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ASIA & AUSTRALASIA *Continued from page 94*

AUSTRALIA **THE DARLING** Sydney

The Darling carries the unmistakable stamp of a metropolitan art gallery: suspended above the entrance is a giant sculpture of a gliding swallow; behind the reception desk is an installation of bronze leaves on a vivid red panel; two enormous Akira Isogawa rugs create intimate spaces within the cathedral-sized lobby. Housed in a 16-storey glass tower, The Darling is attached to The Star casino, a glitzy complex recently renovated at a cost of £590 million. Views from its 171 rooms are of the historic port and city-centre skyline with the famous Harbour Bridge in the middle distance; they are best enjoyed from the Adored, Jewel and Stellar suites on the upper floors. Entry-level

Darling rooms are decorated in masculine shades of flax, latte and grey with plum accents on the handmade Venetian glasses, bathrobes, towels, bed linen and cushions; the pillow menu has no fewer than 12 options; there are Delonghi Nespresso machines and iPod docking stations. The spa – Sydney's largest – has 16 treatment rooms and two hammams in a labyrinthine complex of subtly lit corridors adorned with candlelit black granite bowls and heavy bronze sculptures. The hotel's Sokyō restaurant serves A-grade Japanese cuisine from a Nobu-trained chef, and there are also 20 new restaurants, bars and cafés in the casino complex.

WHEN TO GO January for summer and the Sydney Festival; May and June for cooler, drier weather.

ROOM TO BOOK Splash out on a Jewel or Adored suite on the harbour side. 00 61 2 9777 9888; www.thedarling.com.au. Doubles from A\$399 (about £270)

WILDMAN WILDERNESS LODGE Mary River Wetlands, Northern Territory

A comfortable two-hour drive from Darwin, Wildman Wilderness Lodge is a gateway to the raw, compelling beauty of Australia's tropical north at a reasonable, half-board

price. Its mission is to give travellers an insight into the cultures, communities and environment of this ecologically sensitive region, just 12 miles from the World Heritage Site of Kakadu National Park. There is plenty of wildlife (crocodiles, water buffalo, wallabies, monitor lizards, dingoes, flying foxes and prolific birdlife) and the lodge is in a prime spot from which to enjoy the spectacular Mary River wetlands ecosystem. Activities include Aboriginal cultural tours, cruises across the flood plain in air-boats (wet season) or four-wheel-drives (dry season), day tours to Kakadu, scenic helicopter flights and top-of-the-line barramundi fishing. The homestead and cabins may give some visitors a sense of déjà vu: after the recent closure of Wrotham Park Station, its lodge infrastructure was transported 2,800km from the Cairns hinterland to Mary River. The 10 air-conditioned cabins salvaged from Wrotham offer the most luxurious accommodation; there are also 10 double safari tents and five family tents sleeping up to four. All the tents have ceiling fans and en-suite bathrooms. Three-course dinners and full breakfasts are included in the price and are served at the very stylish homestead.

WHEN TO GO Wildman is open from 1 March to 30 November. The dry season between May–September is most comfortable,

but the wet season is when the flood plains are at their most scenically beautiful.

ROOM TO BOOK One of the air-conditioned cabins. 00 61 8 8978 8955; www.wildmanwildernesslodge.com.au. Cabins (sleeping two) from A\$630 (about £425); tents (sleeping two) from £330. Prices include breakfast and dinner

