

the guide

The Best of a New Sri Lanka

Bursting with boutique hotels and natty restaurants across its palm-shaded avenues and postcard beaches, Sri Lanka now presents a concoction of laid back, but snappy, island culture. From the tried-and-tested locales to the newer hotels, bars, and restaurants, this is a run-down of some of the best places for food, party, drink, and resting your head in the country. BY **GOVIND DHAR**

STAR ATTRACTIONS *fabulous hotels that have been hiding in plain sight.*

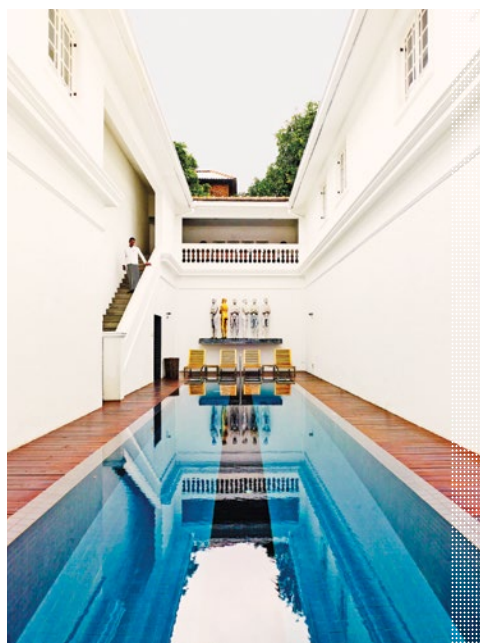


Heritage Kandalama

With boulders in the lobby and ivy cladding the balconies, Heritage Kandalama is Geoffrey Bawa's paeon to living it up in the refined world of Sri Lankan avant garde. His architectural majesty weaves through in towering sculpture, wrought-iron furniture, and airy cement-floor spaces. With wraparound views over the hill-hemmed Kandalama reservoir, some from infinity pools, this hotel is all about taking into stride Macaque monkeys running through the lobby on your way to a sumptuous breakfast. Their Sri Lankan preparations and smoked meats truly stand out. The Six Senses spa is divine. heritancehotels.com

Jetwing Vil Uyana

At Vil Uyana's boutique thatched-roof villa retreat, you might forget you were in Sri Lanka. Its wooden floors, open-air sala-style library, neon-green paddy fields, and lotus ponds make you think of Vietnam. Its barefoot attendants in sarongs offer king coconut water, and the cement-floor rooms are covered in the popping colours of local Lankan loomhouses. Thirty villas have been built in a clearing that has been cultivated into a man-made nature reserve. Adorable and endangered Loris primates have made this retreat their habitat. The hotel even offers nightly walks to see the creatures. jetwinghotels.com



TINTAGEL

Formerly the home of a prime ministerial family, the Tintagel is a result of exquisite old-world-meets-new design alchemy. Signature black-and-white striped furnishings run through the property amid Doric columns and outsize vases on raw cement plinths. Shanth Fernando's curation of objets d'art with sculpture, wood, marble and brass has established this address as one of the most sought after in Colombo. The hotel of 10 suites offers most mod cons, a petite library of leather-bound books, a private courtyard, and pool. In a world of increasingly prosaic luxury hotel offerings, the Tintagel's singularity may be considered a blow to the ubiquitous. paradiseroadhotels.com/tintagel

CAPE WELIGAMA

Cape Weligama is a mix of lavish Mediterranean villas with cliff-top vistas into clear aquamarine ocean. With almost every luxury accounted for here, each room comes with its steam room, baths, and spa beds. The order of play is yoga in the ocean air, plunge pools for cooling off, and cocktails at sunset. Their all-inclusive rates mean you don't sign any bills. Views of the big blue from the restaurant and bar are spellbinding. capeweligama.com



BOTTOM LEFT: IAN ALLEN

TRADITIONAL FEAST

restaurants that serve the best Sri Lankan fare.

