

By STACIE STUKIN

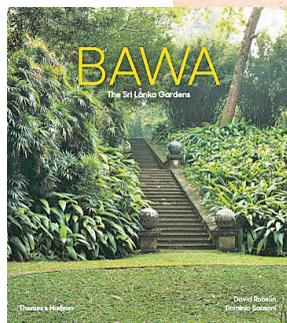
SRI Lanka conjures images of heavenly sunsets, fisherman gracefully balancing on stilts and feel-good moments of Buddhist Zen. Yet for many, the devastation of the 25-year civil war and the 2004 tsunami kept the Indian Ocean island off itineraries. Now, new resorts and tourists are bringing the island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



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.



SITTING PRETTY: The luxe lobby at the Anantara Kalutara.

ISLAND STYLE



TRUNK DRIVERS: Elephants make their way across Kandalama’s lush landscape.

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

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

About a half-hour east of Colombo, Bawa’s most prominent public work is the Parliament building built in the 1970s, which symbolized self-rule for the new Republic of Sri Lanka. It used traditional building materials as well as copper-covered pitched roofs, a nod to local, traditional temple architecture (*Parliament.lk*).

KALUTARA Anantara Kalutara

Situated between the Indian Ocean and Kalu Ganga estuary, the new Anantara Kalutara hotel was originally conceived by Bawa in the early ‘90s. When the civil war escalated in 1995, the half-built property lay

dormant. Much of it even survived the tsunami and construction began again under Bawa’s protégé, architect Channa Daswatte. He lovingly restored the hotel including the striking, yet simple main building with a gable roof and soaring ceilings (*Anantara.com*).

BENTOTA

Lunuganga

Some would argue that Bawa’s design journey started at this rubber plantation he purchased to recreate the Italian and British gardens he loved. The estate would be a 50-year project that evolved into a living document of his ability to tame the wild tropics into a cultivated vision that looked organic. This is also where he entertained artist pals who were integral to the country’s modernist movement (*GeoffreyBawa.com*).

SIGIRIYA

Kandalama Heritage

Perhaps the most dramatic Bawa design, this hotel, built on a cliff overlooking an ancient reservoir in the country’s “cultural triangle,” is the first building outside the US to receive LEED certification. Sustainable elements — roof gardens and cooling corridors — were often part of Bawa’s schemes, yet here the ship-like design, with its multiple levels, has been enveloped by the jungle as if it has always been part of the natural landscape (*www.HeritageHotels.com*).

Steve Chinn

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