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GLOBAL HOTEL DESIGN

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Soho Farmhouse

Soho House founder Nick Jones on the group's rural Oxfordshire resort

Phum Baitang

Zannier Hotels enters Cambodia with an authentic Khmer village in Siem Reap

The Old Clare

Unlisted Collection brings lifestyle hospitality and globally-renowned chefs to Sydney



HOTEL REVIEW



Phum Baitang

SIEM REAP

To evoke the atmosphere of a Cambodian village, AW2 has collaborated with Zannier Hotels, embedding a retreat into the natural landscape while interweaving interiors with artisanal finds.

Words: Neema Dhilon | Photography: Courtesy of Zannier Hotels





Dragonflies dance over an expansive vista of paddy fields and lemongrass terraces, providing a verdant backdrop to clusters of stilted homes and wooden pavilions. Such is the authenticity of the first luxury rural retreat to open in Siem Reap that it is easy to think Phum Baitang is the real thing – a Khmer village.

This guiding principle of authenticity is at the core of Arnaud Zannier's belief that 'simplicity is the ultimate sophistication'. Phum Baitang is the second property to open as part of his Zannier Hotels collection – the first, an intimate 12-suite hideaway in the French Alps began operations in 2011. Still, hospitality is a relatively new business activity for the Zannier family, whose entrepreneurial roots are embedded in textiles and fashion, with viticulture another growing concern. So why would a French national residing in Belgium choose Cambodia for his second hotel project? "My father and I have been coming to south-east Asia for years and we support two Cambodian orphanages through our foundation," explains Zannier. "Having acquired land here, we recognised the potential of Siem Reap as a fast-growing tourist destination. While there's so much history and culture within the temple complex of Angkor, we felt we could potentially introduce another dimension to the visitor experience by developing a resort where guests can absorb a genuine sense of the country, of the Cambodian lifestyle."

Sensitive to its rural surroundings on the outskirts of Siem

Reap, away from the town's hustle and bustle where other upscale properties are grouped, Phum Baitang is distinctive not least for the eight hectares of land it occupies. As part of his desire that the resort should be conducive to longer stays – typically, travellers drop into Siem Reap for two to three nights as part of a multi-location itinerary – Zannier knew he had to create a destination that would encourage cultural immersion while providing five-star comfort. He turned to Réda Amalou, partner and founder of Paris-based architecture and interior design practice AW2, to realise his concept of a green village set in the Cambodian countryside.

"Arnaud was looking for a firm with relevant experience, and we know Cambodia and the Indochina region well," Amalou says. "So, for us, it wasn't a case of discovering Khmer culture but more about defining what we wanted to use as a reference. Deep awareness of local traditions makes it easier to understand how the way of life and considerations such as climate have a strong influence on construction techniques."

This knowledge of the architectural vernacular informs the retreat's design from the masterplan to interiors. Arrival onto site through a landscaped tunnel of greenery gives little away until guests emerge from the lobby pavilion out to the central rice fields, punctuated with raised wooden pathways and illuminated by torchlight. Trees, planting and south-east Asian vegetation species have been largely





Above: The 45 villas, arranged as single-space houses and oriented to maximise both views and privacy, maintain references to Khmer culture with wooden shutters and criss-cross window panels. Inside, organic materials continue the natural aesthetic.

introduced as a textured garden layer springing up from the land. Organised at both ends of this organic landscape on a sunrise-sunset axis are the public areas. Designed as a series of pavilions notable for its sequence of pitched roofs, Bay Phsar restaurant and the Pool Bar spill out onto a 50-metre infinity pool – its ‘invisible’ wall allowing the water’s edge to merge with the stepped landscape beyond. On the other, the lobby pavilion is joined by Hang Bay restaurant and an atmospheric Cigar & Cocktail Lounge, housed in a century-old Cambodian farmhouse painstakingly moved and re-erected onsite – representing the only structure not custom-built for the resort.

Stilt construction and sloped roofs covered in thatch palm or timber shingles – common local features designed to cope with the high waters of the rainy season – characterise Phum Baitang’s public buildings. Accommodation clusters, arranged as single-space houses and oriented to maximise both views and privacy, maintain references to Khmer culture with wooden shutters and criss-cross window panels adding architectural interest. Yet AW2 has not been a slave to traditional techniques, especially when they have hindered environmentally sound practices. The design has also been balanced to avoid a pastiche. “We haven’t created copies of local ‘style’, rather reinterpreted elements into our own language and integrated them into a luxury resort environment,” Amalou points out. “References such as wooden cladding – incorporating doum chen timber for its

beautiful grey colour – give authenticity and meaning but they never try to be what they are not.”

A particularly successful aspect is the outdoor living space provided with each of the 45 spacious villas. Private pools lined in honed and tumbled granite characterise 20 of the villas while the others feature generous terraces as a connection to the external landscape. Generating space in all are the high-pitched ceilings under which substantial and organic materials have been simply treated to continue the natural aesthetic. There’s a hardwood known as koki used for the floors and selected handmade furniture; walls in places are covered with a tadelakt-type render; the weighty freestanding bathtub is crafted from natural stone with a cement finish; and even the basins are carved as units from local stone. Hues of ‘Zannier green’, earth red and beige retain the understatement of the accommodation, with most sofas and chairs custom-made, complemented by uniquely shaped petrified wood sidetables sourced from Indonesia. Bathroom lamps, meanwhile, nod to local fishermen’s nets. Adding the quirkiest touches, however, are the artefacts that have been accumulated by Zannier’s in-house team to elevate the interior design.

“We spent three years travelling around south-east Asia, including expeditions into villages, to collect three large containers of antiques, furniture, fittings and artisan-made accessories,” reveals Zannier. “In fact, we ended up sourcing from antique markets and shops around