Paradise Road Gallery Café

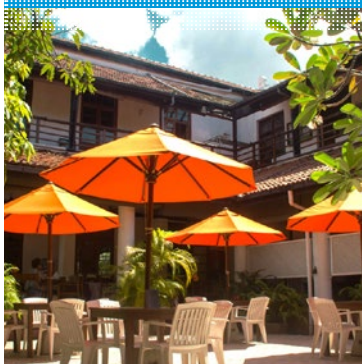
Shanth Fernando's Gallery Café takes up residence in super star architect, Geoffrey Bawa's old offices, in the leafy Alfred House lane. The location is a mainstay on Colombo's must-do lists, for its cobblestone and ivy environs, and for its embodiment of what could be considered Sri Lanka's tropical boutique identity. Today, the cafe is a 'book-well-in-advance' venue. Most come here for the delicious food (lemongrass and ginger chicken, black pork curry, pan fried modha) and cocktails (tamarind chilli martini and the Dr feelgood). But anything with chocolate, lemon, or coffee should make you champ at the bit, and are so indulgent, you could easily skip every course and go straight to dessert, thrice. Don't miss the Via Paradiso cup. paradiseroad.lk

VOC CAFÉ, DUTCH BURGER UNION

The Dutch Burgher Union has been around for over a century and has a gallery of stern and moustachioed men looking down from its walls and staircases to prove it. The DBU houses a popular café that does the most delicious Lamprais and yellow rice with curry going. Lamprais is a traditional Burgher invention of yellow rice, fish cutlet, mixed meat curry, boiled egg, ash plantain, mango chutney, *moju*, and *seeni sambal* wrapped in a banana leaf. 114, Reid Ave, Colombo

KAEMA SUTRA

Sri Lankan food is known for its heat and its hearty proportions, so the 'contemporary' tag hasn't gone down well with some locals who've tried Kaema Sutra. Ignore all detractors—the food here is full of flavour and taste. Fresh ingredients and spot-on seasoning make its grub superior to curries at a plethora of eateries. Try their tender goat curry, shell-stock prawn curry, and classic cashew curry with *kade paan*. Warning: the chicken wings are addictive. kaemasutra.com



Tasty Caterers

For the uninitiated, kottu is essentially a mash up of roti, biryani, and chowmein. With a unique dollop of Sri Lankan curry and chilli heat thrown in, kottu is the ultimate all-day fixer-upper and is a readily available snack at many small restaurants on the island. A good bet however is Tasty Caterers. People start lining up for the clatter-happy meal before 6 pm on Fife Road, so get there early. Locals like to wash food down with ginger beer for extra kick. If the kottu's finished, try and grab a chicken and cheese roti. They're a yummy version of our Indian Frankies. 88 Fife Road Havelock Town, Colombo

COOL QUARTERS Worth a visit now are these fast-changing neighbourhoods of Sri Lanka.

Clique

Opened by hip design studio Cantaloupe and Co., Clique is Colombo's ode to Miami glamour with its stark white walls, gilt-edged frames, and electric neon lights. With heaps of swagger, Clique includes an attached supper club if you want to dine before a night of highjinks. Occasionally host to Michelin chefs, Clique demands that you dress to impress. cliquecolombo.com



BAREFOOT

Barefoot is a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's cottage industry scene, now home to the kick-back culturati. Started by Barbara Sansoni in 1964, the gallery and cafe is being kept alive by her photographer son, Dominic, and his daughters. As an enterprise to encourage and safeguard the handloom cottage industry, Barefoot today is the leafy, courtyard space that's home to weary-travellers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians. Take home the obligatory vintage Ceylon postcards and Michael Ondaatje books from the shop. barefootceylon.com



41 BY SUGAR

Just over a year old, Sugar 41, as it has come to be known, has become a tour de force in Colombo's rakish pre-clubbing scene. Part al fresco dining, and part cigar, cocktail, and wine lounge, 41 overlooks a rugby pitch and resides on Maitland Crescent. The low-lit space is a warm introduction to the city's tastemakers and personalities who tend to stop in regularly. International music acts or sought-after local musicians set the tempo for the evening and when the dancing bug takes hold, patrons go a floor below to a nightclub called Silk.

