

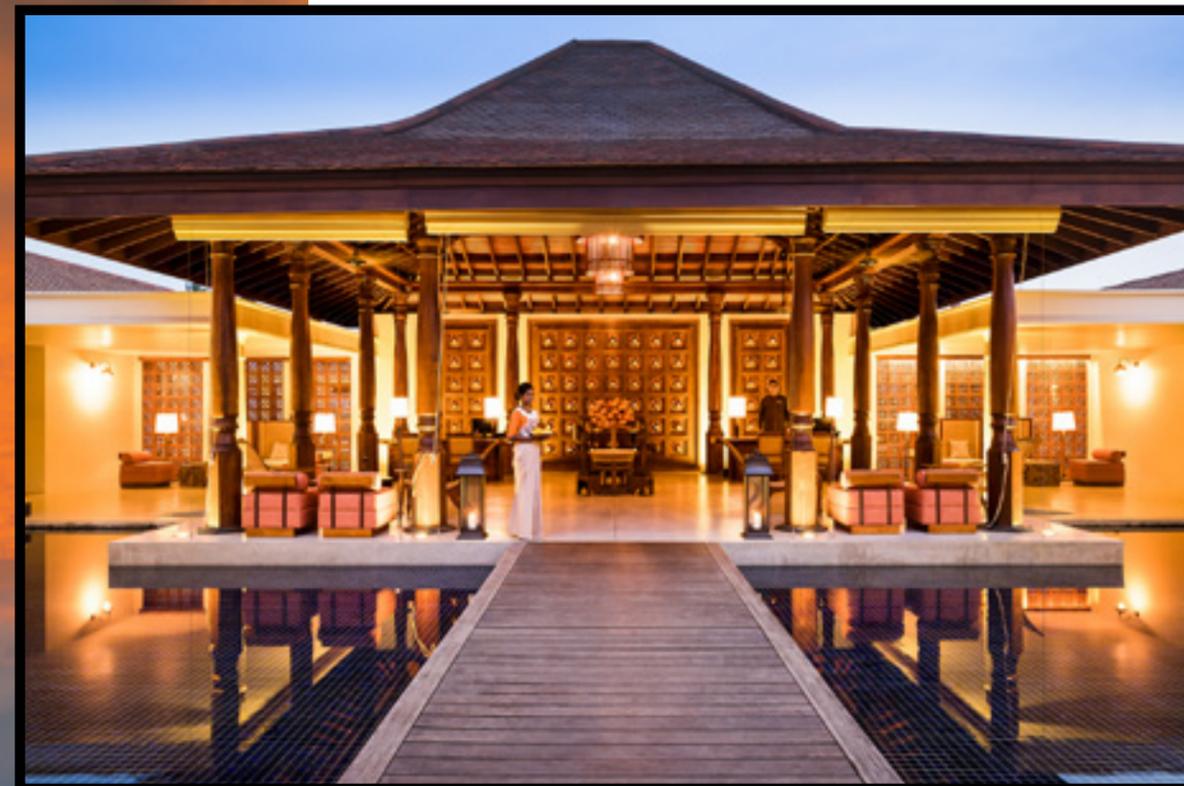


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# Spice island

Sri Lanka's tourism scene is burgeoning — fast-tracked to become the next big thing in travel. And with a backdrop of sandy white beaches, lush rainforests, and friendly hospitality it's easy to see why.

WORDS SKYE HOKLAS | IMAGES ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE RESORT



## SRI LANKA

**Population:** 20.48 million

**Size:** 65,610 km<sup>2</sup>

**Official languages:** Sinhala, Tamil, and English

**Capital city:** Colombo

**Climate:** Tropical

**Official currency:** Sri Lankan rupee

**T**erracotta clay pots of varying sizes are scattered across a wooden bench, each filled with a different ingredient. There's orange-hued turmeric in one, sweet-smelling Ceylon cinnamon in another.

Chopped onions sit next to a bowl of freshly-made coconut milk, and black blobs of dried gamboge fruit take pride of place alongside a super-sized dish filled to the brim with basmati rice. The aromatic spices fill the air, and I find myself spluttering a little when the smell of freshly chopped green chili hits the back of my throat.

