

Wild Indulgence

A remarkable new Cambodian camp pushes the frontiers of luxury with a thrilling zip-line arrival, decadent tented accommodation, fabulous food, adventurous outdoor activities and indulgent spa treatments.

WORDS BY UTE JUNKER

Safety helmets aren't generally part of the dress code at five-star lodges. Then again, at most five-star lodges, guests don't swoop through the air to enter the property. At Shinta Mani Wild, however, the airborne arrival – courtesy of a 380-metre zip-line stretched high above the jungle canopy – is the recommended way to make an entrance.

All but the most adventurous of souls will feel a faint flutter as they stand on the zip-line's launch platform, which stands as high as a five-storey building. The treetops look a long way down from up here. My harness is securely strapped, my helmet is firmly fastened on, and my personal butler has just demonstrated how it's done, sailing through the air ahead of me. Even so, stepping out into thin air does require a certain amount of faith. Gritting my teeth, I manage to step off the platform – and, within seconds, I am laughing away as I speed through the air, the landing platform coming ever closer.

After that thrilling ride, the second, shorter zip-line, which floats above a waterfall and conveniently deposits you right in the lodge's bar, seems like a doddle. To toast my courage, another staffer is waiting with a freshly-made mojito – my favourite cocktail. My personal butler, Boren, is delighted at my enthusiasm.

"Shall we do it again tomorrow?" he asks me.

"Sure!" I reply.

There is one downside to the zip-line entry, and it has nothing at all to do with the fear factor. (Guests can arrive by car, if they prefer.) An arrival that is this memorable lifts the

expectations of guests about the rest of their stay, which puts pressure on the staff to maintain the standard. Fortunately, Shinta Mani Wild delivers. This brand-new property, hidden deep in the Cambodian jungle, is an experience unlike anything else you will find in Asia.

Shinta Mani Wild sells itself as a tented camp, but tent is really an inadequate description of these lodgings. Sure, some of the walls are made of canvas, but with furnishings including a handcrafted bed intricately decorated with metalwork, not to mention an ensuite bathroom, this is nothing like the tents you remember from childhood holidays.

And we haven't even got to the tent's best feature yet – its expansive deck. Overlooking the river and completely private, the deck comes equipped with a long sofa, a dining table and chairs, a fully-stocked, and complimentary, mini-bar (try the locally-distilled Seekers Mekong Dry Gin). The most enticing feature of all is the roll-lipped tub, in which you can literally soak up the view.

Shinta Mani Wild is the brainchild of architect, interior designer and landscaper Bill Bensley, who has created some of the most luxurious resorts in Asia for the likes of the Four Seasons, InterContinental and Rosewood. Shinta Mani Wild is the second property in his eponymous Bensley Collection; the first, Shinta Mani Angkor – Bensley Collection, is in Siem Reap, close to Angkor Wat.

Bensley brings his design flair to an experience that is equal parts total indulgence and rugged adventuring. There is a decided vintage vibe to the property, from the aged leather armchairs in the bar to the antique

From left to right: Each tent overlooks the river; Vintage pieces add atmosphere to the interiors; A soak with a view is a great way to end the day; Fill decanters with your choice of spirits from the free-of-charge mini bar; Each meal is a discovery; The sprawling private deck is a wonderful spot to relax; Sunbeds near the restaurant are the perfect place to while away the time; Guides will take you hunting for butterflies or orchids; Vintage finds are scattered throughout the resort.

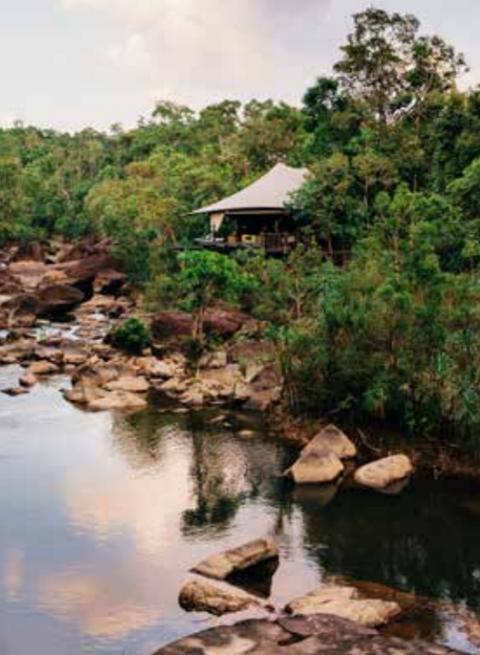
suitcases decorating your tent, mixed with colourful prints. Bensley says that his design inspiration came from the idea of Jackie Onassis going on safari with King Sihanouk in the 1960s. And while there are plenty of opportunities to let yourself be spoiled – the all-inclusive rate allows guests to enjoy unlimited treatments in the spa, nestled among huge boulders – Shinta Mani Wild is all about exploring the great outdoors.

