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The hotel's architecture has distinct Geoffrey Bawa touches



THE FEELING OF WALKING INTO THE ARMS OF A NEW Geoffrey Bawa-designed hotel is like stumbling upon a rare bootleg Beatles LP and hovering the stylus over the record's first grooves. There's a charged sense of the familiar – skeletal concrete ribs uphold looming, blanketing roofs; outstretched polished-concrete floors run away into walls of light and air, and a triumphal collection of Barbara Sansoni batiks flutter in the breeze from the neighbouring lagoon. The structure housing the new Anantara Kalutara Resort was originally designed by the revered Sri Lankan architect in the Nineties and was then completed, almost three decades later, by his protégé and spiritual successor, Channa Daswatte. It seems a testament to the power of Bawa that, despite a devastating civil war in the intervening years and a subsequent tsunami, his canopies of warm terracotta roofs perched on Dutch walls would eventually see off devastation and stand proudly against Kalutara's backdrop of sea and sky.

Situated on an enviable sprig of peninsula on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, Anantara Kalutara is just over an hour's drive from the capital, Colombo, and feels like a spacious veranda set on a lily pad between lagoon and sea. The property stays loyal to Minor Hotels' blueprint of sprawling resort spaces, but the 141 rooms, suites and villas are split between two lofty wings that tame the wide-openness of the grounds. In the Ocean Wing, guests across three floors are treated to the sounds of the Indian Ocean and postcard-worthy sunsets, while in the Lagoon Wing, rooms overlook either the gardens with their vast lotus ponds or a swimming pool and the

Kalu lagoon. Everything is connected through Bawa's signature long, lattice-screened corridors with framed views of nature and sculptures.

Entering my room, I'm welcomed by a blanket of light reflecting from the adjoining pool and the lagoon beyond. There's a tasteful balance between an uncluttered colonial sensibility and Thai design, eschewing heavy or ornate furniture save for one carved screen separating the bedroom and the walk-in closets. A safari palette of beige upholstery against dark wood, black trim and backdrops of white is accented with pops of peacock blue and fuchsia in silk. The bathrooms are appointed in cool, creamy marble, with a generous egg-shaped bath tub for two, rain showers and double washbasins. The mini-fridge is paired with a stand-alone grape chiller containing a few vintages, and a compact Nespresso machine is on hand for the mornings after. Generous flat-screen TVs come loaded with an online library of on-demand films and cable TV, and there's a smattering of wall plugs everywhere, meaning I didn't struggle to recharge my phone and tablet. A short walk from the room, the charming Geoffrey Bawa library is a den of cool brass and wood, showcasing his architectural drawings and books as well as works by his erstwhile design conspirators, Ena de Silva and Laki Senanayake.

One afternoon, I'm invited to cook my own Sri Lankan lunch for a change, with chef Nuwan who demystifies any erroneous assumptions that it's like Indian curry with a strict no-coriander rule. Soon I'm feasting on delicious prawn and seer fish curry, followed by cold, sweet coconut water and ice cream by the pool. Then I unwind from my culinary labours under the healing hands of a Balinese masseuse in the 10-room spa with its own water garden.

Those looking for more Bawa in their diet could opt for an excursion to admire the ingenuity of his garden estate, Lunuganga. Another day out involves learning about virgin white tea at the Handunugoda Estate, which produces blends untouched by hand that sells in boutiques around Europe at close to AED 3,300 a kilo. I opt for the atmospheric Richmond Castle excursion, a cobwebbed walk through a mash of imperial manor architecture, with oil portraits whose subjects follow you around the room.

That night I return to a private lagoon dinner organised by the resort, with a tailored menu of Jaffna crab and curries, and a rambunctious fire that sends smoke into the inky night. The menu diverts from the usual five-star set list with a good smattering of Japanese, Thai and Middle Eastern dishes. Even the burger patties here are made from ground Australian Angus – unusual in a country that favours "up-country" beef from the Sri Lankan hills.

Much of Bawa's legacy in the country is succumbing to modern renovation or destruction. In this latest resurrection of his work, we are given the rare chance to experience one of architecture's greatest minds once more – albeit in an evolved, modern form. Anantara Kalutara hums with the romance of a bygone Dutch Ceylon, but keeps time with the quiet luxury and understated pulses of pampered island living. ☺

Doubles from AED 800; 0094-3-4222 0222, kalutara.anantara.com

EXCLUSIVE
FIRST REVIEW

ANANTARA KALUTARA RESORT

*At this new architectural resort on Sri Lanka's southern coast,
GOVIND DHAR discovers a modern retreat with a pleasant hint of nostalgia*

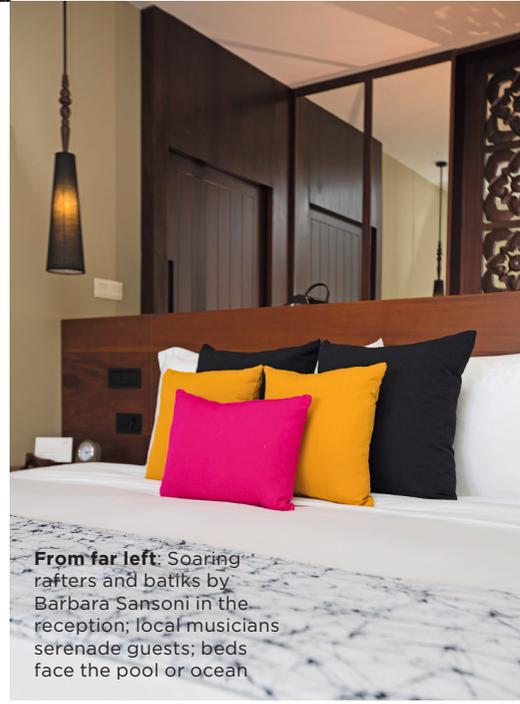
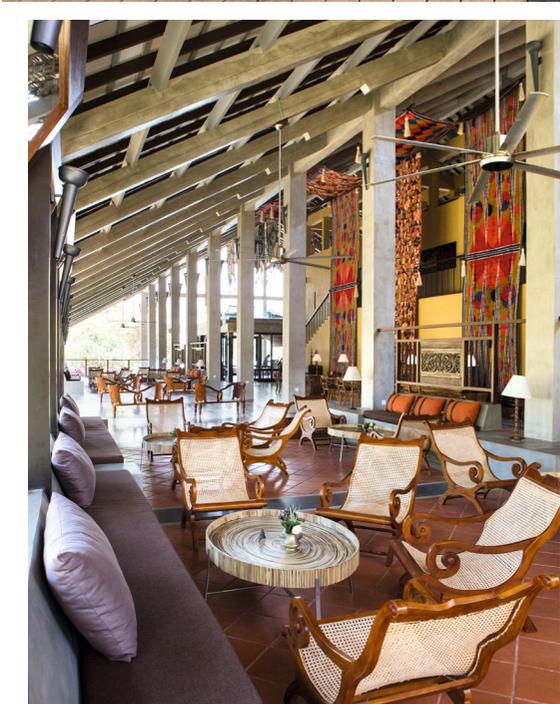
PHOTOS: RAJESH RAGHAV



Decks and open air lounges offer al fresco dining. **Right:** High tea in the Geoffrey Bawa library



CNT EXCLUSIVE



From far left: Soaring rafters and batiks by Barbara Sansoni in the reception; local musicians serenade guests; beds face the pool or ocean



From left: Learn to cook prawn curry at the hotel; take in views of the lagoon adjoining the pool; unwind at the spa