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Age-old hospitality: top heritage hotels in Sri Lanka



Staff at Ulagalla carry out the setting for a meal in the rice paddies.

by Kendall Hill

Our concept of serendipity, the art of making joyous discoveries, apparently stems from the ancient Persian name for Sri Lanka, Serendip. Which makes perfect sense, really, because it's hard to think of another island where joyous discoveries are so abundant.

For its size, Sri Lanka packs a lot of surprises. They're waiting to be discovered in the country's garden-to-plate gastronomy. There, too, in the intricate history of old Ceylon, its fortresses, temples and tea plantations. And there, most felicitously, in Sri Lanka's new breed of heritage hotels. From venerable family mansions to restored Dutch houses inside Galle Fort, age-old doors are opening up new experiences around the island. These are some of our favourites.

Ulagalla (Anuradhapura)

The property

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The original homestead at Ulagalla was built in 1916 as a local headman's estate.

Home-grown hoteliers Uga Escapes opened this flagship property in 2010, but the original homestead was built in 1916 as a local headman's estate. Today the [resort](#) commands a 23-hectare property of 20 guest villas set in a Shangri-La of peacocks and macaques and almost 100 recorded bird species. A range of ecological measures, from rainwater harvesting to Sri Lanka's largest solar farm, ensures guests can indulge without guilt.

The setting

Each "chalet" is a pitched villa in three sections: the bedroom with four-poster and sitting area, a full-service bathroom and a comfortable lounge with generous minibar treats. Wake to coucals and kingfishers plundering your plunge pool or monkeys cavorting in the canopy above. Staff warn of occasional incursions by elephants, and snake sightings are not rare. "Please refrain from petting or feeding animals," the guest compendium advises.

Dining

The upper level of the restored homestead houses Liyawela, a lofty restaurant space of lazy fans and views across the eight hectares of paddies that supply the resort's rice needs. The ambitious menu rarely misfires, whether tackling Andalusian gazpacho or BBQ pizza with minced Australian beef, but its forte is local food. Ulagalla's take on the typical rice and curry is a 10-act extravaganza requiring its own trestle table.



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The master bedroom of a villa at Ulagalla.

In the area

Ulagalla is handy to Sri Lanka's most glittering cultural treasures: the rock fortress of Sigiriya, the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, and the rock caves of Dambulla.

Rooms to book Chalets are similar but numbers 1 and 2 lack private pools. Residents must make do with the 30x15-metre showpiece pool.

Address: Thirappane, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Tel: +94 11 232 8832. See ugaescapes.com



Kirinda Walauwa sits in a clearing at the end of a winding jungle drive. Kendall Hill

Kirinda Walauwa (Gampola)

The property

[Kirinda Walauwa](#) is a beautifully preserved aristocratic home in tiny Kirinda village, about 40 minutes' drive from Kandy. Owner Lalith Illankoon quit his Colombo job in 2012 to return to his 19th-century ancestral home, open it to paying guests and manage the 12-hectare farm. "I felt that guests who came to Sri Lanka didn't have an opportunity to live in a home with a lot of tradition, and to eat home-cooked cuisine," he explains.

The setting



Cook Prema in the wood-fired kitchen at Kirinda Walauwa. Kendall Hill

The *walauwa* (noble home) sits in a clearing at the end of a winding jungle drive. Twitchers will delight in sightings of golden orioles and paradise flycatchers but the real attraction is the house itself with its gleaming teak floors, jackfruit-wood verandah and a traditional indoor garden, or *meda midula*. Five airy guestrooms with attached bathrooms and twin beds are basic but no deterrent to a great night's sleep.

Dining

Cook Prema has been with the family 35 years. A virtuoso in the wood-fired kitchen, she turns her hand to Sri Lankan and Western dishes according to guests' whims. Breakfast features estate-grown delights such as custard apple juice and buffalo curd drizzled with kitul palm treacle. Prema also gives thorough cooking lessons that culminate in a lavish lunch.

Something special



On the verandah at Kirinda Walauwa, Kendall Hill

Lalith is an avid collector, restorer and racer of vintage cars and will gladly give guests a tour of his beauties.

In the area

Village walks to Kirinda temple and the simple local bakery. The attractions (and traffic torments) of Kandy are less than an hour away.

Address: Hondiyadeniya Road, Gampola. Tel: +94 7777 80782. See [facebook.com/kirindawalauwa](https://www.facebook.com/kirindawalauwa)

Maniumpathy (Colombo)

The property

Owned by the Hallock family for five generations, **Maniumpathy** is a stately home in Kynsey Road – once known as the Harley Street of Colombo for all the distinguished

physicians with rooms there. Its neighbours in leafy Colombo 7 include the French and Turkish embassies, the UNHCR and the exclusive small hotel Tintagel, where Charles and Camilla stayed for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2013. This is dress-circle Colombo, in other words.

The setting



The pool at Maniumpathy, owned by the Hallock family for five generations.

