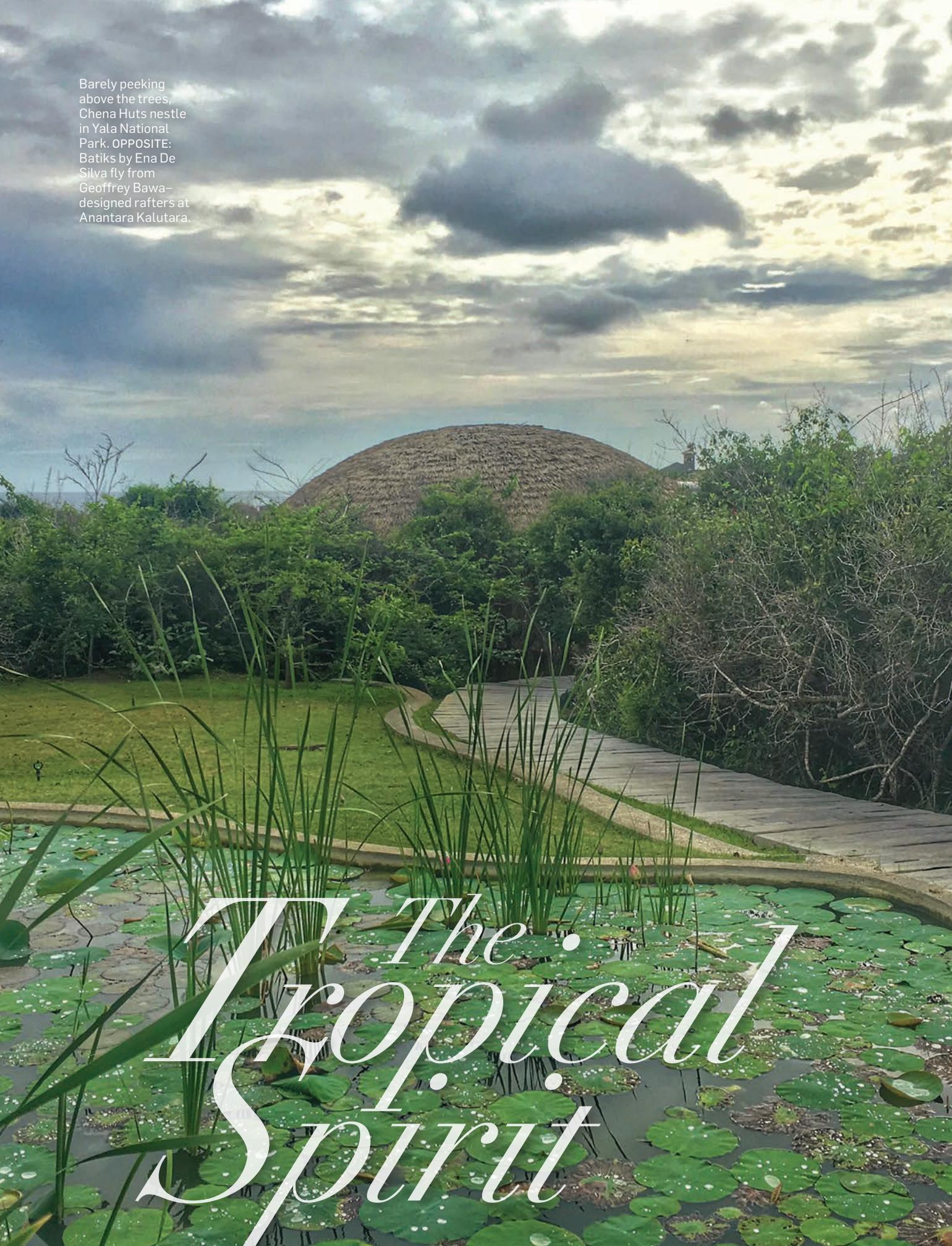


Barely peeking above the trees, Chena Huts nestle in Yala National Park. OPPOSITE: Batiks by Ena De Silva fly from Geoffrey Bawa-designed rafters at Anantara Kalutara.



