

# asiaSpa



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## THE NATURE ISSUE

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NUT MILKS

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# Cambodia's Sweethearts

A luxurious, remote wellness haven that treads lightly on the earth, Song Saa Private Island takes romance to the next level Writer Vivienne Tang

## InnerRetreat

**T** rue to its name – Song Saa in Khmer means ‘sweethearts’ (a local nickname for its two islets, Koh Ouen and Koh Bong) – the eco-friendly resort in the Koh Rong archipelago offers its guests romantic once-in-a-lifetime holidays as well as three five- to seven-night all-immersive wellness retreats. Of course, I’m overjoyed the minute I find out that my plans to visit this gem are finally coming together, as I’ve been mesmerised by photos of this unique private island resort ever since it opened.

What started as a passion project by

Australian couple, Melita and Rory Hunter (who had been living in Phnom Penh for a number of years, stumbled across Song Saa by chance and then slowly started to develop it as a hotel), has now turned into a full-fledged luxury resort with numerous awards and accolades, but one that treads lightly on this earth and takes environmental concerns very seriously without them being a simple marketing plot.

Integrity and soul stand at the forefront of everything the two conjure up, which makes one’s stay an unforgettable treat

PREVIOUS PAGE: Koh Ouen and Koh Bong, the two islands that comprise Song Saa Private Island. THIS PAGE: Villas here boast breathtaking sea views; the bedroom features sand stone walls and a king-sized four-poster bed. OPPOSITE PAGE: While away the day in a day bed



### Integrity and soul stand at the forefront of everything the two conjure up, which makes one’s stay an unforgettable treat

that is embellished with many little heart-warming details that you’ll treasure forever in your memory.

Getting there is no easy task though. It’s fairly remote by anyone’s standards, but I guess, this is exactly its charm. A three-and-a-half-hour private car ride from Phnom Penh, followed by a 40-minute speedboat transfer from the port of Sihanoukville later (or a helicopter ride from Phnom Penh), you reach the private island, and you’re immediately enchanted by this untouched

paradise, realising that your long journey was well worth it.

#### DAY 1

My partner and I arrive around noon, and we quickly get whisked away to our Ocean View Villa, which is tastefully adorned with Moroccan lanterns and Cambodian wall art and sculptures, featuring sand stone walls, a king-sized four-poster bed and a fully stocked fridge (all food and drinks are included) camouflaged as a beautiful travel trunk. The spacious bathroom features a deep sunken bathtub and two indoor showers, and the cosy and very private verandah comes with a pool as well as outdoor showers.

Once settled in, we’re treated to a welcome foot ritual, followed by a wellness consultation to confirm my customised itinerary (a mix between the three wellness programmes: Refresh, Rejuvenate and Revive) in the very comfort of our own villa.



## InnerRetreat

It's fabulous not having to walk anywhere and simply being able to ease into my five-day retreat, especially after the long journey. The masseuses revitalise and soothe our tired feet and calves, and in no time we're in tune with the laid-back island vibe.

After splashing around in the pool and taking a cold al fresco shower to cool ourselves down, we decide to explore the island and stroll past the dive centre and the main pool over to the open-air restaurant to grab a bite. Just off the island's shoreline and surrounded by the sea, the serenity-inducing atmosphere here will definitely calm down

energy scrub, seaweed wrap and Kundalini massage send me into a state of complete relaxation, and I might have even passed out throughout half of the session, entirely cocooned and nurtured in this beautiful sanctuary. At the end of my treatment I get to pick my daily scroll with an inspiring quote, which I ponder on the way back.

I'm wiped out after my treatment and saunter back down to my villa. I feel like skipping dinner, but decide against my desire to hibernate for the rest of the evening, and we head to the restaurant for a light dinner to enjoy the gentle sea breeze

THIS PAGE: The bridge that connects the two islands. OPPOSITE PAGE: Enjoy al fresco spa treatments



any remaining stressed-out nerves if the fully equipped villa, which caters to all your needs, hasn't already done so.

In the afternoon I'm off to visit the spa aka The Song Saa Sanctuaries, which is nestled in the serenity of the rainforest at the very top of the island. I'm booked in for a two-hour-long Bio-Rhythms treatment (using British organic skincare brand ila) to help me deal with water retention and jetlag, balancing the nervous system and restoring my very own body clock again. The ionizing

while we dine on local specialties.

We return to our room, and to our surprise, we find our bathtub adorned with candles and filled with warm water and beautiful petals. We're in absolute awe and decide, despite our tiredness and lack of energy, that we can't let the beautiful bath ritual go to waste, and let the warm scented water soothe our tired limbs.

### DAY 2

It's an early start today, and I'm off to enjoy

a yoga sunrise class at the very end of the footbridge on the side of Koh Bong. I'm the only student today and devour this rare opportunity of having the teacher all to myself. It feels good to stretch, especially after yesterday's rigorous pampering treats. My muscles feel a lot more limber and I ease into every single asana and sense the newly gained flexibility and expansion within my body.

The sun is up and shining bright by the end of our session and it's time to get



some food in my belly. My partner has just returned from the gym (which by the way boasts gorgeous ocean vistas), and so we decide to make time for a quick shower and then breakfast.

