

The stunning property is situated among reed beds and paddy fields over the first man-made lake since the era of King Parakramabahu

Getting Lost at Vil Uyana

The alluring luxury eco-lodge at Sigiriya is beguilingly hidden amongst paddy fields and a tranquil lake.

Off a dirt track that at one point snakes past the Dambulla water reserve towards the ancient city of Sigiriya, a shock of near neon green paddy fields surround you. Where once there was red earth dirt track and boulders dotting surrounding hills, you are now engulfed by bamboo thicket and squat disparate houses. The area feels entirely different to where you once were. In this part of the dry zone, the foliage and vegetation around the hotel is remarkable.

Vil Uyana is a collection of 30 thatched-roof chalets snaked around a man-made lake. A honeymooners delight, there are open air salas, water lily and lotus carpeted pools, and exposed rafters under bamboo thatch. This is Sri Lankan tropical boutique — a style the island nation does very well. Saronged attendants walk through

the area as you golf cart or walk your way through cicada-echoing paths to your lodgings. The chalets feel almost Thai — they are open air and make good use of thatch and wood. The giveaway is the use of blonde cement flooring that has been made so popular by Geoffrey Bawa's use of the material, and the minimalist wood furniture that the local craftsmen have made for the hotel.

The beds are tastefully appointed with the rich earth colours of handloomed cottons by one of the country's flagbearers for cotton weaving (Selyn). With Wi-Fi, mini fridges, DVD players, air conditioning and electronic safes to boot, the eco-tourism tag given to the hotel is somewhat misleading. There are composting and recycled water facilities; the resort uses discarded cinnamon wood for its water boiler and a solar power field is in the works, but the

Beyond Vil Uyana

If you want an adventure beyond just sitting in Vil Uyana's gorgeous open-plan library overlooking the lake, go on a Loris walk. The hotel is sought after for the sightings it offers of Sri Lanka's smallest recorded primate, the elusive Slender Loris, which has come to inhabit the resort after the hotel group built on this patch of forest. The large-eyed tree-dweller bears some resemblance to the bush baby and is essentially, unbearably cute. Once the sun sets, the resident naturalist Chaminda Jayasekara is on hand to take guests to look for these little fellows. It might seem dull, but is wonderfully thrilling when you do clap eyes on the fellow. *National Geographic* filmed a documentary here on this endangered species, garnering wide attention for their preservation. Initial expansion plans for the resort were also reconsidered since the development might have affected the large-eyed Lorises. Six new chalets are now being built elsewhere on nearby paddy fields.

Some locals associate the animal with bad luck and have unfortunately resorted to killing the creatures or taking them as pets. Largely, however, due to the clearing of forests, the Loris is endangered mainly by loss of habitat. The hotel raises funds for their preservation by taking donations on the tour. •



PHOTO: CHAMINDA JAYASEKARA



The interiors are tastefully appointed with rich earth colours of handloomed cottons

association of 'roughing it' with the notion of eco-lodges is practically negligible here.

There's a neatness and tidiness to Vil Uyana which is often compulsive for that getaway feeling. There are open skies for nightly star gazing and a lack of signposting to help you get lost on the way. Cement baths and petite plunge pools appoint some chalets, while others have open air showers. Walking across the property with its termite-hills, sound of crickets and creaking and knocking bamboo fills me with an isolate sense of nature. I become keenly aware that silence and personal space are very much a part of the everyday.

Vil Uyana is a wonderful escape and offers you tranquil seclusion packaged in tidily-built chalets and villas. Couples will love the resort, not least for how low-lit it can be, but families too could enjoy a few days of peace and quiet if they stick to the larger villas with their own private plunge pools. Otherwise, there isn't much to do at the resort except go for walks, hit the gym or swim, but that's precisely what you come here for. **S**

Cycling

Bicycles are on hand for residents to cycle to nearby locations such as Sigiriya to view the monolithic 180m rock protrusion. The Dambulla Cave Temple is closer, providing an easier ride for guests. Polonnaruwa, the second-most ancient capital of Sri Lanka (circa 1070) boasts the remains of an ancient palace, Buddha statues carved into rock at Gal Vihara, temples, and even an archaeological museum, allowing you to fill a day with sightseeing. •

