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Sustainable Cambodia

Song Saa, the soulful private island sanctuary on the Koh Rong archipelago, takes “luxury that treads lightly” to heart

By Rona Berg



It sounds like a fairy tale, and in a way, it is.

A young Australian couple, Rory and Melita Hunter, were living in Phnom Penh, where he ran an ad agency. She was an organic stylist and traveled the world to create things like suspended rain-forest canopies for fashion shows. They had fallen in love with Cambodia, and wanted to start a business there together.

One day, Rory and Melita heard about a remote string of islands that a fisherman had told them were so beautiful, they had to see it for themselves. So they rented a boat and went sailing around the Koh Rong archipelago. “The beaches were completely free of footprints, there were no foreigners,” says Melita. “It was the most amazing two weeks of our lives.”

That could have been enough, but then something really strange and wonderful happened. A village elder asked if they’d like to buy two of his islands, and he made them an offer they could not refuse. They said yes. And that’s how the award-winning Song Saa, a gorgeous organic and sustainable private island sanctuary, was born.

At first, Rory and Melita had no idea what to do. But whatever they did, they wanted to figure out how to make it sustainable, and that included bringing back the dying reefs and replenishing the dwindling fish stocks that were collapsing around the islands. “As we were picking rubbish off the beach, we said, ‘Why don’t we create a very small protected reef with the support of the locals, and work with them to help police it?’,” says Melita.

So they set to work on a two-year clean-up project, employing local people from surrounding communities to help. “We started with the village chief,” says Melita. “We worked with villagers who set up workshops and gave out flyers. When the big fishing boats came around—mostly from Thailand and Vietnam—the villagers from Prek Svay (Mango Village) went out to meet them with flyers. In 18 months, we saw the fish stocks replenish.”

Rory and Melita then created the Song Saa Foundation, a local environmental NGO based in Phnom Penh, with three full-time



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONG SAA

staffers. The villagers identified what was needed. Song Saa taught them to compost, so their sandy soil could become fertile enough to grow vegetables like organic squash, eggplant, lemongrass, taro and peppers. The Foundation supports a school in Prek Svay, and set up a waste management system in the village. They worked with International Medical Relief, which visits surrounding villages annually, to provide nutritional supplements, dental care and women's health, supplemented by the Boat of Hope, a monthly health-care follow up.

Song Saa Foundation is developing a turtle conservation program, to protect endangered green and hawksbill sea turtles and working on mangrove and rainforest restoration. The Cambodian government is now setting up its first protected area around Song Saa. "Tourism can be a force for good if it is developed sustainably and in collaboration with the community," says Melita.

Everything was moving along beautifully when Melita was struck with endometrial cancer and had to go back to Australia for treatment. But she kept on working on the floor plan and designing the property, where thatched-roof villas with recycled wood floors and sandstone walls now rise out of the tranquil blue waters on stilts.

Much of the one-of-a-kind furniture in the breath-taking villas (each with its own private pool) is made from piles of driftwood she collected after it stormed. The fallen branches from a nearby mangrove forest, where guests can

kayak with the marine biologist on staff, were gathered and used to build a roof for the outdoor bar, with no plastic water bottles or straws; bamboo is used instead.

Now guests can spend the day lolling on white sugar-sand beaches staring at calm, crystal-clear waters, and watch the fish jump while enjoying a Khmer-style picnic. At night, the moon and stars are so bright, it's perfect for an underwater scuba meditation where you can kick up the water to see sparkly bioluminescence. A romantic torch-lit dinner can be savored on the beach, in the chef's garden, in a villa overlooking the infinity pool, or in the shallow end of the pool itself. And, you can experience one of the best spa treatments of your life—developed with the Ila brand—in the outdoor spa cabana.

Meanwhile, at Song Saa, "The birds started coming back, the fish are jumping, it's healthy and happy—and we didn't cut down a single tree," says Melita. "It just evolved, it was very organic." And, as in the fairytale, everyone lives happily ever after. songsaa.com

