



Trip of a lifetime

Sri

With its verdant jungles, honeyed shores and rich heritage, Sri Lanka's south coast is the perfect spot for a soulful adventure.

Travel Editor Emma Winterschladen explores what this enchanting corner of the globe has to offer.

Lanka

Island life: the
Indian Ocean's
magnificent
shoreline



As I touched down in Colombo, I dragged not only my suitcase out of the airport, but a heavy to-do list from home, too. My mind felt frantic, my shoulders tense and I could feel stress swimming wildly around my body. Lucky then that I was here on a ten-day yoga retreat: the first half of my Sri Lanka adventure.

We arrived at Nisala Arana Boutique Hotel in Bentota as the heavens opened. Thick emerald jungle enveloped us and was alive with a symphony of rain, cooing birds and babbling monkeys. There were 12 of us in the group – all here for our own reasons; from work burnout to a sisterly reunion, midlife sabbatical and a broken heart. The retreat, run by Adventure Yogi, was hosted by husband-and-wife duo Chetana and Will Thornton. Chetana is a yoga teacher with over 20 years' experience, and Will is a sound healer and kirtan musician (using the power of words and mantras to move and inspire).

Our days were wrapped in yoga, with 90 minutes every morning and evening. After a deep sleep, we'd start our day with sun salutations under a hot Sri Lankan sky, before moving into the *shala* (yoga hut) for an

energetic, awakening session with Chetana. Out in the open air, with the sounds of the jungle surrounding us, it was a far cry from the cramped yoga studios I was used to in London. We were all at different levels with our yoga, yet Chetana was able to cater to and challenge us all. Her yoga is a fusion of different styles, weaving in core yoga principles and philosophy, and it became clear quickly that this wasn't just about 'moving' and 'working up a sweat'. Rather, it was just as often about stillness and breathing – about taking the time and space on the mat to tune out everything else and just focus on yourself and the now. A rare thing indeed.

Yoga was followed by a breakfast spread of Sri Lankan favourites, including hoppers (crispy bowl-shaped pancakes made with fermented rice flour), and fresh fruit with buffalo *dahi* (curd) and palm treacle. The days were then our own, with the option to do as little or as much as we wanted. Mine were spent cycling down the mud track to the local beach – a vast, honey-coloured, palm-fringed paradise with just a scattering of people on it. Men wandered around selling fresh coconuts and juices, and there was a



The vibrant colour,
tastes and sounds of
Sri Lanka's south coast



selection of restaurants tucked behind the railway line, offering an authentic lunch. I always made sure to be back in time for afternoon tea at 3pm though, which was accompanied by a selection of home-baked goods.

Evening yoga was more about winding down and reconnecting with ourselves, often helped by the soundtrack of Will's deep, harmonic music. The mix of movement and music made it an incredibly meditative and restorative experience. A session of particular note was when Chetana introduced us to TRE (trauma release exercises). This simple yet effective series of exercises, often used when treating PTSD, is designed to release deep muscular patterns of stress, tension and trauma. For me, it was an intense, whole-body 'awakening' that left me physically and emotional exhausted, but ultimately like I'd been 'unknotted' in some way. What's more, Chetana and Will are both 'VortexHealing' practitioners, which is a holistic alternative therapy used to heal emotional pain. I was curious, and booked in for a session with them both; Will's was more physical and included a deep-tissue massage, whereas Chetana delved deeper with a more energy-focussed, spiritual angle - of which, months later, I still can't quite explain, but continue to reap its benefits.

In fact, it was the not-quite-pinpointable nature of Adventure Yogi's retreat that effected me the most. It was so much more than ten days of yoga. It was about stepping back, refocusing and reflecting (or as Chetana says, practising *pratyahara*, which means to 'gain mastery over external influences'). After a week, I felt a renewed sense of energy, focus and joie de vivre - not to mention feeling altogether lighter and brighter.

And then, with a few days left of the retreat, Tom arrived. One of just two men in the group, my military, decisively-non-yogi boyfriend was soon converted (and still does yoga to this day). We moved across to our own place at Suhada Villa, with its secret spice garden, a generous-sized pool and a ratio of two staff to each of us. Every morning, after yoga, we returned to a fully-laid-out breakfast for two on the veranda. I was even invited to the kitchen to learn how to make hoppers and onion jam, while Tom sat contently reading his book. It felt like having our own private residence, tucked away from other tourists.

Golden hour

Our next stop was Kumu Beach: a honeymoon-worthy boutique hotel hidden behind white-washed walls in Balapitiya - a short jaunt down the coast. With its crisp, contemporary architecture, manicured gardens and panoramic sunsets, we felt like we'd arrived in a beautifully-curated paradise. Our palm-tree-framed Ocean View Suite - decked out with an alfresco jungle shower, stylish interiors and local art on the walls - opened out on to a garden terrace. Here, we enjoyed fresh seafood platters and ample reading time. In fact, there wasn't much else to do, other than slow down and switch off - be it doing laps of the 23-metre infinity pool or snoozing in an ocean-facing day

‘Overlooking a perfect scene of stilt fisherman, the hotel feels like a whimsical ode to literature, colour and Sri Lankan culture’



bed (Tom did the former; I did the latter). This lifestyle suited us perfectly, and was accompanied by the soundtrack of rumbling waves, lapping against the shores of a secluded beach just a few steps away.

