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## OCEANS OF OPPORTUNITY

With customer demand at an all-time high and new-build ships on order from all the major players, there's never been a better time to grab a slice of the cruise market

**Plus: Winter-sun hotspots, Latin America, Indian Ocean, Cambodia, Namibia, how to make the most of sports sponsorship and on location with Swords Travel**

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# Status symbol

The opening of high-profile resorts is set to elevate Cambodia's status in the luxury stakes over the next few months, adding to its already rich cultural appeal

**AUTHOR: ROB GILL**

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he 12th-century temples of Angkor Wat have always made Cambodia an enticing destination – even though the country has been through plenty of turbulent times.

Visiting this vast complex of buildings has often been part of a side trip into Cambodia as part of a wider itinerary combining neighbouring south-east Asian countries such as Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

While Siem Reap, the gateway to Angkor Wat, has long been home to a cluster of luxury hotels, more upmarket resorts are starting to open across other parts of the country, giving Cambodia more traction as a standalone destination.

Among the newcomers will be the second property from the Bensley Collection – Shinta Mani Wild, a tented camp located in Cambodia's

South Cardamom National Park, three hours drive from the capital Phnom Penh, which is due to open for guests from November 1.

Shinta Mani Wild is a sister property to the existing Shinta Mani Angkor, which opened in January in Siem Reap. Bensley's second Cambodian resort will feature 14 one-bedroom and one two-bedroom tents, with guests even able to make a spectacular entrance by flying into the camp along a 380-metre zip line above the river and waterfalls. Pricing here is not for the faint-hearted either, starting from around \$2,345 per night (minimum stay of three nights), including all meals and drinks, guided activities and excursions, unlimited spa treatments and land transfers from Phnom Penh or Sihanoukville airports.

For a more beach-based experience in Cambodia, Alila Hotels and Resorts has opened its first resort in the destination, Alila Villas Koh Russey, on a private island (aka Bamboo Island) in the Koh Rong archipelago off the country's southern coast, close to the city of Sihanoukville. A 15-minute boat ride from the mainland, it features just 63 suites and villas including a four-bedroom villa with outdoor terrace and pool area.

Scheduled for a December opening is Six Senses Krabey Island, also a first for that brand in Cambodia, with 40 pool villas set around the 30-acre island off the southern coastline, just north of Koh Russey. These two properties will join existing private island resort Song Saa, near Koh Rong, which opened in 2012.



and the authenticity of its people and culture. "Cambodia has a sombre recent history but its people are finding their essence and soul, and are eager to share their love and passion for their Buddhist culture," he says. "Cambodia is still a developing nation, one that offers real, authentic and culturally-rich travel experiences."

### River adventure

One of the best ways to see larger areas of Cambodia is to take a river cruise along the Mekong from Phnom Penh through to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam.

There is also the option of cruising on Tonle Sap lake, south of Siem Reap, with the Tonle Sap river connecting to the Mekong in Phnom Penh to create a longer river cruise itinerary within Cambodia, something explored by Aqua Expeditions.

Francesco Galli Zugaro, chief executive and founder, says: "We are excited about the amazing luxury soft-adventure offerings and new products coming online in Cambodia. With half our cruises exploring the upper Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers, we are seeing a strong uptake in four and seven-night programmes year-round.

"There is a misconception that summer [May to September] is not a good time to come, but we are changing that mindset – it's one of my favourite times, with daily water-based excursions and biking, it's perfect to explore on the water and on shore."

Pandaw's Classic Mekong seven-night itinerary – from Ho Chi Minh City to Siem Reap – has added inclusive cultural experiences, such as an exploration by ox cart or bike to Koh Trong, a river hamlet where guests can explore rural Khmer life. A visit to Koh Okhna Tey, or Silk Island to study the entire silk-making process, from worms to weavers, is also an option. Meanwhile, Wendy Wu Tours is building its own 35-cabin ship, the \$10 million Victoria Mekong, which is due to start operating from 2020. Senior product and commercial manager for south-east Asia, Linh Farid, adds: "Cultural trips are by far the most popular in Cambodia, however there is a trend in river cruising, so we often combine the two." ■

### Pictured

1. Angkor Wat
2. Six Senses, Krabey Island
3. Shinta Mani Wild, Bensley Collection

### How to book it

InsideAsia Tours offers an 11-day Cambodia In Style itinerary priced from £3,170pp, including four days in Siem Reap/Angkor Wat, two in Phnom Penh and five in Koh Rong (international flights not included). Tel: 0117 244 3380, [insideasiatours.com](http://insideasiatours.com)

Looking further ahead, several major global hotel companies are also moving in – InterContinental, Marriott's Le Meridien and Accor's Novotel brand all have projects under way in Sihanoukville. There's also been development in Phnom Penh, with Rosewood opening a property earlier this year and Shangri-La making its debut in the capital in early 2020.

### Destination boost

Operators seem to be genuinely excited about how these new luxury properties will help entice customers to spend time at a Cambodian beach resort rather than more established options in Vietnam or Thailand.

Craig Johnstone, south-east Asia product executive at Audley Travel, says: "Traditionally it has been difficult for clients to enjoy a full luxury experience in Cambodia, as luxury properties were limited and almost all were located in Siem Reap. We are seeing a change in this now, with five-star properties now available in Phnom Penh and the islands."

Having more luxury hotel brands coming into Cambodia is already raising the profile of the destination, adds Nikki Hain, Indochina product

manager at Premier Holidays.

"Whenever any brand arrives in a country, it increases awareness, and that can only be a good thing," she says. "In the past, people would incorporate a stay in Cambodia with Vietnam and Thailand. However, that's not the case any more. Cambodia has become a major destination in its own right. We've noticed people wanting to spend two-week holidays just in Cambodia and incorporate the main sites with cultural experiences and a beach stay at the end."

Chris Greener, south-east Asia product executive for InsideAsia Tours, also agrees the country's reputation as a beach destination is growing.

"Cambodia has really emerged from the shadows as a luxury beach destination – think Thailand without the crowds," he says. "Koh Rong in particular has become more accessible over the last few years with new luxury hotels, such as the Royal Sands [which opened in April 2018], being built here."

Meanwhile Jef Moons, owner of Knai Bang Chatt, a hotel located in the former French colonial beach resort of Kep, says Cambodia's key strength lies in offering experiential travel