

DEPARTURES

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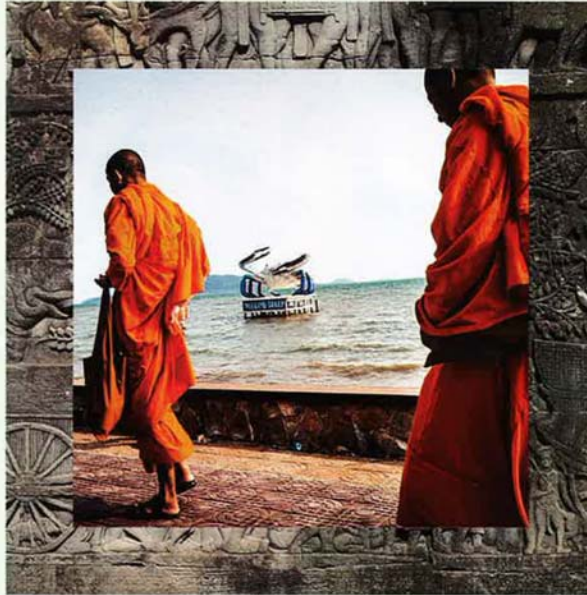
FALL FASHION

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UPDATE



The DEPARTURES Guide to Cambodia

Traveling through the Southeast Asian country reveals a nation developing an identity for itself beyond its well-trod temples. BY JESSICA FLINT

Change is afoot in Cambodia, located between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and bordering the Gulf of Thailand. "It's more of a rebirth than a birth," says Lim Muy Theam, an artist and designer based in Siem Reap, the country's cultural capital. Cambodia's history was practically erased during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, from 1975 to 1979, which was responsible for the genocide of nearly 2 million Cambodian people and, along with it, the dismantling of the country's heritage. Political unrest followed until 1998, when Prime Minister Hun Sen and

the Cambodian People's Party came solely into power (they remain there today). Because 68 percent of the country's population is under the age of 30, the older generation is trying desperately to instill a sense of tradition in the younger one, which is eager to move on from the past and catch up with the rest of Asia. This creates a palpable melting pot of emotions: hope mixed with heartbreak. DEPARTURES travels to the cities of Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Kep (pictured above), and to the island-resort Song Saa, and discovers that it's this dichotomy that is paving the way for Cambodia's future. **CONTINUED ▶**

Song Saa



A two-bedroom jungle villa's pool and deck are on a hill above the resort's overwater villas.

The speedboat is thumping against rough waves in the Gulf of Thailand, having pulled away from Cambodia's port of Sihanoukville 45 minutes and 20 miles ago. To the left is the mostly uninhabited Koh Rong island, with lush wild rainforest growing to the edge of the landmass's more than 16 virgin beaches. To the right is nothing but open sea, though an occasional wooden fishing boat putters by. Suddenly two mounds of jungle, like little green gumdrops, appear off Koh Rong's coast, and as the speedboat darts closer, thatched-roof villas, extending over the water like octopus tentacles, emerge into view.

I've arrived at Song Saa, Cambodia's first private island resort. It consists of two islands—Koh Ouen and Koh Bong—that are connected by a footbridge over a marine reserve. There are 27 villas (9 overwater, 11 in the jungle, and 7 with ocean views), each immaculately designed, each serviced by a ratio of

about six happy staffers to one villa. At Song Saa, guests can do as little or as much as they'd like. Activities include snorkeling, scuba diving, paddleboarding, kayaking, hiking, yoga, spa-ing, pool-ing, beach-ing, or simply luxuriating. Clocks are set an hour ahead of the mainland's to give the island more daylight.

A paper scroll, delivered to each villa daily, invites guests to dinner in different locations every night. The menus rotate, too. One evening supper might be at the Driftwood Bar for Thai cuisine; another night it could be a beach setting with Khmer food. Retiring after dinner, guests will find their villas lit up solely by 20 or so twinkling candles, and baths might already be drawn with, say, coconut milk and lavender.

It's no wonder Song Saa is usually visited as the relaxing end to a Cambodian journey. Although those who have traveled around the country first might find the resort to be a jarring contrast to the gloomy poverty elsewhere, it's only after experiencing Cambodia as a whole that one understands that Song Saa is

more than just a luxury resort. It's a metaphor for Cambodia's future. It's a symbol of hope.