The Tropical Spirit

Southern Sri Lanka's newest wave of hotels carries on the simple, sustainable and hybrid spirit of Ceylon's most famous native son, architect Geoffrey Bawa.

BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEO MCHUGH



The grandeur of Anantara Kalutara is less likely to hit you visually than elementally. That's not to say the enormous hollow A-frame, one of the last hotel designs by Geoffrey Bawa, inventor of the tropical modernist design school, is not stunning. On the contrary: it is simple, regal, breathtaking. But it faces the confluence of the Kalu Ganga Estuary and the Indian Ocean, with guests arriving via the backside (and instantly becoming the grand marshal of their own welcome parade that's led by local singers, dancers and drummers), meaning you must later head north to the hotel's spa or pan-Asian restaurant Spice Traders and glance back to get the full picture of the building's angular glory.



But wait. Sitting under the big top is a powerful experience. Go to the upper deck and sink into a brown, butter-leather armchair, to the murmur of billiard balls rolling across the pool table and the whoosh of the water flowing outside. It's impossible not to be mesmerized by the gargantuan batiks floating from the rafters. This open-air yet fully protected space feels like a medieval castle-cum-equatorial beach house. That the majestic banners come from a cooperative founded by Ena De Silva, Bawa's friend and herself Sri Lankan-design royalty, heightens the effect. The glass of premium dark rum in your hand, brought by the bartender who knows your drink, doesn't hurt.

That cross-breeze? It's not just the sea air. It's the articulation of Geoffrey Bawa's design ethos. "In many ways, the hotel conformed to the Bawa ideals of non-air-conditioned spaces open to the beautiful landscape," says architect Channa Daswatte, who was charged with fulfilling the original vision and rounding out the rest of the hotel, which opened late last year, including 141 rooms, suites and villas. "This was [Bawa's] belief that visitors to Sri Lanka really came to enjoy the salubrious and benign climate of the island."

They also came to enjoy the layered culture, with which Bawa, himself the product of an English and Muslim father and German, Scottish and Sinhalese mother, understood intuitively and translated again and again into his designs over more than half a century. He opened up the traditionally stuffy colonial-style buildings prevalent in Sri Lanka to gardens and courtyards, combined local art with European antiques, meshed the masculine angles and lines of Mies with the feminine curves of frangipani and other native plants. His design philosophy, Daswatte says, "rooted in the ideas of environmental sustainability long before it was fashionable."

Anantara Kalutara opened last year, and besides my interest in this newest release from a ghost (the incredibly prolific Bawa died in 2003, and the hotel has a lovely library dedicated to his work), I wanted to see how evolving Sri Lankan design carries on his legacy today. So, I took a swing through the south coast to visit his estate, that of his brother, Bevis, a renowned landscape designer in his own right, and a few vastly different new resorts. Not all of them originated in Geoffrey's sketchbook but they each take the environment as inspiration, pay homage to local context, feel fresh and contemporary, and wear their commendable eco-cred lightly, just like the man himself.

I wake up in a room that smells like Christmas, with only the haziest of memories of how I got there: Someone gently shaking me awake at the end of a long car ride and leading me off into the black night... An uphill path through low bramble... A doorway to a building that seemed tall... There was definitely a spiral staircase... The sun is peeking into the oblong-shaped room and I wonder, *Am I in a lighthouse?* A push of the shades reveals a view across a lake, and a stronger scent of holiday baking. It's only once I groggily shower and descend the, yes, spiral stairs and a natural rounded path outdoors, downhill, to the property's



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In the Anantara Kalutara spa; overlooking the Kalu Ganga Estuary from Anantara's upper deck; a Geoffrey Bawa-designed iron throne at Lunuganga; through the Hobbit hole at Bevis Bawa's Brief Garden; the Anantara welcome parade; a blue door echoes Dutch style at Brief Garden.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, ALL AT CHENA HUTS: Stays are full-board, meaning all the cheesecake you can eat; the huts boast safari-luxe interiors; safari guide Vidupa Rathnayake; leopards live in Yala at the highest density on earth; a post-safari picnic on the hotel's beach.

