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**RISKING
IT ALL**
THE CHILD
JOCKEYS OF
SUMBAWA



BUILDING PEACE

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ENDING GLOBAL CONFLICT





Island Song

The story of Song Saa in southern Cambodia is the story of an Australian couple's attempt to rebuild a broken community. **Geordie Torr** looks at how a luxury resort can improve local lives

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORDIE TORR

The Song Saa resort is on one of two islands in southern Cambodia

The Canadian General Manager of the Song Saa Private Island resort in southern Cambodia, is sitting in the resort's Vista Bar, ruminating on the unexpected path his life has taken while watching the small fishing boats set off from the village of Prek Svay, just visible across the water. The bar is built on stilts over the water, and is the perfect spot to watch the sun set over the adjacent island of Koh Rong.

'I wasn't planning to return to Asia,' he tells me, 'but then I came out and saw Song Saa and met Rory and Melita, and heard about their vision, about how they really, genuinely, tie the environment, the community, the sustainability, together with the whole experience of Song Saa. I don't know if I've ever come across a property that has delivered the whole package at this level. It's unique and I love it.'

The Rory and Melita he refers to are the Hunters, a Sydney couple whose chance meeting with a local fishing family led to the creation of this luxurious, yet socially responsible resort. They first arrived in Cambodia in 2005 en route to New York when Rory was offered a job running an advertising agency in Phnom Penh. 'We got there and fell in love,' Melita tells me. 'The country was waking up - from the war and everything else that had happened. Seventy per cent of the population was under the age of 30, so it had this vibrant, youthful feel. We got caught up in this amazing energy.'

At the weekends they would travel to the coast to go scuba diving. 'It was soul-destroying because you go down and there are the remnants of dynamite fishing; there were no fish and the water wasn't very clear,' Melita says.

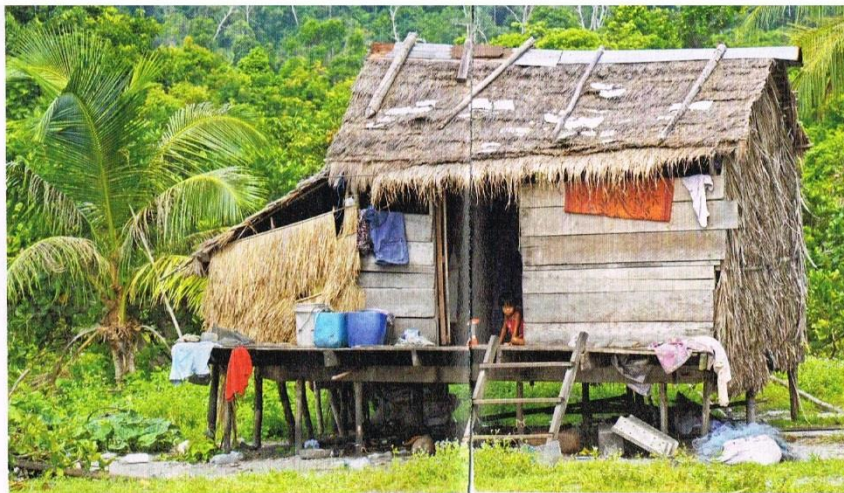
Then a Cambodian friend told them about some pristine islands near the port city of Sihanoukville. 'We rented a fishing boat, came across the archipelago and spent the next two weeks exploring it,' she recalls. 'There was a little community on one of the islands, so we stopped in looking for lunch. The head of the family told us that the surrounding waters were overfished and that he was having a hard time feeding his family. He said he wanted to return to the mainland and go back to rice farming, and asked us if we wanted to buy the islands. That was the catalyst for what we've done for the past 11 years.'

FIRST STEPS

The couple returned to Phnom Penh and spoke to their lawyers, who drafted up a contract that gave them squatters' rights to the islands, because at that time no-one, local or foreign, could own an island in Cambodia. 'Then we went back down there and got the navy to witness everything as we all thumbprinted a piece of paper. Then we handed over a brown paper bag full of money, the family sailed off to the mainland - and we were left with these islands.'

The smaller island, which now houses the resort, had been cleared of rainforest. 'The fishing community had been living there for about 20 to 25 years,' Melita says. 'They had been throwing their rubbish on the ground; fishing boats had been dumping their bilge water nearby. The reef was dying and it was a very sad-looking island. So with no grand plan, we just started picking up rubbish.'

