

(À La Mode)



BY NONITA KALRA



Taprobane Island is shaped like Sri Lanka. In fact, Taprobane is the original Greek name for Ceylon

# An Island, A Jewel

**T**HERE IS NOTHING MORE ANNOYING THAN THE UGLY Indian traveller. He is loud, obnoxious and hugely obstreperous. Add to that, incessant photography with a blinding flash, off-key piano playing by a certifiably tone-deaf musician and loud peels of laughter, and you get a gaggle of excited people in the gorgeous heritage property of Tintagel in Colombo 7. Please note, I am not referring to the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall. I suspect that during CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) 2013, Charles and Camilla were far better behaved than my friends and I; we were dubbed “the disturbers of the peace”. But we had an airtight excuse: Sri Lanka makes you giddy. With joy. This tiny island, once wracked by the Civil War (26-year-long), contains so much beauty that it is hard to imagine that peace is just six years old.

Look at the story of Paradise Road. Shanth Fernando started with a small boutique there in 1987. Today, he runs two of the most sought-after properties in the country, five stores and the Paradise Road Gallery Café (opened in 1998) which is on everyone’s must-do list. With a bar, restaurant and an art gallery on Alfred House Road, it is situated in the former offices of the late Geoffrey Bawa. An oasis of calm, the food is the hero here. It helps that the owner is obsessed with the menu and eats there all the time. So when he insists you try the ginger ice cream with biscotti, you listen. After which you

devour four more desserts even though you don’t have a sweet tooth. Then you go back for dinner. And lunch the next day.

Unfortunately, I don’t think Mr Fernando reciprocates my hero-worship. When he joined us at our table, he looked quite disturbed by the horrors of Indian tourists. It seems his staff hadn’t recovered from the previous evening’s particularly noisy batch of guests. I had to confess that we were the culprits. And though he smiled, I am not sure if it reached his eyes. That didn’t deter us. Our entire trip to Colombo had us going from one Paradise Road store to another. Each time we discovered something new. Even the classic black and white diagonal stripes (a Paradise Road special) looked fresh with every viewing, such is its simplicity. It is no wonder that the magazine, *Wallpaper*, calls Fernando “Sri Lanka’s Terence Conran”.

The Sri Lankans have a wonderful, laidback, sleepy island approach to life. A far cry from our aggressive Indian city stance. This ability to stop and stand still, I suspect, is the reason why their sense of aesthetics is amazing. Particularly when it comes to décor, art and literature.

We were attending Colombo Fashion Week (CFW) and while the uber sophisticated design sensibility doesn’t see direct traction into fashion, there are still interesting labels to look out for. For men, Arugambay beachwear and Conscience, an “ethically conscious brand”, are clear winners. The designer



Clockwise from top left: The Ministry of Crab, which is owned by cricketers Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara, serves delicious seafood; Maus is known for its stylish yet simple clothes, like the dress worn by this model; Dutch Hospital has live music on Saturdays

behind these brands is also the brain behind CFW—Ajai Vir Singh can be credited with turning fashion into an industry by pushing for an event as early as 2003. My personal favorites are Maus and Pappillon du thé, available at PR, in Horton Place. The creative forces behind these brands are the Fernando sisters, Annika and Saskia. One makes the most stylish yet simple clothes, the other accessories that are breathtakingly lovely. Full disclosure: They are Fernando’s daughters but the family has learnt to work together and separately—for instance, PR is Annika’s multi-brand fashion concept store. Next door, you find the Saskia Fernando Gallery.

Of course, there is more to Sri Lanka than the Paradise Road aesthetic even though I have waxed eloquent. Take Dutch Hospital in Colombo, for instance. Right across a rather impressive World Trade Center, it is considered to be one of the oldest buildings in the Colombo Fort area—instead of letting it run to ruin, the way we have allowed Mumbai’s Fort district to, it is now the city’s hippest shopping and dining precinct.

Come evening, you cannot get a table at Ministry of Crab. The food is incredible but I suspect its cult status comes more from the fact that it is owned by Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara—this is a nation that loves cricket as much as we do. Equally fabulous are Heladiv Tea Club and Colombo Fort Café. For retail junkies, there is Spa Ceylon (also available in Mumbai) and the ubiquitous chain ODEL. I am not a huge fan of the store, never have been, but I do love its brand Embark which has been set up to support stray dogs.

On Saturdays, Dutch Hospital has live music. And it is here that their commonality with India is most obvious. Their men too lack any sense of rhythm and should not be allowed to dance in public. But perhaps I am being biased. When I am in Sri Lanka, I see no reason to do anything but eat. You should abandon all explorations and just feast on coconut sambol and egg hoppers. I try and make a meal of this at least three times a day. Sri Lankan food has my heart.

When I first visited, it was just after the attack at the Bandaranaike International Airport in 2001 and you could still see the debris of violence as your plane landed. It is a different country now. This serendipitous island is full of hope. It is in the process of remembering and forgetting as it moves forward. I am reminded of my first introduction to Ceylon through Michael Ondaatje’s magical, “semi-autographical account”, *Running in the Family*. He describes it as “a portrait, ‘gesture’.” And adds: “...If those listed above disapprove of the fictional air, I apologise and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts.” Many nights I lay awake, rolling off the names of all the places I would like to visit: Weligama. Nuwara Eliya. Trincomalee. But most of all, I chant Taprobane over and over again—the original Greek name for Ceylon. This 2.5 acre-island is shaped like Sri Lanka and is home to a five-room hotel. It can be accessed by wading through surf, an elephant or a sedan chair. A tiny jewel, like Serendip itself. **67**

*The writer was editor-in-chief of ELLE India for 13 years (till Dec 2012), a role in which she influenced fashion and lifestyle*