Arcade, Independence Square

Arcade is a quaint-yet-modern shopping complex dating back to 1885 when it was the Jawatta Lunatic Asylum. Eerie associations aside, the high-ceilings with glass atria, and wooden staircases make this a wonderful structure to walk through. Restored by the Sri Lankan army and navy, it houses coffee shops, a cinema, restaurants, and a colourful Dilmah tea room. The gardens are the perfect place to watch Colombo's denizens walking, playing, and jogging about. arcadeindependencesquare.com

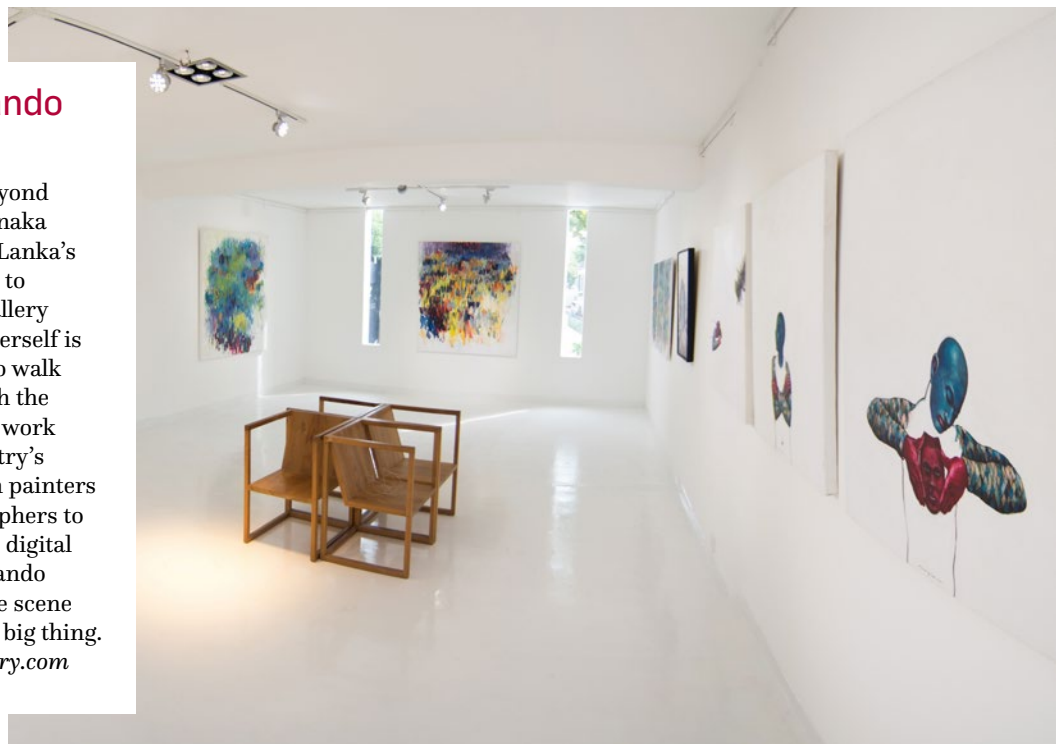


VISUAL FEAST Places that look amazing thanks to their architecture, art, design, or natural beauty.



