

THE RUB OF
THE GREEN
ABOVE Sri
Lanka's Hill
Country is home
to lush tea
plantations

Love is in the Air

AFTER 26 YEARS OF CIVIL WAR, **SRI LANKA** IS FIRMLY BACK ON THE SAVVY TRAVELLER'S RADAR. AND, AS PAUL KAY DISCOVERS, THE IDYLIC ISLAND IS HOME TO SOME OF ASIA'S MOST DELIGHTFUL BOUTIQUE HOTELS

OUR SEAPLANE TILTS low over the tea-bush-covered hills as we swoop in to land on a long, narrow lake set amid a beguiling palette of lush greens and reddish browns. Old colonial hill stations and tea factories dot the undulating terrain in the near distance, while the sculpted lines separating the rows of bushes add a slightly unreal quality to the landscape as we splash down and come to a surprisingly gentle, and suddenly quiet, stop.

We're making the short, but amazingly picturesque, hop from Colombo to Hill Country as part of a whistle-stop tour of southern Sri Lanka that will also see us take in the coastal delights of Galle and Tangalle, and the ancient former capital Kandy. One day in and it's already clear that a week is scant time to do justice to the attractions of this verdant island nation off the south-east coast of India. Then again, it's a boon to be here at all – from 1983 to 2009 a bitter civil war made Sri Lanka an unattractive, and often inadvisable, prospect for tourists. Since the advent of peace, however, the country formerly known as Ceylon has been working its way back into the popular consciousness – and with good reason.

But while those with even a passing knowl-

edge of the teardrop-shaped isle might be aware of its unspoiled beaches, lush tea plantations and rich cultural heritage, Sri Lanka's burgeoning luxury boutique hotel scene is likely to come as a surprise to many. For a tourist market in its relative infancy – few of the major hotel chains are in evidence here and there are almost none outside capital city Colombo – Sri Lanka punches well above its weight when it comes to bijou bolt-holes.

It's fitting then that we are travelling with representatives from Mr & Mrs Smith guides, perhaps the most savvy boutique hotel specialists around. Known for their carefully curated collections of unique and couple-orientated small hotels, Smith has grown in less than a decade from a modest operation focused on



THE SIMPLE LIFE

FROM TOP
Colonial-style
afternoon tea is a
daily ritual in Sri
Lanka; Buddhist
monks take a
stroll; the Ceylon
Tea Trails villas are
a sight to behold,
outside and in



romantic retreats in the UK and Ireland to a global business featuring hotels in about 60 countries. Of the 13 Smith-approved properties in Sri Lanka we are visiting eight, starting with The Wallawwa.

All non-domestic flights to Sri Lanka land at Bandaranaike International Airport on the outskirts of Colombo, and many of those arrive around midnight. This makes onward journeys something of a drag, while a stay in Colombo is unlikely to top most visitors' wish lists. This makes The Wallawwa a popular stop-off point for travellers looking for a good night's sleep and a means of avoiding the morning traffic out of the capital. Set in a restored 200-year-old manor house with two acres of private gardens and a lauded spa, it's a shame that most guests don't spend more time at The Wallawwa – but even if you use it only to bookend your trip in maximum comfort, you're unlikely to be disappointed.

Fresh from a night in The Wallawwa's generously sized suites we catch the seaplane to Hill Country, where it's significantly cooler. Flying by seaplane is fun in its own right, as well as a way to guarantee a bird's-eye view of the verdurous landscape, but it's also practical: Sri Lanka, which is roughly the same size as Ireland, doesn't yet have the infrastructure to make road travel between its hotspots the favoured mode of transport, and the seaplane cuts several hours

