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TAKING THE LEAD *Issue*

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TRAVEL

PERPETUAL ESCAPE: YOUR MONEY'S REALLY GOOD HERE

There's more to the fabulous Song Saa Private Island than just sun, sand, sea and a really great sunset view.

Words by Lestari Hairul



IT IS PISSING RAIN in Phnom Penh. It has been pissing rain since the swanky hotel pickup whisked me away from the Jetstar flight earlier, uneventful except for the interrogation by my Cambodian seatmates on my business in the capital. Drinks and chill, man. I'm spending just one night here before a three-and-a-half hour drive to Sihanoukville the next day. And what that means for me is plundering the Elephant Bar at Raffles Hotel Le Royal. A former flatmate of mine who's now based in Phnom Penh touted their happy hour prices as the best in the entire city, especially since it's a bunch of beautifully crafted cocktails from a hotel bar. That's meant to be just the first stop

of the night, before continuing on with some happiness-inducing pizzas and dodgy drinks, but the rain is putting a damper on our plans. If the hotel's historicity includes a series of famous writers and journalists, then by God I must walk the same path.

But unfortunately, it is the cuisine that seals our fate. Cambodian tapas and the Femme Fatale, a champagne-drenched cocktail inspired by Jackie O's visit in '67, set the stage for a night that eventually fills up with more delicious French-Khmer food and wine at the hotel's Restaurant Le Royal until the only plan possible is a slow crawl back into my plush room to sleep it all off before the early morning ride. Have you had Khmer food?

Top
Aerial view of the Song Saa Private Island.

Have you had it in a historical dining room while a pianist plays Teresa Teng's "The Moon Represents My Heart" and the rain patters indolence outside? I sleep the first of many sweet slumbers of the trip.

The comfortable ride to Sihanoukville is unremarkable for this trip's prevailing tendency of more rain (thus far), and more sleeping. I am itching to move. Once out of the city marked by construction sites including an "integrated shoplex mall" called Lion City, I am greeted by views of vast emerald landscape. My driver explained that Song Saa meant "sweethearts" in reference to the two islands close together, the bigger one called Koh Bong, which means "guy island" and Koh Ouen

for "girl island", also utilised amongst Cambodians to refer to each other as an honorific. Minus the "koh" part of course. Unless you're an island. The actual resort is situated on Koh Ouen, the smaller island, linked by a footbridge to the forest sanctuary of Koh Bong where no human resides but where you can take a nature hike through.

ISLAND-TIME

A speedboat takes me, the sole passenger, from the port. It is a far more exciting journey and as John, the Burmese guest experience ambassador relates, the already fast 35 minutes ride is cut down to a mere 15-20 minutes under the expert hands of

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Song Saa's CEO, Rory Hunter. A nearby island where *Survivor: Cambodia* filmed earlier in the year passes us by, along with a few others including future island resorts under development, and one that was abandoned by its owner who went bust. Song Saa is the only private island in the region, just about a five-minute boat ride away from party-packer island of Koh Rong. However, they still have the best powdery-white sandy beaches on Sanloem.

But upon arriving at the jetty, powdery white or not being on a luxury island feels like a far better deal. Even if the rain continues on its never-ending tirade against the sun. The sand is too muddy for barefoot jaunts but a little water-pot for washing by the entrance to each villa sorts that out nicely.

Right. Enough waffling about the rain and its effects because the villa, *hooboy*, that's one place I wish I don't ever have to leave. From the moment you enter an Oceanview Villa, you're in complete seclusion. What that naturally means, of course, is nudism. With your own little private beach and an infinity pool that looks out into the ocean, with nary a boat within sight, you technically don't have to utilise all the swimwear you've packed in for the trip. If you want to have the privilege of jumping straight from the villa into the waters, there's the Overwater Villas to consider, with its great sunset views, but I don't quite fancy the idea of skinny-dipping and skinny-suntanning whilst a bunch of boats languidly ride past. It's a view from a boat that I've unexpectedly been privy to.

After a bout of running about the beautifully and sustainably constructed villa, designed by co-founder Melita Hunter to include natural elements

from the islands themselves, and excitedly recording videos and taking numerous pictures, it's time for the actual drinking. Well, I write drinks too for the magazine and I'm rained in on an afternoon. There's only so much nude swimming or half laps you can do.

But before I could fully explore the well-stocked mini-bar to my liver's content, the phone rings and I am told that my spa session will be scheduled soon after I'm done with my in-room



Right
The monks are ready to bless you.

Below
A community project, teaching school-aged children how to plant seedlings.



Above
The waterways of the Prek Svay village in Koh Rong.

lunch. I binge, of course, and put my clothes back on for the spa. Beers and Pinot Noir will have to continue later.

