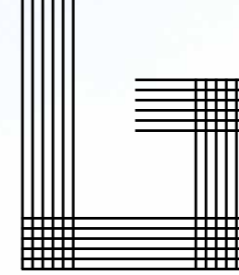


Guests of the new  
Cardamom Tented  
Camp kayaking on  
the Preak Tachan  
in Botum Sakor  
National Park.  
Opposite: An early  
morning boat ride  
on the same river.

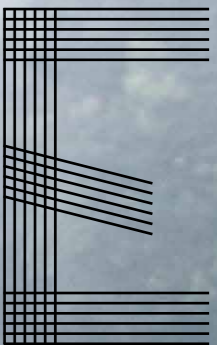
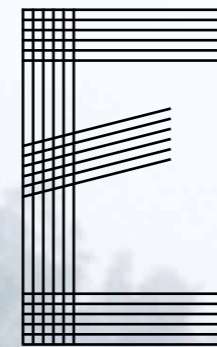
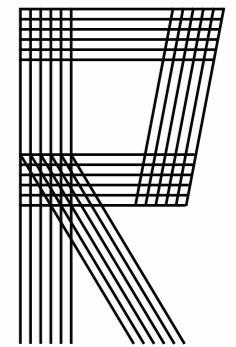


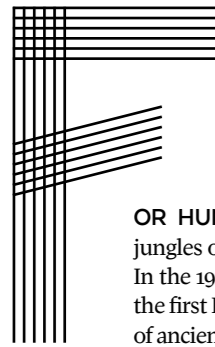
# GREEN DREAMS

ENCOMPASSING  
THE LARGEST TRACT  
OF UNBROKEN  
RAIN FOREST  
IN SOUTHEAST  
ASIA, CAMBODIA'S  
CARDAMOM  
MOUNTAINS  
HAVE LONG  
BEEN PLAGUED  
BY RAMPANT  
DEFORESTATION  
AND POACHING. BUT  
A NEW GENERATION  
OF DEDICATED  
CONSERVATIONISTS  
IS HELPING TO  
PROTECT THIS  
VAST WILDERNESS,  
BACKED BY  
ECOTOURISM  
INITIATIVES THAT  
ARE ONLY NOW  
BEGINNING TO PUT  
DOWN ROOTS.

BY CLAIRE KNOX

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
LAURYN ISHAK





FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, the misty, mysterious jungles of Cambodia have enticed intrepid adventurers. In the 19th century, French explorer Henri Mouhot was the first European to stumble upon the overgrown ruins of ancient Angkor. The forested plateau of Phnom Kulen, once a Khmer Rouge stronghold, is now known to harbor “lost” temple-cities too. And in the country’s southwest, the wild Cardamom Mountains have in recent times divulged secrets of their own, including hoards of burial jars belonging to some long-forgotten tribe and a growing number of new species, among them a previously unrecorded legless amphibian and a carnivorous plant dubbed *Nepenthes holdenii*.

When I moved to Cambodia in 2012 for a two-year stint at the *Phnom Penh Post*, I had this kind of exotic jungle imagery seared into my mind. I’d read about the Cardamom range and how it encompasses the single largest tract of uninterrupted rain forest left in Southeast Asia. I also learned that this biodiversity hot spot is home to significant populations of rare wildlife, including a staggering 70 species on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. I imagined all sorts of Indiana Jones-style adventures that my new job might entail: research trips with renowned archaeologists; treks to tribal villages; perhaps even spotting an Indochinese tiger.

That was all pretty naïve, of course. My first month in the *Post*’s newsroom provided a sad introduction to the true state of affairs in Cambodia’s forests. I was aware that illegal logging and poaching were serious issues, but I hadn’t appreciated the sheer scale of forest destruction. From the deciduous bushland of Monduliri in the east, to the Prey Lang forest in the north, the country’s tree cover was rapidly disappearing, as was its wildlife: in 2016, the Indochinese tiger was declared “functionally extinct” in Cambodia. Satellite data shows that since 2001, Cambodia has lost more than 1.75 million hectares of forest. Its rate of deforestation is accelerating faster than any other country in the world.