Employing locals from Prek Svay to help them, they again heard of the overfishing problems. 'We spent a lot of time with the village chiefs and suggested that they set up a protected area around the islands,' Melita says. 'We did some basic education about fisheries and the importance of refuges for the fish. Then, together, we funded the printing of material and they



The resort works with the locals to improve conditions on the islands



'We handed over a paper bag full of money, the family sailed off to the mainland - and we were left with these islands'

went to the other villages to educate people and get them onside. Eventually, we set up the marine sanctuary. Eighteen months later the fish stocks start to come back.

SENSE OF PLACE

They also began investigating the possibility of building a resort on the islands, but for that the couple would need more security than just squatters' rights. 'We started to ask the government, "How do you own an island?,"' Melita says. Answering that question took nearly two years and involved the government rewriting the country's land laws. But, finally, the couple was granted a 99-year lease. 'The first two years was spent cleaning up the island, setting up initiatives and building trust among the communities,' Melita says.

A lack of experience in hotel design necessitated a basic approach when it came to building the resort. 'All of the sandstone was dug up from the island; the flooring is made from recycled timber, which we got from old warehouses and factories in Thailand and Cambodia,' says Melita. 'As many finishings as possible were either recycled or locally made. I really wanted for it to not feel like just another private island hotel - it needed that sense of place, to feel as though it was supposed to be there, for the communities around it as well as the guests once they're inside.'

The resort finally opened in 2012 and as it became established, the Hunters decided to create a separate foundation to focus on their philanthropic initiatives. 'Initially, there was a community and conservation team as part of the resort, so when Song Saa opened, the philanthropic work that Rory and Mel had envisaged - livelihood support, waste management, fisheries support, marine conservation - were all driven by the resort.'



The Song Saa resort mixes luxury with local sustainability

explains Ben Thorne, the foundation's project director. 'A year after the resort opened, the foundation became its own entity.'

The best way to see the foundation's work in action is to go on one of the regular walks through Prek Svay that Song Saa organises for its guests. The first stop is the solid-waste-management centre. 'In the past, food was wrapped in bamboo and rice paper, which was biodegradable. Then plastic came along and people continued to do what they had been doing for years, which is throwing their rubbish on the ground. But of course it wasn't disappearing, it was just piling up,' explains Emma Gallacher, the resort's conservation manager. 'When Rory and Melita first came, the whole area was knee-deep in litter. Now, seven women go through the village and clean it up every morning.' Since they started keeping records in 2010, 16,000 bags of rubbish have been picked up – about 80 tonnes worth.

COMMUNITY CARE

Walking on past children playing while adults sit quietly in the shade, we arrive at a sign bearing a large map of the islands and the surrounding waters, the community fishery. The sanctuary was largely set up to keep illegal fishing boats from Thailand and Vietnam decimating the local stocks. 'As with all of our community projects, we empower local villagers to manage

'The first two years was spent cleaning up the island, setting up initiatives and building trust among the communities'

their own environment – with the community fishery support this includes providing them with funding for their weekly patrols,' Ben explains. 'We're particularly proud of the Song Saa Marine Reserve because it was a stepping stone to what is now becoming a much larger marine protected area.'

This new area – Cambodia's first – will cover an area of 44,535 hectares, encompassing the two Song Saa Islands, Koh Rong and Koh Rong Sanloem, another large island just to the south. 'There will be specific zones where certain activities will be prohibited – a mixture of conservation zones, recreation areas and multiple-use areas,' Ben explains. 'There have been several rounds of consultation with local communities, the local government, non-profits and the private sector. Using scientific data, community questionnaires and so on, we created a map

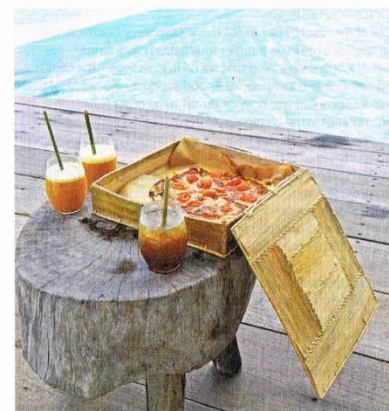
that we took to each of the partners. Then we created a final map that all parties were happy with. Now we've been finalising the process through the correct ministries and it's awaiting final proclamation to become regulation.'

