

AYUBOWAN

If you are looking for a me-time vacation with a view, head to Sri Lanka. Tip: Explore the small towns along the coast.

BY SUREENA DALAL



One of my things to-do was to travel solo. And then after many 'no', 'not now' and 'let's see', I finally decided to go to Sri Lanka this summer. And so, the planning began. Step one was naturally making space in my iPhone, charging my Nikon camera, researching all the places I might want to visit, making lists of things for other people that I'd bring back and above all else, pretending to be calm about this vacation I was about to take on a journey alone after all! There was excitement as well, a cocktail of emotions shall we say.

A three-and-a-half-hour flight and I was in Colombo at around 12 am and I had another three hours on the road before I reached my destination – Tangalle. Honestly, I had pictured it very differently in my mind, you know the general way of things in Sri Lanka would be a chaotic country torn by the civil war. Roads were well lit, helpful signages and I had a good supply of food in the car. My night was made.

The driver woke me up and informed me that we had reached Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort. There is nothing more soothing than the delicate sound of trickling water accompanied with absolute silence. Not a person in sight and that's probably what made me the happiest. I thought the ride was over but wait, my belongings and I were then transferred to a golf cart which took me to my private villa. Whatever sleep might have lingered on had all vanished in a heartbeat. In front of me lay this gorgeous villa with a pool. The clock struck four and I had been on the move for a while but that didn't prevent me from exploring my room.

At 7 am, I was in my bathrobe standing on the pool deck with a cup of coffee. Being a north Indian, a water facing property is a massive deal and when you are in a villa with its own pool facing the ocean, the waves crashing on one another as they make their way to the shore lined with rows of coconut trees as dawn breaks. That took my breath away. Soon after I called the front desk to have me picked up for breakfast, my villa host, Shafni was at my door step in my carriage, (the golf cart), in a matter of minutes. As Shafni and I were talking about the weather in Tangalle, we reached Journeys, the restaurant that serves Sri Lankan, Middle Eastern and Asian cuisine. I devoured my breakfast, going through a few falafels, king coconuts, cinnamon rolls (which I loved) and of course some tea in no time. I was all set to explore Tangalle.



A beach villa at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort

My first stop was the port which is close to a Sri Lankan Navy Station with a few fishing boats and ferries and fishermen of course. After a tenminute halt at a Buddhist temple, we headed out to explore the place. On the way, we took a detour to explore the bylanes where stood local cafes, Portuguese cottages, greenery in every nook and cranny. We even came across a few iguanas. The drive back was surreal, like something out of an old movie. Narrow lanes, quiet beaches and no traffic whatsoever. I was in the middle of nowhere and in no rush to get anywhere. I never wanted this day to end, but inside my head, a little old devil reminded me that I had to make my way to the spa. Everything can be put on hold when it is time to pamper yourself, that's what

