

PARADISE FOUND

Janice Leung-Hayes REPORTING FROM *Sri Lanka*: Decades of uncertainty have kept this tropical island off travel itineraries. But its beguiling mix of colonial architecture, lush landscapes and a budding culinary scene have cemented its destiny as a destination on the up. PHOTOGRAPHER *Anna Maria Nielsen*

“We drive around and think, ‘What is this place?’” says Annika Fernando. “It has changed so much in the past five years; another five years from now and we might not recognise it.” Fernando runs her family’s hospitality and design business from an office in the Colombo district of Cinnamon Gardens. All around her, new cafés, boutiques, hotels and residential skyscrapers are sprouting out of the ground. Clearly Colombo is a city on the move.

Galle Face Green – a seaside promenade and public piazza overlooked by the city’s most famous historic hotel the Galle Face – is a good spot for new arrivals to observe the shifting character of the city. Families fly kites and couples stroll along the water’s edge, nibbling *isso wade* (deep-fried prawn cakes) with *achcharu* (pickles), as they have done for decades. Yet all around are cranes

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and construction sites. The 500-room, 31-storey Shangri-la Colombo opened late last year as part of a mixed-use office and retail development called One Galle Face. To the north of the green, land is being reclaimed from the Indian Ocean to build Colombo International Financial City, a Chinese-backed free economic zone.

“Tourism is booming, land values are rising and there are investors waiting to come in,” says architect Pinnya Samarantunga, sitting in her home in the Colombo suburb of Kelaniya, which was built by her father in 1979. Last year she became the first woman to be awarded the Young Architect of the Year award by the Sri Lankan Institute of Architects. It’s certainly a good time to be in her line of work.

Almost a decade has passed since the end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, better known as the Tamil Tigers. With most of the fighting happening in the north, the western and southern coasts of the teardrop isle had long been open to visitors but this newfound stability has attracted much more international interest. Inbound tourism numbers have gone up by more than 20 per cent on average year-on-year in the past six years and Colombo, once avoided in favour of the beaches on the southern coast or tea country in the central highlands, is now benefitting.

“The cities are becoming more cosmopolitan and Colombo in particular is seeing growth in the food and beverage scene,” says Henry Fitch, managing director of the expanding hospitality group Teardrop Hotels. “In the past, most good bars and restaurants were at the five-star hotels in the city but there are now many more good-quality standalone bars and restaurants setting the trend.” The group has just opened Monsoon, a modern Asian restaurant in Colombo’s popular dining district Park Street Mews. Fitch says Monsoon “caters to both tourists and the local market”, with the latter “dining out more and more”.





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This is in evidence at Plus Nine Four, a café in the Colombo 5 district. While Sri Lanka is perhaps best known for its tea, here coffee is the main draw. It's said that tea growing only blossomed here because a fungal disease wiped out coffee plantations in the late 19th century. Coffee growing has recently made a comeback thanks to a rising interest in speciality single-origin coffee. "Ceylon Coffee has a rich heritage, with more than 250 years of growing the finest coffee in the hilly regions of Sri Lanka," says Shana Dandeniya, who opened Plus Nine Four earlier this year in partnership with coffee start-up Soul Coffee.

Before opening Plus Nine Four, Dandeniya had already started to introduce café culture to Colombo with Cafe Kumbuk, an all-day café nestled in a renovated colonial building. Cafe Kumbuk serves dishes such as *isso* wrap, combining well-loved prawns with colourful organic vegetables. "Our philosophy on food and drink is simple: eat local, support small businesses and benefit the local community," says Dandeniya. At Cafe Kumbuk, the atmosphere is relaxed. Staff are on a first-name basis with regulars, a deliberate move to move away from the more traditional establishments in Sri Lanka, where customers are usually addressed as "Sir" or "Madam".

Meanwhile, Annika Fernando, who trained as an interior designer, recently completed a commission for Baillie Street

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Merchants, a restaurant and bar that specialises in classic cocktails. Her father Udayshanth was one of the first to see the need for a modern retail offering that showcased Sri Lankan arts and crafts. Back in 1987 he launched lifestyle brand Paradise Road and the company has since grown into a group of retail and hospitality businesses. "A lot of educated people are coming back from abroad and starting up new businesses," says Fernando. "They're not scared of trying something new and being inspired by what they see overseas." Dandeniya, who was born in Sydney and grew up in London, is a perfect example of this herself.

