

# LUXURY TRAVEL ADVISOR

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DESTINATIONS

# SRI LANKA SEDUCTION

BY MARY WINSTON NICKLIN



**ANANTARA KALUTARA** s One Bedroom Pool Villa has a private plunge pool with sundeck, loungers and outdoor dining furniture.

The secret's out about Sri Lanka. Since the 26-year civil war ended in 2009, the island in the Indian Ocean is quickly gaining ground as one of the globe's most prized destinations. Beaches, deliciously spiced cuisine, temples and safari-ready national parks where elephants and leopards roam — There's an overwhelming wealth of natural and cultural riches packed into an island roughly the size of West Virginia. Not to mention the eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Far-flung exotic travel is taking off as a luxury travel trend for 2018, and Sri Lanka is ripe for authentic, transformative experiences. On a recent adventure in old Ceylon, we found that Anantara makes it easy with twin resorts that offer an immersive experience in complementary settings.

Start your itinerary at **Anantara Kalutara**, located on the west coast, south of the capital city of Colombo. The luxury resort's proximity to the international airport (1.5 hours) makes it a good gateway, and Anantara's airport transfer comes with cold, scented towels, Wi-Fi, an iPad and a wicker basket loaded with treats. The resort was designed by the late Geoffrey Bawa, who pioneered an indoor / outdoor —modern tropicalism— design in which nature is part of the decoration. From the enormous swimming pool to the spa, the Anantara Kalutara's facilities are world-class, but it's really the architecture that will impress: soaring, open-air spaces fringed by palm trees and luxuriant vegetation.

Just a year old, Anantara Kalutara sits at the confluence of the Kalu Ganga River and the Indian Ocean. This important waterway originates in the mountains near Adam's Peak, one of the world's most sacred pilgrimage sites. At Kalutara, traditional fishing boats ply the waters, while the lush river-



banks are dotted with Buddhist temples, Catholic churches and mosques representing the area's diverse mix of religious faiths. There's no better place for appreciating this privileged perch than the Presidential Suite (No. 13). From your private pool, sun deck and garden, observe local life along the lagoon. Sometimes the imam's call to prayer, or the sound of a train reverberating on its tracks floats across the water. There are floor-to-ceiling windows throughout the 1,184 square-foot Presidential Suite, and you can also take in the views from a big soaking tub.

We also love the Deluxe Ocean View Room. This is a smaller room category (645 square feet) but quite popular among clients; it feels spacious and has dreamy

views of the Indian Ocean lapping the beach below. Note that the one- and two-bedroom pool villas are situated in enclosed courtyards and therefore don't have the views. Generous amenities across the room categories include Nespresso machines, wine fridges, Anantara flip-flops and indulgent bath products in marble-clad bathrooms.

Giles Selves, the passionate area general manager, sweats every detail. A big focus has been on the spa, restaurants and service, with a large investment in staff recruitment and training. Guests are greeted by name, and served their preferred breakfast and / or drinks before being asked. For VIP bookings at Anantara's Sri Lanka properties, luxury travel advisors can reach

out to Selves ([gselves@anantara.com](mailto:gselves@anantara.com); 011- 94 85- 3- 68).

Designed with 10 treatment rooms, the spa at Anantara Kalutara is, in fact, the biggest in Sri Lanka. Many of the highly trained therapists hail from Thailand. Never turn down a chance to indulge in an Anantara Signature Massage — 90 minutes of deep kneading and muscle manipulation that's guaranteed to erase the effects of jet lag. Food is another star attraction at the resort. There's a decadent breakfast buffet at Olu; refined Italian cuisine at Acquolina, which overlooks a beachfront infinity pool; and at Spice Traders, Asia's melting pot of flavors is on display in perfectly executed plates. Tip: Be sure to try Sri Lankan specialties

like breakfast "hoppers," a bowl-shaped pancake slowly cooked with an egg in the middle and paired with spice-infused condiments. Note: Anantara Kalutara also stages a fruit market on Saturdays, when a local boat, laden with fresh fruit, docks at the resort. Guests also have the opportunity to go night-fishing with a village fisherman.

Your personal villa host can arrange activities like scuba diving lessons, water sports (directly from the resort) and deep sea fishing. If the resort's insanely cool architecture piques your interest in Geoffrey Bawa, ask about an excursion to his Lunuganga country estate, about an hour away. The fascinating guided tours provide insights into his architectural philosophy and Sri



**ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE RESORT** is set amidst coconut plantation along the Indian Ocean. Seen here is a Beach Pool Villa.

**ANANTARA KALUTARA's Dining by Design** offers customized dining in a secluded hideaway pavilion or along the Indian Ocean.



altitude plantation known for the cultivation of Virgin White Tea.

