

SRI LANKA'S NEW GROOVE



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TAKE IT EASY IN SRI LANKA



There's a real buzz about Sri Lanka right now, with those in the know making a beeline for coastal spots south of Colombo. Lee Marshall has the lowdown on the most beautiful beaches, the coolest hangouts and the best places to stay.

The cynics call it 'India lite'. Well, yes, you can see what they mean: Sri Lanka is an easy place to visit, with polite, unruffled and uninvasive inhabitants. Walk along any street in Colombo,

and passing motor-rickshaw drivers will certainly stop to ask about your transport requirements. But here's the funny thing: say no thanks, and they will actually give up and go away. You feel like shouting after them: 'Come on, hassle me - I can take it!'

It's also true that Sri Lanka lacks a site with the sheer cultural and spiritual overload of, say, Madurai or Varanasi. But this teardrop of an island does have some of southern Asia's most fascinating, ancient Buddhist temples, cave paintings, and historic hill towns, not to mention a huge variety of landscapes and climates in an area smaller than the Republic of Ireland, including two separate monsoon zones.

Pictured: the view from the main lodge at Amanwella, near Tangalle



Credit: David Crookes

View from the main lodge at Amanwella, near Tangalle in Sri Lanka

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THE SRI LANKAN RIVIERA

One Question Site Survey
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It also has one thing that its oversized neighbour India lacks: real beaches. The Sri Lankan riviera, as it is unofficially known, wraps around a great swathe of the island's west and south coasts. Beaches with sand the golden-tan colour you're hoping to achieve are backed by palm trees and a patchwork of gardens, smallholdings, mangosteen orchards and rice paddies, interspersed, further south, with the bright-green sweep of the lowland tea plantations. The focus of the area's cultural life, and its main sightseeing draw is Galle, a handsome, walled colonial city formerly occupied by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Today, it is still the centre of a small but active expatriate community.

West of Galle, the beaches become wilder and more tropical. Complicating the choice between west and south is the fact that although its beaches are not as paradisaical, the west has a better selection of hotels. It also used to benefit from being closer to Colombo's international airport - until the first stretch of the long-awaited Southern Expressway was inaugurated last year, slashing the Colombo-Galle journey

time from three hours to just one, and making the south coast a feasible long-weekend destination.

Pictured: hauling in fishing nets near The Villa Bentota



Credit: David Crookes

Hauling in fishing nets near The Villa Bentota

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SRI LANKA AT PEACE

What is not 'lite' about Sri Lanka is the ethnic strife between the island's majority Sinhalese inhabitants and the Tamil minority, which made this island paradise a recurrent news story between 1983 and 2009, and turned the Tamil north and east into a war zone. But the conflict is finally over, and the government is now attempting to offset the triumphalism of its military victory over the Tamil Tigers by making a few concessions to more moderate Tamils.

The two communities live alongside each other peaceably in cities such as Colombo, and while it's true that they keep themselves to themselves (inter-ethnic marriages are still rare), they seem to have reached a *modus vivendi* at least as genuine as Belfast's uneasy truce. One silver lining of the Civil War is the brake it put on large-scale development. When parts of Bali and Thailand were being spoiled by the number of hotels and visitors they were asked to absorb, Sri Lanka was considered too risky an investment. The hotel projects that did go up were mostly small-scale, and many have been funded locally: the island's biggest hotel chain, Jetwing Eco

Holidays, is Sri Lankan owned, and many of the island's newer boutique hotels are run by locals.

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Credit: David Crookes

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DESIGN AND CULTURE IN SRI LANKA



There are foreign investors on the Sri Lankan scene, but most are individuals rather than companies: globetrotting mavericks who have chosen to live here and are passionate about the island - its food, traditions and people. The guiding spirit of the Galle hotel and cultural scene is Geoffrey Dobbs, a Cambridge-educated Brit who moved to Sri Lanka after a successful career in Hong Kong; he now owns The Sun House, The Dutch House and Taprobane Island. British interior designer George Cooper owns one of Sri Lanka's most

perfect eco-retreats, Kahanda Kanda, and sells furnishings and kitchenware largely produced by local artisans from his shop in Galle, KK Collection.

Like the vast majority of expatriate hoteliers in Sri Lanka, both Dobbs and Cooper are involved in community outreach and cultural projects. Dobbs is the founder of the Galle Literary Festival; he also provided emergency support and funding after the 2004 tsunami, which devastated the south coast. Cooper has launched a project to build a permanent structure to house the local Buddhist Sunday school, which now convenes outside, even in the monsoon. He ploughs 10 per cent of the hotel's profits back into the community and sources 90 per cent of goods and services from the surrounding area.



Credit: David Crookes

Taprobane Island, in Weligama, Sri Lanka

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BEACH SCENE



The riviera north and west of Galle is not the only area of Sri Lanka to have developed a beach scene. The east coast has some fine, sandy coves and beaches, too; but unless you're a surfer, the rather scrappy hotels that currently exist there are something of a disappointment. One area that is worth watching, however, is Kalpitiya to the north-west - a pristine peninsula three hours' drive north of Colombo, which is earmarked for development into a Maldives-style eco-resort based around 14 lagoon islands.

