

CAMBODIA

Glow tide

A unique underwater bioluminescent light show is just one highlight of this remote Cambodian resort that also shines a light on the local community. Jonathan Evans discovers the maritime magic of Song Saa Private Island.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER WISE



Not every resort asks you, several weeks before arrival, your favoured cuisine should you find yourself marooned on a remote island. But few oceanside getaways are anything like Song Saa Private Island, the stunning scenic hideaway neighbouring Cambodia's Koh Rong island. It is, in fact, two islands connected by a footbridge; Song Saa means "the sweethearts" in Khmer. Formerly known as "Sibling Island", it refers to the folkloric Koh Ouen ("young sister") and Koh Bong ("older brother").

A bumpy 007-style speedboat ride from Sihanoukville port launches my wife and me into this otherworldly idyll of sustainable luxury, founded in 2012 by pioneering conservationists Melita Koulmandas and Rory Hunter.

Everywhere you turn in this isolated haven, with its thatched-roof villas, is infused with uniqueness and distinction. Guests set their watches forward by one hour to synchronise

with "island time", prolonging sunset – a glorious purple light show best admired from exquisite fusion eatery Vista Bar & Restaurant. Song Saa's own wet-season microclimate is drier than that of the step-off point of Sihanoukville's, exemplified by drizzly nights and the occasional sprinkle of morning rain.

Sushumna Sanctuary, at the end of the winding Koh Ouen walkway, is the most calming outdoor spa I've experienced. As my therapist Sarit kneaded my aching body with jasmine oil, I gazed at uninhabited Koh Bong – an island left to nature's own devices – as crabs scuttled across the shallow-water rocks below our feet. As with all the world's finest hotels, Song Saa's staff pull off the uncanny knack of knowing what you're doing at all hours. They ask about activities you undertook earlier that day – a skill Cambodians are especially adept at perfecting.



OPPOSITE: Song Saa is an oceanside getaway, an otherworldly idyll of sustainable luxury.

FROM TOP: Relaxing by the beach; the overwater bungalows that are drawing travellers to this part of Cambodia.

Getting away but giving back

The resort also has a huge sustainability focus. Fijian-born Kiwi Donald Wong, the resort's GM, has taken the reins as manager and brand ambassador of Song Saa Collective – an umbrella name for the Private Island, Reserve and Song Saa Foundation. Helped by a revamped marketing strategy, social influencers and tour operators, Covid was mercifully kind to Song Saa, with the owners determined to remain open. Its über-desirable situation for socially distanced escapes ensured high occupancy as Cambodian borders remained open. Donald neither recruited nor trained new staffers; instead, trainees joined from Siem Reap's Sala Bai hospitality school.

This resort inspires fervent worker loyalty and many staff – Cambodian, Thai and Filipino – have worked here since it opened. As Filipino guest experience manager Harold Jubinal puts it, "I love my home country, but I consider Cambodia my second home."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: enjoy the incredible sunsets; the resort tables are made from sunken-boat wood; staff are loyal and long-serving. **OPPOSITE:** the resort is set on a remote archipelago with shallow water, coral reefs, sea turtles and dolphins.



The Song Saa Collective initiative aims to improve life for marine and human inhabitants of the archipelago. Community co-ordinator Chhun Sideth tells me sea turtles are released to freedom, coral reefs restored and even dolphins are protected near Sihanoukville port.

"We strongly believe in giving back to local communities," says Donald. "A stay here is not just about being at a luxury resort. You're directly contributing to the ethos of Song Saa, and the ethical charter of conservation and supporting locals." Case in point: the collective installed rainwater-harvesting facilities and filters in villages.



Stay at Song Saa





Song Saa Private Island

Get ready for the ultimate private island experience. Spend your days diving into the private pool or plunging straight into the ocean from your Overwater Villa, drying off on your sundeck or daybed before rinsing and repeating. Embrace inner peace with private yoga classes, personal training sessions or spellbinding spa rituals before dining on sumptuous locally sourced Khmer dishes with sweeping views at the Vista Bar and Restaurant.

It also brings vital medical and food relief to villagers in sparsely populated Prek Svay, known for its two waterfalls; now, international holidaymakers come to enjoy its simple new resorts and white-sand beaches. Schools and a pagoda were built in an area where electricity coverage was previously limited.

Local women remove plastic waste washed up from the mainland in beach clean-ups. One year, in typically resourceful style, they upcycled the trash into womenswear for a fashion show. Likewise, resort tables are made from sunken-boat wood; Song Saa

helped fishermen relocate to make way for the resort, and their marine ecosystem was preserved.

Our final engagement was the bioluminescence trip – Song Saa's protected marine area being the only place in the Gulf of Thailand where this underwater firefly show takes place. Snorkelling under the 9pm darkness, while rewarding, isn't mandatory; instead, you're treated to phosphorescent plankton darting, leaping or glowing through the waters, a sight even more beautiful when clouds obscure the moon.

At Driftwood's intimate bar we reflected on a one-of-a-kind trip with a Chilean merlot and French pinot noir. By the time we retired to the villa, happily inebriated on Song Saa's soulful spirit and visual wonders, a torch-brandishing security guard guided us to the safety of our villa.

In its decade-plus of designing dream vacations – it just became Cambodia's first awardee of the prestigious B-Corp Certification – this celebrated resort has perfected every single aspect of the art of hospitality.