

## A hotel with heart and soul

The Shinta Mani hotel in Cambodia has become a poster child for responsible tourism

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The Calgary-based NGO, Future Group, has reported that the most conservative number of prostitutes and sex slaves in Cambodia alone is between 40,000 and 50,000, and higher estimates range between 80,000 and 100,000.

Many of the children are from communities so poor that girls and boys as young as six are actually sold to brothels by their own families. The dark underbelly of southeast Asia is all the more reason to take responsible tourism seriously. If you go, consider taking a proactive approach.

On a recent trip to Cambodia, my son Daniel and I discovered that you can be an active witness to the magnificence of the region and still leave a positive footprint. Amazingly, we accomplished this not by joining an aid organization, but by staying at a hotel.

The Shinta Mani Hotel and Hospitality Institute is a lovely 18-room boutique hotel in Siem Reap. Facilities include spacious and well-appointed rooms, an atmospheric outdoor restaurant and air-conditioned indoor dining room, and a spa with the elegance and serenity one would expect of a five-star property.

Although the Shinta Mani is loaded with class and charm, there is a heart and soul to this place that was apparent from the moment we were greeted by the smiling young staff.

As responsible tourism goes, this hotel is a poster child.

Owner Sokhoun Chanpreda founded the Hospitality Training Institute in 2004 - the first class of 21 young people selected from the poorest of families graduated in 2005.



CREDIT: Michael Wuitchuk, for the Calgary Herald

The Shinta Mani Hotel and Hospitality Institute in Siem Riep, Cambodia is noted for giving back to its community in a variety of innovative ways.



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Michael Wuitchuk and son Daniel met with villagers to donate a host of essential items.

Students, all of whom were considered "at risk" due to extreme poverty, can choose between cooking, serving, housekeeping, reception and spa services - each are taught in nine-month modules.

The school is funded entirely with hotel funds and donations from guests and others from overseas.

We were so impressed with the Hospitality Training Institute that we extended our stay to accompany Theany, the hotel's "community liaison officer," on one of her forays into the many poor villages around Siem Reap.

We drove in the hotel pickup truck loaded with treadle sewing machines, backpacks filled with school supplies, bags of rice, vegetable seeds and a bicycle - and watched Theany and her staff do aid work, Shinta Mani style.

The model is simple - use the labours of salaried hotel staff (who are dedicated to giving their time - the communities are, after all, their own communities), donate \$5 from every guest night to the community program, and provide an opportunity for guests to both see the program in action and donate to specific projects. Among the range of options, guests can contribute a mechanical water well (\$100), a pair of pigs (\$80) or even a small concrete house (\$1,250).

We visited villages that had been working with the Shinta Mani staff for some time, and some that were new to the community program. The villages that had received water wells had well maintained vegetable plots and a few small concrete houses - in these communities the women and children turned out in numbers, their hands extended in prayerful thanks.

In a village new to the Shinta Mani program, we met a family that had been recently chosen to receive a well - their entire worldly possessions were the clothes on their backs and a tired set of cooking pans.

These people and their neighbours seemed both desperate and skeptical - they were clearly not used to receiving aid or good news of any kind.

Later, while sitting in the hotel's lovely outdoor restaurant, general manager and Sri Lankan ex-pat Chitra Vincent told us that Shinta Mani means "the gem that provides for all" in Sanskrit - the place could not be better named.

Some numbers

- . We met two teachers in rural schools - each had four years of experience after teacher training and each made \$20 a month.
- . Theany's husband is a policeman - she says he makes \$25 a month.
- . A student at the Shinta Mani Hospitality Institute receives a uniform, \$10 a month



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The Institute of Hospitality Training is funded entirely with hotel funds and donations from guests and others from overseas.



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Children saying "thank-you" for packs with school supplies and a uniform.

and four kilos of rice per week for their families.

. When hired as employees, they earn \$50 a month while on three-month probation, and \$80 a month when full time.

If you go

. Skip the air-conditioned cars to the temples - take a tuk tuk. Far cheaper (\$10-\$14 and they wait at each temple), and far more fun.

. Avoid the cheap massages in Siem Reap - and for the rest of Asia for that matter. Go to a reputable spa, pay \$40-\$50 for a professional massage as good as anywhere. I suggest the Shinta Mani or Victoria Spas in Siem Reap. The Victoria also has wonderful spas in Sapa and Hoi An, Vietnam.

. Tip: browse the booking companies, read the reviews, but always go to the hotel website itself - I have found better rates than through internet "discounters."

. Read, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, by Somaly Mam, Virago Press.

. Check out, [thefuturegroup.org](http://thefuturegroup.org)

. Accommodation: The Shinta Mani Hotel internet rates, about \$100 plus tax double [shintamani.com](http://shintamani.com)

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