

COUNTRY & TOWN HOUSE

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

APRIL 2018 £3.90

Crime and Punishment

*Bill Browder's
battle with the
Russian Bear*

SPRING
DESIGN
UPDATE

THE
LURE OF
LISBON

Now's the time
to move to
Portugal

ANNA FRIEL

Acting's English Rose with thorns

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



ESCAPE

TRAILING THE TEARDROP ISLAND

Follow **Fiona Duncan's** graceful ten-point trail across the tea gardens and surfing beaches of Sri Lanka

Shaped like a teardrop, Sri Lanka is stunningly beautiful, mainly Buddhist and 'India lite': it's so much easier to travel here than in India. It's safe, friendly and remarkably hassle-free, full of nature, culture, smiling faces and charming people, a beautiful, serene, slow-paced island nation all of its own.



Top 10 to do



1 BEGIN AT THE WALLAWWA

Just 30 minutes from Colombo's international airport, this romantic, 18th-century country retreat has wide verandas overlooking the croquet lawn, and kind staff who emanate unbidden from the shady old mansion. By day the extensive, leafy gardens and pool have a slightly gloomy feel, but by fire and candlelight at night, it's magical. With its calm, colonial air and a spa, this is just the place to uncoil after the journey. teardrop-hotels.com

2 HIRE A DRIVER/ GUIDE...

... and make sure your car is air-conditioned. You'll probably make great friends (we called in on our driver's daughter and family en route) and learn much about life in Sri Lanka. It's surprisingly inexpensive and it takes away all the hassle of getting around the island.

3 BUT BE SURE TO TAKE AT LEAST ONE TRAIN JOURNEY

The famous stretch between Kandy and Ella is impossibly beautiful; just be sure to sit on the right side going south and to reserve seats well in advance. Other great routes are from Colombo to Kandy and Colombo to Galle (see seat61.com for details). Sea planes are also an increasingly popular way of getting about; watch the



daily flight landing on Castlereagh Lake from Camellia Hills and you will long to be on board (cinnamonair.com).

4 MAKE TRACKS TO HILL COUNTRY

Set among the emerald slopes of Sri Lanka's Golden Valley of Tea, Bogawantalawa, in the southwest of the region, is this refreshingly contemporary interpretation of a traditional tea planter's bungalow that has just five bedrooms and an infinity pool set in lush gardens. It works beautifully, designed to make the most of stunning views over mirror-calm Castlereagh Lake. The spacious interior, with wooden floors, lovely linen fabrics, shelves of good books and open fires manages to feel both homely and coolly stylish at the same time. camellia-hills.com



5 FOR A CONTRAST, HEAD TO THE SOUTHWEST SIDE OF HILL COUNTRY

Thotalagala, opened in 2016, is another planter's bungalow but this one is authentic, its layout unchanged since it was built, with original features such as fireplaces, panelling, furniture and pictures from the period, full of character. And since it's part of Sir Thomas Lipton's beautiful Dambattenne tea estate, guests can have a private tour of the Scottish magnate's hardly changed 1890 factory and take tea, served by a butler, at a linen-clothed table on the lawn of his manicured garden. If mustachioed Sir Thomas, who brought tea to Britain's working classes through his Liptons' stores, had emanated from the French doors of his splendid, frozen-in-time bungalow, I would not have been remotely surprised. thotalagala.com



Thotalagala Plantation House is as authentic as it comes

7 STAY ON A PARADISE BEACH

Hidden away near Dikwella on the south coast, Hiriketiya Cove is ringed by palms and coconut trees, dotted with beach cafés, with waves for both beginners and experts. Cove House and Little Cove, sleeping six and four respectively, overlook the bay. They come air-conditioned, each with a pool and fully staffed, with an excellent chef. Evenings are magical: lamplight, sunset, cheeky monkeys, huge bats flitting among the trees and fireflies. covehouses-srilanka.com



Galle is full of historic buildings

6 SPEND A DAY IN GALLE

Surrounded by grassy ramparts, spacious, laid-back, arty Galle Fort is full of historic buildings dating from the Dutch occupation of the 17th century and full of jewellery shops, art galleries and cafés. Its multi-ethnic, multi-religious population and tranquil air make it a place to linger. Take tea under a whirring fan in the Galle Fort hotel, a colonial haven set in an old gem merchant's mansion (galleforhotel.com). The slick Amangalla (aman.com), set in another fine colonial building, is almost next door, but for a step back in time, complete with aged waiters in white coats and black bow ties and original stone fountains and aviaries, head for Cloisenberg Hotel overlooking Galle Harbour (cloisenberghotel.com).