VIEW, ROOM AND LEOPARD: COURTESY OF CHENA HUTS

Thirsty pachyderms have been known to sneak up to sip from the plunge pools

main lounge that I understand that I have been sleeping in a water tower covered in cinnamon sticks at the center of a giant Fibonacci sequence.

Over breakfast of three hoppers (those fermented-batter bowls filled with eggs and curries that Sri Lanka does so well) nearly too pretty to eat, general manager Oliver James explains how the layout of Tri, here on the shores of Koggala Lake, in the center of southern Sri Lanka, is the golden ration writ large, a nautilus-shell hotel map on which is imprinted the current of Bawa's tropical modernism. Just look at this indoor/outdoor sala that serves as main house, and the right angles of the cantilevered infinity pool and of the eight high-ceilinged, stand-alone villas tucked into natural breaks in the trees at the outer edge of the spiral. When I practically trip over a snail the size of a credit card after an evening rain, I'm sure it's no coincidence.

Tri is a place where curry night brings together all guests at a communal dinner table, where 95 percent of the food comes from within a 35-kilometer radius, and where chlorine is banned from the pool and plastic from the entire property. Classes in Quantum yoga—a dynamic style conceived by Tri co-owner Laura Baumann to help achieve harmony of mind and body—are cooled by the crosswinds blowing through the open-air sala that has sightlines aligned with the teardrop pond surrounding the water tower; and trips to an island to visit a local cinnamon farmer are captained by bright-smiling Douglas, who lived on the property long before it became a resort. The owners helped Douglas build a house, employed him as guard and driver of their electric (of course) boat, and now Douglas is the only reason Tri can sail the waters of Koggala, having personally been granted permission by the area fishermen who control the lake. It's easy to envision this cooperative back-and-forth spiraling outward ad infinitum.

My jeep driver is a hero. He's woken up before four in the morning to procure us the first entrance tickets to Yala National Park, making us the first vehicle of the day to trundle through the gates at 6 a.m.—and all the difference. Not 10 minutes in, our guide, trained veterinarian Vidupa Rathnayake, excitedly points out a sloth bear ambling in our direction. A black-haired bear of no relation to the sloth, with elephantine ears, inward-turned feet and patches of white on his face and chest, he is heading for easy eats at a termite hill softened by the morning dew. (Though not exclusively nocturnal, they prefer to feed at night, in the early hours and after the rains because the mud hills harden to concrete in the tropical sun.) As he scoops pawfuls of the bugs into his mouth, I wonder how an animal that size—they grow to about two meters—could survive off such miniscule protein sources. Vidupa says he must be three to four years old because though he is dining alone, he has no scars on his face to indicate past territory fights with rivals.

A second then a third jeep pull up behind us and cut their engines... but breakfast is over. As if on cue, a mongoose (a ferret-like creature not related to geese) appears next to our door and bares his spiky teeth. The bear rolls forward off his haunches and heads back to the woods. We watch his round backside slow-motion shimmy into the tree line. I'm psyched now; later I am unbearably smug to learn that we were the only three cars in the park to see a sloth bear that day. Gold stars to my early-rising driver and keen-eyed guide.

Most people visit Yala for the leopards, which live here in the highest density on earth, for the elephants and for the peacocks, and while we see all of these this morning—brother and sister cat cubs prowling around an unsuspecting bird; mama and baby pachyderms post-bath; a bizarre cooperative mating display by a peacock with his interspecies wingman mongoose—I am also pretty impressed with the menagerie at my resort.

Chena Huts by Uga Escapes is named for the structures that local farmers used to sleep in to protect their bush crops from elephants. The property, a dreamscape recently opened by one of the oldest Sri Lankan boutique hotel companies, is bordered by the ocean to the east, a saltwater estuary, and Yala.