(and endless kilometres of tortuous two-lanes) off the journey. Hill Country is perhaps closest to the stereotypical image some might have of Sri Lanka, with sloping tea plantations as far as the eye can see and bands of sari-clad women picking the precious leaves and depositing them in sacks. It's also the place to live out your genteel colonial fantasies at one of the beautifully preserved and converted hill stations. We checked in to Ceylon Tea Trails, a quartet of elegant villas with lovingly tended gardens scattered around a picturesque lake. The attention to detail here – from the manicured lawns and smattering of offbeat antiques, to the candlelit bathrooms and help-yourself drinks cabinets – make it perilously easy to slip back in time. Doors are left unlocked unless requested otherwise and a butler is always on hand, making it feel like a real home from home. And after a hard day spent exploring the local tea factories and trails, there's no better way to wind down than to sip on a cold gin and tonic on the porch while taking in the early evening air.

Kandy is another popular stop, and the ancient capital is probably best known for the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, which apparently houses one of the Buddha's pearly whites. It is also close to one of Sri Lanka's best golf clubs, the Victoria Golf and Country Resort. A few hours north of Hill Country by road, it's a



STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

FROM TOP
Nature abounds in the relaxed environs of The Wallawwa, on the outskirts of Colombo; dining with a breathtaking view at Amanwella



IN LIVING COLOUR

FROM TOP
The picture-postcard shoreline at Amanwella; a lazy perch at The Kandy House; the Moonamal Room at The Last House



A TOUCH OF
REFINEMENT

FROM TOP
Suites are beautifully appointed; beat the heat in a poolside cabana; service with a smile; all at Amangalla



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DESTINATIONS OF
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bustling yet scenic city set around a lake, and the place to stay is The Kandy House, a grand, two-centuries-old property cannily updated with liberal splashes of artistic flair.

Indeed, architecture is the province of one of Sri Lanka's favourite sons, the influential Geoffrey Bawa, and examples of his work can be seen all over the nation. We visited two Bawa-designed creations, Kandy House's sister property The Last House in Tangalle and Bawa House 87 in Bentota. The Last House is a colourful and wonderfully quirky boutique hotel located on the beach and set around a frangipani-fringed courtyard. Hit by the 2004 tsunami that ravaged Sri Lanka's south coast, it has since been restored to surpass its original glory. Bawa House 87, meanwhile, comprises a trio of fetching 1960s-built bungalows set amid 17 acres of sprawling gardens dotted with statues, grottos, lakes and other signature Bawa touches.



*Sri Lanka punches well
above its weight when it
comes to bijou bolt-holes*

Having packed a remarkable amount into the first few days, we round out the trip with laid-back stays at properties run by a far more familiar name: Amanresorts. First is Amanwella, in Tangalle, which sits on a paradisiacal stretch of palm-tree-tickled golden sand. Imbued with all the hallmarks of an Aman property, this 30-suite hotel is a first-rate place to relax fully, with the greatest pressures being whether to lie by the 150ft infinity pool or go for a surfing lesson, or whether to dine on the ocean-side terrace or on the beach.

For those looking for something even more boutique in Tangalle, Maya, with its five individually decorated suites looking out over scenic rice paddies, is a fine option.

We end our trip in the historic coastal town of Galle, for many the jewel in Sri Lanka's crown. This fortified city, a Unesco World Heritage site, was colonised by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British respectively and abounds in well-preserved examples of European architecture. Set within the ramparts of the 17th-century fort is perhaps Sri Lanka's finest hotel, Amangalla. Built in the 17th century as the garrison headquarters for the Dutch and turned into a hotel in 1863, the former New Oriental was taken over by Amanresorts in the mid 1990s and reopened in its current form in 2005. A grand, three-

storey colonial structure, Amangalla has been restored with painstaking attention to detail, from the grand entrance-dining hall, to the lavishly appointed suites, to the attentive butlers, to the cosy library, where it's easy to lose hours wrapped up in its collection of unusual books and nostalgic photograph albums (or checking your email if the need to return to the present should arise).

As one might expect, the hotel is awash with history and legend, much of it revolving around the former proprietor Anastasia Brohier, or Nesta as she is universally known.

