





# Designs on Sri Lanka

Long coveted by European powers for its condiments, Sri Lanka is now the main course for creative expatriates opening stylish hotels along the southern coast of one of the world's most appealing island destinations.

By Robert La Bua

**C**eylon, the island of spices known today as Sri Lanka, has been a land of trade and commerce for more than a thousand years. An exotic abundance of agricultural products highly prized by both Eastern and Western cultures saw ships from China, Europe, and the Arab world drop anchor in Galle, the port city on the country's south coast, and buy up as much tea, cinnamon, cardamom, clove, and black pepper as their vessels could carry back to

their own markets. On home territory, due to the demand, the condiments fetched prices many times higher than gold.

As occurred elsewhere in the world, various European powers took turns conquering Sri Lanka as their roles in world domination waxed and waned. First were the Portuguese, whose great explorers sailed far from home at a time when the world beyond Europe was virtually unknown. The Portuguese established trading

posts along the coasts of Asia, along with forts to protect them. One of the most important of these strongholds was Galle, which eventually fell to the Dutch, who greatly expanded and strengthened the fortifications, and subsequently to the British before Sri Lanka's independence was proclaimed in 1948.

Galle Fort today is one of Sri Lanka's most evocative tourist attractions. A UNESCO World Heritage site, the sturdy ramparts >



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survive to this day, making Galle Fort the most well preserved European fort in Asia. Within the walls is a microcosm of European architecture transported to the edge of the Indian Ocean. The Dutch were prolific in their construction, and it is their style of building that remains the most prevalent within the fort. The largest private mansion of the Dutch era was transformed from ruins into a superb hotel by Australian Karl Steinberg, whose Galle Fort Hotel opened in 2004 as one of the first hotels to be located within the fort, which at the time was in a derelict condition. No longer. A decade of renovation and rejuvenation, along with helpful funding from UNESCO, has turned Galle Fort into a time capsule where travellers can enjoy themselves in numerous bars, restaurants, and shops that cater to their modern needs, while operating in a manner that preserves the integrity of the fort and its unique history.



Galle Fort Hotel became the darling of architectural magazines across the world and remains a beacon of inspiration in the restoration of historical properties in Sri Lanka and beyond. The atmospheric rooms of Galle Fort Hotel vary in size and style, but all of them present guests with memorable accommodation whether in the Porcelain Suite, the Chinese-influenced Admiral Cheng Ho Suite, or the traditional Grand Apartment where antique Dutch furniture recreates a sense of a bygone era in a spacious two-bedroom suite. Although Steinberg has moved on to other projects, Galle Fort Hotel remains in the capable hands of another Australian, General Manager David Elgar.

Karl Steinberg was a pioneer of another sort, being among the first visionary hotel investors to take advantage of the Sri Lankan government's allowance of 100-per-cent foreign ownership

property laws (no longer the case). Many others followed his example, relocating to Sri Lanka to enjoy a slower pace of life, the friendliness of the people, and the beautiful scenery. Among them was Thomas Elbaum, a highly successful CEO in his native Sweden before his relocation to Sri Lanka. In Ahangama, one of the popular towns near Galle a bit further along the south coast, Elbaum and his two partners took their Scandinavian design ethic and applied it to The Three by TPV, an intimate property with only six guestrooms. On a small bluff above the coastline, the view of the ocean from the swimming pool is only part of the charm of this stylish, contemporary establishment where white dominates. While the rooms open to the central courtyard, their outdoor bathrooms look onto lush garden areas. Especially notable after the decor is the food, superbly prepared and presented. The entrepreneurial owners of The



Three by TPV also own The Livingroom, a chic bar–restaurant in Galle Fort, as well as a gift shop and café. Managing what is perhaps the most glamorous and exclusive accommodation in the country, The Three by TPV can arrange a stay at Green Turtle Villa, an ultraprivate property fully staffed to serve guests staying at the four-bedroom, oceanfront home in the town of Kosgoda, north of Galle.

Food is one of the great pleasures of visiting Sri Lanka, as locals, cooks, and chefs utilise the spices and vegetables which grow profusely in the tropical climate, matching it with the abundance of fish caught locally. Sri Lankan cuisine is a mix of ingredients as subtle as the cultural influences that have given rise to the island’s unique dishes.

One of the best places to enjoy Sri Lanka’s culinary offerings is Kahanda Kanda, a small collection of cottages owned by British expatriate interior designer George Cooper. Located on the edge of a tea plantation in Koggala just next to Ahangama, Kahanda Kanda is a glamorous hideaway where the essence of Sri Lanka thrives in the sophisticated surroundings expected of an interior designer.



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The Dubu Suite, with its special Balinese interior, is set on a private compound with its own park and swimming pool. Great pride is taken in the food served at Kahanda Kanda, and cooking classes are easily arranged for those who want to understand the country’s flavours. No visit to Sri Lanka, the world’s biggest tea exporter, is complete without a visit to a tea plantation. The Handunugoda tea estate next to Kahanda Kanda is an interesting excursion, not only to marvel at the antique equipment meticulously maintained and still in use to prepare delicate leaves for auction, but to understand where tea comes from before it is wrapped in a little bag to be dipped in hot water.

For those preferring to stay near the airport after or before their arrival or departure, The Wallawwa provides chic accommodation much closer to the airport than Colombo. The name ‘wallawwa’ means manor house in Sinhalese, which explains the feeling of being a guest on a private estate rather than a hotel. Set on 10 acres of beautiful gardens, The Wallawwa’s 16 rooms and suites are large and comfortable and are serviced by an expert team of hospitality professionals. The two-bedroom Mountbatten Suite is especially popular among families. Refined cuisine served on the restaurant terrace is matched by the finesse



of the spa therapists in The Wallawwa’s Z Spa, who can rub away stress and jetlag and transport guests into a state of Sri Lankan tranquillity.

Travellers properly prepared with electronic travel authority approved before arrival will breeze through airport procedures. A tour operator that offers intelligent, helpful, and friendly guiding and transport services is Kulansa Tours. Based in Negombo near The Wallawwa and the airport, Kulansa Tours specialises in personalised luxury travel for business or leisure purposes and can take travellers to the major destinations and attractions across Sri Lanka. Owner Chaminda Kumara has more than a decade of experience catering to the needs of international visitors. Many of them ask to visit Brief, the extraordinary home and gardens of Sri Lankan personality Bevis Bawa, a bon vivant whose close friend Australian artist Donald Friend lived in this home while creating some of the splendid artworks among the meticulously landscaped grounds. Donald came to visit Bawa for two weeks and ended up staying four years. Sri Lanka is that kind of place. •

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