

# ISLAND STYLE



**TRUNK DRIVERS:**  
Elephants make their way across Kandalam's lush landscape.

After a decade of peace, **Sri Lanka** is South Asia's most daring design destination

By **STACIE STUKIN**

**S**RI Lanka conjures images of heavenly sunsets, fisherman gracefully balancing on stilts and feel-good moments of Buddhist Zen. Yet for many, the devastation of the 25-year civil war and the 2004 tsunami kept the Indian Ocean island off itineraries. Now, new resorts and tourists are bringing the island (formerly Ceylon) back into focus.

"People often think of Sri Lanka as 'India light' and they come for the beach and hot weather," says James Jayasundera, a Sri Lankan by birth and the founder of UK-based Ampersand Travel. "But Sri Lanka also has a strong modern design and architectural history that's often overlooked." In particular, design en-

thusiasts will revel in the legacy of Sri Lanka's foremost architect, Geoffrey Bawa (1919-2003), who over his nearly 50-year career imprinted his own unique interpretation of Tropical Modernism onto the island.

David Robson, an architect, scholar and Bawa friend, has written extensively about the Ceylon-born architect whose privileged, colonial heritage — Arab and British on his father's side, and Dutch Burgher and Sinhalese on his mother's — afforded the tall, debonair man a British education at Cambridge University, where he was known for his strikingly designed suite of rooms.

In Robson's two latest books, "In Search of Bawa: Master Architect of Sri Lanka" and "Bawa: The Sri Lanka Gardens" (left) he continues to explore

Bawa's passion for a modern vernacular architecture in an island landscape. Robson compared Bawa's influence in Sri Lanka and beyond to Frank Lloyd Wright's here in the states and says, "Bawa created architecture with a soul strongly linked to Sri Lanka's past that intimately involves you with the tradition of his culture."

Companies like Ampersand (*AmpersandTravel.com*) and Sri Lanka In Style (*SriLankaInStyle.com*) offer Bawa-specific itineraries, while the island's capital, Colombo, is best reached from the US via Dubai on Emirates (*Emirates.com*) or Qatar Airways (*QatarAirways.com*) through Doha.

Here's a taste of the island's best design spots.

## **COLOMBO** Geoffrey Bawa Residence

Maintained by the Geoffrey Bawa Trust after the

architect's death in 2003, Bawa's Colombo home is open to the public (there are two rooms set aside for stays). The entire structure reflects Bawa's penchant for graphic black-and-white accents, batik textiles, Buddhist relics, colonial cane furniture and mid-century designers like Eero Saarinen (*GeoffreyBawa.com*).

## **The Gallery Café**

Udayshanth Fernando, often referred to as the Terence Conran of Sri Lanka, transformed Bawa's former offices into a café and gallery in 1998 with the architect's blessing. It also happens to be one of the best restaurants in Colombo and Fernando has painstakingly kept the space almost as it was during Bawa's time with an open courtyard and a reflecting pool (*ParadiseRoad.lk*).

## **KOTTE** Sri Lanka Parliament building