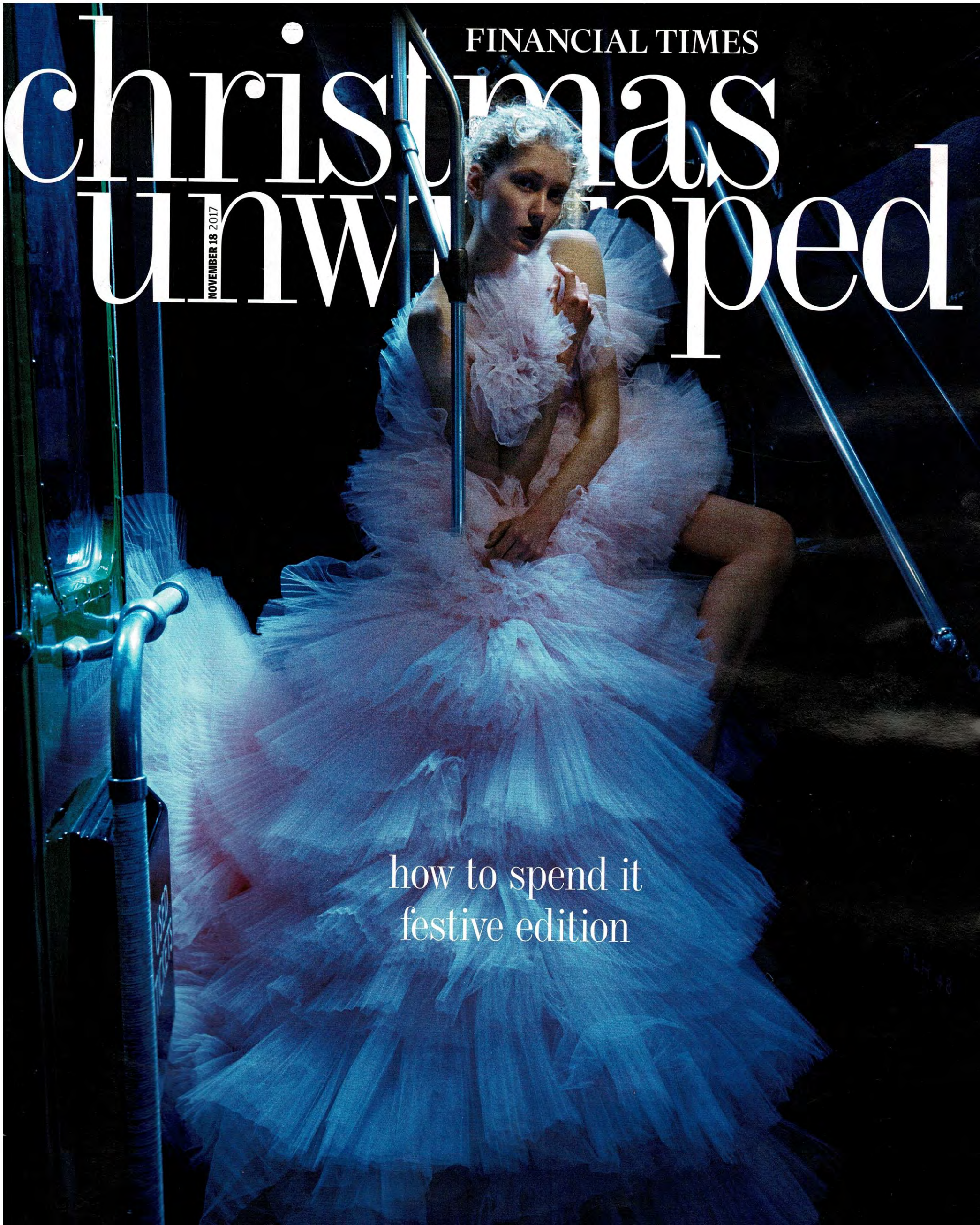
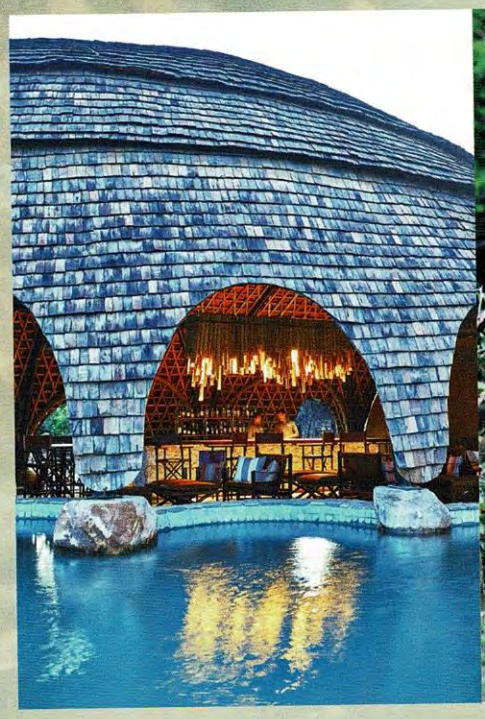
FINANCIAL TIMES