For the time being, though, it's the existing riviera, with Galle at its centre, that anyone considering a beach holiday to Sri Lanka should head for.

Pictured: surfers head for the beach



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Surfers driving to a beach in Sri Lanka

Credit: David Crookes

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM COLOMBO TO GALLE



COLOMBO TO GALLE

South of the bustling capital city, Colombo, the beach stretches for miles. Sheltered from the prevailing easterly winds and currents, it has a ringside view of some spectacular sunsets. Sip a glass of cold lime soda and watch the evening sun go down, setting the Indian Ocean on fire. But this is also a rowdy coastal strip, and the hotels that colonise it tend to be gated enclaves, in order to create a corner of quiet in a

world of colour and chaos.

Take **Serene Pavilions** (www.serenepavilions.com; doubles from US\$480) in Wadduwa. The style of this 12-suite boutique hotel, which opened at the end of 2009, is a little too generic: the Italian architect who designed the place was inspired by Bali, which is quite another island. But they certainly pull out the stops to coddle you. You get your own pavilion with a plunge pool, a private butler, and the services of a chef whose international creations - Pernod-infused seafood chowder, for example - further disorient one's oriental compass; but for the stressed executive, Serene Pavilions offers efficient tropical detox.



Credit: David Crookes

The beach at Serene Pavilions, in Wadduwa

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Pictured: the beach at Serene Pavilions

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DESIGN HOTELS IN SRI LANKA

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Design fans will prefer Paradise Road The Villa Bentota (www.paradiseroadhotels.com/villabentota; doubles from US\$224), further down the coast on the seaward edge of the laid-back town of Bentota. A colonial-era ancestral home, the building was later refurbished by the towering master of 20th-century Sri Lankan architecture, the late Geoffrey Bawa. After years as an uninspiring beachside hotel, it was bought and given a makeover by the island's current design guru, Shanth Fernando, and reopened for business in December

2009. Fernando uses a strong, boldly striped palette of whites, blacks, creams and chocolates. At first, it all seems a little too urban for such a seaside setting, but it grows on you. Laid-back service and an excellent restaurant, which serves refined Far Eastern-tinged dishes such as lemongrass-and-ginger chicken, make it a very pleasant place to spend a few days.

Other lovely west-coast retreats include **The River House** (www.asialeisure.lk; doubles from US\$286), near Balapitiya, easily the most successful of the three boutique properties owned by the Asia Leisure group (formerly Taru Villas). Set a little inland in a curve of the Madhu Ganga River, this soothingly modern take on a colonial-era villa sits on top of a hill, surrounded by gardens that sweep down to the water. There are four spacious suites in the main house and one honeymoon pavilion near the riverbank. The style might be described as designer *Jungle Book*. The group's other nearby property, Tamarind Hill, is not nearly as special.



Credit: David Crookes

Paradise Road The Villa Bentota, in Bentota

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The two great sightseeing draws of the coast north of Galle are both Bawa-related gardens. **Brief Garden**, seven kilometres inland from Aluthgama, belonged to Bawa's elder brother Bevis, who put more energy into the embellishment of this sylvan refuge than he did into his largely ceremonial role as the aide-de-camp to a succession of British governors of Ceylon. There are green rooms perfumed with flowers of cannonball trees and frangipani, and decorated by artists such as Donald Friend, an Australian who came for a week and stayed five years. This blurring of inside and outside spaces inspired Bawa and was a feature in many of the houses he went on to design.

His own garden at **Lunuganga Estate** (www.lunuganga.com; doubles from US\$200; garden tour and lunch US\$25), on the shores of the Bentota River, exposes the landscape in a series of dramatic vistas. If Brief is Italianate in its compartments and balustraded staircases, Lunuganga takes the wild and airy English Romantic tradition and gives it a Sri Lankan twist, with rubber, rice and cinnamon woven into the mix. The couple

who now manage the place, Michael Daniels and Asha De Silva, are both architects and passionate about Bawa's legacy. They run the house and outbuildings as a discreet country-house hotel on behalf of the Geoffrey Bawa Trust. If you can put up with the lack of a pool, this is one of the island's most privileged rural retreats. Even if you're not staying, it's worth ringing ahead to book lunch here before or after your tour of the garden and house; the Sri Lankan rice-and-curry feasts we enjoyed here were among the foodie highlights of our whole trip.



Credit: David Crookes

Brief Garden in Sri Lanka

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HIGHLIGHTS EAST OF GALLE

EAST OF GALLE

To put it bluntly, if you've come to Sri Lanka for a tropical beach break, this is where you want to be. Something changes beyond Galle. The countryside becomes more verdant and at the same time a little wilder, with fields, orchards and rice paddies backing onto steamy rainforest tamed here and there by tea plantations.