Rent Cove House for a paradise hideaway

8 HAVE AN AUTHENTIC SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

Pepper organises everything from cooking curry in a wattle and daub home, with lotus leaves for plates, to climbing sacred Adam's Peak in time for sunrise. On Christmas Day we hiked with a guide, appropriately named Santa, to a waterfall in the Kanneliya Rainforest and had lunch at a table planted in the river. We saw chameleons, snakes and monkeys and one of us (me) attracted no less than three leeches. 'Very good for your health,' beamed Santa when I showed him my blood-soaked trousers. pepper.life



You can't leave before trying an egg hopper

10 IN COLOMBO, DINE AT THE GALLERY CAFE

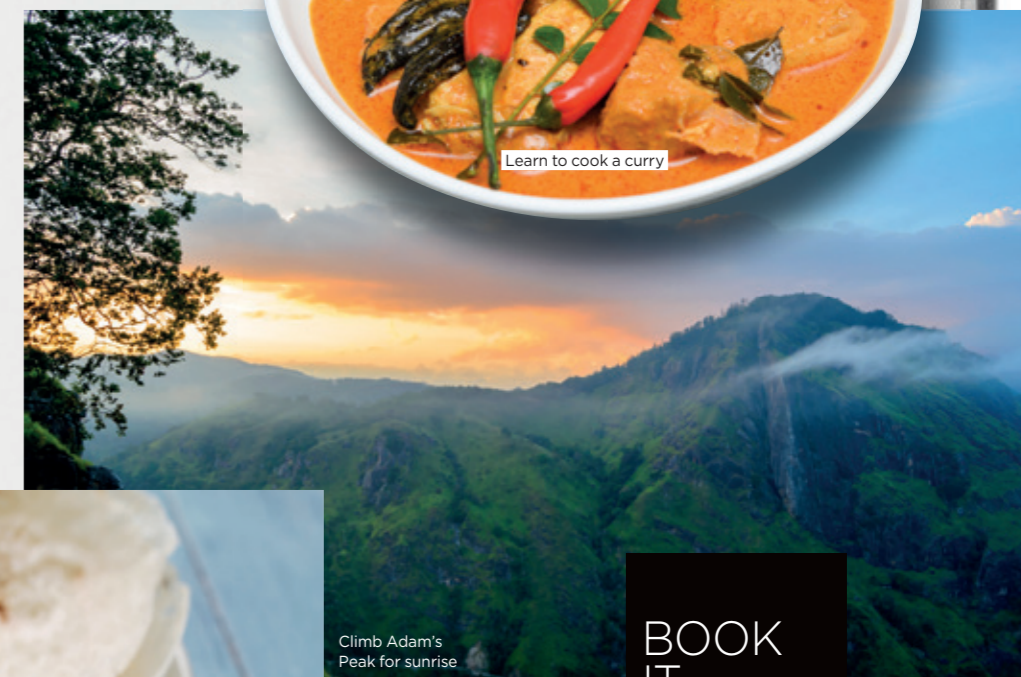
Developed by style arbiter Shanth Fernando, creator of Paradise Road shops, restaurants and hotels, from the offices of revered architect Geoffrey Bawa, this is the coolest hangout in town. Just the place to while away the evening before the night flight home. paradiseroad.lk



One last cocktail at The Gallery Café before heading home



Learn to cook a curry



Climb Adam's Peak for sunrise

BOOK IT

9 EAT EGG HOPPERS FOR BREAKFAST...

... or try them at a street stall. The bowl-shaped rice flour and coconut milk crêpes make edible containers for simply cooked eggs, served with curry accompaniments. After that, practise saying hello the Sri Lankan way – a big smile and a characteristic waggle of the head.

Ampersand Travel offers bespoke tours to Sri Lanka. A seven night tour including accommodation at Teardrop Hotels The Wallawwa and Camellia Hills, and Thotalagala, Haputale, starts from £3,200 per person, including direct flights, private transfers, private guiding and walking tour with Pepper.

Cove House is available from £8,290 (low season) for seven nights based on full occupancy (six people) including flights and transfers. Little Cove is available from £5,050 (low season) for seven nights based on full occupancy (four people) including flights and transfers. ampersandtravel.com
SriLankan Airlines flies daily to Colombo from London with fares starting from £500. srilankan.com



BUY ON THE ISLAND OF DREAMS

If your travel tastebuds have been tantalised, why not go the whole hog and buy a house on Sri Lanka? **Caroline Phillips** reports on the island's latest property hot spot

Imagine a palm-fringed beachfront retreat. An 8,500 sq/ft tropical villa built in 2005. One boasting a massage temple – with sides open to the jungle foliage – and a colonnaded walkway. An outside sitting room with a chandelier and a 49ft dining room overlooking monkeys swinging in the Khomba tree and the courtyard swimming pool. Add to this six colonial bedrooms with soaring ceilings and inside/outside bathrooms open to the fireflies that sparkle in the inky sky.

