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R e t u r n

As Sri Lanka emerges from a four-year malaise, one intrepid hotelier is hoping to remind holidaymakers why they fell in love with the tiny island nation in the first place.

By Alexandra Kirkman

“If the sun sets in the kingdom of heaven as nicely as in the Bay of Bengal, then I dare to assure you, the kingdom of heaven is very good,” wrote Anton Chekhov of his visit to Sri Lanka in 1890. Much has changed on the Edenic isle in the ensuing 133 years, but the sunsets have not – and there is a just poetry to the country’s post-colonial name, Sri Lanka, which means “resplendent island”.

The nation’s ineffable exoticism and dazzling natural bounty were known for wowing adventurous visitors like Chekhov until the onset of the nearly 26-year civil war in 1983. Intrepid travellers arrived in ever-growing numbers after its 2009 conclusion – the country welcomed 2.3 million in 2018 – before the unthinkable happened anew. On 21 April 2019, Isis-related attacks killed 269 people and froze inbound travel in its tracks. That horror, coupled with the 2020 pandemic and last year’s economic crisis – the worst since the country gained independence after 133 years under British rule in 1948 – comprised a devastating trifecta that left the island’s fledgling tourism industry in tatters.

That’s about to change, at least if Malik J Fernando has anything to say about it. The managing director of Resplendent Ceylon, the hotel group whose celebrated three-resort “Tea, Sea & Safari” circuit first put Sri Lanka on the luxury-travel radar, has launched two singular new beachfront escapes, Ahu Bay and Kayaam House, with a mission to bring the world back to the storied island.

t o S p l e n d o u r





The dining room at Kayaam House hotel spills into a sunlit inner courtyard

“I’m very confident about Sri Lanka’s tourism future,” Fernando explains. “To me, it’s the single biggest industry suited to this country.”

It’s not hard to see his point as you gaze across the beautiful landscapes, flora, fauna – and yes, sunsets – that retain their prelapsarian splendour. Perhaps Fernando’s confidence comes in part because of his connection with that land. His career as an “accidental hotelier” began in 2005, when he debuted the first iteration of Ceylon Tea Trails, the brand’s 27-room flagship, which now spans five historic, sumptuously restored tea-planter bungalows in Sri Lanka’s achingly picturesque central highlands. Tea plays a starring role in Resplendent’s origin story: in 1988, Fernando’s father, Merrill J Fernando, founded Dilmah, whose fair-trade teas are now sold in more than 100 countries.

In 2014 came Cape Weligama, a five-hectare, cliff-top grande dame overlooking the sea, where peacocks roam the 39 suites’ and villas’ tropical gardens and seasonal whale-watching trips bring lucky guests within arm’s length of blue whales and orcas. Wild Coast Tented Lodge, the circuit’s acclaimed beachfront safari outpost, followed three years later. Blending seamlessly into the surrounding landscape, with artfully designed “cocoon suites” equipped with claw-foot copper bathtubs and some with plunge pools, the resort neighbours Yala National Park, a beacon of biodiversity that is home to 215 bird and 44 mammal species, including 200 to 250 Sri Lankan leopards.

Ahu Bay was conceived nearly three years ago, when Fernando’s friend, who owned a property on Sri Lanka’s west coast, approached him about opening a hotel there together. Hooked at first sight by the jaw-dropping location, he agreed – but he was by then an experienced enough hotelier to know it couldn’t cannibalise stays at Cape Weligama, less than 80 kilometres away. “So we decided to give it a laid-back, beach-house ambience, but with Resplendent’s Relais & Châteaux-level service,” he says. (The brand’s three resorts are Sri Lanka’s only members of the esteemed collection.)

Bookended by two secluded, palm-fringed beaches on Ahungalla Point, a headland less than two hours’ drive south

from Colombo, Ahu Bay presides over a prime stretch of swimmable coastline, offering 180-degree vistas of the Indian Ocean’s glittering expanses. With just 16 airy, sun-splashed rooms – featuring sleek rattan furniture, brushed-gold accents and teal-tiled spa baths – the resort exudes casual elegance and uncontrived cool.

You can happily while away the days sprawled on a chaise between dips, or the endlessly congenial staff, virtually all Resplendent veterans, can arrange a wide array of excursions, including waterfall treks in the nearby Beraliya Jungle, or a visit to a Ceylon cinnamon plantation, with a cinnamon-centric lunch prepared by an Ayurvedic doctor.

At dusk, there may be no more bewitching spot island-wide than the poolside restaurant – with Ahu’s coconut-infused take on a margarita in hand, of course – as the sun sinks seaward before you in a

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How Sri Lankans make visitors feel imbues their fondest travel memories, and that’s something we will never lose