In my first year in Phnom Penh, the Cardamom Mountains appeared frequently in the headlines. Plans were moving forward on a controversial Chinese-built hydro dam project in the Areng Valley, a sacred and biodiverse region that is home to one of Cambodia’s oldest ethnic groups, the Chong. Destructive sand dredging along the Taitai River had become incessant. But by far the biggest story of 2012 was the murder of Chut Wutty, an outspoken environmental activist and founder of the Phnom Penh-based environmental watchdog Natural Resources Protection Group. A few months before I arrived, Wutty had been shot dead by an unidentified military policeman while taking two journalists to witness the deforestation of the Cardamoms. Many of my new colleagues had worked with him; some had been his friends.

Since then, however, there have been some glimmers of hope. In 2013, the government earmarked the mountain range as a key area for ecotourism development, working alongside conservation groups to establish village homestays and turn poachers and loggers into tour guides. And 2016 saw the creation of Southern Cardamom National Park, which joins together six existing national parks to

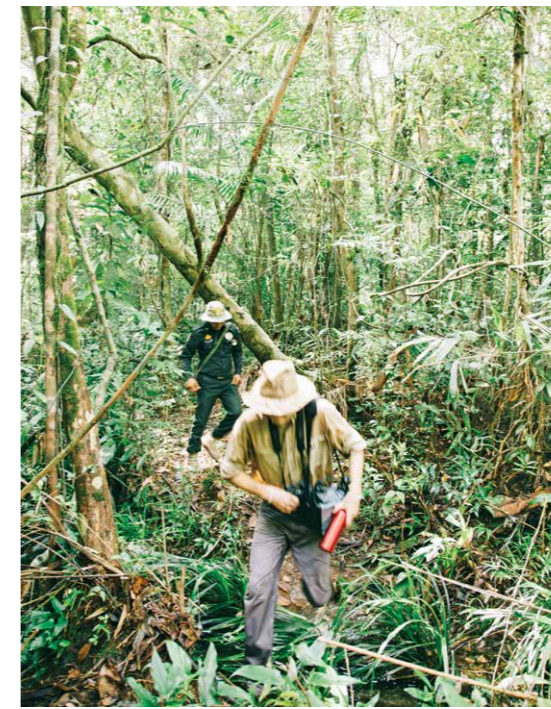


create one vast, 1.8 million hectare protected area that also contains one of the last unbroken elephant corridors in Asia.

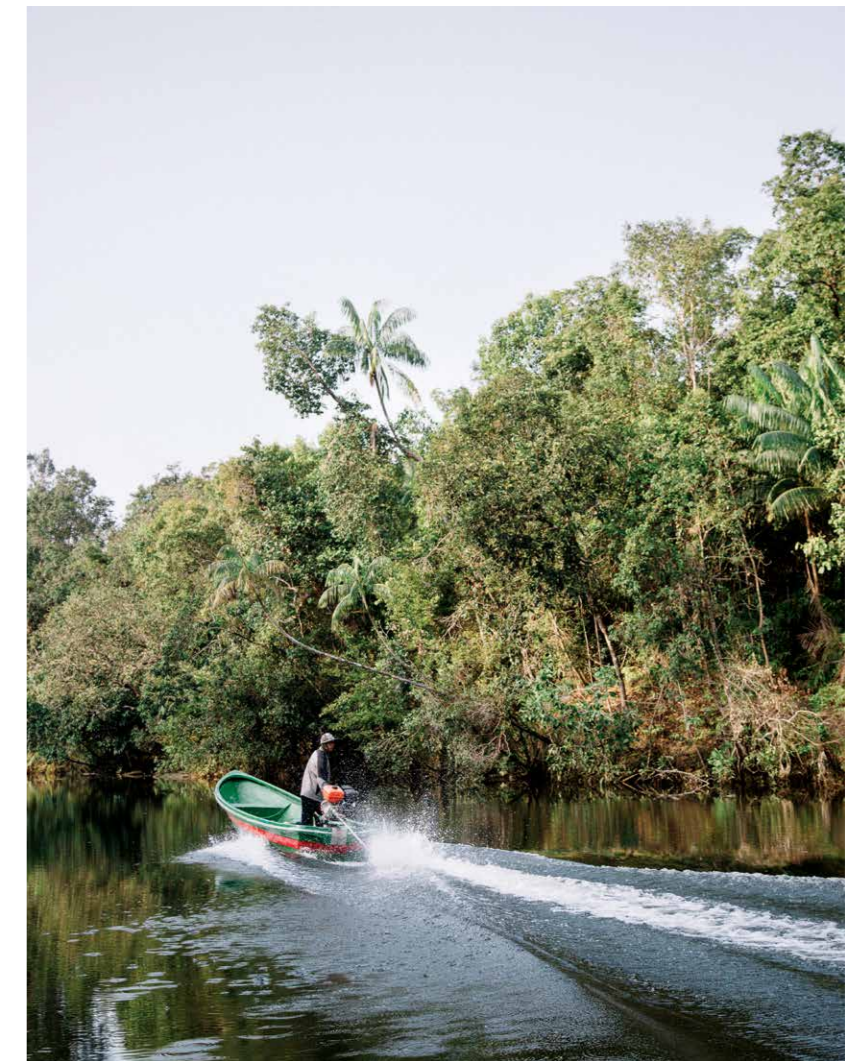
A friend who had worked in the region told me the year I arrived in Phnom Penh that the sheer size of the Cardamoms gave her hope that there was still time for the forests to be saved. “But if I were you,” she added, “I really would try to get there sooner rather than later.”

