

DEPARTURES

Autumn 2014



The art of
Style

FROM THE UNABASHED GLAMOUR OF HAUTE COUTURE
TO TIMEPIECES WITH AN UNMISTAKABLE EDGE AND
A SUMPTUOUS ARRAY OF HOMEWARES – A SEASONAL GUIDE
TO THE CHIC, SLEEK AND UNIQUE

Plus

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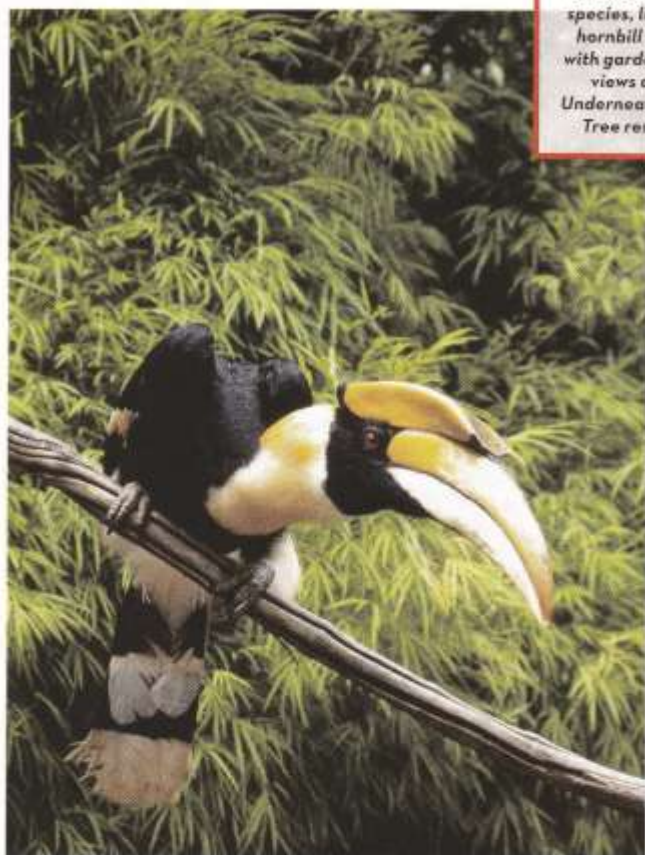
Pristine wilderness, culinary delights and an unfettered sense of adventure all combine to make Sri Lanka's southward side an off-the-radar treasure, as

FRANZISKA SENG *discovered firsthand*

We've actually got everything right here," says island native Noel Rodrigo, speaking in a part of the world that is the stuff of storybook illustrations: lonely bays, fine sand beaches and, beyond them, several thousand kilometres of nothingness – then Antarctica. "Everything," he continues, "except for ski slopes." The outer tip of Sri Lanka doubles as the lowermost point of the Indian subcontinent: the ends of the Earth as we know it, and yet, this once-troubled island (where a civil war raged for decades) has experienced a boom in development over the past few years, offering up compelling reasons to come explore its already culture- and nature-rich surrounds.

Crystal-clear waters and laid-back beach life in Unawatuna, near Galle

Sri Lanka is home to a number of rare bird species, like the great hornbill (left); suite with garden and ocean views at the new Underneath the Mango Tree resort (right)



Rodrigo is a former motor sport professional and owner of two safari camps to which we're heading, as we pass scores of pilgrims en route to Sithulpahuwa. The ruins of the 4,000-year-old Buddhist cloister lie at the heart of Yala National Park, just one of the area's ancient cultural treasures. In a certain sense, Rodrigo is a pilgrim, too. Before founding **Leopard Safaris** (leopardsafaris.com), he spent some 30 years exploring Sri Lanka's national parks on his own. But his true passion is the leopard, and Yala is his El Dorado. "We have one of the highest concentrations of leopards worldwide. The chances of spotting one are pretty high," he explains. "I like to sit in a tree until one flits across my camera lens!"

His guests enjoy considerably more comfortable environs: spring-loaded Land Rovers, air-conditioned tents, barbecue dinners and hot showers in the company of lightning

bugs under the starlit sky. Still, the best experience here is with the animals. If watching the sun rise over the park – campers, unlike daytime tourists, are the first here – isn't spectacular enough, the many rare birds, the elephant herd that makes its way past us against the backdrop of the Indian Ocean and, of course, the three leopards that suddenly appear to soberly examine us, only to quietly disappear back into the wilderness, shine like sparkling

gems, unforgettable keepsakes seared into one's memory.

