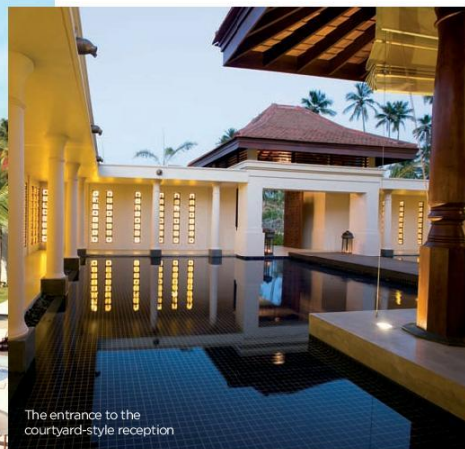


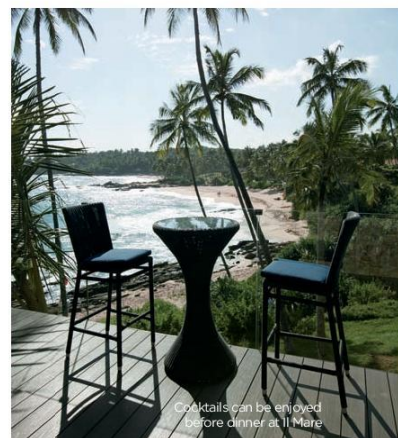


CNT EXCLUSIVE

The 25m infinity pool at the centre of the resort



The entrance to the courtyard-style reception



Cocktails can be enjoyed before dinner at Il Mare



The welcome drum is played for new arrivals



The resort is fronted by a strip of beach



Decor in a guest room. Left: One of the hotel's tuk-tuks

Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle

On Sri Lanka's south coast, RHEA SARAN discovers a resort that is as serene as it is beautifully wild

Nothing worthwhile comes easy. The saying flashes into my mind as I warily contemplate the three-hour long drive from Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, to Tangalle on the south coast, where Anantara recently opened its beachside resort Peace Haven Tangalle. Yet, ensconced in the hotel's hybrid Mitsubishi SUV moments later, I'm hard-pressed to identify any hardships in this particular journey. The car peels away from the hubbub of the capital and purrs near-silently down an expressway that makes up the majority of the distance between the two points, passing verdant hillsides that alternate with luminously green

paddy fields and coconut groves along the way. Every so often, a temple reveals itself amid the dense foliage. For the periods – few and far between – when I tire of the picturesque vista beyond the glass, in-car Wi-Fi and an iPad keep me entertained.

Eventually, we turn off a twisty village road, through gates and down a path leading into a 42-acre coconut grove, halting finally at a pillared portico where smiling staff greet new arrivals with a wish of “*nyubowan*” (meaning “long life” and used, I would discover, as a greeting at any time of day). Stepping into the open courtyard-style lobby at Peace Haven Tangalle – to the beats of a welcome

There's a quiet serenity here, matched only by the wild beauty: waves crash gently against rocks, coconut trees rise vertiginously high and sunsets paint the sky pink and orange

drum played by three local women – it's clear right away how worthwhile the journey to this hideaway has been. There's a quiet serenity here, matched only by the wild beauty beyond: waves crash gently against rocks strewn in the ocean, coconut trees rise vertiginously high and the sunset paints the cloud-flecked sky into a Pantone strip of glowing pinks and orange.

These views can be enjoyed from a number of the premier and deluxe rooms, many of which face out across the main pool, built on two levels, to the Indian Ocean beyond. Tucked further in are the villas, some looking on to gardens, others out to the ocean or the beach, each with its own plunge pool and sundeck with loungers and a villa host. Depending on your daring, the enormous villa bathrooms are fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass so you can soak in the stand-alone tub while enjoying views of the outdoors (the candle standing ready by the tub is a nice added touch) – or draw the blinds for complete privacy.

In lieu of a golf cart, I opt to hitch a ride on one of the resort's cycle rickshaws up to the main dining areas. A gusty wind topples the idea of Dining by Design on the beach as originally planned, but the alternative, a private dinner in a Spanish cellar-like space – grape fridges along a wall, barrels in the corner, legs of ham and sausages dangling on display in a cooler – is just as appealing. Another dramatic destination dining option

is on the edge of a small cliff near the Italian restaurant Il Mare – though the restaurant itself, with its sweeping views across the tops of the palms to the beach and the soundtrack of lapping waves, is romantic, too. Luca, the *maître d'*, might suggest you try his homemade ice cream after your beef carpaccio and pillowy gnocchi – and you should. A more international selection is available at Journeys, which is also the spot for a vast buffet breakfast including the traditional Sri Lankan hoppers (with or without egg) and string hoppers with a variety of curries and coconut *sambol*.

An even greater taste of Sri Lanka can be enjoyed with Spice Spoons, an experience that begins with a chef-guided visit to a fruit and vegetable market and the fish port (the latter is not for the squeamish) to pick out fresh produce that is then brought back for a cooking class where you learn local specialities and techniques. My choice of a veggie-centric menu with unusual ingredients like breadfruit and gourds was delicious, flavourful and light.

There are at least half a dozen other local experiences to be had in the area, including visits to Yala National Park, tours of colonial fort town Galle (now full of boutique hotels, shops and cafés) and whale- and dolphin-watching excursions. Waking up at 4.30am for this last activity was rewarded, hours later, with sightings of several blue whales, who blew water through their air holes before tail

Cooking with the chef at Spice Spoons



diving back underwater. The dolphins were, predictably, far less shy, spinning and jumping and playing. Anantara provides a picnic in a cane basket for visits such as these, complete with fresh strawberries in a jar and a cheese and lettuce sandwich I was grateful for after the long morning.

Alternatively, you could just loll about the pool, as many opt to do. Or, better yet, book a treatment at the Anantara Spa, a quiet sanctuary with locally inspired wooden latticework throughout. Treatments begin with a foot ritual; the Anantara signature massage aims to rejuvenate (which it manages to do while also relaxing) and involves some limb stretching in addition to the oil massage. Afterwards, sipping on ginger lemon tea and flipping through a glossy mag in the courtyard relaxation lounge, it isn't hard to imagine how this hideaway on Sri Lanka's south coast earned its rather apt name.

Doubles from AED 1,280; 0094-47-224 4466, tangalle.anantara.com CNT

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PHOTOS: RAJESH RAGHAY