BY SUREENA DALAL

If you are looking for a me-time vacation with a view, head to Sri Lanka. Tip: Explore the small towns along the coast.
When my friends talk about their summer holidays,

My first stop was the port which is close to a Sri Lankan Navy Station with a few fishing boats and ferries of course. After a ten-minute halt at a Buddhist temple, we headed out to explore the place. On the way, we took a detour to explore the bylanes where stood local cafes, Portuguese cottages, greenery in every nook and cranny. We even came across a few iguanas. The drive back was surreal, like something out of an old movie. Narrow lanes, quiet beaches and no traffic whatsoever. I was in the middle of nowhere and in no rush to get anywhere. I never wanted this day to end, but inside my head, a little old devil reminded me that I had to make my way to the spa. Everything can be put on hold when it is time to pamper yourself, that’s what we believe, right? Back at the resort I quickly made my way to the spa. Excitement levels—off the charts. As I waited in the lobby for my turn, I was given four options to choose from—Sweet (laosoner, rose, magnolias), Spice (black pepper, ginger, orange), Splash (peppermint, rosemary, lemon) and Smooth (sandalwood, patchouli, clary sage). Detox was my target and I wanted to get rid of them all, and so I chose the Smooth. Ahum, my masseuse for the next 90 minutes, escorted me down the pin drop silent hallway to my room. I popped in, slipped into my robe and couldn’t wait to get started. Believe me, there is absolute magic in that spa. The relaxation I felt in just a 90-minute treatment was other worldly I assure you, better than any other session I have been to and not to miss the cioccolato dome, it was the highlight for me.

My next pitstop was Il Mare, an Italian restaurant on a terrace, overlooking the ocean. Born Indian but Italian at heart, (ever since my one year stint in Milan) I have been spoilt when it comes to good Italian cuisine. So naturally my expectations were high and Il Mare met. With some exquisite wine, perfect caprese, and not to miss the cioccolato dome, it was the perfect end to a calm day.

Day two began bright and early at 5 am and I was going to meet a few elephants at the Udawalawe National Park. After an hour and a half long ride, I shifted to a park vehicle which was a little more raised off the ground for easy spotting. Having seen my fair share of elephants in India, the landscape and the way I felt was nothing like my Indian pachyderm experience. I did manage spotting a herd of wild buffalos, a golden deer and many tropical birds. For those who have never been on a safari, the Udawalawe National Park is a good place to do a test run. I got back to my villa and had a few hours to myself, I decided to take a dip and ended up spending hours in the pool. I looked like a shrivelled prune when I got out. A tropical destination done the right way indeed. I could see Verele, the teppanyaki inspired dining area from my room. A 5-minute walk from my villa lies this Japanese restaurant which appeared to be a favourite among the guests at the resort. But then I am vegetarian which appeared to be a favourite among the guests at the resort. But then I am vegetarian so I thought Japanese cuisine might pose a bit of a problem but the chefs outdid themselves, laying out before me a fine spread of vegetarian sushi, stir fried vegetables and a bowl of soup in no time. The entertainment section of this resort was the live counter where the chefs show off their culinary art along with their acrobatic skills. It is mesmerizing to watch them work their magic. At the end of the day I had done what I wanted to do at my own pace. With just the right amount of fatigue on a full belly it was time for a soak in the tub, FaceTime with family back home and say good night to Tangalle because before I know it I would be packing my bags.
Yes, I agree the last line was a bit forlorn and sad, but I knew my holiday wasn’t over by a long shot. The next day saw me on my way to the Handunugoda tea estate which was on the way to my destination for the day, Kalutara. The 145-year-old tea estate has many interesting stories retold by those who inhabit it now. They specialise in some of the world’s most sought-after teas like the Sapphire Oolong, Lapsang Souchong and Flowery Camellia. I can’t help but tell you at least two of the many stories I heard here, the first is of the Virgin White Tea. It is the only tea in the world that is not picked by hand. Back in the day, the tea leaves were cut by a pair of golden scissors only by virgins and was for the consumption of royals alone, and so, the name. Another variety of tea I found here was the Suicide Blend, which has a trace of, and I dare not say it, in its name. Why the name, I ask. The guide told me that this is the tea that members of the Suicide Club would start their day with as they read their copy of the bestselling book, The Suicide Club. Would start their day with as they read their copy of the bestselling book, The Suicide Club. I found this surrounded by beautiful landscapes and a fair amount of wildlife. If you, a tea connoisseur, are a pre-dinner drinks kind of person, the resort has the perfect place for you – the Upper Deck, where one can have anything from sake, aperitifs and botanical spirits to some of the finest Sri Lankan cocktail blends. All this with a great view.

As I stared at the beauty, I realised it was my last day in Sri Lanka and I wanted to make the most of it. I started my day with a visit to Kosgoda, a sea turtle conservation project where they rescue disabled or newborn turtles. It is a must-see. The people handling and responsible for the project have their hearts and souls poured into saving these lives. Next stop was Lagunagala, Geoffrey Bawa’s country estate. If you have a keen interest in architecture, this place has to be on your list for it. Ingenious architecture and picturesque landscaping. You can even book rooms at the estate if you like, to get a complete feel of the place. With colours like cream, white, grey, black and yellow, Geoffrey Bawa’s estate is elegance materialised. He had different bells and whistles installed at different parts of the estate so that his help could tell precisely where they were needed. He made and had installed his own sundial, several varieties of trees and the backwaters perfectly visible from his house.

After my last meal in Sri Lanka at Aquolina, an Italian restaurant, it was time to get back to reality. My first solo trip had drawn to a close and honestly, I believe the opportunity and pleasure of exploring this intensly beautiful country was a great way to have done it. Top notch food, service and all this with a great view. See you again, Sri Lanka.

“WITH COLOURS LIKE CREAM, WHITE, GREY, BLACK AND YELLOW, GEOFFERY BAWA’S ESTATE IS ELEGANCE MATERIALISED.”

A real proposal along with the chef at Anantara Kalutara (above, left)

A king coconut