Which means that elephants may still wander by your bedroom—or meal table, as they did during my first lunch in the all-inclusive restaurant.

The 14 “huts,” connected by boardwalks, are camouflaged among the trees by their thatched domes. Inside, it’s full-tilt safari-luxe. A cloud bed with a hand-hewn, tree-trunk headboard anchors a large square that includes a living room area and a stand-alone tub, and is accented by rattan fans and faux kerosene lamps and handmade pencils and diaries for recording your thoughts. The porches beyond rounded picture windows have plunge pools, and thirsty pachyderms have been known to sneak up and sip from them.

General manager Roshan De Silva tells me of one couple who were returning sadly to the resort after a leopard-free safari in the national park, pulled into the circle at the Chena Huts entrance, and chanced upon two big cats sunning themselves next to the guard booth. This is why you’re not allowed to wander the grounds alone after dark. And it’s also a neat iteration of those principles Bawa lived by: respecting the surrounds, having the inside open out and bringing the outside in, merging ways of life.

Visit Bawa’s estate, Lunuganga, as I did during my stay at Anantara Kalutara, and all his theories fall into place. The experimental use of space—such as a gateway to the property that in fact contains a lofted bedroom; rooms that use glass, doorways and overhangs to be at once inside and out; the black-and-white checkerboard floors associated with the Dutch; emphasis on sightlines and the horizon, which you can see in both directions through the front and back doors of the main house; fidelity to topography. Bawa owned land on both sides of a village road; rather than raze or engulf it, he built a covered bridge so subtly that from a distance you can’t see the gap in the land.

It is a large plot, but he used precious little of it for buildings, sprinkling a staircase here, a mural there, coaxing the grass and the trees and the streams to seem to do much of the work on their own. In that sense, the mostly wide-open property stands in interesting contrast to that of his brother Bevis, who as a landscape designer created much more intricately manicured gardens at his estate, the Brief Garden, less than an hour away and filled with homoerotic sculptures and nooks for trysting. (“Nowadays in the tropics, an outdoor shower is a luxury,” the property’s caretaker, who was Bevis’s assistant, Dooland De Silva tells me. “Mr. Bawa had that idea 85 years ago.”) But the homes themselves feel similar in their open plans, incorporation of the outdoors and, Dooland points out, “maximum use of breeze and light.”

They’re so inviting it comes as little surprise that one acquaintance of Bevis’s came from Australia for a quick visit and wound of staying for six years, and that Lunuganga today operates as not just museum but also hotel, as do many of the residential properties Geoffrey designed, including The Last House, a charming, open-air ochre beauty in Tangalle. The Bawa genius was conjuring a way to make spaces feel both beautiful and egalitarian, exposed yet cozy, at once rooted in and transcendent of Sri Lanka. It isn’t hard to see why this 70-year-old philosophy remains the modern ideal. ☺

THE DETAILS

HOTELS

Anantara Kalutara St. Sebastian’s Road, Kalutara; 94-34/222-0222; kalutara.anantara.com; doubles from US\$280.
Chena Huts Palatupana Yala; 94-47/226-7100; ugaescapes.com; doubles from US\$660 all-inclusive of meals, drinks, two game drives daily and

