

RAYS OF LIGHT

Between tea-scented valleys and picturesque ancient cities, Sri Lanka's luxury resorts are leading the way in eco-friendly adventure

Words: Michelle Johnson

Sri Lanka is having a moment. The ancient island nestled in the Bay of Bengal is one of the most developed and biodiverse countries in South Asia. With incredible natural beauty, a sprinkling of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and a diverse hotel offering ranging from hippy-chic to eco-luxe, it's high on the must-see list for many travellers – and for good reason.

In recent years, the country has welcomed an influx of Insta-travellers eager to capture the breathtaking scenery – such as once-unique views of Galle's traditional stilt fishermen or the beatific train journeys – but, for us, the promise of something a little more unique was of greater appeal. Venturing away from sleepy southern towns and much-photographed golden beaches, we journeyed into the mountains that rise at the heart of the island and beyond. Here, we discovered luxury resorts whose commitment to sustainability is changing the very landscape of how we holiday, in all the right ways.

Hotel groups such as Uga Escapes have been key in positioning Sri Lanka as a pioneer of eco-conscious tourism. Resort-led green energy initiatives, community outreach programmes and conservation projects mean guests can experience responsible travel in style – whether that's lounging by an infinity pool in the protected jungle or tracking elephant migration through the country's 70+ national parks.

Here, Tempus ventures into three very different landscapes to discover how eco-luxury is being redefined by this magical destination.



ANURADHAPURA
Abandoned ruins, holy relics, royal wars: Sri Lanka's ancient past is catnip to history buffs. Anuradhapura is the ultimate base for those of us seeking a healthy helping of cultural intrigue with our escape. Step back in time in the island's 'Cultural Triangle'.

GOING GREEN

The remarkable Ulagalla by Uga Escapes is a sophisticated five-star resort and pioneer of sustainable tourism. The 58-acre grounds boast working rice paddies, organic gardens and natural wildlife habitats – home to 100 species of native bird, playful langur monkeys and peacocks. The resort's 20 freestanding villas are ecologically built using local, biodegradable materials and benefit from the resort's solar farm. Designed to blend seamlessly with the surroundings, each features a private pool, beautifully furnished lounges and plenty of space to entertain. Staff – 40% of whom are recruited from local villages – are ready to anticipate every request. The resort's community outreach programme funds everything from medical camps to sanitation projects for local schools.

ANCIENT WORLDS

Take an excursion to UNESCO World Heritage Site Anuradhapura or monuments Sigiriya Lion Rock and Pidurangala – both of which are well worth climbing the many (many!) steps for extraordinary views. Book a chauffeur to explore the sprawling ruins of Polonnaruwa, or head to an elephant safari at Minneriya National Park. Back home at Ulagalla, take part in cookery lessons and local ceremonies such as the biannual rice harvest, enjoy horseriding in the grounds or relax in the spa and pool.

FINE FUSION

Ulagalla's Liyawela restaurant keeps the spotlight firmly on Sri Lankan cuisine, blending it with Western favourites to satisfy an international audience. For dinner, I started with fried calamari followed by a Sri Lankan pittu – a traditional rice flour and coconut dish served with a range of curry dishes. The trick, chefs tell me, is to blend each of the curries together as one to produce rich, complementary flavours. The restaurant's five-course breakfast offers a generous spread of fresh fruits, pastries and egg dishes but if you prefer a lighter start to the day, the chef is more than happy to whip up whatever strikes your mood.»

ugaescapes.com/ulagalla



Inset above: Traditional curry at Aarunya Nature Resort; **Right, clockwise:** Villas at Ulagalla by Uga Escapes; Ulagalla's central Walawwa; on-site produce for Liyawela restaurant; inside the villas



KANDY

Kandy is the second most populous city in Sri Lanka – with the traffic jams to prove it – but just 15 minutes into the mountains, travellers can quite literally rise above it all. Get your head in the clouds and discover the picture-perfect hills standing tall in the centre of the island.

TOP OF THE WORLD

The newly opened mountaintop resort Aarunya Nature Resort is a cut above the rest, thanks to its attention to detail, effortless privacy and extraordinary location. Aarunya means ‘first rays of sun’ in Sanskrit and architects have certainly made the most of its views of the famous Knuckles mountain range, which can be enjoyed from sunrise to sunset. Our Sky Villa – one of only seven in the intimate resort – features floor-to-ceiling windows and a balcony (complete with hot tub) suspended over deep valleys and lush forests. At the highest point of the complex sits a communal bungalow where guests can find the concierge, infinity pool, al fresco restaurant and relaxed bar and lounge that’s a prime spot for sundowners. After a fresh fruit cocktail, head to the open-air spa for a zen sunset massage accompanied by the meditative background song of frogs and crickets.

TAKE YOUR PICK

On its seven-acre mountainside plantation, Aarunya grows 20% of its own kitchen produce – this is on track to grow to 70% by the end of 2019 in line with the resort’s sustainability missions. General manager and executive chef Alec van Cuylenburg incorporates ingredients into a seasonal menu of Sri Lankan fusion – his creamy take on a peppery mulligatawny soup is heavenly.

EXPLORE THE SENSES

The Temple of the Tooth is a popular attraction in nearby Kandy, but we suggest skipping the traffic and taking a more genteel detour to Nuwara Eliya. In the heart of tea country, this town is a feast for the senses, with verdant rows of tea plants filling the air with the scent of tea, and many plantations offering tasting tours. From there, it’s on the road more travelled – the train to hiking destination Ella is more than worth the hype. Take the opportunity to venture out from the cool, enclosed first class cabins to really enjoy the open views of one of the world’s most scenic train journeys.

aarunyaresort.com



Instagrammable views await at Kandy's Aarunya Nature Resort

COLOMBO

The bustling capital city of Colombo is Sri Lanka's commercial heart, with lofty aspirations of becoming the next Singapore. Locals will tell you that this modern metropolis is like a whole other country, but there are moments of tranquillity nearby if you know where to look.



BY THE SEA

Take advantage of Colombo's proximity to Sri Lanka's glorious southern beaches and surfable waves by exploring nearby surf haven Negombo or the picturesque fort town Galle where shoppers can pick up quality handmade crafts. Private whale-watching trips by catamaran are available in this area if you want an ocean-friendly, less crowded way to spot the sealife. Open your mind with a visit to the capital's various conservation centres, created to protect sea turtles and at-risk coral reefs.

CITY SLICK

A night or two at slick boutique the Residence by Uga Escapes (above) is an ideal way to keep that relaxed, hill-country quality even in the city. The 11-suite Residence is unique to Colombo – it's in a 19th-century building that was once a haven for British governors, Indian maharajas and European nobility, and is built around a stunning, open-air central courtyard. And with leafy Park Street on the doorstep, there's no shortage of boutique stores, restaurants and nightlife.

SPORTING SUPPERS

While the hotel's on-site restaurant, Rare at Residence, serves up elegant international cuisine, it's well worth heading further into the city for some of Colombo's famous crab dishes. Upscale rooftop restaurant Botanik's at Colombo Fort is receiving rave reviews for its local seafood. For a more down-to-earth experience cricket fans must visit The Cricket Club Café, where you may run into professional sportsmen during the cricket season. ①

ugaescapes.com/residence