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It is no accident that most of Sri Lanka's private beach villas are strung out along this stretch of coast. You can see why it makes sense for hotels to be close to Colombo - access from the airport is easier, as is staff recruitment - but those who choose to buy their own corner of Sri Lankan paradise are less concerned by the long drive to the international airport, and more swayed by the fact that down here you can own a villa on a deserted beach.



Credit: David Crookes

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SRI LANKA SOUTH COAST

Just south-east of Galle is a string of laid-back seaside villages: Dalawella, Thalpe, Koggala and Unawatuna, a hippy-chic, beach-party hangout. At Thalpe - not so much a village as a stretch of beach - a string of smart villas present high walls to the coastal road. **23 Palm**

(www.twentythreepalm.com; sleeps six, from US\$550 per night) is in a Versace-goes-East mode, but it's all great fun. The pool is huge, and the beach is at the end of the garden. If you just want to eat by the sand rather than live on it, **Wijaya Beach** (www.wijayabeach.com) is the area's coolest sand-in-your-toes bar; it does good, simple seafood dishes including coriander-chilli prawns, served with lassis, fruit juices or potent arrack-spiked cocktails. Dinner for two costs about £70.

Not all south-coast villas are in the super-smart bracket. Set in the rainforest behind Unawatuna, **Satori** (www.satoriexperience.com; sleeps six, from US\$330 per night) is a delightfully warm and atmospheric villa, and includes the services of a great local cook; massages and

yoga courses are also available. This is the place to rent with family or friends if you want a relaxed holiday in one of the island's prettiest rural corners.



Credit: David Crookes

Surfers in Sri Lanka



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The ultimate Sri Lankan villa experience has to be Taprobane Island (www.taprobaneisland.com; sleeps 10, from US\$1,000 per night), an entire private island in the bay of Weligama. The neo-Palladian house at the top of the shaggy islet was built by a French rake who called himself 'Count de Mauny-Talvande'. Today, it is a charming, jazzed-up colonial residence full of hunting trophies and heirlooms accumulated by owner Geoffrey Dobbs. Some may find it a bit frayed, but to me it was utterly magical, and as a honeymoon refuge or a

venue for a holiday with friends, hard to match.

My other favourite south-coast villa was **The Last House** (www.thelasthousetangalle.com; sleeps 10, from US\$900 per night), so-called because it was the last project Geoffrey Bawa worked on before his death in 2003. It's one of his most perfect creations, a play of open and closed living spaces with graceful, square columns. Bright and airy, and decorated with Sri Lankan antiques, it seems not so much a house as a permeable membrane between the sea and the rainforest.

Pictured: the veranda at Taprobane Island



Credit: David Crookes

Taprobane Island, Weligama

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SRI LANKA'S SOUTH COAST HOTELS



The two most desirable south-coast hotels are, without doubt, Amanwella and Kahanda Kanda. They're very different. A little inland, on the far shore of Koggala Lagoon, Kahanda Kanda (www.kahandakanda.com; doubles from US\$380) is the creation of its interior designer owner, George Cooper. There are just eight guest suites, dotted among a series of pavilions separated by lily ponds, in the middle of a tea estate. Much of the furniture is made by local artisans to Cooper's own designs, and the whole experience feels like the sort of colonial house party Somerset Maugham might have written about.

Further east, Amanwella (www.amanresorts.com; suites from US\$693) is an Amanresort, and therefore comes with frills. But the character of the place is evident in the personal service, the restaurant's delectable and admirably local food, and, above all, the fantastic location. It is in a secluded crescent of golden sand bookended by rock pools and fringed with palms. The 30 suites, spread out among the trees, are all identical, but the earth tones and modernist furniture work well in this context; and if you bag an ocean suite, you'll be too busy gawping at the sea to worry about the furnishings.



A villa at Kahanda Kanda

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For something more affordable but still on the beach, try The Frangipani Tree in Thalpe (www.thefrangipanitree.com; suites from US\$250). Nine minimalist suites with four-poster beds and open-air bathrooms surround a pool that points straight towards the ocean. The communal layout of the palm-thatched dining area gives it a house-party vibe. More affordable still is **Mamboz Beach Cabanas** (www.mambozbeach.com; doubles from US\$130, half board), 20km east of Tangalle: three basic cabanas in a palm grove

set back from one of the south coast's most deserted beaches.

It belongs to Matthew Gale, an Alaskan who is much in demand as a deep-tissue masseur; one of the unexpected bonuses of this *Robinson Crusoe* corner is the chance to book a massage. A final south-coast highlight in the mid-range bracket is **Talalla Retreat** (www.talallaretreat.com; doubles from US\$87), a laid-back place that specialises in Ayurvedic yoga courses. Another reason to like it, apart from the warmth of service, is the fact that it helped to build new boats for the local fishermen after the 2004 tsunami.



Credit: David Crookes

Fishing in Sri Lanka

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Pictured: fisherman using traditional techniques near The Frangipani Tree