

Cambodian resort

This sheltered private island is a beacon of environmental excellence.

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4 MINUTE READ

Cambodia isn't internationally known for its resorts. The kingdom has long been overshadowed by Thailand, The Maldives and, increasingly, Vietnam, when it comes to sea-and-sand tourism, but there is a beguiling exception with a clear agenda of conservation, community involvement, philanthropy and marine stewardship. Song Saa Private Island, part of the Koh Rong archipelago in the Gulf of Thailand, is a hybrid of sorts. High standards of luxury are palpable but so is an environmental focus that highlights sustainable materials and a beachcomber atmosphere.

Guests are accommodated in 24 spacious thatch-roofed villas divided into categories of premium over-water, ocean view and jungle, with aspects of clear blue-green sea, white beaches and virgin rainforest. All the ritzy elements are in place, such as day beds, flat-screen TVs and surround-sound systems, sunken tubs, indoor and outdoor showers, and private pools. The jungle configurations come with a choice of sunset or sunrise views, and as the resort is close to the Equator, clocks are set forward an hour to allow for sun-up sleep-ins. There are also glass floor panels in the overwater villas for the laziest of marine viewing. But there's so much more to consider and commend here than just creature comforts.

The estate encompasses two rainforest-covered islands, Koh Ouen and Koh Bong, jointly known as "the sweethearts", or Song Saa in the Khmer language. The smaller, Koh Bong, is a nature reserve with walking trails and lookouts; it's home to hornbills, kingfishers and sea eagles, and thus a birdwatcher's delight, particularly

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decade ago, after moving into the region in 2004 and falling in love with Cambodian culture.

The reserve is now more than 10 times its original size. Tropical fish, schools of snapper, seahorses, giant clams and turtles are in abundance and marine conservationists lead guests on excursions. But the peak underwater experience is a bioluminescence night swim off the north side of Koh Ouen. I hop off one of Song Saa's boats with safety jacket and snorkelling gear and wave my hands around under the water. The plankton glows and sparkles in streams of blue so eerie that it feels like immersion in an ethereal underworld.

Entering into its 10th year of operation, the Song Saa story is one of environmental excellence, including rainforest and mangrove regeneration, the latter involving the planting and management of thousands of saplings each year. Just strolling or sitting at this remarkable resort offers insight into Melita's vision of upcycling and sustainability. Driftwood, bamboo, boards from old fishing boats, building materials and furniture pulled from disused housing sites, the stumps of fallen trees, oil drums and other cast-offs have been variously turned into wall panels, screens, tables, chairs, stools, desks and planter troughs and used as planks in walkways. The tiles in the meandering infinity-edge main pool are of local granite; the exquisite ceramics have been commissioned from regional artisans; entwined vines gathered from the jungle serve as pool and deck shelters. Nothing feels contrived, generic or organised according to the template of a famous international designer. It's much more organic, and even rustic, with a distinctively quirky and imaginative feel.

Staff are mostly local, from Sihanoukville and smaller regional settlements, and are highly professional and polite, all under the guidance of hotelier Donald Wong, whose CV includes brands such as Aman and Mandarin Oriental. His highly recommended tip is to join a day trip by longtail boat to nearby Prek Svay Island with a community co-ordinator to see the stilt houses and cashew plantations and meet villagers whose livelihoods and welfare are supported by the Song Saa Foundation. It's pretty rare for guests at five-star resorts to venture beyond the boundaries but reality checks are a given here and the foundation's work is comprehensive and ongoing.

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peppercorn and watery leaves and buds are also decidedly local and full of crunch and flavour. Fragrances of cinnamon, lime and lemongrass carry on the breeze, the bread is baked on the island and seafood sustainably drawn from the surrounding waters. The beachside Driftwood Bar and Kitchen, with indoor-outdoor seating, is more casual, with pizzas and tapas. There's a sense of what the resort calls "choreography" when arranging private dinner locales so guests can experience different settings. This can be as inventive as beach staff scooping up sand and packing it tight to form chairs and a low table by the jetty, producing canvas covers seemingly out of thin air. And then a chef appears to mix, say, guacamole made to order. Aperitifs appear as the sun goes down. Another day in paradise? You got it.

In the know

[Song Saa Private Island](#) is on Cambodia's southern coast, 45 minutes by resort speedboat from the port of Sihanoukville. Flights connect from Phnom Penh and Siem Reap or it's about a 2.5 hour transfer on a newly opened highway from the capital. Two-bedroom family villas are available in selected categories. The all-inclusive package rate has just a few exceptions, of the likes of premium alcohol and spa treatments in a variety of locations, including an overwater sala (although a foot ritual and head massage are complimentary), but is otherwise remarkably comprehensive, from three pieces of laundry per guest each day and daily replenished minibar to snorkelling gear, kayaks and top-quality meals that can also be served in guest villas. Average daily rate, \$1455 plus taxes for two twin-share, including breakfast, snorkelling gear, non-motorised watersports equipment and speedboat transfers, for two twin-share, with seasonal variations. All-inclusive packages from \$2384 plus taxes. Check for deals geared to the Australian market that offer four nights for the cost of three.