



TAKING  
*sanctuary*

Sri Lanka's flourishing boutique hotel scene is setting the pace with gracious, serene retreats that reference its colonial past.

WORDS BELINDA JACKSON



## PASSENGER

THIS PAGE The splendour of early Dutch colonial style is perfectly preserved in the 'zaal' or great hall at Amangalla resort in Galle, in Sri Lanka's south. OPPOSITE PAGE A tranquil welcome to Amagalla's spa baths.







THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The original building was built in 1684 to house the Dutch Governor. An airy corner of an Amangalla suite. The city's lighthouse stands sentinel to the ancient Galle Fort. The reception. The pool with its cube-shaped cabanas. An elegant guestroom.



Come up and see the most beautiful room in the world!" demands Geoffrey Dobbs, who all but takes me by the hand and hauls me up a flight of white-painted timber stairs. At the top of the stairs, the Cinnamon Suite comprises a salon lined with books to the ceiling and a classic archway that leads into an airy bedroom. The bath is outside, on a sunny Juliet balcony. "Well, that's how Condé Nast described the room," says the hotelier, who opened the Sun House in Galle, on Sri Lanka's sunny south coast, in the late 1990s.

It's agreed among the island's network of small hoteliers that the Sun House marked the beginning of Sri Lanka's unique, vibrant boutique hotel scene. Think billowing white fabrics over four-poster beds, warm coastal breezes and cool, quiet spaces for indulgent contemplation.

Later, in 2002, Geoffrey opened the Dutch House, just across the road, an 18th-century building with just four suites curled around a sprawling, 200-year-old tamarind tree. "It was one of the first boutique hotels to charge the magical \$300, and without air-conditioning!" says top Sri Lankan architect Channa Daswatte, who remembers marvelling at the concept.

Nearly a decade has passed since the Boxing Day tsunami devastated the palm-lined southern coastline, and four years since a heartbreaking 26-year civil war ended, and Sri Lanka has a new wave of admirers. A million to be exact: 2012 was a bumper year for tourism arrivals. In sultry Colombo, the city is full of foreigners: Europeans seeking winter sun, Indians on a quick shopping binge, and the flavour of the moment, Australians bearing robust dollars and keen for new experiences in western Asia.

The big, luxe chains are snapping up land: Shangri-La and Ritz-Carlton are building seven-star hotels and a third Taj is on the way, with the arrival of many more hotels, boutique or otherwise, to come. New motorways link main cities Colombo, Galle and Kandy with the airport, and seaplanes zipping around the island offer a luxury travel option.







THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Room at the table at Sun House. Cinnamon Suite offers an inviting reading place. At Dutch House, restful spots are plentiful both outdoors and in. Romance from a bygone age at Kahanda Kanda. Rampart at the old fort at Galle. At Maya Villa, the beauty of the original woodwork trellis shines.



**GEORGE COOPER** "There is a rule in the country and coast: don't build above the coconut tree," says George, but that rule seems about to be broken. "Four years ago, 400,000 tourists visited Sri Lanka. Last year, it was a million," says the owner of Kahanda Kanda, one of the country's top boutique hotels. Designed by Australian architect Bruce Fell-Smith, the eight-room hotel is set on a working tea plantation.

"Sri Lanka was never about upmarket tourism. Before 1999, boutique hotels didn't exist, but that is changing," George says, pointing to a rush of new, high-end hotels and the foreigners' holiday houses that are morphing into small hotels and villas for hire. "Talpe, 15 minutes from Galle, is the golden mile of the best villas," says the British interior designer, who now lives permanently on the island. When asked what defines Sri Lankan style or architecture, he pauses. "It's difficult to define. This is a country that has been occupied for a number of centuries, so you can see touches of Dutch colonial, English colonial and Portuguese influence."

Sri Lanka is already well-known on the global design trail as the home of Geoffrey Bawa, father of 'tropical modernism', whose legacy is spread across Asia. Now, the new wave of boutique hotels give the design aficionado more reason to book that flight. 'New' is not quite the word, perhaps, as many boutique hotels have been built within an existing framework. Some, like the Dutch House, are up to 300 years old, and the architects and interior designers are using their pure lines as a reference for their ventures.

The manor homes of Sri Lanka's former elite, called *wallawwa*, are an obvious target for adoption by boutique hoteliers. Hong Kong interior designer Niki Fairchild and Sri Lankan architect Pradeep Kodikara took on a hundred-year-old village chief's *wallawwa* just outside the coastal town of Tangalle to create Maya Villa. Set amid verdant rice paddies, an L-shaped blue-ink pool and a contemporary wing now curl around the original building, whose woodwork trellis and outdoor pavilion are echoed in the modern section.