When you arrive at Anantara resort in Tangalle, you might not want to leave. Opened in December 2015 on a coconut plantation, the Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort is surrounded by exceptional natural beauty — towering palms and a perfect sandy beach where sea turtles build nests — and the facilities hit the perfect note of barefoot luxury. We also loved the local touches: the chilled coconut water offered during check-in; nightly sunset ceremonies performed by local villagers — complete with a conch blowing; the wiry coconut guru who shimmy up trees to fetch coconuts for guests and the luxurious in-room bathrobes with a coconut motif conceived by a local designer.

The sprawling resort has such incredible wildlife (monkeys laughing on the trees, peacocks strutting on the lawns, monitor lizards basking in the sun) that General Manager Ross Sanders (rsanders@anantara.com) recently recruited a top Sri Lankan biologist, Anuradha Ediriweera (Eddy) (aediraweera@anantara.com) as the resident naturalist. Sri Lanka is a biodiversity hot spot and Eddy — with an impressive résumé — working on environmental initiatives — can provide valuable insights. Don't miss excursions to Yala National Park, populated with leopards, and

the Udawalawe National Park, renowned for its elephants. Tip: Request that Eddy accompany your excursion; his knowledge is astounding and will enrich your experience. Sanders points out that Sri Lanka is the only place in the world where you can see — on the same day — both the biggest land animal (elephants) and the biggest sea mammal (whale-watching outings).

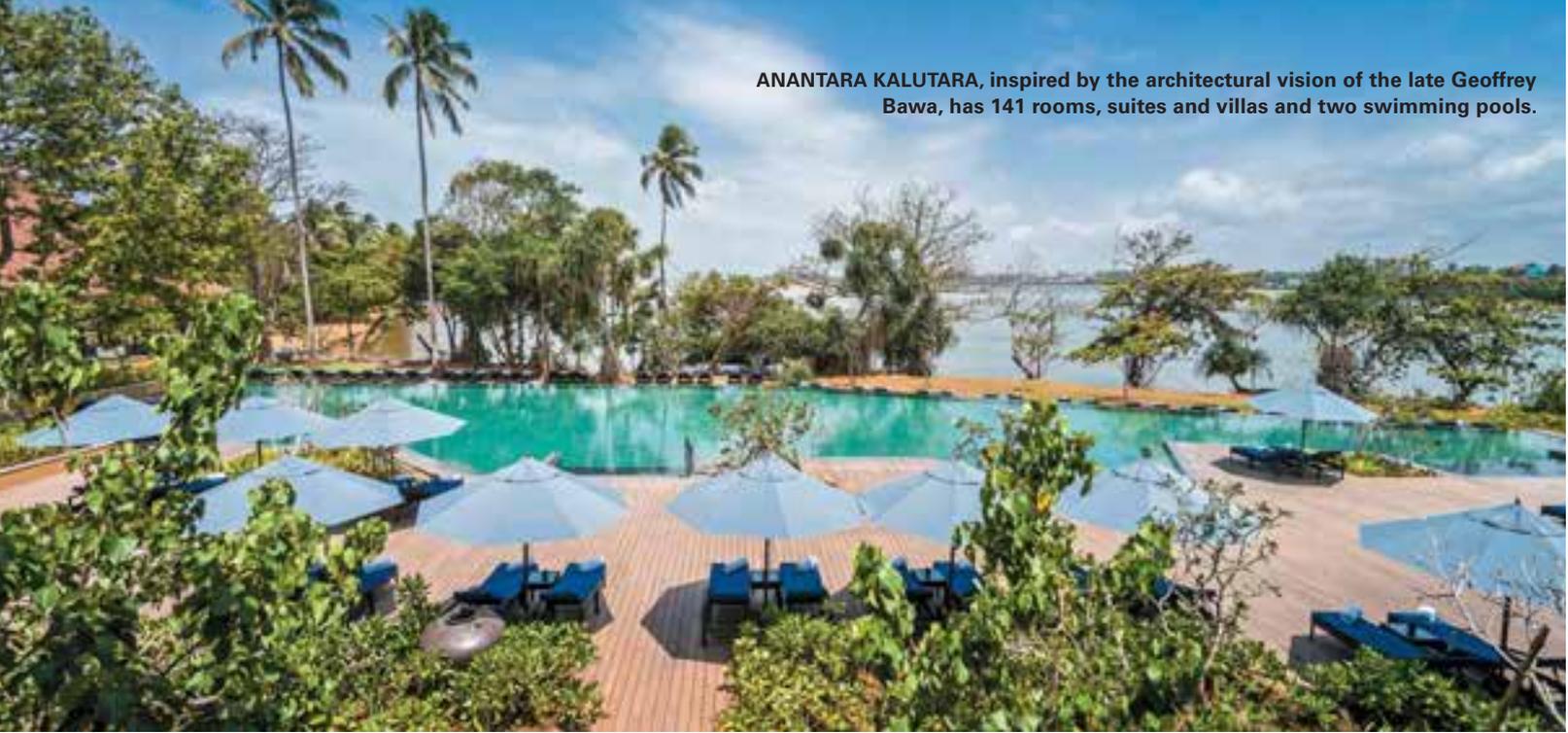
Another must is surfing lessons with Tropicsurf, an Australian luxury surf company that partners with top resorts around the world. Regardless of your age or ability, you'll experience the thrill of riding the waves. This Tropicsurf outpost is located directly at the Anantara Tangalle resort. Beginners learn tricks from the pros, while more advanced surfers should opt for a road surfari — exploring some of the best beaches in the area, including some secret spots only the locals know about. Expert guide Steve Taylor shares his passion for the sport with enthusiasm that's contagious. Note: The surfing season is year-round, but the biggest swells are between April and October.