Rejuvenate

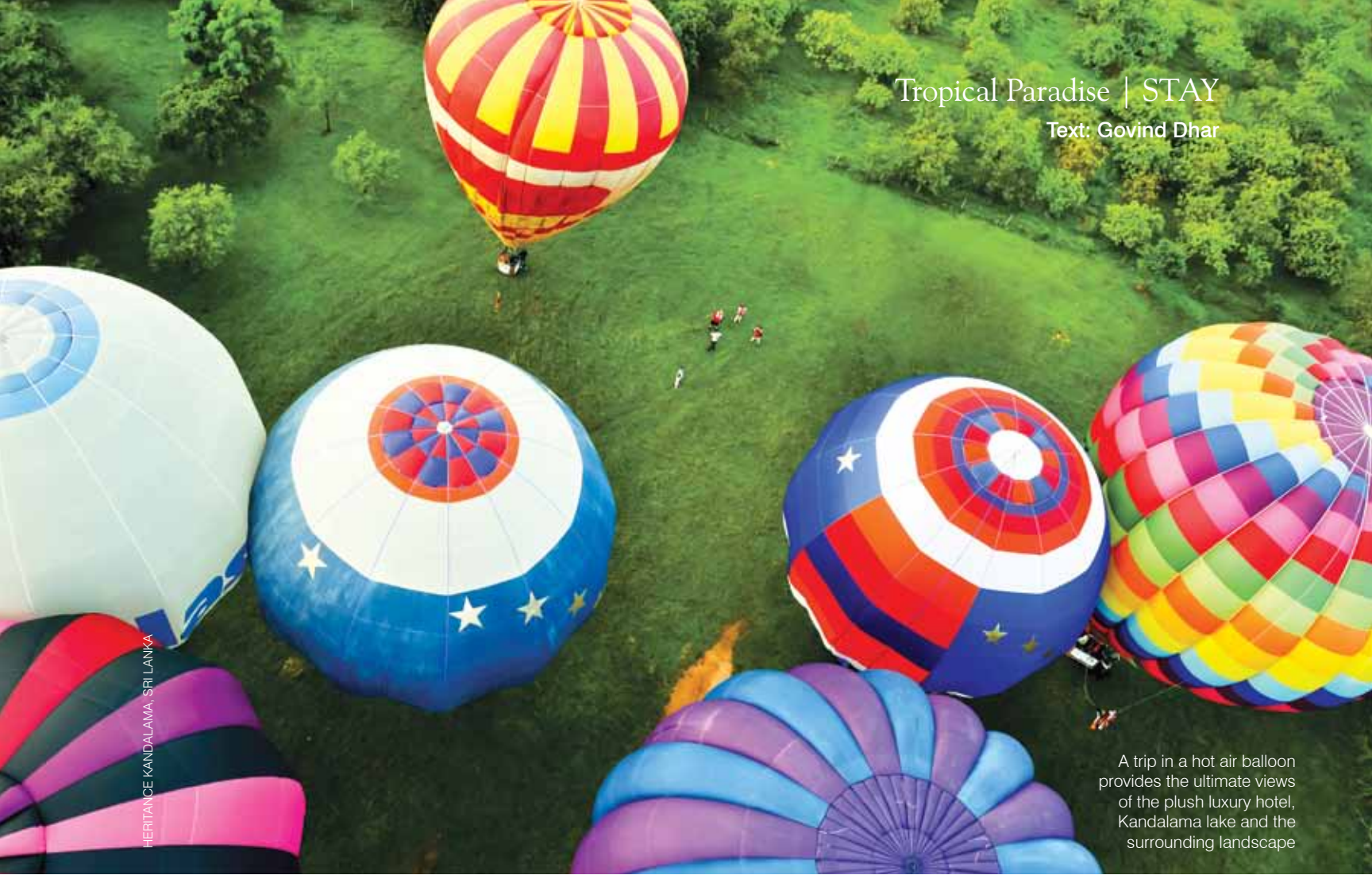
Vil Uyana's spa has a lot more character to it than most hotel spas — there are private, yet open-to-air spaces with views over the lake, and the lazy fans over cement and stone rooms are utterly charming. Ayurvedic treatments are also available. •