I'm at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort in Sri Lanka, getting ready to start a Spice Spoons cooking class. Focusing on local cuisine, it's a great way to get a taste of the culture, and by learning how to create the home-grown dishes myself, I can return from my travels with a traditional recipe to share with friends and family. This means they too will get to experience a little bit of the journey. So many stories can be told through >>



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food, and the Anantara luxury hotel chain encourages the sharing of those many cultural tales by making cooking classes a signature part of its service offering all over the world. In Thailand, you can try your hand at classic pad thai; in Vietnam, it's all about the spring rolls; and in Sri Lanka, the star of the show is curry — sweat-inducing, fiery, coconut-based curry.



My day has begun with an excursion to the local fruit and vegetable markets in the coastal township of Tangalle, just a short drive away from the hotel, and three hours south of the capital city, Colombo. I'm accompanied by one of Anantara's Sri Lankan-born chefs. The plan is to choose some ingredients to cook with later in the day from the hundreds of fresh produce stalls lining the market square. As we zip along the windy roads in our air-conditioned van — sweet relief from the sweltering heat outside — it quickly becomes apparent that we aren't going to be in luck today. Each April, the Sinhalese New Year is celebrated, and this results in a total shutdown of most shops and markets. The tradition goes that the Sri Lankan people must abstain from material pursuits as well as alcohol for a couple of days. Locals also mark the occasion by setting off firecrackers and attending various religious events.

While the market is a no-go, the trip proves to be fruitful in other ways. We find a lone vendor selling some brightly coloured veg, so we pick up a few bags of ingredients like okra, mushrooms, and bitter melon. It's also an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the local way of life, outside of the creature comforts. We stop by some rice paddies, the cracked soil desperately yearning for the upcoming monsoon season, which the chef tells me is set to happen "any day now". There's a young family on the side of the road climbing for tamarind — an edible fruit which tastes like sour lollies — and they throw us down a pod or two to try. We pull up at a driveway lined with cashew trees and ask the owner if we can taste the nut and accompanying apple. On our way back to the resort we pass the homes of the locals, some slightly decaying

but all painted in bright colours like fuchsia, aqua, or tangerine; the primary school, from which pupils are absent for the holiday; the lush rainforest lining the roads; the gorgeous blue stretch of coastline that is Tangalle Beach; and a scary-looking monitor lizard basking in the beaming sunshine.

Back at the resort, I learn that Sri Lankan curries are quite different to those found in India. They are typically thinner in texture and more heavy-going on the spices, which results in super-punchy flavour combinations guaranteed to get the cheeks flushing. There are several base ingredients that go into almost all Sri Lankan dishes: onion, tomato, curry leaves, and chili. Coconut is another fundamental ingredient, and the lanky trees are everywhere on the Anantara site, which was formerly a coconut plantation. They are plucked down by the resident picker, an elderly looking local man, fit as a fiddle, who climbs the tall trees with nothing more than a piece of material tied around both ankles to support him. He's been doing the job for most of his life and says he's only ever fallen down once.

While I sip on a glass of prosecco in the Spice Spoons kitchen and dining room, the chef starts heating up a heavy clay pot on a

Bunsen-burner which has been built into the benchtop. The ingredients sizzle as he throws them in. Quantities are measured by feel and the hearty aromas quickly engulf the fresh air. As he talks me through the steps, he asks if I would like to stir the pot and I oblige, flicking around the components of a prawn-based curry>>

**Fast fact**  
Prior to 1972, when Sri Lanka became a republic within the Commonwealth, it was known as Ceylon.

**EXPLORE THE AREA**

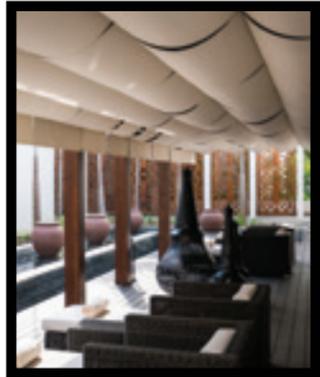
**Udawalawe National Park**

Fancy seeing an elephant up close in its natural habitat? Perhaps a chameleon latched onto a tree? Then a jeep safari at Udawalawe National Park — one of the largest wildlife reserves in Sri Lanka — might be for you. The park's beaches, coastal lagoons, and mangroves provide the perfect habitat for more than 150 bird species, crocodiles, and herds of up to sixty elephants. If you're lucky, you might even catch a glimpse of a leopard's tail — there's said to be only ten of the big cats on the site.

**Mulkirigala Rock Temple**

This Buddhist monastery, situated on the top of a rocky mountain, is well worth the climb, even if only for the view. Visitors can traipse up the hundreds of stairs and stop along the way at seven different heights to explore each of the ancient cave temples, which were built in the third century. Inside the temples you'll find painted murals and statues depicting the Kandyan era and the story of Buddha. When you reach the top, which is 210 metres high, you'll get to enjoy a glorious panoramic vista of the surrounding jungle.

