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TAKING CONTROL

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look back in *languor*

If a sanctuary of uncompromising luxury sounds just like you, this exquisite island resort off the coast of Cambodia won't disappoint. By Pauline Webber.

Two tiny islands snuggle side by side in the green waters of the Koh Rong Archipelago, off the Cambodian coast. Khmers call these islands Song Saa, “the lovers”, a name adopted by the five-star luxury resort which now occupies them.

Night falls during the 40-minute trip from Sihanoukville in Song Saa's motor launch, and my first sight of the twin islands is a spectacle of flickering orange-red candlelight amid the trees.

It's on the boat that I get my first taste of Song Saa service. I opt to sit out on deck. Instantly one of two Khmer staff on boat duty wipes the sea spray from my seat and lays out a warm, dry towel for me. The other keeps me company during the crossing so that by the time I arrive I feel I have already made two friends.

The resort has 27 villas – a mix of over-water, ocean-view and jungle. My jungle villa is at the topmost point of the island, with a stunning view across the sea to the rainforest-clad hills of Koh Rong, the biggest of the region's 61 islands.

Song Saa is the love child of Rory and Melita Hunter, the realisation of their dream to build a “sustainable sanctuary of uncompromising luxury” on this unspoilt coast (think Thailand, 30 years ago).

My villa is spacious, with a four-poster bed draped with white cotton and a glass-walled bathtub with a view of jungly vegetation. A big wooden deck leads to my personal infinity-edge pool and vast day bed shaded by a roof of plaited tree branches. The theme is rustic chic – wood, stone and aged metal – with quirky details such as the double sinks mounted

on thick tree trunks and the bar fridge built into an old leather travelling trunk. It's the work of someone with creative flair so it's no surprise to discover that Melita is an artist and interior designer.

“Sanctuary” is a word used a lot here. The idea is to give guests the ultimate luxury escape experience with the minimum of fuss and bother. “Relaxation” is the other Song Saa keyword and the temptation to just lie around in my villa is almost overwhelming.

I suspect this is what many guests do, because other than at breakfast I seldom see a soul. A guest soul that is – the charming Khmer staff are always on hand to meet your smallest want.

I exert myself for sunrise yoga and a spot of kayaking along waterways in the mangrove forest. I even manage a few

sessions at the gym, housed in a cute little bungalow with floor-to-ceiling windows through which I can watch crabs the size of saucers battling the incoming tide.

Picnics at one of the beautiful beaches on Koh Rong, reached by longboat, are popular, as are diving excursions (the Hunters have helped establish a marine reserve in the archipelago), but you can retreat to the main pool and a refreshing tropical cocktail any time.

Vista, the resort's premier restaurant and bar, is built over water and reached by a long wooden walkway. At breakfast, I watch the fishing boats returning to their village on Koh Rong with the night's catch, their engines chugging like slow helicopter rotors.

Melita Hunter's design flair shows here too. My tropical fruit comes on a bed of



First resort:
(clockwise from
main photograph)
ocean-view villas
at Song Saa resort;
a day bed at Song
Saa; a romantic
dinner on the
beach; a spa bath
overlooking the
ocean; Buddhist
monks; sunset at
Angkor Wat.



A BIG DECK LEADS TO MY PERSONAL INFINITY-EDGE POOL AND VAST DAY BED SHADED BY PLAITED TREE BRANCHES.

ice-cold stones nestling in a long wooden box. My toast comes in another box with tiny pots of jam and butter fitted into the lid. A lunchtime snack is delivered to my room in a box of bark sheets woven together with palm frond.

Driftwood Bar offers a more informal setting popular with families, and there's an in-villa menu as well. At night, tables are set up on the beach for extra-romantic dining. Food is fresh and local, which

suits the Hunters' commitment to sustainability and the community. At Vista I enjoy some excellent dishes: the tender pork comes from pigs raised nearby, the fish from those returning fishermen, and vegetables are grown for the resort on Koh Rong.

The Hunters have established a charitable foundation to support the local community and it's worth taking the tour over to Prek Svay to see how the resort and the village work hand in hand. One small feature I appreciate is that my villa is supplied each day with cool, filtered water in glass containers. No plastic bottles here.

The resort is primarily a "wellbeing experience", general manager Bradlie Goian tells me, committed to ensuring guests get all the quiet and relaxation they need. So I'm well rested, rejuvenated

and ready for action when I arrive at my second Cambodian destination, the Amansara Resort in Siem Reap. Luckily, I have no trouble keeping busy from dawn to dark because while this northern town is regarded as Phnom Penh's quiet cousin, it has a surprising amount to offer.

To do any kind of justice to the nearby temples of Angkor you need three days. By cleverly plotting times and routes to avoid the crowds, my Amansara-provided guide ensures I experience these magic places in solitude.

Two more days are needed to explore Siem Reap's markets, shops and galleries and to sample some of the excellent Khmer and international restaurants. Too soon I have to leave, but I vow I'll be back to delve deeper into the charms of Siem Reap, and of Cambodia. •

Trip tips

When to go

Between November and February the weather is cool and dry but it's also peak season. I found October less busy, with just the occasional rain shower and not too hot.

Where to stay

Song Saa Private Island Resort: songsaa.com.

Amansara, Siem Reap: aman.com/amansara.

Useful information

At Song Saa, laundry, food, alcohol, Wi-Fi, phone calls and many water activities are included in the room rate. Excursions, motor sports and spa treatments cost extra.

More tourismcambodia.com.