In this sweeping mansion, opened as a hotel a year ago, guests can relive a golden era of Colombo without forgoing 21st-century comforts or technology. The eight suites each have their attractions – a private courtyard and direct pool access, an indoor-outdoor bathroom, or extra-wide balconies. Romance abounds in the Delft-blue comforters, parquet floors with Persian rugs and four-poster beds draped in wispy netting.

Dining

The Grand Ebony Room, named for its centrepiece 16-seat table, is the main dining room but house guests eat more casually on the pool terrace. At breakfast, butler Pradeep spoils his charges with blended juices, tropical fruits with curd and treacle, plus sausages, bacon and eggs as you wish. Lunch and dinner are also available but Colombo's vibrant eating scene lures most guests off site for meals.

In the area

Kynsey Road is the centre of Colombo but not exactly central to all its attractions. Most city highlights are a rickshaw or cab ride away.

Rooms to book

Upstairs suites have more privacy; downstairs ones have direct pool access. Tough call.

Address: 129 Kynsey Rd, Colombo 7. Tel: +94 11 269 6988. See maniumpathy.com



Taru Villas, in Lighthouse Street, Galle, is a four-room inn of impeccable taste.

Taru Villas, Lighthouse Street (Galle)

The property

Interior designer and hotel guru Nayantara Fonseka, known universally as Taru, is behind this chic conversion of an 1800s Dutch merchant's home into a four-room inn of impeccable taste. Guests enter a world of colonial elegance and barefoot staff proffering icy poles of pineapple, Sprite and mint. Period pieces and antiques enhance public areas and lend each suite character. Sister property Rampart Street overlooks fort walls and the ocean and has that essential tropical accessory, a pool.

The setting

[Lighthouse Street](#) is one of Galle's more charming and gentrified thoroughfares. But in a neighbourhood flush with converted mansions of glamour and style, Taru Villas feels like the best address in the street. There is one bedroom downstairs, three up, and two terraces for gazing across Galle's historic rooftops. Bells are supplied for summoning staff.

Dining

Meals are taken at a communal table for eight that is busy at breakfast – well-executed Western and Sri Lankan plates – but otherwise often empty as guests sample Galle's lively eating scene. This is a pity because the in-house kitchen is excellent. Extensive menus offer broad choices from prawns with black pepper curry leaf sauce to salted caramel semifreddo, and the best green chicken curry I've had outside Thailand.

In the area



The dining room at Taru Villas, in Lighthouse Street.

Local guide Shanjei Perumal's Galle fort walks are entertaining primers on history and local culture. See gallefortwalks.com.

Rooms to book

If screen time's important, superior rooms have their own TVs.

Address: Taru Villas, 42 Lighthouse Street, Galle Fort. Tel: +94 112 340 033. See taruvillas.com

Warm welcome

Taru Fonseka and Leana Pieris were not the first to reimagine unique and historic properties as exclusive small hotels but, with eight addresses now operating under their Taru Villas banner, they're a driving force behind the renaissance of Sri Lanka's once-neglected heritage.

To the outsider, it might appear that the end of the decades-long civil war sparked a collective confidence in the country's future, and in its past. That would explain all the sensitive, often sensational conversions of storied properties into bijou hotels offering visitors authentic experiences of old-meets-new Ceylon. But Pieris says the trend to rescue and restore historic piles predates Sri Lanka's long-awaited peace.

"I believe the phenomenon of heritage boutique properties in Sri Lanka developed as a way of marking out our own version of what was possible, what we could do to preserve our traditional *walauwas* and rural holiday bungalows," says Pieris. "The practicalities and economics of maintaining these heritage buildings, with no public financial support, quite naturally led to many of them being turned into boutique hotels, villas and guest houses."

The Taru Villas portfolio includes a handful of languid Indian Ocean villas, two colonial mansions in Galle and a lakeside lodge in Colombo. Pieris puts their success down to doing what they love.

"We have a very clear idea of how we like to vacation – our checklist of must-haves – and we translated this into a pioneering business model of boutique hotels," she explains. "We realised this same formula would be attractive to the braver, more worldly-wise and higher-end travellers who wanted to experience this island paradise of ours."

Top of their checklist are places with character that welcome visitors to share in the beauty and culture of Sri Lanka. And cuisine must always be a strong suit. Good hospitality means feeding your guests as well and as fully a possible, Pieris says.

"Also, I believe Sri Lankans as a people are naturally warm and welcoming to guests. Whether they're local or foreign, the tradition of hospitality to strangers is strong in our culture, which makes us ideal hosts."

The writer travelled to Sri Lanka courtesy of India Unbound.

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India Unbound specialises in customised journeys of India and Sri Lanka, indiaunbound.com.au. Sister company Remarkable East specialises in small group tours. Their 13-day Sri Lanka in Style trip, departing in June, costs \$10,950 a person, twin share. See remarkableeast.com.au.

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