

Good Things

goodthingsmagazine.com

GOURMET FOOD LUXURY ESCAPES

MEET THE CHEF

HÉLÈNE DARROZE

Motherhood and
Michelin stars

**FOODIE
SKI GUIDE**
DONNA HAY'S
MERINGUE
MASTERCLASS
**BEAUTIFUL
KITCHENS**



Oct/Nov 2017 £3.99



The Autumn Edit

José Pizarro's Catalonia... Cocktails with Mr Lyan... Jeremy Pang's Hong Kong... Veggie recipes from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

SRI LANKAN *soul*

Georgina Wilson-Powell discovers the teardrop-shaped island has lots up its sleeve. Not to mention in its kitchen...

Sri Lankan food is as varied as it is delicious. But not many tourists get to see it being grown. I'm in Anuradhapura, known as the cultural triangle, to see an ultra-local rice festival.

At Ulagalla, guests are greeted at the colonial mansion house that was once the seat of Anuradhapura nobility and are welcomed in by lighting a candle and banging a gong. Here in the heart of Sri Lanka, cultural traditions remain part of everyday life. A warm breeze works its way slowly through the courtyard of the wooden mansion. There are comfy armchairs for cocktails on the veranda and an enormous pool, which seems to merge with the crops that sit on the horizon.

Grow your own

Ulagalla is a large estate (58 acres) considering there are only 20 eco-friendly villas. Guests get around on bicycles, while the resident monkey population swing between the trees. The enormous villas are dotted out of sight of each other, and sit up on stilts so you can survey the pristine land. Private plunge pools sit almost in the surrounding jungle and more monkeys are evident just out of sight.

Part of the large estate has been given

over to an impressive kitchen garden. Dragonfruit, mango and papaya are so prevalent, the trees are sagging. There are tiny bananas, okra, chillies...the well tended garden's only drawback is the number of elephants that decide to help themselves once a month or so.

I turn up on my bicycle ready for a traditional cooking class. Chef and I dive into a mud hut and start heating clay pots on an open fire while chopping herbs, onions and tomatoes. Creamy dahl with spinach, okra curry and a prawn curry are on the menu, but most Sri Lankan dishes start with the same handfuls of mustard seeds, turmeric, chilli powder, cardamom and cinnamon – all liberally sprinkled into an ancient pot with lashings of coconut oil. It's hot, hazy work that smells absolutely divine.

After a juggle of pots on the open fire, I sit down to a meal fit for the Sri Lankan nobility that used to live here, overlooking the garden where most ingredients were grown. I don't think I've had a better meal in Sri Lanka.

Rice, rice baby

The next day the staff and guests gather for the rice harvesting ceremony. There's a procession and fires are lit in a little grove by the rice paddies. Priests

in traditional skirts light candles and banana leaf sculptures. There are chalk mandalas on the floor. Today a lot of Ulagalla's rice paddies are harvested by machine but the ritual remains. The staff show me how to cut rice by hand. It's backbreaking, even after a few minutes, trying not to cut my own legs with the curved knife. I would be a rubbish paddy worker.

Head north

The north-east coast, which suffered greatly during the civil war, is still relatively unknown. Trying to change that is Uga Jungle Beach at Trincomalee, which has eco-lodges that sit with one foot in the jungle and another on the beach. I plump for a triangle-shaped villa in a jungle clearing with a shared pool, close enough to the beach that I can be on it in a couple of minutes. The hotel built within the tree clearings, which means getting around is like trying to find your way through a wooden maze (guests need torches after dark as things are kept as natural as possible).

Jungle Beach is impressive in its own way, even if it's much more compact than Ulagalla. An enormous wooden treehouse sits at the heart of the hotel,

with an open-air dining room. A tiny bar clings to the edge of the pool, and it's here in the evening as groups come in, everyone starts to make friends. Jungle Beach has invested in the local community, training up the war-torn residents to an international hospitality level and employing war widows to help with housekeeping.

While rice paddies seem like a distant dream, down on the beach I discover the most enormous seafood platter I've ever seen. Crabs' legs longer than my forearm, lobsters that look more like little engines and prawns that want to be lobsters. It's all presented beautifully down on the shoreline between tiki candles.

One of the delights is being able to access Sri Lanka's Pigeon Island marine reserve, one of only two in the country. 40 minutes off shore by boat, the ticket office is still a little shed on this rocky island, but underwater, life is glorious. A shallow reef makes it perfect for snorkelling, and you might come face to face with a turtle or a black tipped shark. There's a fabulous coral reef and, while it's not pristine, environmental groups are working to raise awareness of why it's important to keep the island clean. Families bring

picnics, kids run about splashing in the rock pools, and underwater lovers have two sides of the island to pick from.

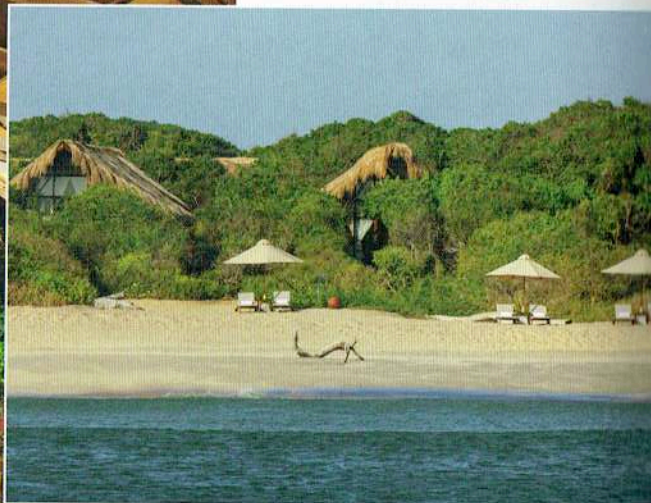
I dot between the two, spotting tropical fish with neon colours and I spy the curved outline of a turtle shell. There's a feeling of real travelling up here. Most visitors are Sri Lankan or the odd backpacker and, heading back on the boat, the verdant jungle stretches as far as the eye can see along the coast. Sri Lanka, I'm in love.

Make it real

Ulagalla from £139 B&B. Book UGA Escapes Ulagalla or Jungle Beach at ugaescapes.com. Fly direct to Colombo from London Heathrow on Sri Lankan Airlines, srilankan.com. Ulagalla also has a luxury Residence hotel in Colombo for overnight stays.



Ulagalla estate



Chalet with private pool at Uga Jungle Beach