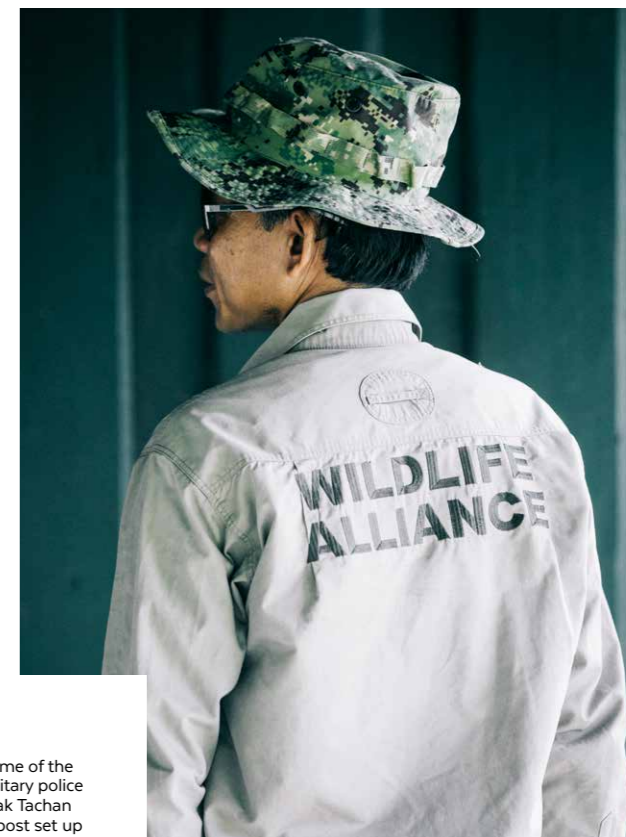
Five years later, I finally find myself deep inside Botum Sakor National Park, a 171,000-hectare swath of lowland evergreen forests and grasslands that juts into the Gulf of Thailand. Puttering up a gently curving stretch of the Preak Tachan River in a longtail boat, my Cambodian husband Thea and I are en route to the brand-new Cardamom Tented Camp, a low-impact lodge set above the sandy banks of the river. Magnificently remote, it’s completely off the grid, powered mostly by solar panels. Food is sourced locally, and staff have even built a sustainable water-treatment system. Accommodation comes in the form of nine safari-style tents linked by wooden walkways and comfortably appointed with big beds, tatami-like mats, and rain showers in the attached bathrooms. There’s Wi-Fi, though it’s temperamental and restricted to the thatch-roofed restaurant. And we are the very first guests.