EDUCATION MATTERS

As we walk through the village proper, Emma provides some background. 'Koh Rong is the same size as Hong Kong Island,' she says. 'The total population is approximately 3,000, but in this village, we have around 780 people.'

We eventually reach Sala Song Saa, the foundation's dedicated sustainability centre. There are vegetable beds, a swing set, a small library and a composting toilet. Here the foundation runs workshops on health and nutrition, recycling and the like, as well as the Song Saa Sea Turtles programme, which is its youth-development project. 'About 75 children come on a Saturday and we do an educational activity and then we do something fun – go snorkelling, for a rainforest hike,' Emma explains.

She points out the buildings where the village school teachers live. 'They were built by an Italian NGO that pulled out of the village – they ran out of money – and now we rent them,' she says. 'The teachers have come over from the mainland, so they're used to a certain standard of living, which is why we put





'One of the guests visited and saw that the school was broken, so he donated his own money to rebuild it'

them up here. We pay their salaries as well – it just ensures that we have really high-quality teaching in the school.' Not long after, we reach the school itself. The main building was built in 2008, but thanks to some shoddy workmanship, it began to fall apart just a few years later. 'One of the guests visited and saw that the school was broken, so he donated his own money to rebuild it,' explains Het Keut, the foundation's community officer. 'He also supported the solar panels, so now, in the evening, the children can come and have English lessons.'

FUNDING SOURCES

Back at the resort, I pay a visit to the Discovery Centre, where the team fills me in on another foundation programme – the Boat of Hope. 'Everything that we do in Prek Svay – the health and well-being, education, livelihood support – we put all of that onto a speedboat and bounce through the other four communities in the archipelago,' Ben explains. 'For two days a month we give a full day to another community. And guests are always invited to come along.'

While there are lots of formal projects such as this, the resort also provides ad hoc assistance where necessary. For example, the local navy was drilling a well and asked if the foundation could help, so it provided financial support. The community fisheries had a boat that was broken down and they couldn't afford to fix the motor, so the team fixed it for them.

Sometimes the support has a direct, life-saving role. 'We have an on-site doctor, Brenda, who works full-time for us,' the GM says. 'A few weeks ago, a young woman in the village miscarried and she was bleeding out. She needed to be stabilised and then rushed to the clinic in Sihanoukville. We sent Brenda over, provided the boat, the transportation on the mainland.'

Of course, all of this philanthropy costs money. And while the foundation applies for grants, looks for partners and undertakes

other forms of fundraising, it helps that the resort's guests tend to be high-net-worth individuals. Central to the foundation's efforts to involve guests in their philanthropy is the Wall of Hope. Located in the Discovery Centre, the wall features illustrated displays of some of the foundation's ongoing projects. 'It's typically the projects that need a bit more investment or new projects that we're trying to get off the ground,' Emma explains. 'It shows the guests what we're working on and hopefully inspires them to make a donation.'

And it works. 'Almost every week, we have guests who donate towards our programmes and the community,' Ben says. 'We also have guests who are interested in a particular project and will choose to fund or part-fund that programme for a year.'

'Because of the nature of Song Saa itself, the majority of guests already know about the Song Saa Foundation and the partnership with the resort,' Ben says. 'A lot of guests choose to come here because of that philanthropic, community aspect, so in that sense, we don't need to sell it to them while they're here. What we do is provide them with opportunities to experience and engage with the foundation's projects.'

AN ETHICAL MIX

Sitting out in the Vista bar, fish jumping from the waters all around, boats from Prek Svay putt-putting by on their way out to sea – right there, you have, in a microcosm, what Song Saa is all about. While the close proximity of high-end luxury to relative poverty could easily be jarring, the work that the Foundation is doing – and the integration of that work with the experience of staying at the resort – somehow makes the meeting of two very disparate ends of the socio-economic spectrum feel less like exploitation and more like a very welcome collaboration. **G**

CO-ORDINATES SONG SAA

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When to go

The wet season runs from May to October; the dry season from November to April with temperatures of around 24°C.

Getting there

British Airways has regular flights to Phnom Penh via Bangkok for £500 one way. cazenove+loyd (cazloyd.com) offers seven nights at Song Saa in a one-bedroom Jungle Villa on a bed and breakfast basis from £3,300 per person. The price includes private airport transfers from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville, shared speedboat to Song Saa and flights from London in economy class with Eva Air and Bangkok Airways, via Bangkok.

More information

Song Saa: www.songsaa.com

Song Saa Foundation: songsaafoundation.org