MEDITATE ON THIS

The island is tiny, extremely walkable, and best done without shoes. A Guest Experience Ambassador places a scroll of the evening's menu, and where to have it, looped on your door knob each day but there are numerous other secluded spots all over the island for you to have some destination dining which can be arranged. Since I am a misanthropic loner, I have the options of dining at either of the two restaurants on the island and in my villa,

and as with virtually everything else on the island it's all-inclusive and all scrumptious. The kitchens are headed by a Canadian Chef whose training included a stint in Japan and it's reflected in the cuisine on the island. Some fresh sushi with oven-fresh pizzas for you? You could even learn to cook some Khmer dishes and feed yourself. Not a bad deal for a food monster who needs all her energy levels replenished especially with all the stuff I'll be doing.

I'd earlier been introduced to Sacha, the yoga instructor, and she told me about the daily sunrise and sunset yoga arrangements. I want something a little bit more than just relaxing and had attempted

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to squeeze in virtually everything I could do into my schedule and reading up on the resort before the trip yielded an interesting activity: underwater meditation. It'll be the first time we're doing it at the resort.

What happens is not so much the serene meditation you may be used to sitting in lotus position on land. We certainly do a little bit of that on a cabana by the beach amidst a stunning view of the skies darkening and the kerosene lamps flickering, but once all that's done, and after I'm bitten by a strange crawling creature that produces massive welts on my back, we head to the beach in near-darkness. Did I mention it's done at night? And underwater?

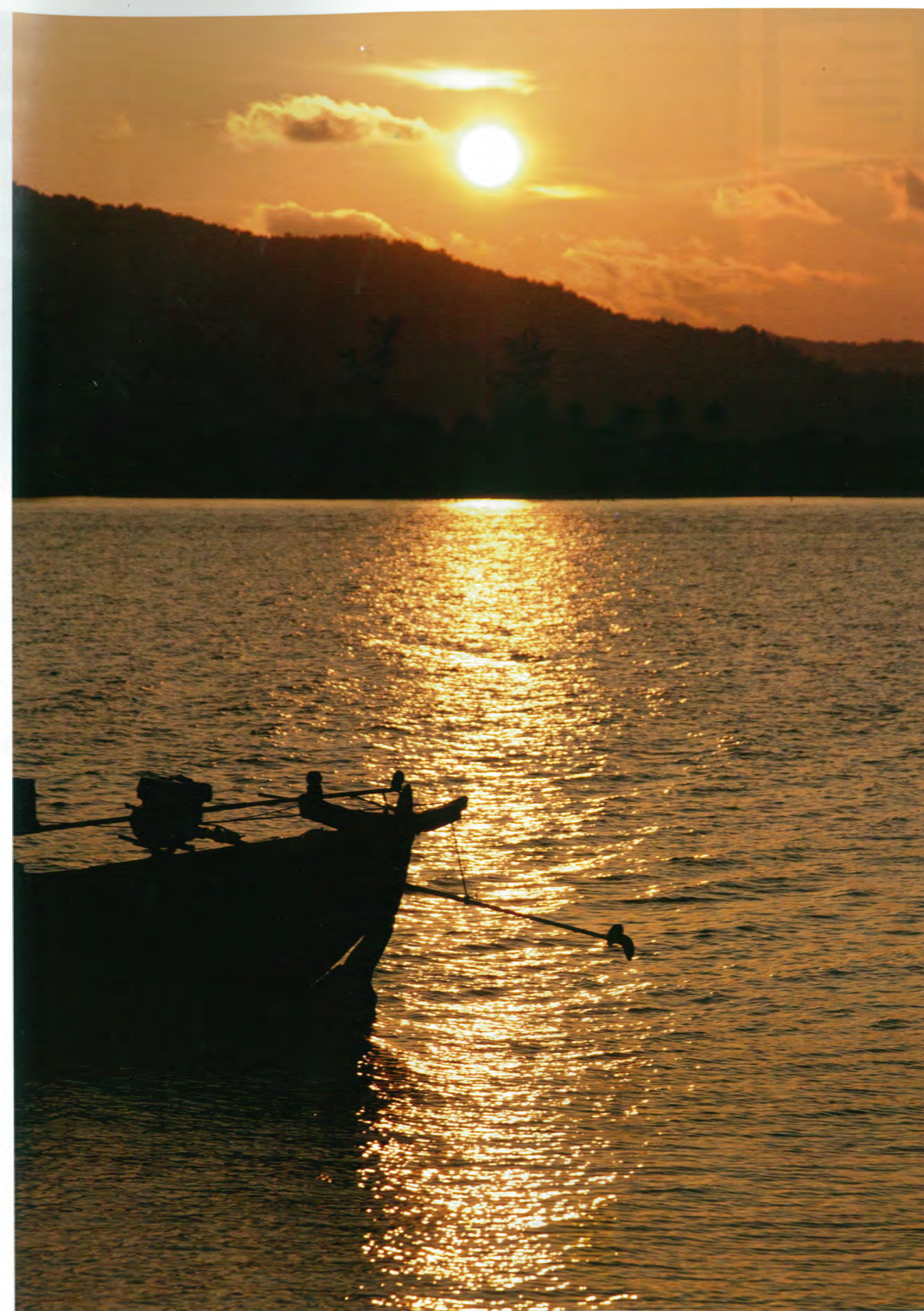
Diving equipment on. I've never dived before and breathing through the apparatus feels strange but with a few years of sporadic yoga and meditation retreats, I assume I will be perfectly fine. We tread water until we could sit comfortably and

fully submerged. Well, correction, it involves quite a bit of trying to bury your ass into the sand and trying to keep from floating away from the tanks with one heel digging in and the rest of your body threatening to swim away.