Nearby, in Galle Fort, Aman Resorts opened its first Sri Lankan hotel just nine days before the 2004 tsunami. The building dates from 1684 and has been a hotel since 1863, making Amangalla the oldest continually operating hotel in Asia. Amangalla's classic terrace and dining room, beloved of high-tea aficionados and the Galle set, give no indication of life beyond, where its beautifully monastic spa of polished concrete and angular pool, along with its string of cube-shaped cabanas, bear the hallmark of Singapore-based Kerry Hill Architects.



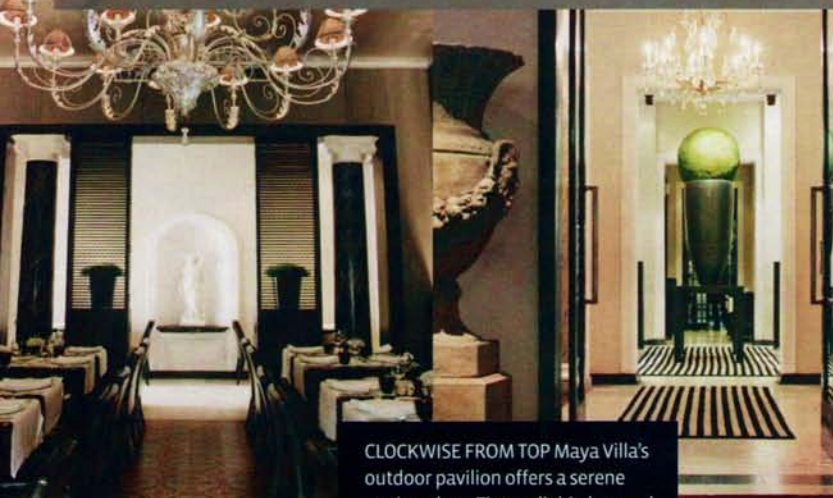




**SHANTH FERNANDO** Serendip. Ceylon. Sri Lanka. "It was called paradise and there's every reason to still do so," says lifestyle designer Shanth Fernando. "It is in a wonderful state of development, constructing and beautifying." The Sri Lankan designer, who spent 10 years in Australia, returned home in 1987 and has no regrets.

His interiors store, Paradise Road, has cemented its spot as the place to shop for unique homewares, fabrics and furniture. His 10-suite hotel, Tintagel Colombo, in the chic Cinnamon Gardens area, sees Shanth's style overlaid on an historic home, once residence to three prime ministers, and Geoffrey Bawa's beach house, now Villa Bentota, about 90 minutes from Colombo. The Gallery Cafe, Bawa's former office that was entrusted to Shanth, now boasts the hottest kitchen in town.

"The central ingredient to my design philosophy is timelessness," says Shanth. His hotel is dominated by oversized Belgian urns topped with huge moss balls and works a neutral palette of taupe, black and white, layered with greenery.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Maya Villa's outdoor pavilion offers a serene resting place. Tintagel's hip lap pool. Lifestyle designer Shanth Fernando. Polished concrete keeps it cool in a Maya suite. Tintagel's signature urn with moss ball. Relaxed seating in the Gallery Cafe courtyard. Muted elegance in Tintagel's dining room.



Back in Colombo, respite from its cheek-and-jowl shopping, souped-up tuk-tuks and notorious 1pm traffic jams is found in such private hotels as Tintagel Colombo and the Park Street Hotel. In contrast, Casa Colombo is the wild folly of its owner and designer, Lalin Jinasena, and the reinvention of the 200-year-old mansion into a 12-suite hotel, with a pink pool, Moorish balconies and mosaic floors, has the town divided. "As schoolgirls, we would dare each other to enter the haunted house," a Colombo friend confides. Now, it's haunted by guests dining in the mansion's grand hall, while the hotel's bar, Zaza, is housed in a contemporary glass box in the gardens.

Casa Colombo's lavish excesses are a departure from the austerity and simplicity of many of the island's best-known properties, including Aman's second Sri Lankan property, Amanwella, back in Tangalle. This is Kerry Hill's homage to Bawa, employing the classic Bawa-style features of polished concrete floors, open-sided pavilions and colonnades that act as a conduit between the indoors and out.

"Until 1977, we weren't allowed to import anything, so we were supposed to be austere," recalls Channa Daswatte, who trained under Bawa and ran Geoffrey Bawa Associates until it closed in 2002. "And maybe that mindset is still running through our young architects, using polished cement floors and pigmented cement walls. It's not because it's fashionable, it's about the grace of simplicity."

*Belinda Jackson was a guest of Banyan Tours Lanka (banyanlanka.com) and Mr & Mrs Smith Hotels (mrandmrsmith.com)*