





Crown Jewel

Sri Lanka is a real gem of a country nestled in the Indian Ocean, and its Southern regions serve up everything from active escapes to holistic healing, plenty of history, and natural beauty.

Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna

In the quiet of Udawalawe National Park, something stirs. A tree branch rustles. You know something is coming, shyly lurking and almost within your glimpse. It could be an elephant, a peacock, a monkey, or if you're really lucky, you might even catch a leopard.

Covering an impressive 30,821 hectares of land, the park was created as a sanctuary for wild animals that were displaced by the construction of the (admittedly stunning) Udawalawe Reservoir just atop the Walawe River, and is a popular site for travellers to the region—so much so, in fact, that it's actually the third most visited park in the country. But aside from a number of other safari jeeps around you, you'd never know that during a visit to the park, since it remains peaceful, quiet, with plenty of opportunities for observing the abundant free-roaming wildlife. We had headed out of our hotel, the Anantara Peace Haven in Tangalle, in Southern Sri Lanka, as early as we could manage after heading to bed later than planned—our lavish dinner at the hotel's stunning Italian restaurant, which boasts a quite simply breathtaking view that overlooks the beach and their gorgeous infinity pool, was too enjoyable to be rushed—even before daylight, in order to make it to the park in time for sunrise. And boy, was it worth it: The sun rose atop the reservoir as we drove up in our comfortable safari jeeps, enveloping the entire vista with the soft, gentle light of daybreak that could never be imitated with any image or photography filter.

For animal-lovers, the entire country of Sri Lanka is a sheer delight: Whether you're

heading to a place of worship or a place of great natural beauty for the incredible views, you're more than likely to see some wildlife. Even back at our hotel, an award-winning location in the heart of Tangalle that is both sequestered away enough to give you a sense of real privacy, as well as central enough to give you access to all of the must-visit sites both near and far in the area, you're likely to see monkeys scurrying about, playfully grabbing each other's tails while you sup on bevies and enjoy a leisurely lunch at the pool. And leisurely

it'll be, since this hotel is five star comfort at its finest: They think of every tiny detail, from extra USB charging ports in the rooms so you don't have to worry about having forgotten a charger, to providing you with a bag full of sunblock, flip-flops, and more, when you're poolside. It's not a trait that's exclusive to their Tangalle location, either—the staff in the Anantara Resorts take great pride in the fact that, despite their undeniable status as a luxury five-star destination, their attention to detail is so on point that it rivals that of a

small, boutique hotel wherein the management are able to take note of every single guest that stays with them, and their individual preferences. In Kalutara, a casual and unintentional mention of how much we loved the idea of a bath in their beautiful tub resulted in the management taking note without us even realising it, and us being informed over dinner in their exquisite Italian restaurant one night, that the staff had drawn up baths for us back in our rooms, perfectly timed to be warm but not too hot upon our





“The sun rose over the park and reservoir, *enveloping the entire vista in the soft, gentle, natural light of daybreak*” /

return to our rooms, complete with rose and jasmine-scented essential oils, a scattering of fresh flower petals, and flickering candles as far as the eye could see. In Tangalle, each morning, when we'd head down for breakfast, the staff would know our names (thanks in large part to a clever system wherein they photograph guests upon arrival, so that all of the staff can familiarise themselves with who you are and make note of your likes and dislikes), and they'd already know my coffee order, and have it ready and waiting, with a smile. We had headed over to Tangalle three days into our trip to Sri Lanka, where it felt like weeks since we'd been there thanks to how much we had managed to fit into our stay already. Kalutara had been the ideal middle ground in between Tangalle and Colombo, being just a 2-2.5 hour drive from the airport, and a great launch pad for the other sights nearer to Kalutara. There, we had the chance to decompress from our flight, shedding off our weary city skins and getting stuck into the local culture, with a visit to a local spice market followed by a cooking class at the hotel. Called the Spice Spoons experiences, guests have the chance to head to an authentic seafood, vegetable and spice market frequented by locals, accompanied by the chef and his team, where you can join him in selecting, haggling for, and taking home fresh produce, meats, and fish to clean, prep, and cook in a small class where you'll be able to learn how to cook Sri Lankan cuisine.

GREEN AND GOLD

If cooking isn't your thing, don't fret—one thing you'll never

lack, both in an Anantantara resort as well as Sri Lanka itself, is something to do, see, or explore. On our first day, we were delighted to be able to swap our usual skyline of skyscrapers for the lush green fields of Lunuganga, the country estate of the late Geoffrey Bawa. One of Sri Lanka's most renowned architects, Bawa was regarded by many as the father of modern Sri Lanka. The land, which had formerly been a cinnamon estate and rubber plantation, is awash with greenery (and unfortunately, mosquitos - we'd warn you to lather up in repellent beforehand, but it's a price worth paying for just how beautiful the grounds are). Bawa had intended to turn it into a weekend house, using his artistic vision to turn its grounds into a tropical version of a European Renaissance garden. And that's exactly what he achieved. In every corner, the garden is full of surprises, from Ancient Greek and Roman-inspired sculptures to Hindu paintings, and stunning views of the river beyond. Lunuganga, which means “Salt River” in Sinhala, is the type of unforgettable garden that you could lose yourself in for hours, almost forgetting that there are, in fact, beautiful colonial buildings in the grounds. Excursions within the gardens are guided, and happen a few times a day at set times; for information, visit geoffreybawa.com/lunuganga-country-estate/introductionpage. We couldn't get enough greenery after venturing out from the desert, but fortunately that wasn't our last stop of the sort on this trip: Once we had finished from the