The eco-retreat is a three-way initiative between the Bangkok-based Minor Group (which operates such upscale hotel brands as

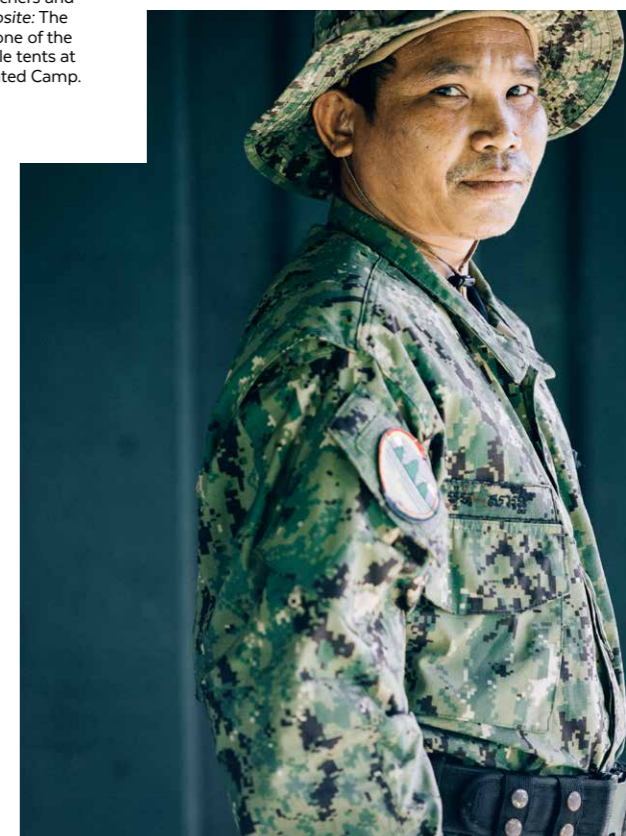
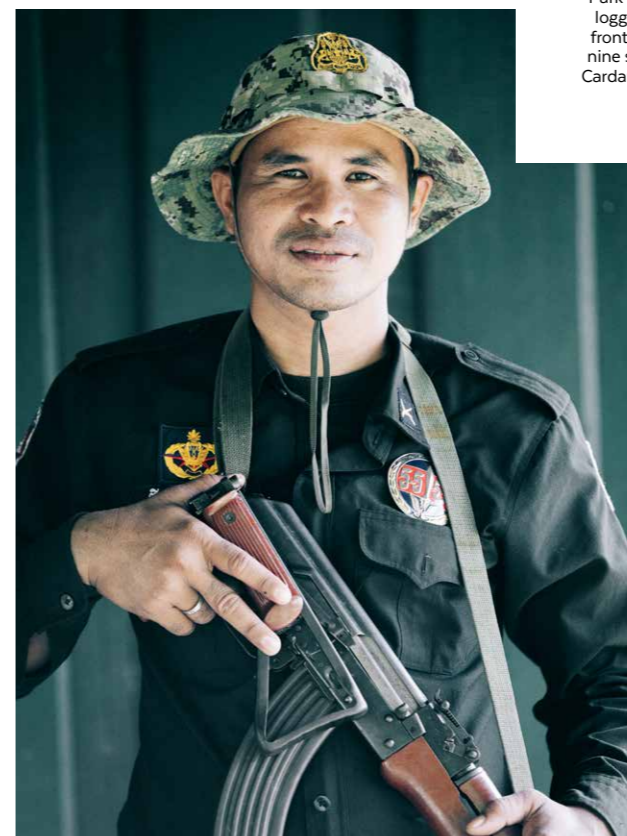


Clockwise from left: Another view of the Preak Tachan River; hiking to Preak Tachan Station, one of two ranger outposts within the 18,000-hectare concession managed by Wildlife Alliance; forest fungi; a local fishing boat; a Cambodian lunch of grilled fish and stir-fried pork and vegetables at Cardamom Tented Camp.





Portraits of some of the rangers and military police who man Preak Tachan Station, an outpost set up to protect this part of Botum Sakor National Park from poachers and loggers. Opposite: The front deck of one of the nine safari-style tents at Cardamom Tented Camp.





**DETAILS**

**Cardamom Tented Camp** ([cardamomtentedcamp.com](http://cardamomtentedcamp.com)) offers two- and three-night packages priced at US\$389 and \$479 per person, respectively. Included are all meals and transfers (by car and boat) from Phnom Penh. The longer stay includes the option of joining forest rangers on more adventurous patrols to remoter parts of Botum Sakor National Park.