Breakfast here can be as healthy or as indulgent as you make it, with the chef catering to any dietary requirements and using ingredients sourced from Song Saa's own garden or local farms. My other half is on a self-imposed detox, so even if I decide to give in to a week of complete indulgence, I'm on my own, which is hardly any fun, so I decide to join his strict health craze and opt for something veggie and wholesome.

We're off to learn more about The Song Saa Foundation and its sustainability efforts and pay the local village on neighbouring Koh Rong island a little visit. We're introduced to Khmer agriculture and even get an insight into daily life of a Cambodian community, its religious rituals, as well as its schooling system (Song Saa also encourages guests to 'pack for a purpose' and bring

school supplies, such as pencils, teaching aids and other resources with them). At the foundation's Discovery Centre we get to explore the solid waste management setup that was launched in 2010 and continues to transform the lives of the people on the island. The foundation is also heavily involved in protecting the region's marine life and dedicates itself to coral rehabilitation and increasing fish stock. The transformational success stories don't stop there though, The Song Saa Foundation is also heavily invested in developing and expanding their existing efforts while introducing new and exciting initiatives, including the 'Boat of Hope', which will see an old Cambodian fishing boat transformed into the region's first floating education and sustainability centre, as well as reforestation projects and the publication of a book dedicated to the people, environment and history of the Koh Rong archipelago. It's an eye-opening morning and perhaps a bit of a reality check, as you start to realise what

lies outside your blissful and perfect bubble that you experience at the resort. But it is inspiring to see how Song Saa works in unison with the local villagers and how your stay can actually enrich the lives of others. From now until October, Song Saa will even donate three guest stays per month to the foundation if they quote 'Journeys of Change' when booking a minimum of four nights. Guests can then choose if they want to be hands-on participants in the ongoing environmental and community activities or be silent donors, simply basking in the property's beauty, knowing that by just being there they are contributing to its sustainable future.

Once back at the property, we enjoy some downtime by the pool, and in the afternoon I'm booked in for a Metta Massage in the overwater open-air sala located at the end of the main island. From the outside it looks like a little run-down shack you'd come across in the forest, but as soon as you enter the changing room, you're enchanted



We celebrate and revel in this romantic experience for a little longer over drinks and nibbles, cosied up on a sofa while taking in the spectacular sunset



THIS PAGE: Explore the turquoise waters surrounding the islands by boat; romantic sunset at Vista Bar and Restaurant. OPPOSITE PAGE: Song Saa is famous for its customised romantic experiences

with the lovely furnishings and accessories all made from reused wood and other natural materials. I'm especially in love with the handmade shell curtain that partitions off the toilet from the rest of the changing room, and I can't even begin to tell you about the breathtaking view from the basin as you look out to Koh Bong island. This is taking the ritual of washing one's hands to a completely new level and has definitely just topped my list. Completely spellbound and changed into a freshly pressed bathrobe, I stroll over to the sala next door where a single massage table greets me, with its sheet gently swaying in the wind. My therapist starts kneading away any knots and remaining tightness, and entirely enthralled by the soothing sound of waves crashing on the shore, I'm quickly lulled into a beautiful sleep, only to awaken from my reverie at the very end of the treatment. Purified, aligned and well rested I head back to the villa, where I soak up some more sun by the pool.

In the evening (when it's already dark), I'm scheduled to have an underwater meditation, which sounds exciting, mysterious, calming and terrifying all in one, but the yoga and Pilates teacher

assures me that I'm in safe hands and that several people have had reservations about this unique meditation but have eventually really enjoyed the experience of seeing the phosphorescence in the water and being cocooned by the ocean (some guests have been so soothed by it, they've even fallen into a little slumber). So I decide to give it a shot, even though I still feel a bit

queasy about breathing from an oxygen tank underwater at night ever since I've had a diving accident more than ten years ago. With mixed feelings, I head down to the beach as soon as it starts to get dark, and surrounded by candles we start with a simple meditation, preparing me with easy breathing techniques for what is yet to come. I then slowly wade into the water and get down on my knees on a shallow seabed and put on my mask and tank. My teacher tells me to relax, lay back and enjoy the moment, but I can't help but think that I'm about to drown as soon as I let go and give in to relaxation. I lie on my back, look up at the beautiful starry night and wait until gravity pulls me under water, but as soon as my mouthpiece is below the surface I jump up and gasp for air. I repeat this a few times, until I eventually give up. Bummed out and a bit frustrated about not being able to quiet my mind and rise above my fears, I head back to my villa.

A private romantic dinner on the beach, surrounded by candles and fire torches, immediately lifts my mood again. We both dig into delicious fresh seafood dishes, while gazing into each other's eyes and digging our toes into the warm sand.

Back at the villa, we find a lovely gift



# InnerRetreat

of organic bamboo straws laid out on our pillow, and another beautiful well-being bath has been drawn for us, and we can't help but give in to being pampered and taken care of.