Previous page, left to right: Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, Il Mare Restaurant at sunset; reception. Above, clockwise from left: Spice Spoons cookery class; Beach Villa bedroom; Beach Villa bathroom. Opposite: Beach Villa with private pool.



**Above, clockwise from left** Journeys Restaurant; resort pool; Dining By Design. **Opposite, clockwise from left** Il Mare Restaurant; Spa relaxation area; Spa couples treatment.

with a wooden spoon. After an hour or so of cooking, we're finished. The result? Half a dozen spicy curries to devour over lunch, a couple of sambal hot sauces, and two desserts — a buffalo-milk curd, and a coconut-milk tapioca pudding.

The cooking class isn't the only noteworthy food experience during my stay at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort. The buffet-style breakfast each morning in the all-day restaurant Journeys is exceptional, serving curries, rice, tropical fruits, and egg hoppers made to order.

The hotel has a number of other great dining options: the Poolside Bar with light bites; seafood-focused Il Mare, which is situated atop the ocean cliff face; El Vino with its Mediterranean degustation offering; beachside

and bespoke Dining by Design; and Verele, set to open in October which is a fusion of teppanyaki and Sri Lankan flavours housed in a building artfully designed to look like a sea urchin.

Anantara first opened its doors in Sri Lanka late last year and it was the first luxury international resort to make its foray into the country. This marked the beginning of a movement for the island, proving that it could attract a higher-end demographic of traveller to experience the beauty that only backpackers and budget honeymooners had seen in the past. Anantara chose to set up its operations in the Tangalle area, a largely unexplored paradise which hugs the coastline of the Indian Ocean.

General Manager of the resort, Tamir Kobrin, says it was an exciting opening for the Anantara brand: "Sri Lanka is an emerging travel destination and I am honoured to be leading a new generation of young hoteliers in a country poised for growth. For more than eight months, our stellar team had been gearing up for our launch in December 2015, and I believe our quality training programs will ensure that we raise the bar for hospitality excellence in the country."

The Sri Lankan people certainly are hospitable. That's something I quickly noticed the day I arrived. With wide smiles, the staff

are always happy to accommodate my every need, offering me chilled lemongrass-infused towels when they notice I need freshening up, fresh coconut water, and bottles of water — anything that would make my stay more enjoyable. And it isn't just in the resort that the people are friendly and helpful; it seems to be the case everywhere I go.

As I wander around Anantara's idyllic site, I notice that the design and architecture of the 152 guest rooms and villas blend authentic indigenous elements with colonial heritage. This is to honour the culture and history of the country. It's a signature look for each of the luxury chain's hotels throughout Asia and beyond. The resort is walking distance from a private lifeguard-patrolled beach, and is surrounded by rainforest, making animal-spotting a common pastime for guests. Proud peacocks stand tall while fanning their colourful tails, birds fly overhead, and the shy white-headed capuchin monkeys occasionally make an appearance.

Then there's the resort spa, which has a focus on Ayurvedic treatments. Ayurveda is a holistic approach to health which comes from India and is thought to have existed for more than 5,000 years. Practised by many Sri Lankans, it has principles in aromatherapy, diet, herbal medicine, acupuncture, yoga, massage, meditation, and the balancing of energies. There is a resident Ayurvedic doctor, who is available by appointment to provide advice on therapies according to individual Dosha type, to encourage you to live your healthiest and best life. On my last day, I spend a blissful afternoon having an Ayurvedic Abhyanga massage, which concludes with a few moments of silence in the spa's courtyard. Then there's ample time to sip on a small mug of spicy ginger tea and I take the opportunity to reflect on the last few days. Sri Lankan colours, culture, and food have me completely hooked, and I'm already thinking about returning one day soon. ■

*The journalist travelled as a guest of Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort and Wasamedia.*

**FACT FILE**

**How to get there**

Cinnamon Air offers a daily forty-minute sea-plane flight from Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport to Mawella Lagoon in Dickwella, which is a ten-minute drive from the resort. Other transport options include chartering a private flight, helicopter transfers, or making use of the resort's luxury Hybrid SUV transfer service, which is approximately a four-hour drive. The fleet is designed with the guests' comfort in mind, offering complimentary wi-fi, DVDs, and an array of journals. [anantara.com](http://anantara.com)

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