Anantara and Avani), adventure travel company YAANA Ventures, and Wildlife Alliance, an international conservation nonprofit founded by American environmentalist Suwanna Gauntlett. And while its tagline—“Your Stay Keeps the Forest Standing”—seems rather ambitious, there is, in fact, quite a bit of truth to it. The camp falls inside an ecotourism concession that has been managed by Wildlife Alliance since 2009, helping to keep the 18,000 hectares of wilderness out of the hands of loggers, poachers, and sand-dredging companies. What’s more, activities here revolve around bona fide protection work with local rangers, from joining them on patrols to helping set up camera traps and animal tracking devices.

Cardamom Tented Camp isn’t alone in setting down stakes in the Cardamoms. On the Taitai River, the Four Rivers Floating Lodge opened near the coastal town of Koh Kong in 2009, featuring a dozen air-conditioned tents suspended over the water on pontoons. And later this year, a luxurious yet low-impact “glamping” sanctuary owned and created by acclaimed resort designer Bill Bensley is set to debut in a 162-hectare river valley along a hitherto unprotected wild-

life corridor connecting the Bokor and Kirirom national parks. While the venture bills itself as a luxury safari experience, it also has some serious eco-credentials, with conservation and community outreach programs being spearheaded by the associated Shinta Mani Foundation.

Given the seclusion of the region, these projects are as ambitious as they are commendable. Getting to Cardamom Tented Camp is an adventure in itself. From Phnom Penh, it takes five bumpy hours for us to reach the tiny riverside village of Trapeang Rung, followed by another hour in the boat. As we chug upstream, squinting under the brilliant November sun, not one other fishing boat appears on the water, and Cambodia’s potholed highways quickly fade from our minds as we take in the passing mangroves, their gnarled roots and branches teeming with butterflies and birds.

“Quick, look over there—a white-throated kingfisher!” exhales our host and the camp’s manager, Allan Michaud, as a flash of electric blue flutters through the treetops. A 16-year Cambodia veteran, the affable Englishman (who, lucky for us, is the grandson of a renowned French chocolatier) is also an accomplished wildlife photographer; in 2001, after 15 days spent wading through swampland in the country’s north, he managed to take the very first photo for *National Geographic* of the rare giant ibis, rediscovered after decades of being thought extinct.

Michaud has only recently taken over the reins at Cardamom Tented Camp, and he’s clearly excited about the posting. As we cruise up the Preak Tachan, he points to a fork in the river where a tributary unfurls like a ribbon deep into the mountains. “In the next week, the gang and I will be poodling up that river, exploring around 10 kilometers. We’re hoping to find waterfalls. For a naturalist like me, this is a wonderful, uncharted canvas to work with,” he enthuses.

As we round a bend, the camp comes into full view. I’m stunned by the dramatic contrast in the landscape’s textures and hues. The river journey had been soaked in saturated greens and rich metallic tones, but once we reach the camp’s pier and climb up the embankment, the scene transforms completely. Before us now is a palette

of muted prairie-like pastels. Long, cottony grass stretches out over a kilometer-long *veal*, or savanna, as fluffy as fairy floss. Standing in the camp's breezy riverside restaurant and sipping on lemongrass-spiked craft beers brewed in Koh Kong, I feel a pang of shame that it has taken me so long to witness this striking part of the country.

**The following morning**, after a breakfast of freshly baked baguettes, tropical fruit, and bacon and eggs, we set off on the first hike of our three-day visit toward the Preak Tachan patrol station. Leading the way is Wildlife Alliance ranger Chum Kheng, a former friend and colleague of the late Chut Wutty who has helped protect this forest for more than 20 years.

Sporting military khakis and a pair of mirrored Ray-Ban aviators, the 48-year-old Kheng possesses a reassuring aura of composure, even when a small brown snake slithers across our track. "Don't worry, it's not a pit viper," he explains calmly in Khmer to Thea. "Nor a python. Though there are many of those here too." Thea's eyes widen, but he thoughtfully doesn't translate this information for me until we've reached our destination.

Deeper inside the forest, Kheng charges ahead, pausing at times to hack through spiky thickets of rattan and point out animal droppings, poisonous mushrooms, or deep scratch marks etched into the trunks of bigger trees. These, he explains, are the work of Malayan sun bears climbing toward the canopy in search of honeycomb.

