

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Surprises are in store for guests staying at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort – Sri Lanka's newly opened five-star sanctuary on the south east coast.

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1. The private beach at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort.
2. Orcas can be seen off the south east coast of Sri Lanka.

Sometimes, waking at 4.30am while on holiday has its benefits.

Whale-watching tours leave the Sri Lankan seaside town of Mirissa at the break of dawn, and the trip from Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, where I was staying, was an hour's gentle drive.

I arrived just before the boat stole its way out of the harbour, leaving behind a line of rustic wooden fishing boats painted in faded yellows, greens and reds. The morning mist dissipated and a dusty-pink sun rose from behind the backdrop of purple peaks in the distance. As soon as we hit open water, the skipper sped up and our vessel sliced its way through the steel-blue sea. We were in search of blue whales and conditions were perfect. From November to April sightings along this stretch of coast are frequent. Expectations were high.

Sri Lanka's blue whales have become cetacean celebrities in recent years, having been repeatedly featured on big budget BBC natural world extravaganzas. To my surprise, however, it wasn't those record-breaking leviathans that we came across, but something smaller, darker and a lot dealier.

Orcas, bona fide killer whales, have started – or perhaps have always been – secretly hanging out offshore in the North Indian Ocean. Despite increasing collaborative efforts between international and local researchers, very little is known about this specific pod of elusive beasts. The captain on my boat, who has patrolled this stretch of coast for years, proclaimed this to be only his third sighting ever. And Manju, a knowledgeable local and Experience Guru at Anantara (who accompanied me on the journey) was as amazed as he was ecstatic, asking me “what next?”

Experiencing such a wondrous sight so early in my Sri Lankan sojourn did indeed set the bar high. However, there are so many equally spectacular experiences offered by the crew at Anantara that I was able to get to see just how wild, untouched and authentic the south east region is.

One excursion saw Manju leading me up hundreds of steps to the Mulkirigala Rock Temple, stopping in at seven cleft-like caves interspersed on various levels to photograph thousand-year-old Buddha statues and ornate murals. This ancient monastery still functions today and lies a few minutes inland from Tangalle. »

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ESCAPE



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MAYA

Lunch or dinner at this five-suite villa retreat that's set in a Sri Lankan manor house can be arranged by Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort. Chef Wasana's exquisite fusion of international and local cuisine has earned him quite the reputation. Tables are set up in the sprawling garden and overlook luminous green rice paddies. mayatangallesrilanka.com

Another saw me partaking in a blessing ceremony with a local priest. Yala National Park is also an easy daytrip from the hotel, and it's here that hundreds of peacocks, crocodiles, and a few leopards can be found. En route, there's a chance a wild elephant will come thundering out of the bushes, too.

Even a visit to the humble fruit and vegetable market in Tangalle is not short of surprises. Amid the hustle of busy shoppers and keen sellers, I saw an Ayurvedic doctor carefully applying a mud-like treatment to a patient who had just broken his leg. I watched as he placed layers of leaves on top of the mud, before wrapping the traditional "medicinal" mix tightly with a bandage.

For those in search of a serene holiday that's far more sedate than, say, climbing hundreds of steps, there's no need to venture further than

Anantara's sheltered, palm-fringed beach, with its hidden cabanas and hammocks or its split-level infinity pool. Hawkers tend not to set foot on the golden sands, meaning you're left alone. Well, except for the perfectly timed and welcome deliveries of fresh fruit sticks and cold towels by genuinely friendly staff. There's also a glorious on-site spa – a feature with which Anantara resorts are synonymous – and it's the perfect hideaway for hours of pampering.

The hotel is set on a coconut plantation with lush gardens brimming with tropical plants. Stylish tuk-tuks and golf carts ferry guests between the main areas – or there is of course the option to walk alongside the resident peacocks and scampering squirrels.

Premier and deluxe rooms look onto the crescent-shaped beach while many of the larger, stand-alone villas

are set back from the shore. Each of the latter has its own private pool and sun deck. Bathrooms are fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass so, in theory, you could soak in the tub while watching the sunset over the sea.

But perhaps the best place to watch the sky flick between glorious shades of hot pink and fiery orange is from Il Mare, the hotel's Italian fine-dining restaurant that perches atop a rocky hill on one end of the beach. The vista across the canopy of skinny palm trees is spectacular. And the sounds of the lapping (or crashing, depending on the wind) waves beneath you is a sublime soundtrack.

Il Mare is one of what will soon be a total of six restaurants at the hotel, all helmed by renowned Thai chef, Anak Koonmart. Highlights of the à la carte menu include fresh homemade pasta and a decadent dessert cart that's piled high with freshly baked cakes and tarts. The gelato is also wickedly good.

Journeys – a buffet-style outlet – is a far more casual affair. The daily breakfast spread here is perfectly balanced between international and Sri Lankan cuisine. Coconut flour pancakes, called hoppers are the

quintessential local breakfast snack. The ones that I tasted here (topped with a fried egg and variety of zingy coconut sambals) are some of the best I've eaten during my travel in this country.

Like Anantara's well-known spas, the brand's Dining by Design concept is also available to guests. Splendid feasts are set up in dramatic destinations around the property – be it on the hilltop next to Il Mare, or in a candle-lit cabana on the beach, with bubbles flowing and white curtains billowing in the cool evening breeze.

The most memorable foodie experience for me was the simplest, most unexpected, option. Each morning at around 10.30am, a fishing boat pulls up onto the hotel's private beach with wicker baskets brimming with fresh clams, giant lobsters, prawns as long as your forearm, crayfish, and rainbow-coloured fish. The chefs race down to the beach to take orders from guests – and at lunch or dinner, your bespoke meal is then served. ▲

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3. One of the many shrines at the Mulkirigala Rock Temple

4. Fresh hoppers for breakfast are topped with coconut sambal.

5. Dining by Design on the beach.

6. Il Mare, an Italian restaurant at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort sits perched atop a hill.

7. Inside a colonial-style Premier Ocean Suite room.

FLY WITH ETIHAD

Etihad Airways offers direct daily flights from Abu Dhabi to Colombo. Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort is a three-hour drive from the Sri Lankan capital, and transfers by luxury hybrid SUV can easily be arranged by the hotel. For more information, please visit etihad.com.

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IMAGES: Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, Maya, Picfair.com & Tiffany Eslick