Born in Room 25 of the property in 1905, Nesta took over ownership and management of her family's business in 1960 and continued in her position for the rest of her life, signing off with an exuberant 90th birthday party at the hotel a few months before she died.

The hotel's general manager, the regal Olivia Richli, is a marvellous source of information on the history of Galle, the hotel in general and Nesta in particular. One of the most memorable tales involves the hotelier falling in love with a man decades her junior and building a small house (now available for guests to stay in) behind the hotel as their love nest. It's hard to blame her. Stay here a while and you'll fall in love too. **T**

IMAGES: AMANRESORTS, PAUL KAY

THE REAL MR & MRS SMITH

FOR FANS OF THE BRAND, the Mr & Mrs Smith name is synonymous with sexy and luxurious boutique getaways, but the catalyst for the guidebooks and hotel booking site came from a trip that was quite the opposite. Smith founders James Lohan and Tamara Heber-Percy were in the early stages of their relationship when Lohan decided to take his lady away for a romantic weekend. Unfortunately – or, rather fortuitously, given their ensuing success – things did not go to plan. “I was trying to impress Tamara with a weekend away and got it horribly wrong courtesy of a guidebook I won't name,” remembers Lohan. “We went to a hotel that we thought was a nice VIP boutique hotel in the [English] Lake District but it was more OAP than VIP. It was the classic quintessentially nasty hotel. It looked great on the outside – beautiful building, lake views – but you got in and it was chintzy and awful, there were scratchy sheets rolled into the duvets, a Corby trouser press, hair dryer attached to the wall and they had a breakfast buffet that was kind of congealed ...”

The pair had previously talked about a hotel guide for discerning couples and this less than glamorous experience convinced them to take the plunge. But their idea of a photography-led book with a membership card inside didn't strike a chord with British publishers and the pair were turned down by those they initially approached. So they decided to publish it themselves, remortgaging their houses and raising money from friends and family to set up Spy Publishing and produce their first guide to boutique hotels in the UK and Ireland. “Naivety is the best weapon for entrepreneurs,” says Lohan, “because if you really knew what you were about to go through you'd never bloody do it, you'd be mad.”

The next problem was distribution because they had already been rebuffed by the publishers, who own the distribution houses, leaving just one option, a company called Portfolio. Unfortunately they turned them down too. But Lohan and Heber-Percy refused to take no for an answer and asked to present to their board. Thankfully the board decided they were worth taking a chance on, warning them that “you won't sell more than three or four thousand of these over a three-year period”. They sold 20,000 in the first three months.

Since then, the pair have launched seven more guidebooks of lovingly curated hotel collections (*Italy, South-East Asia, France, Australia/New Zealand, European Cities, European Coast & County* and *The Global Shortlist*), opened offices in New York and Melbourne to complement their London HQ, and racked up more than 75,000 members on their website (www.mrandmrsmith.com), which features impartial reviews from an eclectic band of tastemakers such as chef Raymond Blanc, actor Nick Moran and designer Stella McCartney. Members can leave their own reviews on the site, TripAdvisor-style, make use of a dedicated booking service and enjoy extras arranged especially for Smith customers.

Lohan and Heber-Percy have personally visited and assessed more than 1,000 properties in the last decade and, says Lohan, they can now tell if a hotel has what it takes within moments of setting foot in the place. “When we started we'd walk around and do a tour, even if we knew it was wrong. Now we can tell in the car park if it's good enough.”

So what qualifies a hotel for the Smith collection? “It has to be tasteful,” says Lohan. “It can be classic, it can be contemporary, but it has to have a sense of place, a uniqueness and individual touches to it. Often they are owner-run, often they are independent. They have to be very personal – you're not a number, you're a name. That's what we look for.”

Heber-Percy nods in agreement. “You have to kiss a lot of frogs,” she says with a knowing smile.



GUIDING
LIGHT
ABOVE

The lighthouse is a distinctive feature of Galle's harbour