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THIS ISLAND HOME

Two NEWLYWEDS bought a Cambodian island (as you do). Add to the mix stage three CANCER and the financial crisis, and you have the extraordinary story of RORY and MELITA HUNTER.

WORDS HELEN COLLIER

Cambodia had not even crossed the minds of Rory and Melita Hunter as a potential new home until work took them to the capital city, Phnom Penh, in 2005.

Their plan was to spend a year there, with Rory heading up an advertising agency, before moving to New York. Yet fast forward a decade and the Australian couple are still there. They opened Song Saa, an opulent 27-villa island resort off the coast of Sihanoukville, in 2012 – and while the couple may now have an island and an eco-resort to their names, none of it was planned – nor was it plain sailing.

Rewind to 2005 and Phnom Penh was an exciting place to be – Cambodia was starting to pick itself back up from years of civil war, and the country was experiencing a high-growth phase on the verge of the tourism and property boom.

“We got swept up in the emotional journey and the incredible energy, seeing and being part of its physical transformation,” says Mel.

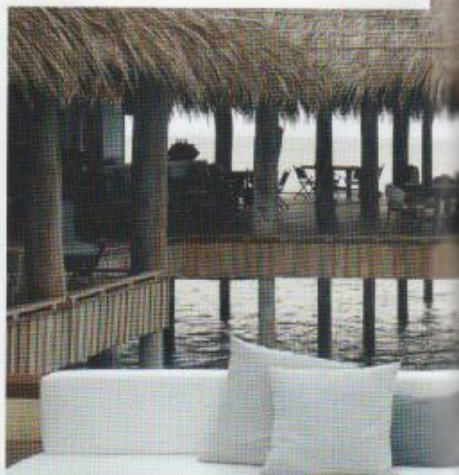
Mel had worked in interiors as an organic stylist, so together with Rory, saw potential in buying dilapidated French colonial properties in the city and renovating them for the influx of new expats. Property development was

a new industry for them both, as was the Khmer language, so the couple took Khmer lessons in their lunch hours and did their due diligence with lawyers by night. To navigate their way through the minefield that is Cambodian land law, they set up a land holding company.

At the end of 2005, Rory left his day job and over the next two years, the couple developed 27 apartments. “It was never part of a grand plan, Song Saa still hadn’t entered our vision,” Rory laughs. “But looking back, all we learned in those early years – how to work out quantities of supplies, understanding lighting plans and electricity, plumbing, grey water – all that stood us in such good stead for building Song Saa.”

Working in a developing nation, they witnessed some exploitation and were determined to not only reject this but also set a new precedent for foreigners doing business in Cambodia.

“What we learned in those first few years was that you can get things done in Cambodia without having to pay bribes; it just takes 10 times longer.”

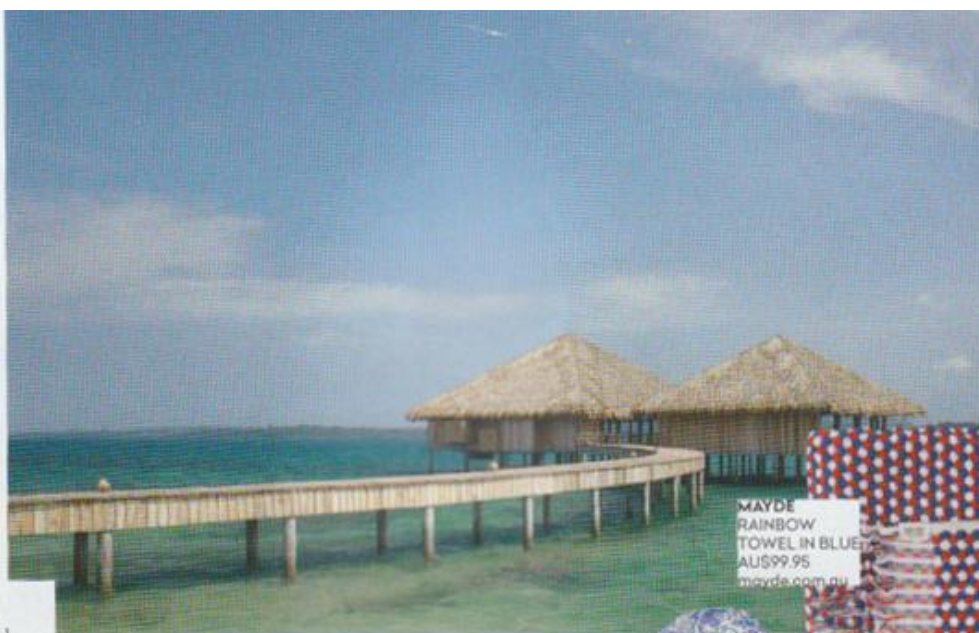


In the midst of a busy development project, the couple decided they needed a holiday. They headed south to explore the under-developed coastline of Sihanoukville, where they rented a fishing boat. Rory and Mel are grateful to that fishing boat to this very day, for it took them to the Koh Rong archipelago, which they say was like a film scene – a land and a people time had forgotten.