CAMBODIA **SONG SAA PRIVATE ISLAND**

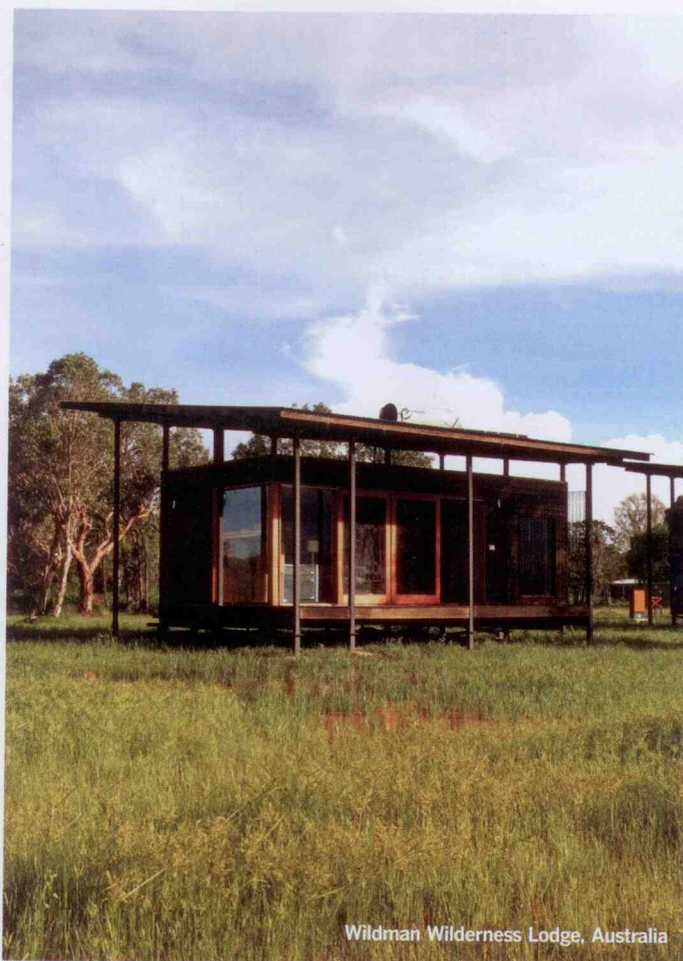
Occupying two diminutive isles off the Cambodian coast, Song Saa Private Island enjoys splendid isolation. Your neighbours in the archipelago are a few fishing villages, and the animals of the rainforest. We visited before the official opening (floods in Thailand had delayed construction by three months), but despite initial mishaps, Song Saa looks set to seduce. Its 27 thatched villas are scattered variously over a forest-covered hill, along the water's edge, and above the water on stilts; they all have secluded terraces and private pools. Original artworks and individual design details add a distinctive touch (such as a glass floor in the lounge area of one villa, with an aquarium view of fish in the sea below). Meals are served at the over-water restaurant, beside the infinity pool (or even in it), in your villa, on the beach – and chef Neil Wager's cuisine is superb. There's a spa, and activities include snorkelling, kayaking, and boat trips to villages on neighbouring islands. This really is getting away from it all, and to add to Song Saa's honeymoon appeal, a tiny temple on a nearby island can be used for civil wedding ceremonies or Buddhist blessings. There's a serious environmental remit, too: a marine reserve extends 200 metres from the outer edge of the coral reefs that fringe both islands, and a highly qualified conservation team can fill you in on projects through which Song Saa is blazing a trail for responsible development in the archipelago.

WHEN TO GO The cool part of the dry season: November to February.

ROOM TO BOOK Villa 22 offers not only a private pool, but its own little stretch of sandy beach-terrace. 00 855 236 860360; www.songsaa.com. From US\$1,902 per villa per night, including transfers from mainland, meals, drinks (house wines, spirits, beers and soft drinks), laundry and use of kayaks, snorkelling gear and other resort equipment

CHINA **BANYAN TREE MACAU**

There's an old primary-school teachers' trick: if children get rowdy, don't raise your voice – lower it. The kids will instinctively quiet down to listen. The same goes for luxury. It doesn't have to shout. It should whisper. Amid the gaudy lights and round-the-clock madness of the vast new Galaxy Resort in Macau, casino



Wildman Wilderness Lodge, Australia

HOT LIST 2012

THE PARK ON HOLIDAY BEACH

Goa

Right in the heart of the buzzing Calangute strip in North Goa, this new beachfront hotel couldn't be better placed for those wanting to be in the thick of Goa's vibrant holiday scene. It's the latest addition to the Park Hotel group, which now has 10 designer hotels across India. Owner Priya Paul is a passionate art collector and design aficionado and her touch is clearly evident in this new 30-room property. Exclusively commissioned works of art dominate the public spaces, including the spectacular, glass-mosaic fish by acclaimed Goan-based artist Yahel Chirinian which hangs above the reception desk. On the beach directly in front of the hotel is an enormous pink sculpture of a naked, well-rounded woman titled 'Big Mama' by artist Anil Kumar. Each of the all-white bedrooms has a different portrait by fashion photographer Rohit Chawla, and groups of friends and families can be heard swapping rooms as they choose their preferred image. The Park on Holiday Beach is a playground for the Indian Jet Set with two happening venues, the Love restaurant and Peace Bar, both beautifully positioned on the beachfront overlooking the Arabian Sea. The soundtrack begins with chilled sunset music and ramps up to full-on progressive tech music as the night hots up. During the day, the compact pool is lined with colourful cabanas for relaxation and spa treatments.

WHEN TO GO The Indian winter, November to February, is the most comfortable season; but Goa is increasingly a year-round destination even in the heavy monsoon months of June, July and August.

ROOM TO BOOK The two deluxe suites at the front of the property (with balconies) are the only rooms with beach views. 00 91 832 2267600; www.theparkhotels.com. Doubles from Rs10,363 (about £130)