We were reluctant to leave our calm compound, but did venture on a fishing trip early one morning with local fisherman, returning that afternoon with two freshly-caught red mullets. It's testament to the bespoke nature of Kumu Beach that the head chef kindly cooked us up a feast that evening, wrapping our red mullets in banana leaves and cooking them to perfection in delicate Sri Lanka spices, with saffron rice. If we weren't already taken by the intimate, refined luxury of the place, that would have done it.

Culture and cricket

After a few days of peace at Kumu Beach, we were itching for a dose of people and culture. Enter the Owl and the Pussycat: a buzzy boutique hotel situated a short tuk-tuk ride from Galle and its colonial-era fortified old town. Overlooking a postcard-perfect scene of stilt fisherman, the hotel itself feels like a whimsical ode to literature, colour and Sri Lankan culture - both new and old. With a restaurant (The Runcible Spoon) serving Sri Lanka cuisine with a global influence, and a bar that comes alive in the evening with local musicians, it oozes avant-garde cool, but with a nod to tradition, too.

After a deep sleep and some early yoga, we went by tuk-tuk to Galle - most specifically the walled old town, with its colonial architecture and cobbled network of bohemian boutiques and cafés. Lunch was at Poonie's Kitchen, a hidden courtyard serving colourful, health-giving dishes (the salad thali is a must). Tom, however, was more concerned with the fact we were in the home of Sri Lankan cricket. From local children playing in the fort battlements to the international test ground just a hop and skip away, cricket is very much woven into daily life



EMMA'S ITINERARY

Adventure Yogi

Sunshine and Yoga holiday Sri Lanka retreat prices start at £1,147 per person, based on two sharing a room (flights not included). adventureyogi.com

Nisala Arana Boutique Hotel, Bentota

The restored home of the village Ayurvedic doctor is set in a four-and-a-half-acre coconut estate. It also offers tailor-made wellness retreats. Rooms from £145 per night. nisalaarana.com

Suhada Villa, Bentota

A secluded villa in a private tropical garden, with spacious rooms, semi-open showers, pool and friendly staff. Make the most of the area by borrowing the free bikes and exploring. Rooms start from £62 per night. Email suhadavilla@gmail.com

Kumu Beach, Balapitaya

Contemporary five-star boutique hotel with ten ocean-facing suites, situated in the Galle District Region. Food is a fusion of local and international cuisine, served on a terrace overlooking the sunset. Rooms from £140 per night. teardrop-hotels.com/kumu-beach

Owl and the Pussycat, Thelpe

Boutique hotel of 17 uniquely designed rooms, inspired by Edward Lear's famous poem. Restaurant, The Runcible Spoon, serves creative Sri Lankan cuisine and has a cracking cocktail menu. Rooms from £172 per night. otphotel.com



Shangri-La Hotel, Colombo

Situated on the Galle Face promenade, with panoramic views overlooking the Indian Ocean, this is a high-rise sanctuary of calmness in the heart of Sri Lanka's capital. It boasts six top-class restaurants, a spa, gym and outdoor swimming pool. Rooms from £150 per night. shangri-la.com/colombo

Getting there

British Airways flies daily from London Heathrow to Bandaranaike International Airport, Colombo for £586 return (one stop). britishairways.com



Left: Lunch at Poonie's Kitchen;
Above: Unawatuna Market

in Galle. We spent a good hour watching an energetic local game, sharing iced coffee and conversation with locals, who welcomed us with a warmth

and interest that now seemed so familiar in Sri Lanka.

For our final day in the area, we hopped in a tuk-tuk to Unawatuna, just south of Galle, to the highly recommended Nautilus Cooking Class. What a culinary education it was. We started off by navigating the bustling local markets, buying fresh ingredients, before heading to a tucked-away spice shop (where I stocked up on roasted curry powder to take home). Once back at Nautilus, head chef Yamuna taught us how to make a host of Sri Lankan culinary classics – from fragrant potato curry to spicy coconut sambal. It was a feast. And the best bit? We got the recipes to take home. The rest of the day was spent lazing on Unawatuna beach, sipping freshly squeezed juices, people-watching and splashing in the bath-warm waves.

Our trip ended with a night of luxury at the Shangri-La in Colombo. One of the newest additions to the Galle Face promenade, this smart high-rise offers a world-class spa, CHI, and six restaurants and bars. One of these restaurants was Kaema Sutra, serving innovative, local cuisine. It's here we spent our last evening, reflecting on our trip as we tucked into a delicious final feast. 