The temptation to explore is great, but take our word for it, you'll want to allow time for serious resort R&R — lingering over the divine breakfast buffet, then whiling away the hours at the beachfront infinity pool or at the spa. We met with the new Spa Director Dr. Jayachandran

## ADVISOR INSIGHT:

**Carrie Wallae**, founder and president of **Ceylan World Travels**, has just returned from a trip which included Colombo, the Cultural Triangle, Tea Country, Yala National Park, Tangalle and Galle Fort. She says, "Sri Lanka is one cool little country. It offers a diversity that's hard to match in such a small area; it's as easy to reach as Thailand, yet none of your friends have been there." Wallace found that the luxury accommodations are exceptional, saying, "Personal favorites included **Ceylon Tea Trails**, a series of five Colonial tea plantation residences converted into lovely five-room guesthouses, all part of **Recess & Chateau**. Don't miss **Amangila** in Galle Fort; explore this funky UNESCO town and be welcomed back to colonial splendor, Aman-style. And, the surprise find — **Santani Welisreota and Spa**, outside Kandy. After being templed-out, this simple mountain haven offers tranquility, Ayurvedic programs and wonderful outdoor excursions." Wallace has some great insider tips. "Travel in shoulder season to avoid crowds in the Cultural Triangle. Start the climb up **Sigiriya Rock Fortress** at 7 a.m. and avoid peak hours at the **Tenpeetha Temple**. Remember, much of Sri Lanka is tropical: there will be bugs, even at the best places," she says, adding that "travel is generally overland, with three- to six-hour chauffeured drives on windy roads. While the scenery is incredible, clients may appreciate other modes such as trains, charter flights and helicopters." Lastly, "for context," Wallace recommends spending a night in Colombo and taking a private tour with Mark Forbes, of **Colombo City Walk**, one of Sri Lanka's top wildlife photographers and a keen chronicler of the city's architectural evolution.

ANANTARA KALUTARA, inspired by the architectural vision of the late Geoffrey Bawa, has 141 rooms, suites and villas and two swimming pools.



## ADVISOR INSIGHT:

**Kevin Doheny** of **MoonRings, Inc.**, an affiliate of **Andavo Travel**, was thrilled to experience Sri Lanka on a recent trip after being intrigued by the diverse country for years. He says, "With so many places to see and lots of ground to cover, I was thankful to have a driver with us the entire time. It made the journey much less stressful and we were able to enjoy the experience even more. The other helpful piece was using an on-site. With all the logistics, hotels and activities, it was wonderful to let someone else take care of those details. I also appreciated the diversity in accommodations. From the subtle, laid-back luxury of the **Aman** properties to the unique and memorable setting at **Ceylon Tea Trails**, there was a fair mix of options for luxury travelers. The other takeaway that will be helpful for future clients is that you shouldn't sell yourself short when it comes to the length of the itinerary. Give yourself the time to really enjoy exploring the different areas at a leisurely pace. A quick visit would only be selling yourself short!!

Thampi (jthampi@anantara.com), an impressive Ayurvedic doctor from Kerala, who oversees a new Wellness and Ayurvedic program at the spa. He works with Dr. Sampath, Anantara Tangalle's resident doctor of Ayurveda, to help guests find mind-body balance from constant digital overload. Note: We hear that new wellness packages centered around fitness, weight loss and mindfulness will debut this year.

Or you could just do nothing but soak up the luxury of your guestroom all day. Even the lowest room category feels large and comes with a balcony. We especially loved pool villas like No. 60. (Steps from the beach, the pool villas are set away from the main hotel).

What We Loved: A fresh fruit plate comes with an illustrated booklet of Sri Lankan fruits, the minibars and wine fridges are fully stocked and fluffy pool towels are rolled carefully on loungers by the pool. Pathways thread through the resort, past the fitness center, game room and the organic garden, but if you're feeling just a little bit tired, your villa host will arrive with a golfcart in what seems like the blink of an eye. ■



ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN's Two Bedroom Garden Pool Villa (above) has 180 sqm of floor area for your space.

ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN (below) has excursions to aim for the wetland sanctuary that is home to more than 10 bird species.