### DAY 3

I decide to skip the early morning yoga class and start my day with a Stand-up Paddleboard (SUP) Pilates lesson at the pool instead. Taking Pilates off the mat and onto the water can have tremendous benefits, as you're really toning your core by maintaining a steady balance. It's the

perfect morning for such a session. The sun is shining bright, and the breeze is cooling our heated bodies, yet also challenging our stability on the boards. It's definitely a fun way to work out while taking in the gorgeous seascapes of the shimmering sapphire ocean.

It's already 11:30am by the time I finish my SUP Pilates class, and we opt for a spot of brunch at the restaurant.

There's nothing scheduled in the afternoon, so we decide to explore the second island (of the two sweethearts), Koh Bong. The island is uninhabited and makes

the perfect romantic setting on sandstone rocks for a leisurely afternoon immersed in nature.

In the evening, we enjoy traditional Khmer cuisine by the fire at Driftwood restaurant, which normally serves brick-oven pizza and a tapas-style menu.

### DAY 4

Today, I'm off to explore neighbouring island, Koh Rong. Together with the conservation manager I kayak through the lush mangroves, followed by a short hike through the jungle, finishing our tour with a

dip in the turquoise ocean and an indulgent, delectable picnic on the stunning deserted beach of Koh Rong, where (I've been told) the French version of *Survivor* is filmed.

Back at the resort, we're offered to move villas and stay in one of the two two-bedroom overwater villas, which we happily accept. The villa, which comes with its very own plunge pool, kitchen and molito station, is (like all the other 26 villas) also built from sustainable materials, such as reclaimed boards from old fishing boats, handcrafted furniture from driftwood made by local artisans and



THIS PAGE: Practise yoga to the sound of the ocean; picnic on the beach on the neighbouring Koh Rong island. OPPOSITE PAGE: Leave the world behind as you take in the mesmerising sunset from your own villa

timber salvaged from around Cambodia, all creating a private oasis according to Melita's architectural vision, blending interior decor with panoramic vistas. The villa is extremely spacious, yet private and offers guests to turn inwards to dream, read and write or to simply laze poolside and stare at the sea.

I'm early for my spa treatment, and I

decide to while away the time and sip my welcome drink in the airy, rustic chic Song Saa Sanctuaries reception area, which is lined with beautifully crafted turquoise-painted recycled wooden panels. I'm scheduled for another luxurious treatment. The Karuna Kaya Massage is all about showing compassion to oneself, and its deep





THIS PAGE: Monk blessing ceremony with local Buddhist monks from the village. OPPOSITE PAGE: Laid-back island life at Song Saa

and rhythmic bodywork increases energy flow and allows the body muscles to soften and the body to ultimately realign itself. I feel relaxed again and the sore feeling from rowing earlier this morning has dissipated.

I head back to our new villa to find our daily scroll (which always evokes exciting memories of childhood treasure hunts) attached to our door handle, which introduces tonight's dinner venue. We're both pleased and extremely excited to read that tonight's least will take place in the Chef's Garden, which up to this point we didn't know existed. Mouth-watering dishes, such as wasabi crushed new potatoes, honey lavender duck breast and lemongrass panna cotta, to name a few, are all awaiting us in the enchanted, fairy tale-like tucked-away garden, decorated with lanterns hanging from trees, making it an utterly romantic experience.

With full bellies we stroll back to our villa where we find a little present of incense on our bed waiting for us, as well as our nightly bath ritual with milks and oils ready to pour and spoil ourselves. Now this we could really get used to!

#### DAY 5

I kick-start my last day of the retreat with a yoga class that gently stretches my tired limbs, followed by another brunch-style breakfast cum lunch with eggs benedict and our daily mango juice.

The holistic Rainforest Facial in the afternoon nicely completes my treatment programme, naturally supporting and encouraging my sun-kissed sensitive skin's regeneration with four raw ingredients from the Amazon rainforest. I leave with glowing skin and a smile on my face.

In the evening, my partner and I have a monk blessing with local Buddhist monks from the village. The ceremony takes place near the footbridge to Koh Bong, and we kneel as verses are spoken out loud in Khmer and holy water and flowers are sprinkled over us. We celebrate and revel in this romantic experience for a little longer over drinks and nibbles, cosied up on a sofa (which has been set up just for us) at the end of the bridge while taking in the spectacular sunset.

And just when you thought that it can't get any better than this, we're whisked

away to enjoy our Thai dinner by the pool (just the two of us) with our toes in the water. Song Saa has an amazing knack for creating unique experiences for two, leaving you thinking that you have the entire island to yourself. With nobody but our personal waiter in sight, we relish our delicious dishes, while taking in the panoramic ocean views under the moonlit sky.

Back at the villa, we're in for our last evening ritual and make it a memorable one, refilling it over and over again with hot water, and soaking endlessly in the flower-filled bath.

And even though we have to leave this magical island the next day, we will always remember this well-being haven, where one can completely de-stress and unplug from the world, reconnect with oneself and your loved one and be pampered with a candy store of memorable experiences and possibilities. It's all very laid-back, but with the utmost discretion, allowing guests the freedom to indulge in and engage with whatever the resort and its surroundings have to offer. [www.songsaa.com](http://www.songsaa.com)