But it is one of the most peaceful experiences I've ever had. If you find peace amidst terror that is. Not that I was terrified fully. It's just the thought of possibly not being able to breathe or a boat passing too close overhead, and of the inky darkness, a fish killing me, and maybe drowning. All that subsides in the first five minutes or so and thereafter you just occupy yourself with trying to stay put and listening to how funny you sound breathing. Thoughts of an earlier hike through Koh Bong in the neighbouring island comes to mind. Emma, the Conservation Manager, guided me through the forest sanctuary populated by a myriad species of birds and other creatures including the Golden Orb Weaving Spiders that produce 3D webs that

Above
Leap off your bed, into your infinity pool, and then maybe jump into the sea below.

Opposite page
Sunset over the Koh Rong Archipelago.



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glitter gold when sunlight hits them. The waters we swim in is part of a marine reserve that along with the forest sanctuary and needs-led community program, are part of the Song Saa Foundation. It feels strange knowing that the reserve is the first of its kind in a country known for its massive numbers of NGOs of all stripes even leading to numerous criticisms of an economy, and people, highly dependent on foreign aid.

THE FOUNDATION

Before the nature ramble, I'd gone on a tour of the work of the Foundation with Emma and Ben, its Project Director. When the Hunters were first offered sale of the islands, "It looked nothing like what it looks like today. It had 20 years of rubbish; it had zero waste management and all of the reefs were in a disastrous state," as Rory Hunter told me. And as they've set the resort and Foundation up, there was a certainty that they would be working with the community and not be an island purely sequestered in luxury and unconnected to the archipelago. So Prek Svay, the village on Koh Rong where the Foundation does its community work is where I was shown about. Ben showed me the waste-management area of the village, which in-

cludes an ingenious contraption of water barrels that ensures organic waste are dry enough for the compost. It is entirely community-led and handled now, providing some income for the women working on it, and as Ben explained, the relationship between village and Foundation has gotten to a point where the villagers themselves have come up with innovative ideas and ways to improve life on the island and the environment.

Unlike the aid-dependency I mentioned, the programs introduced by the Foundation once they're set up, are led by the Prek Svay community themselves, leaving out the cycle of dependency. Lack of infrastructure and trained personnel are amongst the main problems behind developing nations in need of aid and the Foundation provides both by giving the villagers what they need like the waste management programs, after-school programs for the children, job opportunities on the resort and support for youths who want to work on the mainland amongst other efforts. Along with all of that, a focus on marine conservation and sustainable fishing.

The Song Saa Foundation doesn't function as a mere corporate social responsibility arm of the resort and instead is its own entity receiving also

external funding. But nor does it work in a traditional sense of an NGO, as a percentage of the resort's revenue provides substantial amounts into the Foundation. They exist in a symbiotic relationship ensuring that each component functions on the same level, the first of its kind in the world and actually making the luxurious aspects of the resort stay highly sensible. With each villa night amounting to at least a thousand dollars, that money's got to do some good.

DRY LAND

All that reflecting whilst meditating underwater has got to pass sufficient enough time. Nirvana somewhat achieved, we set our equipment back on the beach for a bout of more night-swimming in a sea iridescent with bioluminescence as the gibbous moon grows fuller in the sky. The great thing about the rain is they aid in the proliferation of these creatures so every time you rise out of the water, flipping your hair back there's a stream of glowy things that make you tiny bit more elegant-looking. When you kick really hard underwater or push and swish your arms about, you look like a continual motion of the Disney logo.

It's awesome, really, in the truest sense of the

word. Splashing about trying to make more things glow and swimming in even deeper, all fear of the dark and the unknown melts away. The lights from Koh Rong dance about, in a euphoric state after a few days of doing virtually nothing but exploring, swimming, eating and sleeping. I feel like it is close enough to swim to. And if I were a partypacker on the numerous beach resorts on that island I probably would attempt that, the other way forward.

Weeks later in Singapore, I receive updates on the Song Saa medical relief mission on both email and Instagram. With International Medical Relief, they've flown in a bunch of American doctors and supplies to provide the local population of the archipelago with probably the first doctor's and dentist's visit in a while and for some of them, the first in their lives. The red string bracelet still tied to my wrist reminded me of the monk-blessing ceremony I attended on the village grounds, where Emma played with the children as Ben explained the positive impact to the environs and its people. Between the pictures of luxury holiday living, there are the more socially responsible and environmentally-conscious ways of existence. Let's hope there's more of that in the future and in other regions. ■

Above
Technically, no one can really
see you.