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# ScandAsia



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Nordea gets Singapore license

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Lively Crayfish Party in Bangkok and Viking Party in Manila

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**Norwegian couple expands their eco-friendly concept in Cambodia**





Babel  
Boutique



# Norwegian couple expands their eco-friendly concept in Cambodia

Photo by Regis Binard



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Norwegian Katrine Solhaug’s journey into the world of social consciousness and her commitment to making a positive impact have for several years been manifested in Babel Guesthouse in Siem Reap, Cambodia. An eco-friendly concept that she and her husband, Simen Julner, has now expanded with Babel Boutique Hotel.

By Miabell Mallikka

**K**atrine meets me at the café area of Babel Guesthouse. As she walks across the crooked floor, that the staff was generously hired to build during COVID, her long blonde hair wavering around her shoulders, makes her standout.

Her welcoming nature and her genuine smile, makes people around her at ease and makes her guests feel at home, as they come to our table, just to great her.

### How it all started

It all started with the acquisition of the guesthouse back in 2011. After more than ten years of running it successfully, Katrine yearned for a new adventure. The opportunity to expand came in the form of another hotel, which they had actually set their eyes on five years prior.

“Five years back, we were on our way to sign the contract for that hotel,” Katrine reminisces.



As the couple was getting ready to leave, the real estate agent called and told them, that someone else had signed the lease, the day before.

“I was so sad that I even threw up. I was so sick. I spent two days in bed feeling depressed. That was how much I already loved it,” Katrine shares, with obvious sentiment in her voice.

### A blessing in disguise

Their initial disappointment soon turned into a stroke of luck, as COVID hit and shut down the otherwise touristy city. The couple quickly realized that having both properties would have been an overwhelming challenge, that they probably wouldn’t have been able to manage.







Photo by Regis Binard

“Of course, it turned out to be really lucky for us. Had we had the boutique hotel back then, we would never have survived COVID. We only just made it with the Guesthouse,” Katrine explains.

Still, it was hard to let go of the dream that had now immersed. Katrine and her kids would pass by the hotel every day on their way to the children’s school. The desire to have it never left her. Then one day Simen comes home saying, that the hotel once again is available for rent.

“We were going to ballet class with the girls and some other kids. I just told the tuk-tuk driver, without Simen knowing, to stop at the place. When he did, Simen was like, no, we’re not going inside. Then I dragged him in with all the kids. We walked around and I looked at him again and again. He kept telling me no, no, no, no, no, but I was like, you know we have to take it. Eventually, during that evening, we put the kids to bed, had a glass of wine, and then he was like, okay, let’s call my dad,” Katrine shares with excitement in her voice as she is looking back.



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### Not the smoothest transition

Simon’s father gave them the green light for the project, and they officially took ownership of the hotel in May. But the road to opening the Babel Boutique Hotel was far from smooth. They had to address unexpected issues, from fixing a leaking roof to coinciding projects.

The couple was supposed to have their grand opening in July, but another project in the south, kept them from sticking to the schedule.

“The reason why it took so long to open is, that we also have this other project done in Nesat, Koh Kong, three kilometers from the beach,” Katrine shares.

Even though, the boutique hotel had been a dream of hers for five years, she couldn’t fully focus on it, because she was caught up by the project in Nesat.

“I couldn’t even focus on the hotel. It had been my dream for five years, and now that I finally had it, I couldn’t focus on it. Cause I was the one running our project down south, while Simen did most of the work here.”

Dome Gaia – another eco-friendly project in the making

The Norwegian couple are truly dedicated to the sustainable lifestyle. Determined to build not just houses, but meaningful, eco-friendly structures, at their land down the south, Katrine spent months doing extensive research, before discovering AirCrete—a concrete with air bubbles that makes it more environmentally friendly. She then contacted Dome Gaia; a renowned organization known for teaching people how to build sustainable structures using AirCrete. Dome Gaia has workshops all over the world, but had yet to bring their expertise to Asia. Another endeavor achieved by the stubborn Norwegian.

“We are building domes made of AirCrete. The design is called Eden, which is their newest design. We plan to build four small ones to rent out through AirBnB and then have one big dome built in the back that will be our home,” Katrine shares with enthusiasm.

How they managed to run two such huge projects successfully, is a testament not only to their dedication, but their collaboration.

Katrine and Simen are a perfect blend of enthusiasm and pragmatism. While Katrine dreams big and generates innovative ideas, Simen pays meticulous attention to detail and ensures that everything runs smoothly. They complement each other well and have thereby been able to turn their dreams into reality.

### The “soft” opening

Despite the challenges, the couple persevered. Driven by their vision of creating a unique eco-friendly boutique hotel that offers great value for their guests’ money, they finally managed to have a soft opening for their friends, on September 9. “I’m so happy that the party is over now. It was nice. It was just a small party. But the stress to get everything ready for it,” Katrine says with a genuine laugh.

“But we’re almost there now,” she adds with a smile and a hint of relief in her light-blue eyes.

