

# GALLE GETAWAY

*The bay with its idyllic beaches, never-ending greenery and balmy year-round temperature charms with its authenticity, warmth*

Perfectly perched on Sri Lanka's southernmost coast, this ancient port, with its unspoiled coastline and lush landscape has evolved into an unmissable, undeniably exotic seaside destination that is finally attracting the international jet-set attention it deserves. The end of the 25-year-old civil war in 2009 has ensured this is now a luxury hotspot for winter sun thanks to the warmth of not just its climate, but also its always-smiling, gentle people.

The historic town itself, a UNESCO heritage site that is still protected by its originally Portugese then 17th century Dutch fort, is an upmarket labyrinth of tourist-friendly, interconnected streets with one-off shops, tiny boutique hotels and local foodie haunts jostling for your attention.

## RETAIL THERAPY

Sri Lanka colloquially known as Ratna-Dweepa; the gem island. Marco Polo himself waxed lyrical about the abundance of stones he found there. If you're in the market for a precious keep-sake, make a bee-line to Pedlar Street where a multitude of shiny-fronted stores entice you to splurge on indigenous

moonstones, aquamarines, topaz, sapphires and amethysts at surprisingly affordable prices. Bargaining is, of course, always good humoured and expected.

Galle fort's distinctive, one-off shops are worth splashing the cash in. Some of the stand-outs include retro-postcard and poster haven, Stick No Bills, beach to bar boutique Mimimango and Barefoot. Olanda is the one-stop spot for interiors aficionados to invest in local pieces. Spices are not just recipe essentials but also medicinal necessities; make sure you stock up on well-priced cinnamon fresh from the biggest exporter of this spice in the world, pungent black pepper (a key ingredient of local dish, pepper-crab) or cloves, ideal for curing tooth-ache.

No trip to Sri Lanka can be complete without a visit to a tea plantation, and the best of the Galle bunch is the 145-year old Handunugoda Tea Estate, the only producer of the revered virgin white tea, a brew originally the preserve of Chinese emperors, that is untouched by human till it is sipped. Following ancient tradition this family-owned and run private estate still has women cut, not pick, this special blend of prized tea

that then falls into a ceramic cup.

## THE SPICE ROUTE

If you can't pay a foodie pilgrimage to Colombo's Ministry of Crab, one of the top 50 restaurants in Asia, then make sure you head to The Dutch Hospital, a revamped historic building now filled with top-notch eateries, and book in its sister-haunt, The Tuna and The Crab. The spicy crab-packed rice is not to be missed.

High-end diners will also appreciate the colonial splendours of Amangalla, oft-cited as the premium hotel in the fort, where a multi-dish Sri Lankan feast, complete with pickles, traditional sambol and a sticky coconut ice-cream topped treacle-pudding is a bargain route to enjoying the luxurious resort. Add on a treatment at their superlative spa for additional post-shopping pampering; the jade-blue pool is an astonishing, serene scene amidst the hustle of the town.

## BOUTIQUE CHIC

Set amidst the lush vegetation of a 12-acre tea-plantation, 25-minutes from Galle Fort, is architect George Cooper's acclaimed

WORDS: NATASHA FARUQUE. PHOTOS: SUPPLIED

Kahanda Kanda; an indulgent hillside nine-villa hideaway that has set the standard other boutique hotels aspire to. Think rich teak furniture, a rainwater-infinity pool, lily-ponds filled with mandarin-coloured fish and ancient trees dotting the 80-meter saffron-walled public space that echoes the robes of local monks, where open-sided pavilions provide shelter and room to lounge. Views of cinnamon and rice-paddy fields lead to the palm-fringed jungle and still Koggala Lake.

Spacious, individual suites decked out in exotic-chic eclectic Asian antiques and luxurious fabrics are topped by jack-wood and terra-cotta tiles, with polished cement floors, wooden shutters that flood the rooms with light. The 20-by-24 foot Tamarind double bedroom had its own private veranda, a wrought-iron four-poster bed and two beautifully-appointed outdoor showers.

The food, from the spicy curry topped Sri Lankan breakfast string hoppers to plump-shrimp topped fresh mango and avocado salads and enriching coconut water picked straight from the surrounding trees, is some

of the best on offer on the island. You'll be hard-pressed to leave this sanctuary.

## SURROUNDING SIGHTS

If you can bare to tear yourself away from the peace of Kahanda Kanda, set a 5am alarm to go whale-watching in nearby Mirissa Harbour or opt for the serene surrounds of Lake Koggala. The latter involves short hop-on and hop-off tours of a spice island, a bird sanctuary and, most importantly, a Buddhist temple, cut-off from the mainland, where monks meditate, never leaving.

The hotel-arranged tuk-tuk is a fun, if slightly bumpy, way to get around. The driver is a dab hand with visitors so will whisk you around the sites, from the fishermen who perch on 2-metre high stilts (a must-do photo op) to a turtle hatchery via Viyasa beach which offers up the best pizza in the area.

**INFO:** Scott Dunn offers a luxury 7 night holiday in Sri Lanka from Dhs7,845 per person. This price includes a stay at Kahanda Kanda on a B&B basis, private transfers, return economy class flights with Emirates and some wonderful experiences. **H**

