



Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort blends indigenous craftsmanship with contemporary designs



Above: These well-appointed villas evoke Geoffrey Bawa's design philosophies



Left: Anantara's Dining By Design provides private dining on the beach with a customised menu

## LUXE Meets LOCAL

**Anantara's high-end Sri Lanka resorts scores for their indigenous designs and tribute to famed architect Geoffrey Bawa. Helmi Yusof visits.**

SINCE Sri Lanka's civil war ended in 2009, travel magazines have been touting the South Asian island as the place to visit. With its gorgeous natural landscape and rich cultural heritage, it has much to offer the jaded traveller longing for authentic, unspoilt destinations.

Right now, few high-end luxury hotels deliver the experience better than the Anantara resorts. One may quibble over the opposing connotations of "unspoilt" and "luxury". But Anantara's two properties which opened in the last two years – the Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort and the Anantara Kalutara Resort – have managed to incorporate much of the island's natural splendour and centuries-old traditions into their blueprints and daily rituals.

Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, for instance, is spread across an 8.5-hectare

coconut plantation next to a beach. Its 152 rooms and cottages boast indigenous design and architectural elements. One is greeted upon arrival by a conch-blowing sentry and three young women who turn old poems into lilting tunes. Nearby, a man expertly climbs the swaying coconut trees to pick fruit for guests. And in a space next to the beach, the in-house Ayurvedic doctor conducts his twice-daily yoga sessions.

Because it is located in a sleepy town on the south coast of Sri Lanka, the resort ensures its restaurants are up to mark. From local and Indian to Western and Thai cuisine – Anantara is a Thailand-based hotel group – you have five bars and restaurants to pick from. The crowning jewel is Italian restaurant Il Mare, perched on top of a short cliff where one can look down at azure waters crashing on rocks. On request, the restaurant can



Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort's two-level pool is located next to the beach

even set up a private dining area near the cliff's edge and serve a customised menu of Italian favourites. (Anantara boss William Heinecke happens to love Italian food, hence the priority on cooking standards).

The best thing about Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort is that one really feels at home away from home. Its personal butler service ensures everything you need for a restful stay. And should you wish to venture out of the self-sufficient five-star splendour, there are: the Mulkirigala Rock Temple, an ancient house of worship built on a massive rock; the Udawalawe National Park with its elephants, buffaloes, jackals and hundreds of other types of wildlife; as well as vast tea plantations which produce Sri Lanka's internationally



Left: The Udawalawe National Park lets you see elephants, buffaloes and other wildlife upclose



The cosy villas make you feel at home away from home

famous tea brands.

If forced to pick between the two resorts, we would take the idyllic Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle as our favourite. However, if one happens to be fan of architecture, then one might prefer Anantara's second property because of its association with Sri Lanka's most renowned architect, Geoffrey Bawa.

Anantara Kalutara Resort was one of Bawa's last projects before he died in 2003. Work on the resort subsequently experienced delays made worse by the Boxing

Day Tsunami of 2004. Fortunately, one of Bawa's proteges was able to pick up where the master left off, and the 141-room Kalutara resort, an hour away from Colombo, opened late last year.

Many aspects of its design reflect Bawa's philosophy. Set on the estuary of the Kalu Ganga River and offering stunning views of the Indian Ocean, the main building features aspects of indigenous craftsmanship, Dutch colonial influence, as well as an enormous high ceiling and open airways – Bawa hated air-conditioners.

There is also a handsome library containing Bawa's books, sketches and writings, surrounded by his favourite batiks. Notably the resort is not far from Bawa's large country estate, which has been maintained to allow visitors a glimpse into his home

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and work spaces.

Anantara Kalutara Resort, like its cousin in Tangalle, has fine restaurants. Spice Traders features Thai, Indian and Chinese cuisines – the fine Thai menu is particularly good. Meanwhile, all-day-dining restaurant Olu offers international classics and Sri Lankan food, while Acquolina serves Mr Heinecke's favourite Italian cuisine.

Last year, Sri Lanka drew more than two million visitors. It was a milestone for the country but low for an island that's almost twice the size of Taiwan. (Taiwan drew 10.7 million visitors in the same year, while Singapore drew 16.4 million.) In recent years, major hotel chains have come knocking on Sri Lanka's door to set up properties on the island. But Anantara seems to have made its mark, with its stylish blend of the authentic and exclusive.

You should be here, before the crowds come.