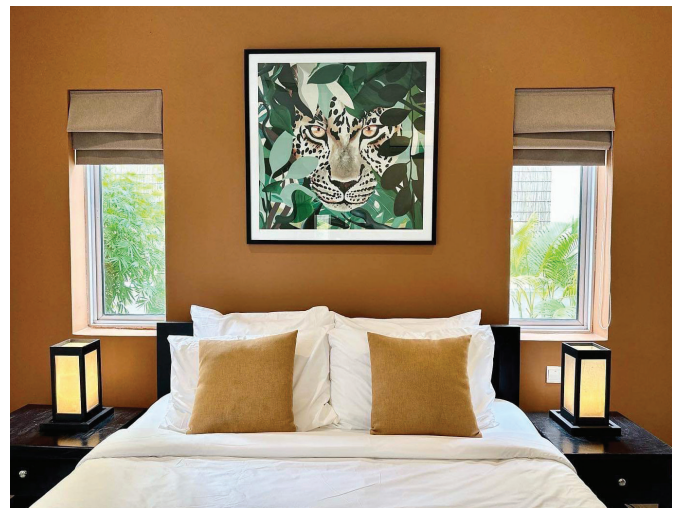




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The stress getting ready for the opening was not obvious for those attending the small gathering, where Katrine's lively spirit, made her the center of the party. While greeting everyone and make them feel welcome, she still managed to proudly show people around their new establishment.

One of the features she made the guests pay extra attention to, as she showed people around, was the stunning artwork on the walls. The boutique hotel is adorned with pieces by UK-based artist, Tamara, who focuses on Cambodian wildlife. A percentage of the profits for her artwork goes to support conservation projects.

"We've known her for a long time. I followed her for inspiration. Every plant that she paints is something from Cambodia," Katrine tells.

### Sharing their wedding present with the guests

Normally, having Tamara's art decorate the walls of the boutique hotel, would be Katrine's idea, but this time Simen, with his meticulous eye for details along with sensible sense, was the one to come up with the suggestion.

"Tamaras art on the walls was Simen's idea. Normally these things are my idea. But this is actually our wedding present, from when we got married in 2014. Simen's parents gave us an amount to use on art for

our house in Norway. But we will never have a house in Norway. Simen asked them, if we could use it on art here in Cambodia, and they said, yes. So, all the pictures are actually our wedding present," Katrine shares.

The couple's passion for wildlife conservation has former led them to collaborate with the Angkor Conservation Center (ACCB). The hotel's proximity to the national park, makes it an ideal base for nature enthusiasts.

"I feel like we were meant to have her art on the walls. Then we can also sell tours to guests that can go and actually visit ACCB. They will take you around and show you the species that they have right now. That way our guests can contribute to the project of protecting wildlife while they're visiting."

### The responsible concept

The foundation of the "Babel" concept exemplifies Katrine's vision. Situated in the heart of Siem Reap, both locations serve as more than just a place for travelers to rest. Babel is an embodiment of responsible tourism – a concept that Katrine holds dear. The guesthouse along with the new boutique hotel, both offer more than just a comfortable stay. They give their guests the chance to actively participate in responsible tourism projects.

Guests at Babel are often encouraged to engage in social initiatives such as contributing to the





endangered wildlife by visiting the national park, garbage-picking events around the city, helping the local schools or supporting various community development projects. This immersive approach enables visitors to give back to the local community in Siem Reap. “I have a lot of projects, but I feel like it all just happens naturally. I have been here 15 years, so it has been evolving slowly,” Katrine says, with a sentimental stare.

“I’ve been here for 15 years. I’m not Norwegian anymore,” she adds with a warm grin across her very northern-featured face.

### More than just a hotel chain

A core focus has for a long time been education, with a dedicated program designed for staff development, ensuring that everyone involved benefits from their collective efforts.

Education is at the heart of the couple’s mission. To elevate their kitchen staff at the new boutique hotel, they recruit individuals from Sala Bai and Spoons, both renowned hotel schools in Cambodia. Especially Sala Bai provides life-changing education to people from rural areas, with their programs in tourism, spa, restaurant, and hotel management. Offering their students, the opportunity for a brighter future.

### Even more eco-friendly

During the challenging times of COVID-19, Katrine helped establish the “Collective for Good.” This collaborative effort brought together eco-conscious businesses, setting stringent criteria for membership. The collective’s aim is to provide mutual support, while creating a network of businesses that genuinely champion sustainability.

One of the key challenges they address is “greenwashing,” where some businesses claim to be eco-friendly but do not follow through on their promises. The collective emphasizes authenticity and transparency in eco-friendly practices. Members are held accountable through regular meetings and a minimum score requirement.

Looking ahead, Katrine and Simen plans to make their new hotel even more eco-friendly than the Guesthouse.

“This is what we are going to work on now. Especially with the new boutique hotel. Because we feel it’s really important,” Katrine states.

The Babel hotels are more than just places to stay. They are a testament to the couple’s love for Siem Reap and their commitment to the community. As they continue to overcome challenges and expand their sustainable vision, one thing remains constant—their unwavering passion for creating memorable experiences for their guests and preserving Cambodia’s natural beauty.