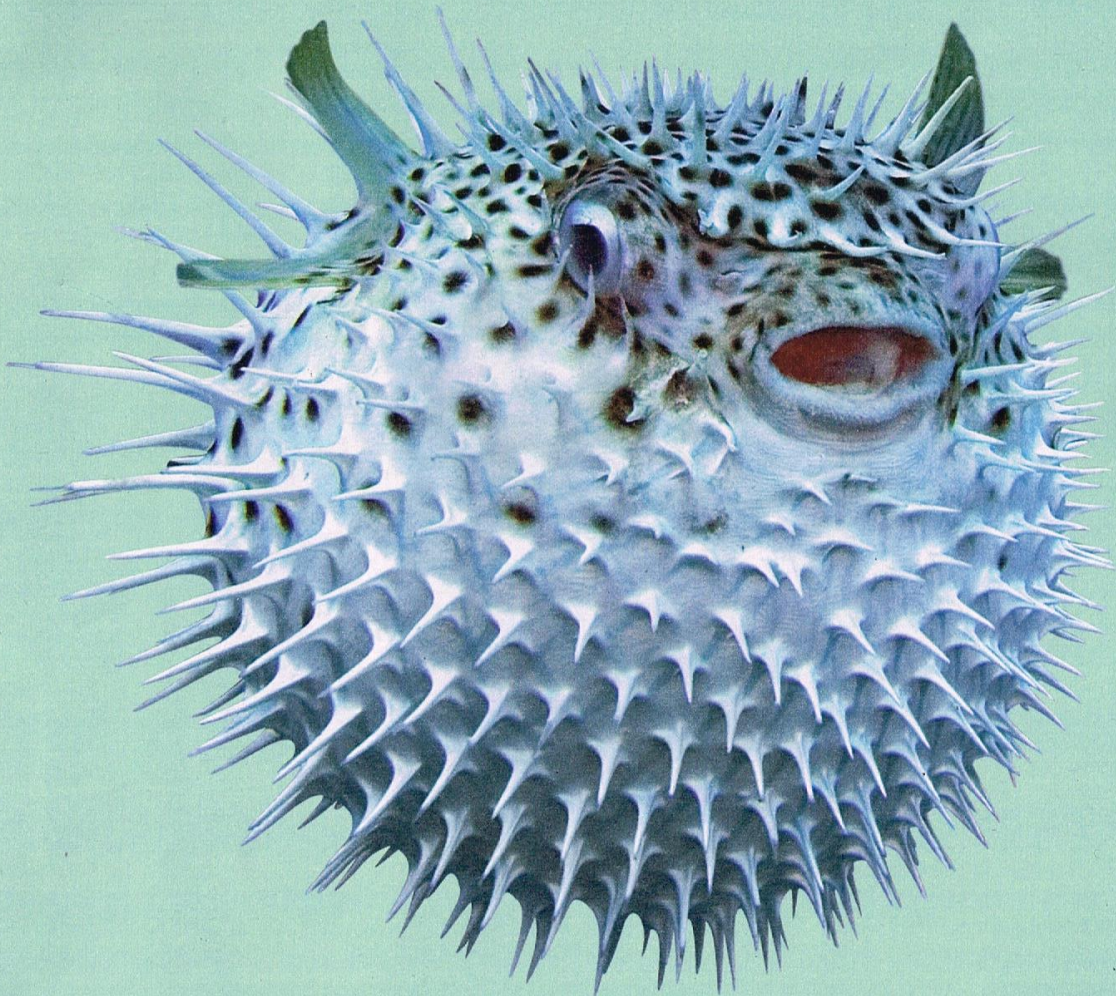


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MARITAL BLISS WITH
A HONEYMOON AT SONG SAA

ENJOY A MOMENT OF CALM IN THE SPIRITUAL BLISS OF SOUTH- EAST ASIA

Stylist's associate editor (beauty), Joanna McGarry, finds enlightenment on a honeymoon among the temples and tropical islands of Cambodia's ancient kingdom

I hate the word 'honeymoon'. All those couples-only beach resorts; everyone jostling for sun loungers and fussy candlelit dinners on a floating piece of wood. That's not us. We didn't want that for the first holiday we'd take as husband and wife. We wanted to have our eyes opened by the world. We wanted to explore and discover a culture unlike our own – and dare I say it – get a bit spiritual. Cambodia, we decided, ticked all the boxes.

After a 28-hour journey, we landed in the north-western province of Siem Reap, gateway to Cambodia's majestic temples, built over 900 years ago by the ruling kings.

In an effort to avoid the busloads of tourists (and their plague of selfie sticks), we hired a temple guide to help frame this ancient world into bite-sized chunks of trivia. We even took his advice to visit Angkor Wat – the largest of the temples – at 4am. Built as a tribute to the Hindu god, Vishnu, this intricate mass of stone is breathtaking to behold, somehow more entrancing in moonlight. Over the next two days

we trekked through a further 11 temples, until they began to fall into each other in my mind.