– Malik J Fernando

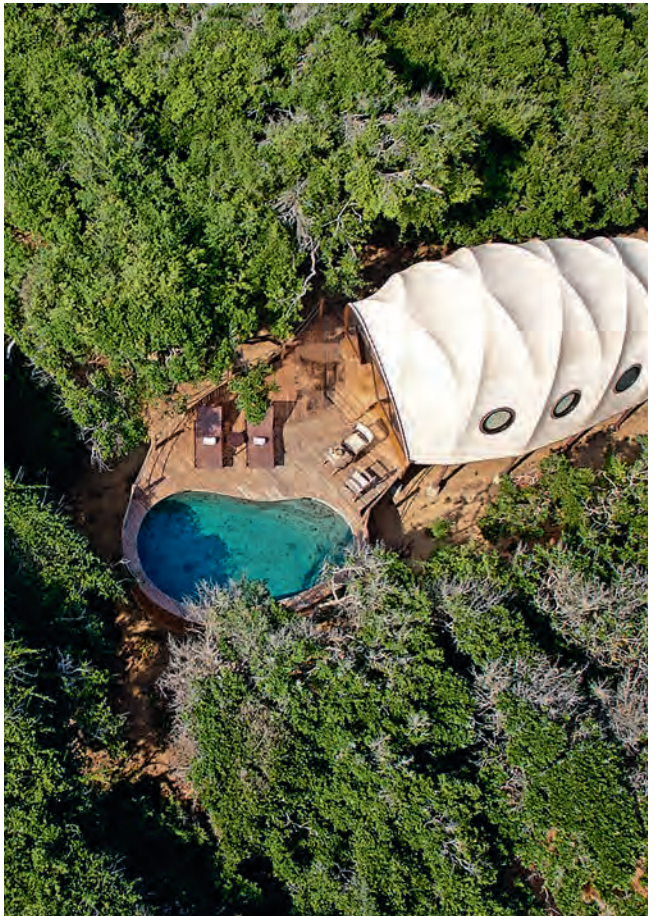
fuchsia-tinged, tangerine blaze. After dark, dinner delights with inspired dishes like tandoori scallops with chickpea and pomegranate or savoury crumb-fried coconut cheesecake, followed by Sri Lankan lagoon-crab curry or popcorn-crusting black-Angus fillet with caramelised cauliflower puree.

Wellness takes centre stage at the other new property, Kayaam House, a soigné sanctuary tucked away amongst lush mangrove forests and jungle-edged coastline near Tangalle, 125 kilometres from Ahungalla in the deep south. The chicly spare, nine-room getaway – graced with grand common spaces and soaring archways that frame arresting views of the infinity pool, flanked by frangipani trees and coconut palms – conjures an almost otherworldly tranquillity, while the beach’s caramel-hued sands seem to refract the morning light, imbuing the grounds with an uncanny, aurulent glow.

Stays at the resort (which allows children under 16 only in exclusive-use buyouts) include a 60-minute spa treatment daily, ranging from Balinese massages to facials incorporating



Clockwise from here: Sigiriya, an ancient rock fortress built into a granite peak in central Sri Lanka; the palm-fringed infinity pool at Ahu Bay; a bird's-eye perspective of Wild Coast Tented Lodge near Yala National Park; the serene interior of Kayaam House



hyperlocal ingredients. With a veteran of Raffles and Aman newly aboard to direct wellness initiatives at all five properties, Kayaam will soon expand its offerings to include multiday holistic retreats, positioning it as a restorative, ne plus ultra escape.

For now, guests can recalibrate with classes in the breezy yoga shala, or try sunrise kayaking in the nearby Rekawa Lagoon, where inky Indian cormorants and pied kingfishers, backlit by the predawn candyfloss sky, dive the shallows for breakfast as you glide past under the curious gaze of toque macaque monkeys and purple herons, perched still as statues in the mangroves.

Longterm, Fernando sees Reverie, the name he's given to his growing clutch of hideaways, as a quirky way to grow the country's top-tier resort inventory while maintaining Resplendent's exalted standards of luxury. "Reverie offers greater flexibility to expand into more offbeat areas," he says. "We may have just four rooms somewhere, but no more than 20 anywhere – and ultimately, five or six unusual properties."

Next up: Kelburne, a 22ha tea estate in Haputale, in the island's eastern hills, which Fernando fondly recalls having visited since childhood. On an overcast day, the surrounding emerald peaks, swathed in glossy-leaved tea bushes, appear to pierce the clouds; on a clear one, you can see five of the country's nine provinces and the Indian Ocean beyond. "It is the finest view in Sri Lanka," he says.

Over at Wild Coast, where the swirling sea thunders hypnotically against colossal boulders lining the windswept beach, Fernando is also

looking to the future, helping create a private conservancy neighbouring Yala, slated to debut imminently. A leopard research centre, a joint project by the MJF Charitable Foundation – Sri Lanka's largest private foundation – and Dilmah Conservation, will soon follow.

Economic recovery in the country is progressing steadily. A recent agreement with the International Monetary Fund to restore macroeconomic stability is providing a much-needed reset, says Fernando – and buoying confidence of those across the industry. Vasula Wimalaweera of Abercrombie & Kent, Sri Lanka, frames his confidence in terms of rare opportunity and exceptional value: "I call it 'compact diversity': we have 2,500 years of history, World Heritage sites, dazzling art and culture, incredible wildlife, untouched beaches – on this one small island, and you can experience virtually everything in one tour," he says. "And we offer the same five-star accommodations and service standards, but at a much lower cost."

Fernando also gives credit to the local people. "It's been one thing after another, and we've suffered, but we're resilient – and the confidence is finally returning," he says. "A key ingredient of successful tourism is the hospitality of the people. How Sri Lankans make visitors feel imbues their fondest travel memories, and that's something we will never lose."

He pauses for a moment, lost in thought. "This country is an extraordinary place," he says. "And it's time for the world to give it a break."
resplendentceylon.com



Cape Weligama
at sunset