The camp is set in the midst of one of Asia's last great wildernesses, a lattice of jungle and waterways in the shadow of the Cardamom Mountains, where deer, wild pigs and even the endangered dhole – a species of wild dog – roam. One of the key reasons for founding the camp was to help protect this area, which is under threat from both poachers and loggers. The camp helps to fund anti-poaching patrols, and when I learn that guests can accompany one of the patrols, I quickly volunteer to head out.

I'm imagining this will involve spending a fun morning exploring the jungle, but as soon as the rangers show up, I realise this is serious business. So serious, in fact, that one of them is brandishing a semi-automatic machine gun. The threat that poachers pose is very real, which is why the patrols always consist of at least two members. We then climb onto our motorbikes – I am riding pillion behind my butler – and head out, first driving along red dirt roads, then through grasslands where the growth reaches our thighs, and finally onto a network of jungle trails.

As we ride, the rangers are looking out for wheel tracks, which indicate people have passed through here. Eventually, they spot some, and we

The camp helps fund anti-poaching patrols – and guests can go with them.





pull over to explore on foot. I find it hard to discern anything standing in the dappled shadows that the tall hardwood trees cast on the leaf litter, but the rangers' eyes are sharper than mine. They fish a discarded knife from the dead leaves and we walk a little further, accompanied by the hooting of distant gibbons, until they stop again. This time, they've found a snare.

Fortunately, it is an old snare, one that has been destroyed by a previous patrol. A ranger shows me the trigger and the wire loop that holds it in place, then he demonstrates how an animal caught in the snare will end up dangling in the air.

He also demonstrates how the poachers lay snares in a long row, arranging fallen branches and rocks as obstacles so that any wildlife passing through will have to walk right over the snare. I ask what the poachers catch. Boren, my butler, acting as interpreter, explains that wild pigs and snakes often get caught – and that one of our guides once got caught himself, but was able to cut himself down.

Our patrol is successful in the sense that we don't find any live snares, which is a very good sign. The rangers say that when they started,

they would often find two to three snares a week, but these days they are rare. Clearly, the patrols are working.

There are plenty of other ways for guests to explore the forest, with everything from mountain biking to day-long hikes. Looking for something less strenuous, I join one of the staff, the erudite Det, on an orchid hunt.

Since joining Shinta Mani Wild, Det has developed a passion for this elusive plant, and has tracked down no fewer than 70 species in the immediate area, including one that had not previously been seen in Cambodia. He has also discovered a number of wild vanilla species. Like the rangers, he proves to have an incredibly perceptive eye, spotting tiny blooms whether they are high up on a tree trunk or nestled close to the ground on a fallen log and sheltered by a screen of taller plants.

The area's waterways also offer plenty of opportunity for exploration. One morning Boren and I set out in kayaks along a narrow arm of the river. The water level is low, and we occasionally get marooned on an unexpected sandbank – always provoking fits of laughter – but the highlight is the spectacular birdlife

we see, from racket-tailed drongos and orange-headed thrushes to elegant egrets and one mighty hawk.

Another waterborne adventure is to be unveiled. The first of the camp's pontoon boats has just been completed – decked out with day beds, it will be available for cruises on the area's tranquil estuarine waters. If that still sounds too strenuous, book a Zen fly-fishing session with the camp's Mongolian fishing guide, or enjoy a treatment in the spa, where massages and facials are done with chemical-free products by Khmer Tonics.

End the day with refreshing cocktails in the bar – where signature drinks include a more-ish mix of Seekers Mekong Dry Gin, lime and holy basil – before heading to the restaurant for a well-earned dinner. There are no menus at Shinta Mani Wild. Instead, the chefs will come and chat with you about what's being served up that day. Bright, fresh flavours predominate, with dishes such as roast barley salad with seared tuna or fish in traditional three-pepper sauce. Local plants, such as krasang and moringa, add unusual flavours to some of the dishes. And if you are intrigued by these new tastes, you are welcome to join the chefs on a foraging expedition in the forest.

One tip: tempting as it is, don't overindulge at dinner. You will want to show up hungry for breakfast. This is a meal that unfolds over several courses, with pastry baskets and fruit plates, followed by an ever-changing selection of hot dishes. There are dishes that showcase local flavours, such as the Kep crab cakes, and inventive spins on old favourites, such as a ham, cheese and egg bread pudding. For those who want to go with the local vibe, there are also Asian options, such as khao tom, rice porridge with ground chicken and fermented soy beans. 

Clockwise from left to right: The bedstead is a feature in every tent; Waterfalls provide a soothing backdrop to drinks at the bar; Take a seat after a hard day's adventuring; Mac heads up the team of butlers.

FACT FILE

An entry e-visa can be obtained at evisa.gov.kh

GETTING THERE

Road transfers from Sihanoukville or Phnom Penh take two to three hours and are included in the room rate.

STAYING THERE

Packages are inclusive of food and beverages, private guided activities and excursions, unlimited spa treatments and a personal butler. A minimum three-night stay is required and guests aged 13 and over are welcome.



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