

PRESTIGE

HONG KONG
JULY 2017 | HK\$50

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JACKMAN**
LIFE AFTER LOGAN

**MAD FOR
MONSE**
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NEW DESIGN DUO

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SEASON**
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Sri Lankan Swagger

Although alerted to “tails” of woe, the dramatic locations, rejuvenating facilities and indulgent dining choices on display at Anantara’s Sri Lankan resorts put STEVE REELS in fine feather

YOU’LL FIND ROAD signs in Australia warning of kangaroos that, in a collision, can easily go through a windscreen and inflict a good kicking on the vehicle’s unfortunate denizens. In Hokkaido, signs alarmingly alert one to the presence of grizzly bears. In Sri Lanka, highway signs declaim, in capital letters: DANGER PEACOCKS AHEAD. It seems somehow apposite that the island’s most hazardous animal – on the roads, at least – should be an entrancingly beautiful bird.

The signs were erected in 2014, shortly after the opening of the Southern Expressway linking the capital Colombo with the south-coast city of Matara. I’m on the expressway as a guest of Anantara, to stay at the luxury-resort operator’s two Sri Lankan properties, which are at Kalutara, on the west coast of the island

and in the southern-seaboard town of Tangalle (and yes, from the limo, I can spot the odd peacock and peahen, glorious in sunshine).

It’s all so different to the last time I was here, in the 1990s. The elegantly engineered highway curves its way south past colourful, well-kept houses. There are smiles and optimism: tangible signs of a country emerging from its troubled past.

Among the top tier of luxury-resort operators, Anantara is an early adopter of Sri Lanka’s growth potential. Its Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, opened in 2015 and named in 2016 as among the top 50 hotels in the world (and ninth in Asia) in *Condé Nast Traveler’s Readers’ Choice Awards*, was followed this year by the brand’s Kalutara Resort, which I head to first.

Sited on a spit of land where the Kalu Ganga (Black River) meets the Indian Ocean, the resort’s guestrooms and suites have either a riverine or a maritime outlook. The two sectors are linked by a three-storey “wall” that contains hidden corridors and connects with the airy, high-ceilinged and almost monumental reception area and main building. Nearby, a large convention centre is





Why am I here? To buy lunch that I will cook. At the Anantara Spice Spoons cooking class

under construction, perhaps giving an indication of the patronage that Kalutara is hoping to attract.

The resort almost never got built. Originally designed by noted Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, principal force behind the “tropical modernism” architectural movement that inspires so many Asian resorts, Kalutara suffered a triple whammy. The civil war stopped work on the project in 1995. Shortly afterwards, Bawa fell ill, passing away in 2003. And to rub it in, the 2004 tsunami made short shrift of whatever works had been accomplished at the nascent getaway.

I’m greeted at Kalutara by Evgenii, a slim and charismatic Siberian with a subversive sense of humour, who guides me to my billet: a 1800-square-foot walled pool villa situated in the central zone between the two waterfronts. Within its walls, I find a suite of rooms fronting a plunge pool that’s large enough to swim in and embedded in a sundeck kitted out with loungers and dining furniture. Between that sundeck, the rain shower, the oval bathtub, the king-size bed and the lounge’s minibar, wine humidior, Nespresso machine

and multimedia connectivity, there’s almost no need to leave the villa.

But leave I do, to up the bliss quotient with a serene, 90-minute signature massage at Anantara Spa, just a minute’s walk away past the enormous, chest-high jars that punctuate the resort’s walkways. And speaking of jars, a morning visit to a wet market is coupled with a raid on a spice factory, where a chaotic assemblage of roasting and grinding apparatus competes for attention with large receptacles containing

spices and curry powders of motley hue. Why am I here? To buy lunch, of course. Lunch that I will



cook. At the Anantara Spice Spoons cooking class. I can’t wait!

Back at the resort, chef Rodney starts me off with the five basic ingredients of Sri Lankan cuisine: onion, garlic, chilli (green today), curry leaf and pandan leaf. Some or all of these are combined in various proportions, and with other tasty comestibles, as Rodney oversees my hackneyed efforts to knock up a yummy and wholesome meal from local produce. We’re aiming for a tuna curry, a creamy shrimp dish and a stir-fried finely chopped kale. You’ll have to take my word for it that the result is, indeed, wholesome and very yummy.

Afterwards, as if that’s not enough, I’m handed a bound sheaf of Spice Spoons recipes. And if that’s not enough, around the resort there’s a plethora of dining choices: Asian fare at Spice Traders, international at Olu and Italian at Acquolina, as well as sundowners at Upper Deck, located in the breezy open attic of the main building.

Moving on. There’s no wall around the pool of my 700-square-foot Garden Pool Villa at Peace Haven Tangalle, rather a lovely view down manicured lawns to palm trees and resort buildings nestled in greenery. There’s plenty of in-resort fauna, too – I spot land monitors, chipmunks, woodpeckers, chameleons and more peacocks among

the chattering menagerie. The 8.5-hectare property’s sea frontage includes a golden-sand beach and a headland that rises over dramatic cliffs for a spectacular view – a view I drink in along with the wine during my Dining by Design experience, the table set on the windy bluff lit by stilt-mounted torches, the meat and fish flame-barbecued nearby.

There’s hardly time to enjoy my villa, which is as sumptuously appointed as its Kalutara counterpart. I grab a resort bike and pedal off for lunch at Verele, a Japan-meets-Sri Lanka eatery

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A ONE-BEDROOM GARDEN POOL VILLA AT ANANTARA KALUTARA; ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE RESORT’S POOL; HANDUNUGODA TEA FACTORY; AT THE SPICE MARKET



that resembles a pair of enormous coconut husks on the beach.

Come 5pm, I position myself at the poolside bar for the daily sunset ceremony enacted by islanders in traditional garb, before heading up to Italian restaurant Il Mare (Anantara's founder, William Heinecke, has a thing for Italian food), where the outdoor dining deck is surrounded by the tops of palm trees, and a great place for sundowners.

Two visits to the gym and one to the spa help to contain the excesses of indulgence, while walks around the grounds (once a coconut plantation) reveal small rewards such as ducks on a wooded stream and the resort's own herb garden.

But just in case the pampered life gets too much for me, over the course of my Ceylonese sojourn, Evgenii sends me out on a number of excursions culled from the extensive Anantara activities menu: to architect Bawa's country estate, an almost surreal Asian expression



of a Capability Brown landscape, a visit that ends in a sudden, exhilarating storm; to Handunugoda Tea Factory, where proprietor Herman Gunaratne regales me in antique English of how he rediscovered Chinese Virgin White Tea (cut by virgins with golden scissors to fall into a golden bowl, with the first part of the human anatomy to touch it being the emperor's lips)

and re-produced it at Handunugoda.

Then it's to Galle Fort, the Portuguese-then-Dutch coastal fortification with its warren of streets lined by superbly preserved and restored colonial buildings; onward to the painted cave murals and statues of Mulkirigala Raja Maha Vihara, a temple complex carved into a 210-metre-high boulder; to Udawalawe National Park for an elephant safari; and to a Tangalle Beach for a surfing lesson better left unreported.

At one point, I slip away from the resort and take a tuk-tuk a few kilometres down the road to what turns out to be a surfers' beach, complete with its own rustic beach bar, called Moon River, and a group of Sri Lankan Rastas waiting for surf. As I sup on a Lion beer, the Rastas peacock on the sand with their surfboards, their dreadlocks and their colourful threads against the backdrop of the lovely bay, and I find it all ... well, entrancingly beautiful. 📍