Dining In

JetWing certainly has a flair for fine-dine plating and presentation, with a good selection of wines from around the world to boot. Thankfully they have avoided the prosaic buffet route, but some of their dishes hit the spot better than others. Also the portions are on the smaller side, which is meant to be offset by a higher number of courses and well-apportioned bread baskets. Breakfast is a hearty affair though, with a myriad of filling and tasty courses on offer — from the usual eggs and bacon to muesli, smoothies and pastries. •

Approx. price per night goes up to ₹47,000 • jetwinghotels.com/jetwingviluyana

Tropical Paradise | STAY
Text: Govind Dhar



A trip in a hot air balloon provides the ultimate views of the plush luxury hotel, Kandalama lake and the surrounding landscape

An architectural masterpiece by maestro Geoffrey Bawa, the plush property lets you explore the wilder side of nature even as you are pampered with old-world luxury. The hotel, much like this island nation, tells you stories about an era gone by.

Luxuriate in Nature at
Heritage Kandalama

The first impression of Heritage Kandalama can be problematic. The exterior paint work of the hotel is worn out. The walls and corners are imbued with vine, craggy rock and so many flying insects that you quit bobbing and weaving after a while because of the sheer futility of it. And at sunset, little bats come rocketing through the corridors for added effect. All the furniture has been here since 1994 when the hotel opened. So if none of this appeals to you, you're probably not likely to stay at the Heritage Kandalama.

But that's probably intentional. Geoffrey Bawa, as grandmaster of tropical modernism, an architectural style that aims for an outdoor-indoor synergy or not knowing where concrete structures end and gardens and foliage begins, wasn't concerned about impressing city folk with glass and



Indigenous herbs, tropical fruits and exotic oils are used for a variety of wellness treatments at the Six Senses Spa

HERITANCE KANDALAMA, SRI LANKA

Rejuvenate

The Six Senses spa here is a tidy little collection of rooms at the top of the hotel with marvellous views of the reservoir. Opt for the fusion treatment which combines a host of Swedish techniques, head massage, foot rubs, and the rest of the body for 90 minutes. It's perfect for easing out all the tension from the climb up and down large boulder palaces and temples, and might put you to sleep. •

Beyond Heritance Kandalama

Sigiriya Rock Fortress and Palace

Not as challenging as some Hindu temples I've climbed, Sigiriya does require moderate fitness but people of all ages could be seen scaling the narrow steps up to the 'eighth wonder of the world'. Built by patricidal King Kasyapa in the 5th century, the rock island protruding 180 metres from the ground is absolutely breathtaking once you get to the top. The climb up is a walk past several foundations and outlines of bricks of water pools, gardens and fountains, but when you scale the actual rock and get to the beautiful views of the plateau around you, it is entirely worth it. Look out for the cobra, lion and elephant entrances which are natural rocks that resemble their nomenclature. There is one main fresco of well-endowed women in one part of the climb.

Hold onto your hat because it gets windy and beware of hives of wasps that have been known to get disturbed while people climb up. It's 1,200 or so steps to the top, but there are places to stop and wander while your legs stop shaking. It's an hour away from the hotel, and about an hour to walk up at a moderate pace. Head here in the morning before 9 or 10 if you want to avoid the merciless sun, and take your passport — Indians get half rate tickets at KLR1900.

Dambulla Cave Temple

There are steps involved here too but far less than those at Sigiriya, making it an easier, gentler climb to the rock temple. Go after 3pm as the clouds rolling in can trap air and heat as you go up, and wear shorts or trousers that cover the knees. Before you climb the steps, you pass through the Golden Temple

dedicated to the world's tallest Buddha in 'Dhamma Chakka' pose. If you stand directly beneath the Buddha at the mouth of the Golden Temple and see clouds floating above, walk back and forth with your eyes fixed on the Buddha; he will seem as if he is moving!