There's also a drawing room with a teak floor rescued from a hill station ballroom, plus a garden bursting with hibiscus and King coconuts that leads onto Mahawella Beach – one of the island's best, plus it's almost deserted. All this for less than the price of an Edwardian terraced house in Kensal Rise.

Welcome to Thalassa – the hideaway of author Charlotte Breese and her journalist husband, Irfan Husain – on the market for £1.85m. It's in the Tangalle district – a relatively undiscovered region in the deep south of Sri Lanka with pristine beaches, ancient Buddhist rock temples and turtle hatcheries; close to the nature reserves of Yala and Udawalawe with their leopards and elephants, and Mirissa for early morning whale watching. And nearby surfing at Hiriketiya.

Prices in fashionable Galle – 50 miles from Mahawella Beach, and with a UNESCO world heritage site Dutch fort – have reached Notting Hill heights. Thus, canny investors are

turning their attention to the Tangalle region in the Hambantota district. There are many good reasons for this. The final stretch of the expressway from Colombo will be completed in 2019. This is expected to push prices up quickly – as happened in Galle when an earlier section of this road was finished. The expressway will also cut the drive time from Colombo airport by 40 minutes to two and a half hours.

Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport (42 miles from Mahawella beach) opened in 2013 but there was little demand from international airlines. Now the Chinese and Indians are vying to monetise it with budget airlines, and hence further open up that part of the country. Add to this that in 2014, Cinnamon Air started sea plane flights from Colombo to Dickwella, and that a new train line to Kataragama is due for completion. So it's not surprising that the area is being dubbed the island's next property hotspot.

The Tangalle beachfront land is currently approximately £400,000 per acre, inland it's just £80,000. 'Until now, there has been a year-on-year growth of ten to 15 per cent around Tangalle,' comments agent, Shane Thantirimudalige. 'I expect property prices on the beach to double in and around the Tangalle area when the highway is completed,' adds Ivan Robinson, director of Lanka Real Estate. 'Around Galle, prices have increased dramatically, a third in the last year on the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A typical morning view of the local fishermen and their boats returning to the beach in front of Thalassa; a wild elephant family in Udawalawe National Park; the courtyard pool, Thalassa's centrepiece; Fishermen in a freshwater lagoon close to Thalassa

beach.' Property is currently still around five times cheaper than anything comparable in Phuket or Bali.

The wider picture is frangipani-sweet too. There's a democratic and relatively stable government. The president is encouraging foreign investment and continuing to simplify the island's confusing property restrictions. He has plans to allow freehold condominium ownership for foreigners, welcoming serviced villas in 2018. Rules have been simplified so that a foreigner can buy a freehold by creating a corporate structure with a lawyer (for around £2,300). Stamp duty on leasehold purchases has been reduced to one per cent and four per cent on freeholds.

Smart folk have been investing in Sri Lanka ever since the 30-year civil war ended in 2009, although there are relatively few primary residences. They've been building

homes, renovating beachside villas and opening (mostly) boutique hotels. In Tangalle, they've been mainly sticking to its golden coast. The British High Commission guides potential investors through the pitfalls of buying, renting or building.

People who've already invested in Tangalle are smiling as broadly as Buddhist monks. Tim Jacobson, an former banker, commissioned the last house designed by tropical modernist architect, Geoffrey Bawa; then Jacobson opened The Last House, now an elegant and thriving boutique hotel on Mahawella beach. The award-winning Kadju House – overlooking Seenimodera Beach – also lures paradise seekers. 'It's simple,

minimalistic and allows guests to be constantly aware of the surrounding nature,' says owner, Vikrom Mathur. It's available to rent. Most owners cover their annual costs with rentals for just a few weeks a year; and most say one thing about Tangalle: invest now.

Luxury hotel groups have read the signs. The Amanwella built overlooking a beautiful horseshoe bay. In 2016, the Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort opened Tangalle's first upscale beachfront property. Peace. Haven. Tangalle. Says it all, really. But for anyone who wants more than just a holiday, there's always Thalassa with its hammocks slung between palm trees, croquet lawn and clear title. ■