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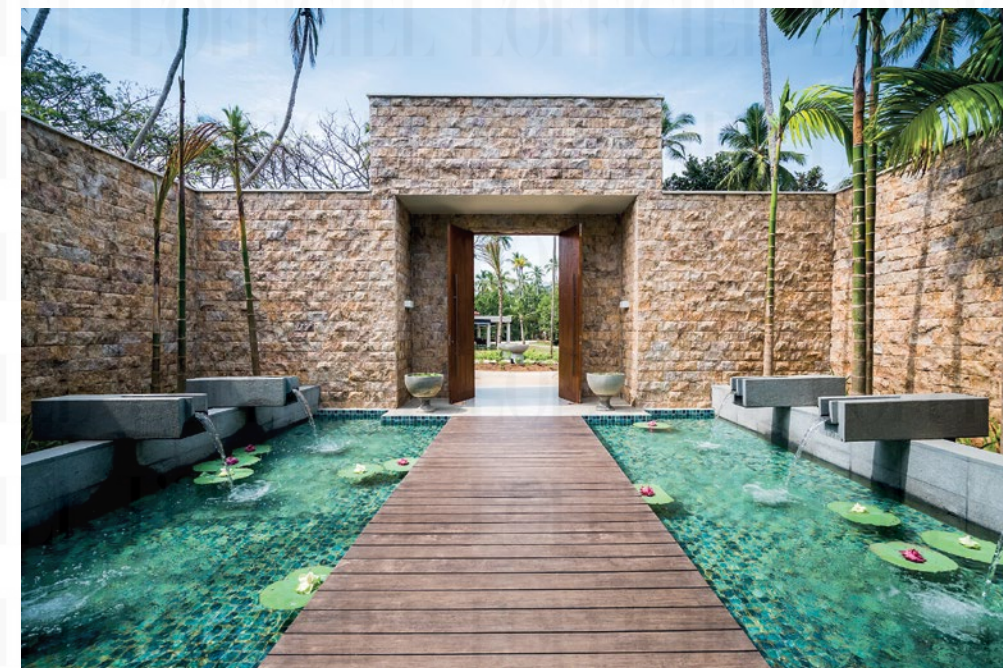
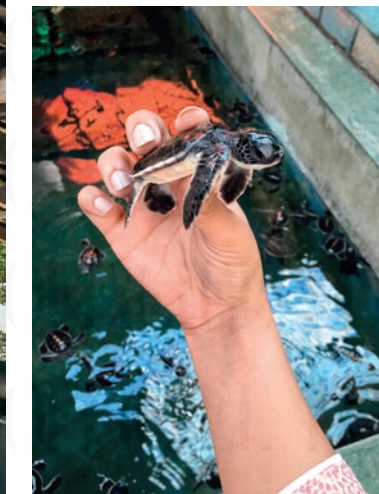
we believe, right? Back at the resort I quickly made my way to the spa. Excitement levels: off the charts. As I waited in the lobby for my turn, I was given four options to choose from – Sweet (lavender, rose, magnolia), Spice (black pepper, ginger, orange), Splash (peppermint, rosemary, lemon) and Smooth (sandalwood, patchouli, clary sage). Detox was my target and I wanted to get rid of them all, and so I chose the Smooth. Atun, my masseuse for the next 90 minutes, escorted me down the pin drop silent hallway to my room. I popped in, slipped into my robe and couldn't wait to get started. Believe me, there is absolute magic in that spa. The relaxation I felt in just a 90-minute treatment was otherworldly I assure you, better than a good night's sleep, ending the treatment with some mildly sweet, dried oranges.

My next pitstop was Il Mare, an Italian restaurant on a terrace, overlooking the ocean. Born Indian but Italian at heart, (ever since my one-year stint in Milan) I have been spoilt when it comes to good Italian cuisine. So naturally my expectations were high and Il Mare met. With some exquisite wine, perfect caprese, and not to miss the cioccolato dome, it was the perfect end to a calm day.

Day two began bright and early at 5 am and I was going to meet a few elephants at the Udawalawe National Park. After an hour and a half long ride, I shifted to a park vehicle



Clockwise: Anantara Kalutara Upper Deck with ocean view; two-day-old sea turtle; spa water walkway at Anantara Tangalle; an auto driver waits nears the Galle Fort



which was a little more raised off the ground for easy spotting. Having seen my fair share of elephants in India, the landscape and the way I felt was nothing like my Indian pachyderm experience. I did manage spotting a herd of wild buffalo, a golden deer and many tropical birds. For those who have never been on a safari, the Udawalawe National Park is a good place to do a test run. I got back to my villa and had a few hours to myself, I decided to take a dip and ended up spending hours in the

pool. I looked like a shrivelled prune when I got out. A tropical destination done the right way indeed. I could see Verele, the teppanyaki inspired dining area from my room. A 5-minute walk from my villa lies this Japanese restaurant which appeared to be a favourite among the guests at the resort. But then I am vegetarian so I thought Japanese cuisine might pose a bit of a problem but the chefs outdid themselves, laying out before me a fine spread of vegetarian sushi, stir fried vegetables and a bowl of soup

in no time. The entertainment section of this restaurant was the live counter where the chefs show off their culinary art along with their acrobatic skills. It is mesmerizing to watch them work their magic. At the end of the day I had done what I wanted to at my own pace. With just the right amount of fatigue on a full belly it was time for a soak in the tub, FaceTime with family back home and say good night to Tangalle because before I knew it I would be packing my bags.