"The locals on these islands were so welcoming. We'd hop off the boat and they'd cook up cashews in the fire for us and give us beautiful freshly caught prawns. The head of the family on the island that is now Song Saa told us how hard it had become to catch enough fish to feed his family, the waters had become so overfished. He had land back on the mainland and wanted to go back there, to rice farming."

And then, as if he was asking them to pass the salt, he simply said: "Do you want to buy my island?"

Foreigners were not able to buy or own land in Cambodia at that time, so they knew that by entertaining the idea, they were essentially agreeing to 'squatters' rights'. But pushing the red tape to the backs of their minds, they also realised what a special opportunity lay before them – so agreed to his asking price of AUS\$15,000. The chief on nearby island Koh Rong drew up an agreement and, with legal involvement, they handed over the money two weeks later.



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"The locals had been running a pig farm on the island for years and there were pigs wallowing in rubbish up to their necks, chickens roaming everywhere, fishing boats emptying their bilge, it was quite a sight," Mel says.

"Rory's family came out to visit us and were wandering over the island literally muttering, 'What have you done?'"

They simply began to clean – paying 30 villagers as garbage collectors – and by chatting to them, they discovered how fragile the eco-system was. Fish stocks were on the brink of collapse so the villagers had been forced into the rainforest to trap wildlife to feed their families.

"We saw then that our timing couldn't have been more perfect to protect this region and put systems in place to stop destruction and to give these people a sustainable future," Mel says, adding that the island had no access to healthcare or education and that the majority of its children had never been to the Cambodian mainland.

According to Mel, during the Khmer Rouge years (when most of the population was rounded up, including those from the islands, and marched at gunpoint to the countryside to grow rice), the islands had been uninhabited, so fish stocks had replenished. >

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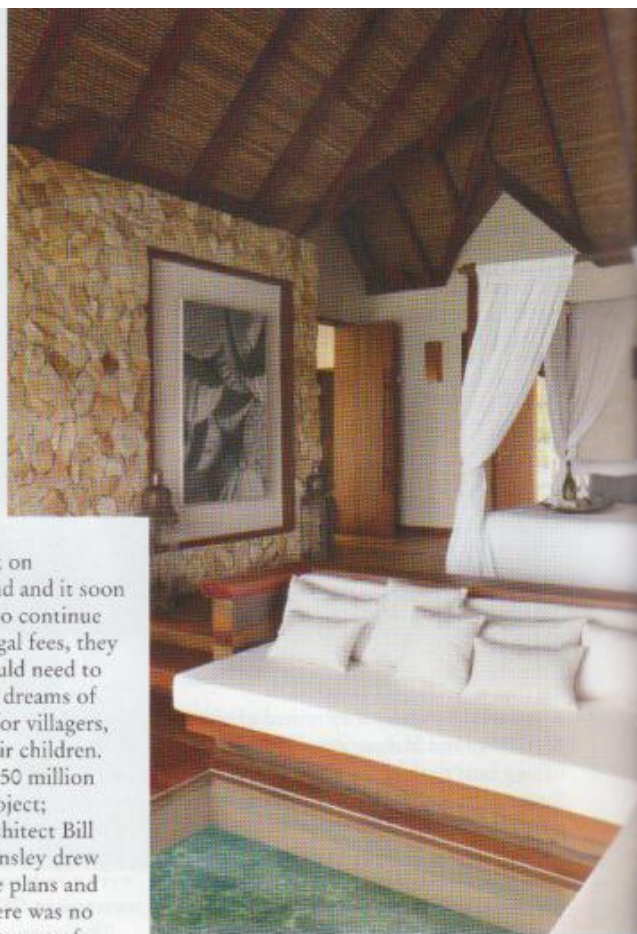
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There had been pods of dolphins and huge amounts of fish life, but following 20 years of human over-consumption, that had all but gone.

In conjunction with the local chiefs, the island's new owners sourced fresh water and created a marine reserve around part of the island in a bid to replenish stocks and keep large Thai and Vietnamese fishing trawlers away.

"In just 18 months, we started to see barracuda jumping again. The fish stocks have now replenished so much that the marine park is now twice its original size and is the largest marine park in the Gulf of Thailand," says Mel.

"At this point, we still didn't have any intention of building a resort on the island. We didn't even know we were going to build anything; it took us two and a half years to work through the ownership structure with the government!"

Along the way, they took on ownership of a second island and it soon became clear that in order to continue all this work and pay the legal fees, they needed funding. And it would need to be impressive to fulfil their dreams of sustainability and a future for villagers, including education for their children.