The actual cave temples at the summit here are breathtaking — literally. Within the caverns of this temple, there is oddly no echo or reverberating sound. The stone seems to suck the very vibration out of any movement by visitors. The caves themselves are packed with statues of sitting and reclining Buddhas, including a Buddha in female avatar. The show stoppers, however, are the unending frescoes that cover the ceilings of these caves, which are so detailed and uniform, it seems as if decorative cloth has been stretched tightly over the surface. No passport needed here as it's LKR1500 for all foreigners. •



For those who love the outdoors, an Angula (Sinhalese for high floating raft) ride is a must

HERITANCE KANDALAMA, SRI LANKA



The Minneriya/Kaudulla National Park includes a water reservoir, which provides the perfect setting to spot wild elephants along with spotted deer, sambar deer and various species of birds

HERITANCE KANDALAMA, SRI LANKA



Heritance Kandalama is an architectural masterpiece by Geoffrey Bawa, built overlooking the eighth wonder of the world – the rock fortress of Sigiriya

HERITANCE KANDALAMA, SRI LANKA

steel and other sanitised hotel attributes. The idea of Bawa is to jump for joy at the prospect of monkeys sneaking into your room for leftover club sandwiches.

Incidentally, Bawa was asked by Aitken Spence, a Sri Lankan hotel conglomerate, to fly around in a helicopter to find the best location for a hotel of this scale. It sits, literally, along a huge sloping rock in the Dambulla region and runs a kilometre long, facing the arc of the sun's daily arrival and departure. It bears a uniform symmetry along seven floors of grey concrete floors, black wrought iron railings and beautifully golden wood furniture. White walls with black accents, columns or tables run right through the rooms, public spaces and even bathrooms. A good measure of skeletal and angular staircases and oversized sculptures cut through each floor. On one side, you are greeted with views of the Dambulla water reservoir, rocky hills and mangroves. On the other, you look into dense forest running up a boulder-infested slope. Mod-cons like air conditioning, hot water (provided by burning discarded cinnamon wood), Wi-Fi and even Jacuzzis in the suites are available. But again, that's not what you come here for.

An uncle of mine is an architect from the '60s era. His home is chock full of books with black and white photos of stark yet open geometric spaces. Every nook of a space is meant to make a statement when viewed whilst walking through it. Something is supposed to happen in that space. They invite theatre as much as frame it. So it is with Bawa. Lean out of any balcony at the Heritance Kandalama and the views of, and through the hotel, are steeped in details hidden in the symmetry — geometrically opposed furniture pieces are placed vertically as the eye line drops from the sixth to the ground floor. The furniture feels slightly worn but in the way furniture in grand ancestral bungalows are. You want to run your fingers over them and smell them. You want things to talk because they've certainly got stories.

Clearly, Heritance Kandalama is a luxury hotel in Bawa's tradition. It is about giving in to the soft edges of nature within your own habitat and being pampered in the true sense of an old world luxury service. To miss it, is to miss the point of how to luxuriate in nature.

Approx. price per night goes up to ₹26,000 • heritancehotels.com/kandalama

Dining In

I was disappointed learning that it's a buffet affair here most of the time, as people are always in and out on tours. However, the Heritance Kandalama packs a wallop in terms of range in their meals with endless exotic fruit and salad counters, a Sri Lankan corner, international cuisine, and usually, live stations including wonderments like oriental food or shawarmas. The hotel requires trousers (t-shirts are acceptable) at dinner so pack a pair. I recommend skipping dreary continental preparations for rice, fish curry, pol sambol (ground coconut and chilli), sweet chutney, papad, Sri Lankan dal and string hoppers – Sri Lankan style! The Ceylonese know how to bring on heat and flavour in equal measure and this kitchen does it well. To finish off, demand the coconut wandu which is a kind of warm bread pudding in passion fruit jus with caramelised mango and cashewnuts. Read: Mughlai style dessert full of flavour, texture and cardamom gone tropical, without being sickly sweet! •