Song Saa's founding goes like this: Rory Hunter and Melita Koulmandas Hunter, both attractive Aussies, met in 2003, in Auckland, New Zealand, where Rory was working in advertising at Saatchi & Saatchi and Melita had an organic-design business. On a whim, Rory accepted a job offer to run an agency in Phnom Penh. They moved there sight unseen for what they thought would be a year. That was 2005.

When the Hunters arrived in Cambodia, they witnessed a country dormant after decades of oppression. In Phnom Penh there were no traffic lights, paved roads, or cars. People got around only on cyclos, *tuk-tuks*, and bikes. But within six months or so, the country started waking up. Roads went down, traffic lights went up, and cars drove in. "We got caught up in the energy of a country wanting to rebuild itself," Rory says.

Locals in Phnom Penh didn't know islands existed 18 miles off Cambodia's southwest coast, in the Koh Rong archipelago, but the



An overwater villa's bedroom looks out at the Gulf of Thailand. The inspiration for the interior, conceived by Melita Hunter, came from the island's surroundings. Materials used to decorate the space include old fishing boats, local stone, and recycled timber.

Hunters had heard about them from a Khmer friend whose father-in-law was a fisherman. In 2006, the Hunters rented a fishing boat and spent two weeks adventuring around the undeveloped islands. The area was pristine. "Pure white-sand beaches, untouched rainforest," Melita says. "The people had never seen a foreigner."

On the last day, the Hunters stopped on Koh Ouen looking for lunch. The island was covered in rubbish, which was shockingly dissimilar to elsewhere in the archipelago (though not unlike the rest of Cambodia). A fishing family had been living and dumping garbage there for 20 years. Waste was everywhere, including in the offshore reefs. Pigs and chickens were running around. The family had cut down the rainforest. The island was dying.

The family said the area was becoming hard to fish since fishermen on about 50 local boats were throwing trash in the water. The father wanted to leave. He asked if the Hunters wanted to buy his island. "We said yes!" Melita recalls. The Hunters came back a week later with a brown paper bag filled with \$15,000.

First they started to pick up the trash. "In those early days we put a call out to the local villages to say we needed help," Melita says. As the Hunters were cleaning up their property—which took two years of hauling 80 tons of garbage to the mainland—they realized that if they protected their reef, maybe the fish would return. So they worked

with the Cambodian government to establish the country's first marine reserve, now a 12-acre no-fishing zone around Song Saa. Within about a year the fish—barracuda, teira batfish, slender silversides—started to come back.

Once the marine reserve was established, the Hunters handed its governance over to Prek Svay, the 645-person village across the bay from Song Saa, on Koh Rong. "We did that through lots of education, and getting the blessing from the locals," Melita says. "The fishermen got the message. They stopped coming. It was a slow, gradual journey."

The Hunters soon started to understand the difficulties that Prek Svay and the other three villages on Koh Rong were up against. They established the Song Saa Foundation to do conservation, education, and health-care work in the villages. That's how the idea for the resort came about: as a way to sustain the foundation through optional guest donations. "This isn't us trying to create a theme park where you can see a different world," Rory says. "We want to make people's lives better. The foundation is sustainable. And it's not there because the hotel is there. It can continue if the hotel goes away." The foundation has since worked on many projects driven by community need, like implementing a waste-management facility in Prek Svay. Today that village, once knee-deep in trash, is clean and beautiful.

Now it's 2015, ten years after the Hunters began their journey in Cambodia, and three

years after the resort opened. I am accompanying three of the Song Saa Foundation team members on their monthly *Boat of Hope* excursion to deliver medical and school supplies around the Koh Rong archipelago. Philanthropy is one of the activities guests can choose to partake in.

Fifty-nine out of 64 elementary-school-aged children in blue-and-white uniforms show up for class today in one of Koh Rong's four villages. But before the kids get to do the fun stuff—play with soccer balls we brought them, or color with crayons—we are going to teach them how to brush their teeth.

One thing to know is that my dad has had a long career in the American dental industry. So here I am, half a planet away from home, and of all things, I am showing these darling children how to use a toothbrush, an instrument most have never seen before. I spot one tiny boy who is foaming toothpaste at the mouth; he has the biggest, brightest, happiest smile.

It's then and there, in this fishing village, a stone's throw from one of the world's most lavish resorts, that I realize that here, beauty goes beyond the richness of the temples. Beauty is in the water, sand, and sun. It's in the art, culture, food, and shops. But, most of all, it's in the warmth, creativity, and hope—especially the hope—of its people. And that is the real luxury of Song Saa. ♦

Villas from \$1,440; Kaoh Rung, Krong Preah Sihanouk; 855-23/989-012; songjaa.com.