Sweat drips from us as we walk on, our feet crunching over a thick, bouncy carpet of rotting leaves and twigs. We learn that across the nine patrol stations in the Cardamoms, 2,500 patrols are conducted each year by 107 rangers, with each station covering more

than 30,000 kilometers per year. I remark to Kheng that the exhausting work must take a toll on his body. "The more [illegal activity] we catch, the more the poachers are driven deeper into the jungle, so we must go deeper too," he says. "But honestly, I am most happy when I am here."

We reach the rangers' station just after noon. A feast awaits us on a large picnic table, and we dig in to fresh, fat river prawns tossed with garlic and vegetables, moreish fried pork ribs marinated in lemongrass and ginger, a spicy and sour fish soup, and *trey niet*, the Cambodian staple of dried, salt-cured fish. Over lunch we're introduced to the rest of the Preak Tachan patrol team. There are between four to five men stationed here each day, a mix of Wildlife Alliance rangers, military police officers, and Ministry of Environment staff—but they sometimes move between other stations within the 835,000 hectares Wildlife Alliance protects in the Cardamoms. Kheun Mony, a 45-year-old ranger from the Ministry of Environment, shows us the equipment they've seized in just the last year: a disturbingly brutal stash of snares with rusty, jagged teeth; traps made of barbed wire; nets, rifles, spears, and chainsaws.

Kheng later pulls us aside to talk more about his late friend Chut Wutty and the legacy the activist left behind. "He was a very brave person. Some people ask me if [his murder] scared me. Why do I keep doing it? We're looked after financially," he says, referring to the salaries, health insurance, and incentives provided by Wildlife Alliance, which now receives five percent of the earnings of Cardamom Tented Camp. "This job means I can send my children to school. But I have grown to love what I do. I have the knowledge of the forest now; I think I am very good at reading the maps and understand the jungle. It would be a waste of these skills if I were to be afraid. If we are not protecting the forest, who will?"

And despite the tough slog and the perils they face, the results are tangible for Kheng and his colleagues. Since 2002, the rangers of the Cardamoms have removed more than 155,000 snares, confiscated over 14,300 chainsaws, and seized almost 4,000 cubic meters of timber. Almost 5,000 live animals have been rescued by Wildlife Alliance, and some 700 offenders prosecuted. They also install camera traps to track wildlife: Kheng shows us a video montage of recent sightings: fishing cats, pangolins, sun bears, a clouded leopard, and a dhole, or Asiatic wild dog. In 2015, they even captured on film a herd of 16 elephants, including several babies, which means the pachyderms are healthy and breeding. It's now been 12 years since an elephant has been poached in the Cardamoms, Kheng adds proudly.

Later on, we climb into kayaks and paddle back downstream to the camp, where Michaud and his team have cleared away bracken from the riverbank to create a small beach for us. As day melts into night, we head back out in the longtail boat for a firefly-spotting cruise. Our cheery guide Sinam uses a flashlight and his iPhone to guide us down the river into complete blackness. After 15 minutes we round a bend and find thousands of the sparkly, luminous insects spread throughout the trees, dancing in the dark. Some of them even float into our boat.

Famished by the time we arrive back at camp, we're grateful to find dinner waiting for us. Our chef hails from the nearby town of Chi Pat, one of the first places in the Cardamoms to welcome tourists and kick-start ecotourism, and she's whipped up a feast. CONTINUED ON PG. 141



Stars fill the night sky above Cardamom Tented Camp. Opposite: Chasing fireflies on the Preak Tachan River.

## GREEN DREAMS

Continued from page 106

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There's fried squid with Kampot pepper, garlicky prawns, and barbecued *tre spong* (a type of sea fish), its flesh moist and tender. Dessert, however, is Michaud's domain: tonight, it's a chocolate lava cake that's fluffy on the outside and oozing in the middle—a recipe passed down from his chocolatier grandfather.

We rise at dawn the next day, and as tempting as it is to stay in our cocoon-like bed, we decide to head back out on the boat for some sunrise bird watching. Outside our tent, the savanna has been transformed again, with hundreds of silvery spider webs lacing the dewy grass. The river, too, is hauntingly beautiful at this hour, its banks draped in thick mist and its surface as smooth as glass.