Saskia Fernando Gallery

If you want to go beyond George Keyt and Senaka Senanayake for Sri Lanka's identity in art, head to Saskia Fernando Gallery where the curator herself is generally on hand to walk and talk you through the edgy contemporary work of some of the country's leading lights. From painters and street photographers to metal sculptors and digital artists, Saskia Fernando Gallery is setting the scene for Sri Lanka's next big thing. saskiafernandogallery.com

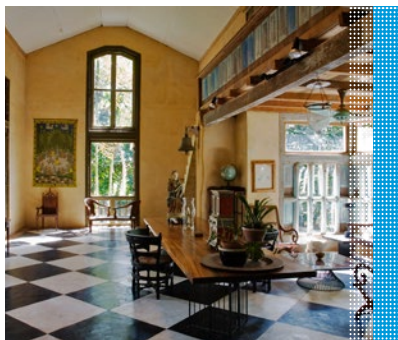


Why House

This beautiful clutch of villas resides amid manicured lawns on a three-acre estate and is run by a British caretaker full of captivating stories! Designed by an Italian architect, Why House offers a fresh take on the British colonial style with immaculately whitewashed walls appended by Roman columns and filled with comfortable settees, books and warm wood cabinets. If the rooms don't tempt you to stay, the limpid Grecian pool certainly will. whyhousesrilanka.com

SAMAN VILLAS, BENTOTA

Saman Villas can lay claim to being one of the 'original' boutique properties of Sri Lanka. It greets you with its temple architecture of ascending stone steps, water pools, and airy pitched roofs. The restaurant places you at the doorstep of ocean sights. The hotel exudes a bygone exotic tropical villa charm. samanvilla.com



LUNUGANGA, BENTOTA

Lunuganga is Geoffrey Bawa's crowning glory in terms of his last, most languorous project. The sprawling garden estate is arguably Bawa personified with his series of residential and verandah-appended rooms nestled in gardens. The rust and ramshackle nature of the space, its sculptures and artefacts, feed into Bawa's philosophy on nature and architecture and makes this a meditative space worth basking in. geoffreybawa.com

HOT PLATES *cafes and little eateries that'll make you forget fine-dining.*



Café Francais

One of the latest addresses on Colombo's swish bar and grub list, Café Francais leads with its Michelin credentials, but has become the locale of choice for libations for the city's well-dressed, come the weekend. A project by the Pourcel brothers, known for their restaurants in France, the Middle East, and Asia, Café Francais is all kinds of French cool. Despite the glassed-off 'French wines-only' bar, it takes the edge off any pretension with its generous plates of food and convivial street lounge atmosphere. The food is prepared by three French chefs, and is delicious. Particularly, the foie gras, and the breast of duck in orange jus, stand out. cafefrancaisbypourcel.com



Min Han Chinese

Min Han is a notoriously worn-down Chinese cafeteria in the heart of the city with plastic table cloths and rickety chairs. Chinese and local businessmen can be seen striking deals at all hours of the day amid families, couples, and grannies who come for the delicious pork dumplings, fried rice, garlic chilli prawns and hotpot. Let the ancient (and solitary) waiter of the place, Mr Vijayapala, tell you what to order! 14 Deanston Pl, Colombo; 94-11/257-6533



MILK

As playfully modish as they come, Milk on Horton Place offers some of the nicest toys, books, and playsets for kids in Colombo, but their café, Milk and Honey is what brings in mums and dads looking to down a vegan juice and guilt-free (okay not entirely, but certainly healthier) baked goodies and wraps, while the kids learn about window shopping. Chalkboard menus, and milk crate seats greet patrons looking for a tasty snack and antioxidant-packed pick-me-up. Milk sells neatly-packaged gluten-free and reduced-sugar products in addition to preserves and teas. Their falafel wrap is tangy, crunchy and delicious and their coconut-scented brownies melt in the mouth. 44 A, Horton Place, Colombo, 94-11/269-6286

ROCCO'S

This Italian mecca has become so popular with those in-the-know that the owners are busy looking for another location in the city to quell their customers' appetites. Wood-fired and scrumptious, their thin crust, 14-inch pizzas and calzones are packed full of a homely love most restaurants lack. Their Gamberetti is a longstanding winner. Finish off with a yummy homemade tiramisu made at home by one of the owners!

