

# BILLIONAIRE



## THE VISIONARIES ISSUE BEYOND THE HORIZON

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# An Ancient Song

The husband-and-wife team behind an award-winning sustainable resort, Song Saa Private Island, are turning their hands to another eco community in Cambodia.

by Tara Loader Wilkinson

In the foothills of Cambodia's Phnom Kulen, the sacred mountain range that once formed the backdrop of the Khmer Empire, lies the 10th century Cambodian temple, Banteay Srei. Referred to as the Citadel of Beauty, intricately carved with deities and mythical creatures, this ancient sandstone temple is one of Angkor Wat's most treasured relics. So much so, that when writer André Malraux stole four devatas from it in the 1920s, it sparked an international outrage, culminating in his arrest. A five-minute drive from this spiritual site, the husband-and-wife team behind the award-winning Song Saa Private Island on the Koh Rong Archipelago are turning their hands to another eco-community.





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FROM TOP: KULEN MOUNTAIN'S WATERFALL, SIEM REAP © DMITRY V. PETRENKO. SUNRISE AT BANTEAY SREY, SIEM REAP. CLEANING LOTUS FLOWER STEMS IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY.



Australian couple Rory and Melita Hunter first fell in love with Cambodia in 2005 when sailing around the sparkling, untouristed coast on their honeymoon. They dreamed up a plan to build a sustainable sanctuary of uncompromising luxury, opening the doors of their island resort in 2012. As well as adopting Cambodia as their new home, they also adopted a six-month-old Cambodian baby, named Naryth.

Now Naryth is a handsome 10 year-old, and the Hunters are about to launch their second project: Song Saa Reserve. Back on the mainland, close to the gateway city of Siem Reap, over the years they purchased a vast patchwork of 230 hectares of disused farmland in a bid to create a new residential and hotel community. Naturally, the project will bear the stamp of their trademark eco-approach. Around half — 110 hectares — of the land will be set aside as a rainforest restoration reserve, bringing back indigenous flora and fauna and never to be developed.

The rest will be divided into 54 plots forming the perimeter of a 35-hectare lake, for sale to individuals and companies as private villas and boutique hotels. These will integrate with a series of sustainability-based initiatives, including a solar farm, a hospitality training centre, permaculture gardens and a 'Green School'.

The first tranche of 14 plots went on sale earlier this year. Ranging in size from 1,500 square metres to 5,000 square metres, priced between US\$25-US\$30 per square metre, all 14 were snapped up within a week.

"No one's ever sold villas in Siem Reap before, so it was a bit of a test to see if individuals related to the values of the project," says Rory Hunter over the phone. The majority of buyers were local Cambodians, something he says he was very pleased with. "Cambodians are really proud of what Song Saa has done in their country, particularly on the sustainability side," he adds.

*“This project allows Cambodia to show the world how tourism, done right, is a powerful means for lifting people out of poverty and protecting the environment.” — Rory Hunter.*

The Song Saa Foundation, launched in tandem with Song Saa Private Island, has to date raised US\$1.5 million for local causes from marine conservation to education and healthcare, predominantly through guest donations and grants. But the impact is far greater than this, says Rory. “For example, for the last five years we’ve brought 40 doctors from the US over to the island for a week and conducted clinics in all the villages of Koh Rong providing much needed access to basic healthcare, dentistry, women’s health, and vaccinations.”

Through the new resort it will be able to further scale, Rory says. As a starting point, the Song Saa Reserve will employ 3,500 people directly and support many more families by proxy. But buyers into the resort will be required to pay US\$0.50/sqm each year to the foundation to help finance the work, so they’re both metaphorically and literally “invested” in the mission.

Rory says: “This project allows Cambodia to show the world how tourism, done right, is a powerful means for lifting people out of poverty and protecting the environment, while delivering lifetime experiences to global travellers and attractive returns to our shareholders.”

An additional 40 plots will come to market over the next three years, says Rory, and as Cambodia permits foreign ownership, it presents an attractive foothold in an emerging Asian market. Tourism numbers are projected to increase beyond the three-million mark in Siem Reap by 2020, and a new airport is planned with a capacity for 10 million travellers per annum. There are very few high-end alternatives close to Siem Reap, says Rory, fewer still with a responsible tourism offering. “It’s a way of buying into a vision that is both sustainable and accessible,” he says.

Of the available plots, the Hunters have held back one to create a five-star boutique hotel in a style similar to that on Song Saa Private Island. Although designs are still work in progress, it will likely comprise around 40 rooms and 10 villas and be open in two or three years. If it’s anything like its sister resort it will be generously ‘rough luxe’, lovingly decked in upcycled driftwood and timber, full of interesting pieces Melita picks up on her travels: from buffalo cartwheels to washed-up fishing boats.

And, in all likelihood, it will take inspiration from its backdrop of the Phnom Kulen mountain range, from where thousands of years ago sandstone was fetched painstakingly to build the holy Banteay Srei temple. Hindus and Buddhists still make an annual pilgrimage to this sacred site, scattered with waterfalls, relics and lush green jungle.

“We underestimated how meaningful this site was to Cambodians, to be able to build a home with such proximity to the temples and mountains,” says Rory, something he realised after the high demand from locals for the first tranche of sites. “It really represents the birthplace of Angkor.”

With responsible tourism projects such as Song Saa, local communities will continue to be able to thrive in the birthplace of their ancestors, for many years to come. ◇



CO-FOUNDERS OF SONG SAA  
COLLECTIVE, MELITA KOULMANDAS  
HUNTER AND RORY HUNTER

