turmeric Chicken Rice), I'm off into the wild. Early morning hiking in the Cardamon National Rainforest is sparking the explorer in me, trekking on different jungle floors, dodging tree branches and drinking rainwater from wild pitcher plants, stopping only to listen to the hoots and howls of gibbons. Then out of nowhere, a pristine lake perfect for swimming. With clear waters and tiny fishes dancing around my feet, swimming in the wild is a most refreshing experience. Nature truly is the best playground, and to think only three percent of primary forest remains in Cambodia. Before we lose even more, there is no time than the present to play our part. Shinta Mani Wild and Wildlife Alliance are leading the way by taking care not to cause harm to Cardamon National Rainforest, preserving wildlife, and putting a stop to illegal logging, mining and poaching. To date, over 7,000 illegal snares have been removed, and close to 200 illegal logging camps have ceased operations.

Learn more at wild.shintamani.com/conservation/

2:00PM

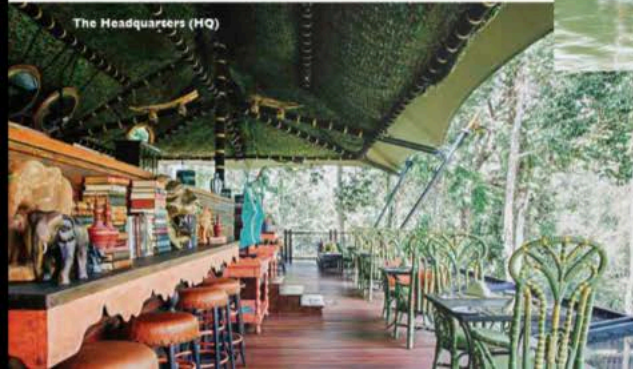
Next on the agenda is a boating expedition at the backwaters of **Upper Srey Ambel Estuary**. Channeling Agatha Christie's S.S. Karnak on the Nile (albeit a smaller version, sans murder), this expedition boat has solar panels and a sundeck to laze or snooze on after birdwatching. Rarely do I get to see eagles and white-throated kingfishers in their natural habitat, 'tis a good time for some tisane or cold beer and snacks.

Come dusk, my feet is back on the ground as I'm en route to the next destination, by way of a 4WD. The sky is changing colour and my final night at Shinta Mani Wild is spent at the top of a hill. Bouyed by misty mountains all-around, wine, margaritas, and warm conversations, I can't take my eyes off the big bonfire burning through the night. Exchanging stories with eclectic travellers from Germany, South Africa, and Tibet, I am thankful for the here and now. □

Backwater Boating at Shinta Mani Wild



The Headquarters (HQ)



BACK AT HQ

Dining at the Headquarters (HQ) means having the glorious waterfalls as your company. A long terrace with an unbeatable view, HQ thrives on spontaneity—it will cook up just about anything for the guests. Serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner no matter rain or shine, it is connected to the Landing Zone Bar, but also goes wall-less right by the rivers and waterfalls, complete with intimate table seatings for romantic moments. Try the signature broth with red ants, one of the many local edibles sourced directly from the Cardamon Rainforest, the peripheral benefits of having nature as your ally.