An exploration of the region's ample culinary cache begins with one of the island-nation's foremost exports: tea. The **Handunugoda Tea Estate** (virginwhitetea.com) near Mirissa produces small quantities of green, black and white blends. Here, guests can taste 20 different varieties – some internationally acclaimed – that have won over at least a

few dyed-in-the-wool coffee drinkers. One-of-a-kind brews include Ceylon Souchong, which is smoked over cinnamon wood, and the morosely named Suicide Blend, which is enriched with cognac. The company's Virgin White Tea, though, takes the cake: it's made on the plantation and is based on a recipe from the dawn of the Chinese Empire.

Those looking for the future of Sri Lankan cuisine should



Precious, carefully harvested Virgin White Tea from the Handunugoda Tea Estate (left); market-fresh ingredients at Underneath the Mango Tree's popular eatery (right)

head for the restaurant at the **Underneath the Mango Tree** (utmthotel.com) resort in Dikwella. Or better yet, book a room for a few nights. Austrian hotelier and former pastry chef Robert Hollmann is paving his own path with an ambitious concept for the recently opened beachside retreat. It's not just the fact that he relies almost exclusively on local resources, adhering to stringent ecological guidelines. Instead, says Hollmann, "Our guests should feel more comfortable here than at home – they should feel like they're visiting Grandma. We want to spoil and look after them." A hint of his distinct Viennese sense of humour is visible in every corner of the place – an exercise in fun-loving design, without appearing garish or loud.

Sri Lanka is known for ayurveda, and Underneath the Mango Tree boasts an extensive offering. The spectrum ranges from "Light" with "Ayurveda Wellness", which includes traditional spa treatments, through to "Ayurveda Intense", complete with a bespoke, doctor-supervised diet plan. It's

not uncommon to catch a glimpse of staff members from nearby ayurveda resorts tucking into the innovative, creative and tasty Sinhalese fusion dishes at the resort's excellent restaurant.

Those not interested in dieting, but still looking to shed a few pounds or ride the waves on the Indian Ocean need not look far. With softly breaking waves, the beaches around Under the Mango Tree in the southeast are not only a draw for surf novices, but are also essentially undiscovered by the surf tourism industry and the crowds that inevitably follow. The best course of action is to hook up with an experienced guide and surf instructor like **Bandula Gardiyawasam** (+94 77 63 577 34).

"I've done surf-guiding for professionals, and they've said: 'Please, don't tell anyone about these spots'," he says with a laugh. Still, sometimes he does just that, giving his guests a treat that for some is the greatest pleasure imaginable: gliding atop an empty, perfect wave at the edge of the world. ♦

THE SCENE

URBAN RETREAT

The blossoming citadel of Galle at the southern tip of Sri Lanka beckons with detour-worthy attractions and much more



Vintage souvenirs at Stick No Bills Poster Gallery (left); Sri Lanka's gemstone wealth renders Galle a paradise for jewellery lovers (right)

Long before colonial times, Galle was a lively commercial centre. Today, the city's old town – including its UNESCO-protected fort – remains a compact bastion of history, and is just the right size for a laid-back day trip. When it comes to shopping, Galle's countless jewellery studios are an absolute must: Sri Lanka, after all, one of the world's most important sapphire and moonstone exporters. While **Ibrahim Jewellers** (47 Church Street) is the most renowned merchant here, check out **Pedlar's Inn** (pedlarsinn.com) for a selection of more innovative designs. **Stick No Bills Poster Gallery** (sticknobillsonline.com) specialises in high-quality vintage prints from Sri Lanka, India and the rest of the world. Designer **Jo Eden Mimimango** (joedenmimimango.com) showcases quirky sari creations in her shop. The diminutive **Fortaleza Boutique Hotel and Restaurant** (fortaleza.lk) offers up refreshing fusion cuisine in a cosy atmosphere. **The Amangalla** (amanresorts.com), in turn, is the only exclusive resort here open to non-guests, who can reserve tables at its excellent in-house restaurant or book a treatment at its spa. Just a short dive from the centre, the **WB Villa** (whybeach.com) is a hidden beach refuge with an Italian-inspired restaurant. **The Old Railway Café** (theoldrailwayshop.com) abutting the train station is the best place to enjoy homemade cake while spending a relaxed afternoon watching trains come and go. —FS



The Yala National Park is best known for its bountiful leopard population

SRI LANKA'S NEWEST JEWELS

Of late, it's clear that the island nation is dead set on making the most of its can't-beat natural beauty. While the intimate eight-bungalow **Gal Oya Lodge** (galoyalodge.com), in a heartbreakingly beautiful park in the southeast of the country, kicked off its first season this June, **Cape Weligama** (capeweligama.com), not far from Galle, is slated for launch in October with a svelte collection of 40 villas and vast, 270-degree panoramas of the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, at the centre of the island, the new **Taylor's Hill** (taylorshillkandy.com) is set on a tea estate and reminds one of a stately English country home. —CLAUDIA WHITEUS