WHERE TO STAY

Relatively new to the region, the Anantara Group has opened up hotels in Sri Lanka's Southern areas of Kalutara and Tangalle, placing you perfectly for an easy arrival from Colombo (Kalutara is a mere 2-2.5 hour drive from the airport, for instance) so that you're able to feel refreshed rather than haggard from driving many hours towards your next destination. In Kalutara, you're comfortably placed to head to everything from buffalo milking farms, to local markets (for everything from food, to clothing, and wood workshops, and more), and there is easy access to sites like the Mulkirigala Rock Temple, for instance. The hotel can arrange transport to take you to Tangalle when you're ready to move on, arranging for stops in Galle along the way. Once you're in Tangalle, once again the hotel can easily arrange transport and guides to locations such as Dikwella, which boasts a number of excellent beaches that are prime for surfing in (and their in-house experts, Tropic Surf, can provide everything you need from high-quality instruction to equipment), as well as national parks such as Udawalae National Park. The locations will set you in place for every hotspot in the area, all while having a luxurious, truly comfortable place to come home to. The hotels often offer joint deals for guests staying in both locations.

Visit anantara.com for more details on the Anantara Kalutara resort in Kalutara, and the Anantara Peace Haven Resort in Tangalle.

“Up at the top, it’s so peaceful that *even your soul will feel calm there, even as your heart pounds furiously* from the 500+ steps it takes to get there”





Anantara Kalutara, we paused at the Handunugoda Tea Estate as recommended by the hotel staff. A famed tea plantation that produces high-quality teas under the name of Herman Teas, the grounds are a fairytale reminiscent of Hobbiton, and have a working tea factory that is at once a museum and production plant. Their famed white tea is said to have the highest antioxidant count of any in the world, and they offer more than 50 varieties of unique teas in their shop, all which can be tasted. It was tough to tear ourselves away from the beauty of the flora, but the beaches of Tangalle awaited, so with a quick pitstop in Galle along the way, we were soon pulling up at the aptly named Peace Haven, ready to explore the beaches, sun and surf, along with the famed Mulkirigala Rock Temple and, of course, the Uduwalawe National Park.

SURF AND TURF

Even before Sri Lanka fell onto the rest of the world's radar as one to watch, surfers in the region and across the world knew of Tangalle, thanks to its stunning white sand beaches

and endless waves of every variety. Whether you're a novice surfer or an experienced wave chaser, Tangalle has something to offer depending on which beach you go to, and the Tropic Surf team that's based out of the Anantara Tangalle is ready to help you out. They have board rentals available, be it longboards, shortboards, fish boards and more—they work exclusively with hotel guests—and offer instruction from highly qualified staff who have surfed in some of the world's most impressive locations from the Maldives and beyond. After a totally rad morning spent in a lagoon, we were stoked to fill up on a killer breakfast back at the hotel. The food in Sri Lanka is reason to visit alone, be it for the irresistibly fresh grilled seafood, to its delicious spicy curries, warm naans and rotis, and lip-smacking curries. Even during our visit to the Mulkirigala Rock Temple, the friendly locals we met outside the entrance insisted on sharing some of their deliciously fresh mangoes with us, which was a welcome rush of natural sugar after we

had climbed up the roughly 500 steps to reach the top. The temple, one of only two of its kind in the country (the other being the Dambulla Rock Temple in the North of the country) is built into the rocks, and is so peaceful that even your soul will feel calm there, even as your heart pounds furiously after the admittedly exhausting walk to get to the top. But it's entirely worth it—once you've reached the viewpoint up top, you'll see that it's a spot you absolutely won't want to miss bringing your cameras for, since you'll kick yourself in your tired legs if you forgo the chance to have one of the most epic photos of yourself taken from the rocky ledge with its simply breathtaking vistas below. Up there, it's not just the natural beauty that stretches as far the eye can see—it's the knowledge that amidst the sea of greenery, there is a country simply bursting with places to be explored. Whether it's the wildlife, beaches, surfing, flora, food, culture, history, friendly people, active pursuits, or even shopping you're after, it's a land begging for adventure, and we already can't wait to return.

GETTING THERE

Sri Lanka is a short 4-5 hour flight from Dubai, and while most major airlines will fly to its capital, Colombo, we recommend Sri Lanka airlines. Aside from their extremely fair prices, the flight timings are extremely convenient, leaving Dubai overnight so you can arrive early enough to hop onto onward transport that will take you to Kalutara, Galle or Tangalle with ample time to enjoy your first day, rather than losing a day in transport times. Bonus: Business Class is surprisingly affordable and considerably luxurious. Visit srilankan.com.