Colombo's rapid modernisation has come at a cost. Just like in every growing city, as the glass-and-steel monoliths go up, historic buildings come down. However, not all heritage is being discarded like spent tea leaves. A compromise was found in the case of the Ena de Silva house, a private residence designed by Sri Lanka's late architect Geoffrey Bawa – founder of the tropical modernism style of architecture (*see panel overleaf*). Originally located in Cinnamon Gardens, the land was sold to make way for



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a car park but the house was painstakingly moved stone by stone to Bawa's estate in Bentota, a town 80km south of Colombo.

"It was not feasible for a house like that to stay standing on that spot," says Samaratunga. "There are a lot of cold buildings going up but I would say that there are some architects who are striving to give all the modern comforts but still end up with a local touch in the building, even if it is a high-rise."

While older examples of high-rises by Bawa do exist, such as the State Mortgage Bank, most Sri Lankan architects have never worked with Bawa and to them, he's seen as just one of many points of reference when tackling the challenges of a developing country. As Samaratunga explains, "In Colombo the land value is rising. Since the plots are small, we have to think of other ways of cooling the building. You cannot have central courtyards like before."

One of the projects for which she won her award was a residence on a plot that was no more than 190 sq m. The Vent Box has three storeys, features deep overhangs to shield the house from sun and rain, a long splash pool along the length of the house for added cooling effect and large sliding doors and windows to allow for cross-ventilation.

Swapping the sweltering city for sand and a sea breeze became a lot easier earlier this decade, following the completion of the Southern Expressway. The drive from Colombo to the southern city of Galle is now reduced to about two hours. However architecture fans wanting the full Bawa experience should take the coastal route southwest instead. His final resort project in Kalutara, about one and a half hours from Colombo, is now run by Thai resort brand Anantara. Meanwhile, further down in Bentota is Lunuganga Estate, where Bawa's design story began – it was buying this property that inspired him to practice architecture.

Be they Bawa projects or otherwise, many of Sri Lanka's boutique hotels and



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DIRECTORY

Colombo

STAY: The Tintagel: Built in 1930, this colonial-style mansion and former home of a Sri Lankan political dynasty is now an intimate 10-suite hotel.

Paradiseroadhotels.com

Black Cat Bed & Breakfast:

Opened by an Australian couple in Cinnamon Gardens, Black Cat offers five rooms above a café. Trust the Aussies to serve a great latte and excellent brunch.

blackcatcolombo.com

EAT/DRINK: Monsoon: This tropical-inspired converted warehouse, located in dining hotspot Park Street Mews, serves modern Southeast Asian cuisine. Curried out? Drop in for some pho or gado gado, an Indonesian salad.

monsooncolombo.com

Good Market: This shop for local and organic products hosts a farmers' market on Saturdays. Tuck into a rice and curry while meeting the producers.

info.goodmarket.global

Plus Nine Four: Cafe Kumbuk founder Shana Dandeniya teamed up with local coffee start-up Soul Coffee to open this cosy courtyard café – named after the country dialing code – at Soul Coffee's HQ.

+94 112 554 225

Tea Avenue: A modern tea house serving teas from across Sri Lanka. Founder Sajeev De Silva comes from a long line of Sri Lankan tea merchants.

tea-avenue.com

Baillie Street Merchants: Sip classic drinks with an Asian flourish at this well-stocked cocktail bar, tucked away in a heritage building in the city's central business district, Colombo Fort.

+94 112 331 302

SHOP: Paradise Road: Udayshanth Fernando's well-curated selection of locally

made soft furnishings and other homewares. With several branches the one near Town Hall is the largest.
paradiseroad.lk

Galle

STAY: Fort Bazaar: A bright, modern 18-room boutique hotel in a sensitively restored merchant's house in Galle Fort.

teardrop-hotels.com

Eden Villas: These luxury villas come in all sorts of styles and sizes and are dotted along the southern coast. Private chefs, drivers and activities can be arranged by their in-house concierge team.

evinsl.com

EAT/DRINK: Galle Things Roti:

A no-fuss diner attached to the five-star Galle Fort Hotel with a simple menu of freshly baked rotis and spicy curries. If you can take the heat, sit outside on one of the streetside benches.

galleforthotel.com

Wijaya Beach: Regulars of the southern beaches swear by the seafood and wood-fired thin-crust pizzas at this relaxed beachside spot, which is closing in on its 40th birthday.