VIVANTA BY TAJ – BEKAL Kerala

Life's tough at this new, 71-room spa resort in undiscovered north Kerala. Should I order a Mojito or a Mai-tai cocktail? Take a spa treatment, go for a walk on the beach, or have a gentle kayak on the serene backwaters? Set on 30 acres of land fronted by Kappil Beach, 80km from Mangalore airport, the resort has wonderful views of the Arabian Sea. The 17th-century fort of Bekal, the largest in Kerala, is a 40-minute walk away and guests can also walk or cycle on paths along the pretty backwater, fringed with dense palm groves. The secluded beach is perfect for paddling, but the currents can be dangerous so swimming is restricted to the infinity pool. The distinctive architecture with its sweeping lines and high, vaulted ceilings fashioned from hand-woven bamboo was



inspired by *kettuvallam*, the traditional Kerala boats. The public areas weave around beautiful water gardens and there is an abundance of local stone sculptures in the Hindu tradition as well as Islamic-inspired artworks and lighting. Every room has a mural, some hand-painted by local artists. The spacious Jiva Spa is at the core of the resort with eight suites offering traditional Ayurvedic treatments and a dedicated Ayurvedic dining room and juice bar; there is a separate yoga pavilion. The energetic and passionate chef, Valentine Athaide, produces authentic Kerala cuisine and a fresh seafood menu. The resort's signature Sadya lunch is a delicious banquet served on banana leaves and features homemade pickles and speciality curries.

WHEN TO GO The most comfortable time is between December and February, when the skies are clear and the daytime temperatures don't exceed 32°C.

ROOM TO BOOK The 10 Premium Indulgence Villas have private plunge pools and outdoor bathrooms. For greater privacy the Deluxe Delight rooms have a similar footprint but have enclosed courtyards. Both are well worth the extra price. 00 91 467 661 6612; www.vivantabytaj.com. Doubles from Rs15,235 (about £195)

THAILAND THE ST REGIS BANGKOK

What views! From the floor-to-ceiling windows of almost every room of the St

Regis you get terrific panoramas over the energetic Thai capital. In the evening a luminescent world of neon stretches out. By day there are outlooks over the Legoland-like Skytrain and bird's-eye views straight on to the golf course of the (very) exclusive Royal Bangkok Sports Club. The epicurean breakfasts at Viu restaurant on the 12th floor tend to be drawn-out as guests gaze on to the green far below, mesmerised by the action. The hotel building is in a prime position, just along from the Grand Hyatt and next door to the Four Seasons. The St Regis has an edge over these rivals thanks to its location right opposite Rajadamri skytrain station. The clever layout allows for two dramatic entrances: one on the second floor, from which a walkway leads to the skytrain; the other at street level, where you step into a huge lobby off which are two restaurants: a franchise Zuma; and Jojo, an upscale Italian trattoria. From there a lift scoots you up to the 12th-floor reception and the 'Drawing Room', a chic bar area that capitalises on those jawdropping views. Above are the 227 rooms (51 of them suites), decorated in variations of soothing cream, taupe and pale blue and furnished with silks and lush carpets. There's a very generous sense of space: corridors are wide; even the standard rooms are exceptionally big; bathrooms accommodate a separate rainforest shower and bath with ease.

devised for serious oenophiles and a 15th-floor leisure complex with gym, outdoor infinity pool and Elemis spa where the relaxation areas are open to all guests whether or not they book treatments.

WHEN TO GO November, December and January offer the best weather.

ROOM TO BOOK A corner Caroline Aster Suite with spectacular views, stylishly comfy sitting room and prodigious bathroom. 00 800 325 78734; www.stregis.com/bangkok. Doubles from 8,710 baht (about £180)

VIETNAM ANANTARA MUI NE RESORT & SPA

The views from the entrance of Anantara's first Vietnam resort embody its Sanskrit name, which means 'without end'. From the raised reception, guests can peer down at the airy L'Anmien restaurant, with its tables and chairs that spill out onto a low deck bordering a lotus pond. A lagoon extends through the centre of the resort until a rocky transition transforms it into a sleek, slate-grey pool flanked by loungers, a swim-up bar and palm trees. Beyond is the chalky sand beach and endless sea, where *thùng chai* (Vietnam's famous bamboo fishing boats) bob on the waves. At Anantara's seaside restaurant – named in the boats' honour – couples relax in rattan chairs and dine on fresh seafood, sheltered from the wind by glass screens. The 89 rooms, suites, and villas have spacious, slate-tiled showers and baths; the 20 private-pool villas have rain showers set in tropical gardens. All incorporate images of *thùng* in the decor. Anantara's intimate spa also draws inspiration from the region: the dragonfruit body polish is made from the locally farmed delicacy; vanilla grown in the region is infused into the oil for the four-hand massage. Vanilla is also used in executive chef Alain Nguyen's signature sauce. The Alain Ducasse-trained chef's carefully tailored degustation menu is sensational and guests are invited to choose their dining venue – glass-encased wine cellar, a candle-lit *thùng* on the beach – in which to sample his French cooking, infused with his Vietnamese heritage and passion for experimentation.

WHEN TO GO In the dry season, November to April.

ROOM TO BOOK The one-bedroom beachfront pool villa for unobstructed sea views from the bed or private pool. 00 84 62 3741 888; www.anantara.com. Doubles from US\$180

FUSION MAIA RESORT Danang

Viewed from the stretch of road along China Beach, the Fusion Maia doesn't look like a Hot List hotel. But tucked away behind the tall granite walls there are 87 private-pool suites and villas, all with