Yes, I agree the last line was a bit forlorn and sad, but I knew my holiday wasn't over by a long shot. The next day saw me on my way to the Handunugoda tea estate which was on the way to my destination for the day, Kalutara. The 145-year-old tea estate has many interesting stories retold by those who inhabit it now. They specialise in some of the world's most sought-after teas like the Sapphire Oolong, Lapsang Souchong and Flowery Camellia tea. I can't help but tell you at least two of the many stories I heard here, the first is of the Virgin White Tea. It is the only tea in the world that is not picked by hand. Back in the day, the tea leaves were cut by a pair of golden scissors only by virgins and was for the consumption of royals alone, and so, the name. Another variety of tea I found here was the Suicide Blend, which has a trace of brandy in it (unique primarily for its name). Why the name, I ask. The guide told me that this is the tea that members of the Suicide Club would start their day with as they read their copy of the bestselling book, *The Suicide Club*. Apart from tea, the estate also has rubber and coffee plantations, a tea museum, a factory where one can see how tea is processed before it is bagged and ready to be shipped. And all of this surrounded by beautiful landscapes and a fair amount of wildlife. If you, a tea connoisseur, find yourself making a trip to this region and meet the owners and visit their cottage on the estate where you can laze about with some freshly brewed tea from the plantation, a good

book and some cake. Now Galle fort. It is like a little bit of Portugal hidden away in Sri Lanka and the entire area reminded me a lot of Goa.

After about an hour, I reached my next Anantara Resort at Kalutara, built in modern architecture inspired by the works of the late Geoffery Bawa, Sri Lanka's most renowned architect. Geoffery Bawa started designing the property but his sudden passing held up the project. It was many years later that they decided that it needed to be finished and so, crisp and sharp edges, grey walls, high ceilings came up in no time and the elegant Anantara Kalutara with its rich regional tapestries came to life. With nothing planned for the afternoon I walked around the property, to explore its

delightful layout. The resort has an immaculate library, which, as far as I was concerned was the highlight of the resort. Old maps and blueprints of the property are available for our perusal, a telescope to gaze into the night sky and comfortable library chairs of varying designs. A very warm study like feel. The property has its own private beach and so plenty of room for water sports in the Indian Ocean and the Kalu Ganga river that flows close by.

Day one in Kalutra was quite laidback so I caught up and prepared a ravenous appetite for the resort's Asian restaurant, Spice Traders. If you are a pre-dinner drinks kind of person, the resort has the perfect place for you – the Upper Deck, where one can have anything from sake,



A meal prepared along with the chef at Anantara Kalutara (above, left); king coconut



Clockwise, from above: Tea tasting at the Handunugoda tea factory; Jara tea ceremony at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort; a variety of teas on display at the Handunugoda tea factory; leaves of the Virgin White Tea

aperitifs and botanical spirits to some of the finest Sri Lankan cocktail blends. All this with a great view.

As I stared at the beauty, I realised it was my last day in Sri Lanka and I wanted to make the most of it. I started my day with a visit to Kosgoda, a sea turtle conservation project where they rescue disabled or new born turtles. It is a must-see. The people handling and responsible for the project have their hearts and souls poured into saving these lives.

Next stop was Lunuganga, Geoffery Bawa's country estate. If you have a keen interest in architecture, this place has to be on your list for it. Ingenious architecture and picturesque landscaping. You can even book rooms at the estate if you like, to get a complete feel of the place. With colours like cream, white, grey, black and yellow, Geoffery Bawa's estate is elegance materialised. He had different bells installed at different parts of the estate so

that his help could tell precisely where they were needed. He made and had installed his own sundial, several varieties of trees and the backwaters perfectly visible from his house. For lunch I was back at the resort and cooked my own with one of Anantara Kalutara's chef. I got back to the resort, thought I'd loll about for a bit but Chef Nuwan was in the lobby waiting for

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me. So off we went to toss up some veggies at the Spice Traders overlooking the river. I really felt like I was in some travelling and cooking show. At the end of it I ended up making four, rather sumptuous dishes: a coconut sambol, traditional coconut chutney that you can eat with rice (or have it like filler) and a Thai eggplant curry (my favourite), mixed vegetable in curry and some rice. This project started by Anantara aims at exploring local cuisine as you familiarise yourself with the authentic ingredients, and the effort and technique that goes into it. There is so much more to food than just eating.

After my last meal in Sri Lanka at Aquolina, an Italian restaurant, it was time to get back to reality. My first solo trip had drawn to a close and honestly, I believe the opportunity and pleasure of exploring this intensely beautiful country was a great way to have done it. Top notch food, service and all this with a great view. See you again, Sri Lanka.