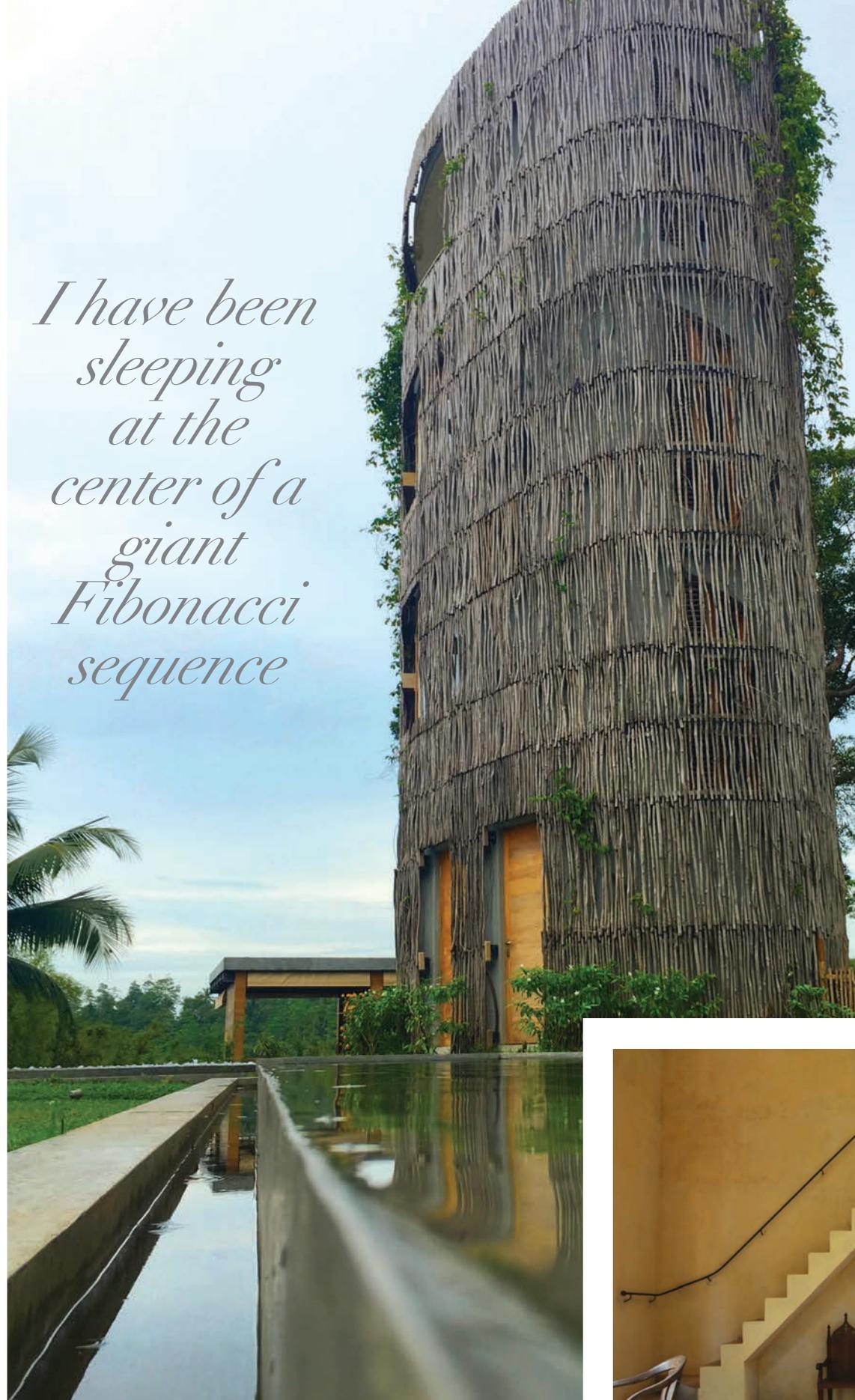
national park fees.
The Last House Pubudu Mawatha, Tangalle; 94-81/720-1115; thelasthouse.com; doubles from US\$180.
Lunuganga Dedduwa, Bentota; 94-34/428-7056; goeffreybawa.com; doubles from US\$220; no kids under 12. Tour admission fee Rs1,250;

daily 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Tri Koggala Lake, Galle; 94-77/770-8177; doubles from US\$270 including half-board; trilanka.com; no kids under 12.

ACTIVITIES

The Brief Garden Kalawila Village, Beruwala; 94-77/350-9290; daily 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

I have been sleeping at the center of a giant Fibonacci sequence



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tri’s cinnamon-shell water tower; Laura Baumann teaches yoga at Tri; the resort’s upscale hoppers; Dooland De Silva, friend of the late Bevis Bawa and caretaker of his property; at Lunuganga, Geoffrey Bawa meshed European and Sri Lanka styles.