Harder to forget, however, were the small children circling the temple gates, cheerily selling souvenirs. It's a place woven in paradox; everywhere I look, scenes of abject poverty rub up against the majesty of a city that was once the largest in the world. Since then, Cambodia has been through hell and back. The civil war that erupted between 1965 and 1975 annihilated 25% of its total population – two million people. Today, over one third of the population lives below the poverty line, on less



than \$2 per day. On a ground level though, all is merry. The children we saw were buoyant and happy enough playing football with a bottle top. And, the poverty rate more than halved between 2004 and 2011. The Cambodian locals were kind, open and almost apologetically polite. This gentle demeanour is the upshot of a culture that has oscillated between Hinduism and Buddhism; religions which promote non-violence and inner calm.

We left Siem Reap feeling privileged to have set foot in Cambodia's ancient world and took a three-hour cab ride to Sihanoukville – essentially the Cornwall of Cambodia. We'd planned to depart soon for a yoga retreat in the capital, Phnom Penh. We failed. As soon as we dipped a toe into the sand on Otres Two beach, it was game over. We booked into a cheap tucked-away villa and turned into beach bums, with only the odd spot of paddleboarding to punctuate our days. It wasn't a spiritual awakening, but it was what we needed.

Just as we began to get itchy feet, we packed up for the finale: Song Saa, a private island in the unspoilt Koh Rong archipelago – think Thailand, 15 years ago. I'll be honest, having witnessed the humble existence of the Cambodian people, hopping on a private speedboat felt a bit well,



wrong. It needn't have. Song Saa has – unlike any other luxury resort I've ever encountered – seamlessly negotiated the balance between grandeur and reciprocity. Its tagline, 'luxury that treads lightly', is entirely warranted.

Each of its 27 thatched-roofed villas are respectfully hewn into the natural landscape through a winding path of sand and reeds. Inspired by Cambodian fishing villages, its aesthetic strikes that elusive balance between rustic and modern; all white linens and re-purposed driftwood. The beds were sink-inside-a-marshmallow spectacular with a thread count that was out of control.

Two restaurants and three separate menus kept things interesting, our favourite of these being the beach bar for the



fresh-as-hell sushi and the stone oven pizzas, which my husband declared the best in the world.

We spent our days languishing in our private plunge pool, making fast work of the in-villa mini-bar sauvignon blanc and Tiger beer and playing Bowie songs into the night. Rewriting the rules of 'all-inclusive', save for some watersports and spa treatments, everything is folded into the villa rate, doing away with the doom of reviewing that final bill. This also means it's not cheap. Still, if you balance this luxurious treat with some cheaper nights at a low-key beach hut, Song Saa makes the perfect finishing touch to a south-east Asian adventure.

Peeling ourselves away from the villa, we dabbled in wakeboarding and water-skiing. And by dabbled, I mean, I utterly humiliated myself attempting to stand up on the water. Snorkelling was more manageable, in colourful reefs protected by Song Saa's marine reserve, a self-initiated project that

took the owners years of wrangling with the local government and has since safe-guarded countless exotic species of fish.

More impressive still is the charitable foundation set up in Song Saa's name. Schools, a new pagoda for local monks and medical care have transformed the lives of the island's original inhabitants – many of whom now hold jobs in the resort. The children scurried around us, laughing and playing, and it all clicked. You cannot take, without giving back.

We may have failed to become fully-fledged yogis on our trip, but we experienced something more enlightening: the unbreakable human spirit. It's been said that people go to Cambodia for the temples, but they come back for the people. We certainly will.



Song Saa Private Island offers a full-board inclusive rate from £860 per villa, per night, including speedboat transfers; songjaa.com

Save your pennies: Sok Sabay Resort

Just a five-minute tuk-tuk ride from the Otres beaches of Sihanoukville, Sok Sabay sits among the calming mangroves of Otres village. A peaceful countryside huddle of ex-pat residences, rental villas and vegan restaurants, it's a hideaway that provides welcome respite from the backpacker raves and busy beachfront.

Run by Sarah, an Australian ex-pat who lives on-site with her super-cool eight-year-old son, Max, Sok Sabay carries the warm feeling of a family residence. A year-round pool forms the central hub, with villas dotted around the outside. Aesthetically, there's something pleasingly Fifties about the place, with its palm trees and peach-toned

wood. Think of it as a Palm Springs getaway at a fraction of the cost. The villas were constructed by Cambodian tradesmen using local bamboo and ceramic tiles. A riverside platform deck forms the restaurant where an enormous veggie omelette will set you back £1.50; and ask about yoga classes with Greg, an Italian ex-pat who genuinely looked like God.

Kick things up a gear by borrowing a bicycle and heading down to the nearby Otres night market, which opens its doors for a night of acoustic music, street food and superb gluten-free brownies, every Saturday.

Double rooms with a river view start from £35, via booking.com