wijayabeach.com

Amangalla: Order a G&T on the terrace and take in the history of this 17th-century building. The former New Oriental Hotel was once frequented by traders and visitors who arrived at the port by steamship.

aman.com

SHOP: Salty Swarms: A blending of Sri Lanka surf culture and Melbourne hospitality, the Tissera brothers opened this shop and café in Hikkaduwa, half an hour along the coast from Galle Fort.

saltyswamis.com



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The birth of tropical modernism

It can take several tries to find Lunuganga on the southwestern coast. This is surprising, considering the man who built Lunuganga Estate is Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's most famous architect, credited for laying the foundations for tropical modernism, an architectural style still employed today. What is striking about Lunuganga, and many of Bawa's buildings, is that it's as much about the greenery as it is about the structures. Given the challenges of a tropical environment – heat and rain in particular – Bawa used landscaping as a way to shade walls and paths and keep surrounding areas cool. While influenced by the open plans and responsive architecture of modernism, Bawa is known to have eschewed flat roofs in favour of pitched ones for better airflow.



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villas are heritage buildings that are full of character, with a true sense of place. When in Galle, a small and walkable little town, it's worth staying a night or two in Fort Bazaar, a hotel located inside the town's fort, which dates back to the 16th century.

Despite the fort being inscribed on the World Heritage List by Unesco in 1988, it wasn't until a few years ago that it became a tourist hotspot, says British expat Jo Eden. Along with her husband Jack and their two children, she moved to Galle about 20 years ago. "There wasn't even a car when we first arrived. There was a truck that would bring the veggies in once a day but that was about it," she says, gesturing to the now-crowded Pedlar Street outside her café Poonie's Kitchen. The family traded in high-intensity Hong Kong for sunset strolls on the beach, while developing businesses geared towards tourists. For Jo, it was resortwear label Mimimango and for Jack, it meant purchasing, refurbishing and managing villas along the pristine south coast, which has quickly become a cult surf spot. In fact, surf culture has been one of the key drivers of tourism to the southern and eastern coasts. "Eight years or so ago there was only Arugam Bay on the east coast," says Jo.

Then, about three years ago, Jo launched her café in Galle Fort. One of her signature dishes is the salad thali, a riot of colours from the vegetables she grows in her garden and buys from organic farmers inland. Next year she plans to open a fine-dining restaurant in Galle. "I wanted to offer an alternative to rice and curry. Really healthy food that's beautifully presented," she says.

Few dishes define the Sri Lankan diet more than rice and curry, which is served everywhere from market stalls to high-end hotels, but today restaurateurs want to showcase much more than that. "Sri Lankan food is unfortunately seen as just rice and curry," says chef Dharshan Munisada, while keeping watch over the busy lunchtime crowds at Ministry of Crab, his restaurant in the Dutch Hospital complex in Colombo

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Fort. “That’s a really sad definition of our cuisine.”

At one of his restaurants, Kaema Sutra, he showcases complex, layered dishes highlighting Sri Lankan ingredients such as tuna and prawns. “Our cuisine is very coastal. Even in the hills, you’ll find preserved fish,” says Munisada. Frustrated by the fact that the best Sri Lankan crabs were sold to Singapore for their famous chilli crab, Munisada opened Ministry of Crab along with legendary Sri Lankan cricketers Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene.

It’s not only the country’s meaty crabs that people overseas are keen to get their claws into though. As Sri Lanka’s economy opens up, investment is pouring in from all corners, with China by far the most prominent of late. And this foreign money isn’t without controversy. Colombo International Financial City, for instance, has been criticised for its heavy reliance on Chinese loans as well as imported Chinese labour. Consequently, fostering self-sufficiency is top of mind for many Sri Lankans. Samaratunga’s father, a veteran of the domestic construction industry who has held numerous public roles,



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helped draft a parliamentary bill to train local labourers. “My father wants to create an identity card where you are trained first and you get a certificate so you know your worth,” she says. “If it works, it would be really good for our youth and will be an income generator for our country.”

At the same time, a new generation of ambitious and thoughtful entrepreneurs is emerging. Shehan De Silva and Atheeq Ifthikar, founders of boutique tour company Ceylon Soul, are engaging locals who would otherwise be removed from the growth of cities and tourist spots. “We work with locals, from farmers to artists to stay-at-home mums,” says De Silva. “As a country, after the civil war, we’re moving into a different type of development. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. We have all the elements here but we just want to make sure the community partakes in it.” — (M)