I'm hoping to spot the otters that Michaud says he encounters often, or the gibbons that Sinam tells us frequent the tree-tops by the edge of the river. Neither species makes an appearance. But as the mist begins to clear, we do see giant black-and-ginger squirrels scampering up branches, and Thea thinks he catches a glimpse of a wild deer darting into the undergrowth. Soon enough, out come the binoculars as a medley of birds swoop down to the water: racket-tailed drongos, pink-necked green pigeons, several more kingfishers, a hornbill, a chestnut-headed partridge.

Before we leave the camp, Michaud talks about his latest passion project: an evaluation of the northern tip of the veal and the forest around it. He thinks it will make a perfect spot to release a group of pileated gibbons that Wildlife Alliance has rescued, once they've been rehabilitated at the organization's Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center. "Wildlife Alliance has had enormous success in rewilding Angkor Wat with the gibbons. I think it would just go great guns here—I mean, just look around you. Our guests would love it too," he grins.

**Curious to learn more** about why Wildlife Alliance has had such positive results in rehabilitating wildlife, several weeks later I track down Suwanna Gauntlett, the organization's articulate, animated CEO and founder. Her jungle routine must be a hard habit to break, as she dials in via Skype from a wintery France where it's not yet even 6

a.m. A wealthy heiress whose great-grandfather, Dr. William Upjohn, started the pharmaceutical company of the same name, Gauntlett is a larger-than-life character. She recounts that her passion for conservation was ignited when she was living as a child in Brazil and witnessed a jaguar being tortured by a gaggle of drunken men, who were burning cigarettes into its velvety fur.

"The rewilding program is certainly one of the more feel-good aspects of our work," she tells me. "It works because years of effort go into preparing the animals for release: a lot of them come to us as babies, and if you release a baby pangolin, for instance, it will not survive. After several years, we prepare them with a soft release at our station in Chi Pat, to get them used to the sounds and smells. We open the cage for them but keep food there and the door open, until one day, they don't come back."

In 1999, Gauntlett founded WildAid with three other "environment spies," and in 2007 the organization reformed as two NGOs: Wildlife Alliance, which works in the field, and WildAid, which focuses on outreach and education. "We had been working in the 1990s in Burma and Khao Yai in Thailand. We really wanted to get into the Cardamoms though, and we were just waiting for the Khmer Rouge insurgency to be over. Basically, the Cardamoms were going up in flames, every month, 500 hectares would just go *whoosh* and people would rush to grab the land. Twelve elephants had been killed in just a few months. The forests were silent; it was a mess. So when the government formed after the 1997 elections, we were welcomed with open arms."

According to Gauntlett, one of the main reasons her organization has been successful is because of its unconventional—some say more aggressive—approach to combating poachers, pressing for direct, strict law enforcement on the ground while cultivating close relationships with the governments and private companies who were often part of the problem. "Many other NGOs' approach to conservation is old-fashioned science and policy-making and raising awareness through reports and workshops. We're doers, and we think others need to be following our example because if we wait



Exploring the savanna at Cardamom Tented Camp.

for all the studies to be published, all of the animals will be dead."

Gauntlett explains that she is in Paris to drum up support for Wildlife Alliance's latest initiative: the Southern Cardamom REDD Project. Supported by Cambodia's Ministry of Environment, the scheme aims to sustainably fund the protection of 500,000 hectares of forest through the sale of carbon credits, in line with the United Nations' REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) program.

As for Cardamom Tented Camp, she says it took seven years of planning to get it up and running; the final piece of the puzzle—finding a hospitality partner to manage the project—slotted into place when a close friend of Gauntlett's in the Thai royal family introduced her to William Heinecke, Minor Group's CEO. She flew Heinecke and his team over to the Cardamoms, and they were sold. "I am more excited than I have been for a long time," Gauntlett says. "Once we secure the carbon sales and ecotourism is at its maximum here, that's when I know the area will be protected for the long term."

She adds, "It's my favorite place in the world, just breathtakingly beautiful, especially when you see it from above." Wildlife Alliance surveys the Cardamoms around once a week by helicopter; it is an expensive exercise, yet it's one of their most successful tools in combating illegal activity. "That's when you can see that these forests are a living, breathing organism, and why it's so crucial that we keep them alive." ●