

GOING PRIVATE

A new breed of luxury villas combine comfort with adventure, writes Lauren Steventon.

Song Saa Private Island, Cambodia's first luxury private island resort, features rustic chic design.

RORY HUNTER and his wife discovered the untouched Cambodian island of Song Saa by accident.

"We didn't set out to develop a private island," says Hunter. "It was only when we rented a fishing boat for two weeks that we discovered this amazing archipelago. One night we moored up and spent the evening watching the sun set, eating fresh prawns and had one of the most peaceful and memorable experiences of our lives. We thought then how amazing it would be to share this with other people."

And so the idea for a different kind of private island retreat was born. The Hunters represent a new breed of luxury traveller who want to combine service and style with an authentic and adventurous experience.

Song Saa, which opens early next year, will appeal to guests who "may be high net-worth individuals today, but were backpacking around the world 20-30 years ago. While their bank balances may have changed, their sense of adventure hasn't," says Rory.

Song Saa spans the islands of Koh Ouen and Koh Bong in the rarely visited Cambodian Koh Rang archipelago. There are the usual villas, a spa and wellness centre, watersports and pool. However, Song Saa is not only about indulging, but indulging in Cambodia. "The goal is to ensure each guest feels like they are staying on their own private island, whilst never losing the sense of place," says Hunter.

The 27 villas have been constructed from sustainable materials in the style of a Cambodian fishing village. As little as possible has been developed - the virgin rainforest, the wildlife and the local people are all still there. Guests can kayak up fresh water estuaries, hike through rainforest to waterfalls, visit fishing villages and engage with the conservation research programs alongside resident scientists.

Similarly, executive chef Neil Wager has imbued the cuisine with a touch of Cambodian heritage. Formerly of North Island in the Seychelles, Wager spent months visiting remote Khmer villages to pick up local tips.

"The unique flavours of Khmer cuisine are relatively unknown to the world. Everything on every plate will be grown locally and our seafood sourced from Cambodia's growing community of sustainable fishermen," he says. "I'm on a personal journey to create a menu that blends old and new."

The Hunters are not the only ones to recognise the possibility for a new kind of luxury retreat. Ariara is in the Calamian Islands of the Philippines, one of the most bio-diverse marine areas in the world. Owner Charles McCulloch was aiming for "something without the commercial feel of a hotel, more personal, more remote and private, but still with all the luxuries".

Alongside this luxury, there is a distinctly Filipino feel: the buildings have been designed by architect Jorge Yulo

and every item of furniture made by local craftsmen using traditional skills, much of it in the island's own workshop.

"Everything about staying on Ariara is an adventure," says McCulloch. "From diving and boating, or kayaking to visiting neighbouring islands and villages." Of course, if you just want enjoy the uninterrupted ocean view or lounge in the pool, that's fine too.

Unlike Cambodia and the Philippines, Malaysia is no stranger to luxury travellers. The resorts of Langkawi easily rival their Indian Ocean cousins. But they are not exactly adventurous. Then there's Pangkor Laut: 120 hectares of island have been minimally developed - just enough to provide 140 luxury villas and eight new estates.

The estates provide guests with helicopter transfer, butler, private infinity-edge pool and use of a yacht - in short, all of the hallmarks of a luxury island retreat. However, guests are also encouraged to explore the heritage of the area, whether that is excursions to visit the villages and temples of neighbouring Pangkor Island, batik painting in Emerald Bay, or exploring the jungle with resident naturalist Uncle Yip.

Whereas on many Malaysian islands visitors might share the beach and jungle with guests from other resorts, on Pangkor Laut it will be macaque monkeys, monitor lizards and yellow-pied hornbills. A chance to truly experience the island's heritage - and not a backpack in sight. **S**

ISLE BE THERE

Song Saa (songsaa.com): Offers rates from US\$668 per person per night, including speedboat transfer.



Ariara Island (ariaraisland.com): Available from US\$295 per person per night based on a party of 15-17 guests in low season.



Pangkor Laut (pangkorlautresort.com): Rates from US\$350 or Estates from US\$8,000 for three nights.