It quickly became a AU\$50 million project;

architect Bill Bensley drew the plans and there was no shortage of interested parties throwing money at the concept.

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MONEY lost.*

Then, overnight, the couple's lives changed. One morning in September 2008 they woke to the news that Lehman Brothers had collapsed, creating financial uncertainty. Then, three days later, Mel was diagnosed with stage three ovarian cancer.

Everything was put on hold and the pair flew back to Australia. Mel focused her energy on curing herself of cancer; she had a tumour the size of a golf ball growing through her cervix into her uterus and spreading. Having watched her mother experience the indignity of

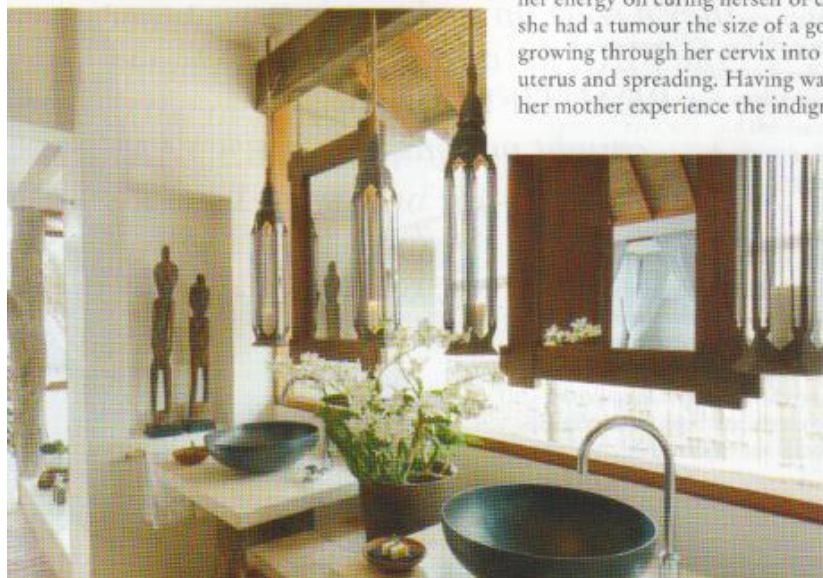
chemotherapy and consequently die from cancer at the age of 45, she knew she needed to handle it her own way.

Doctors prescribed chemotherapy and a radical hysterectomy, but Mel had her own approach. She went to see a kinesiologist, practiced yoga, did visualisation, attended Petrea King's cancer camp, meditated, did qi gong and had an eating plan drawn up by a naturopath.

"Your body is so good at fighting cancer," Mel said. "I'd been going through a lot of stress pulling this project together, we were working our tails off."

Rory says he put Mel in a bubble to allow her to focus on her cancer, buffering everything, not allowing any stress to reach her.

When she was ready (and not before) Mel let the doctors operate to remove her uterus and after two weeks of waiting, the pathology report came back confirming she was cancer-free. As well as celebrating Mel's amazing recovery, the delay also brought the couple good news on the business front.



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"It was so serendipitous," Mel recalls. "We were able to start again, no money lost."

"Had the financial crash happened a few weeks later and we had signed contracts with everybody, we'd have lost the lot. But we had only agreed term sheets, so we were able to start from scratch."

They returned to Cambodia, to their two islands, with no investors and a clean slate. Mel drew some designs for a couple of very simple shacks. But despite the unstable financial climate, there were still people willing to invest, so at a small launch in Phuket, they showed some drawings of nine villas. All nine sold that night. Buyers wanted to become shareholders, the drawings became more elaborate – bathrooms were designed in stone and individual plunge pools were added.

And so Song Saa was born. Made up of two islands linked by a wooden walkway, its name means 'the sweethearts' in Khmer. The result is

an exclusive, romantic resort of 27 private villas made from reclaimed materials mostly gathered from around the island. Guests arrive by helicopter or speedboat and there's a 'no shoes' policy once on land. Then, all that's on the to-do list is eating with your feet in the infinity pool, snorkelling or lying on the beach.

Rory and Mel explained that brilliant people came into their lives from all over the world. Volunteers and investors came, specialising in everything from marine biology to nutritional health, and the Song Saa Foundation has now been created so the pair don't have to rely on guest donations or their own money for community projects. They are currently searching for their next Song Saa site in Southeast Asia.

"We're not in a hurry to suddenly expand. It's been a decade of learning and we want to apply that to the next one – to prove that [our] model can work, to show that you can run a sustainably driven business. And prove that the 'for-profit' sector can also be 'for-good.'"

We're not in a hurry to suddenly EXPAND. It's been a decade of LEARNING and we want to apply that to the next one – to PROVE that [our] model can WORK.

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