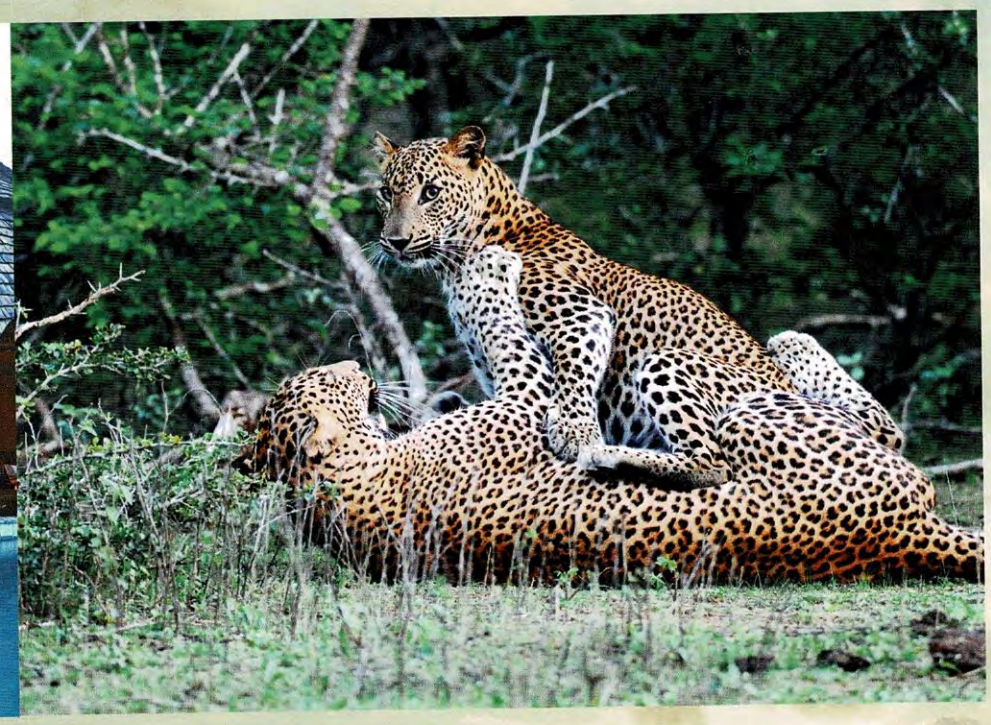
christmas unwrapped

NOVEMBER 18 2017



how to spend it
festive edition





a foot in b

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Betwixt dense palm jungle and pounding ocean surf, Charlotte Sinclair **finds southern Sri Lanka's charms singing out – and gets a first look at a remarkable tented camp, complete with leopard prints on the beach**

"The very last thing I wanted to do was open a hotel in Yala," says Malik Fernando with a hopeless grin as we sit in the entrance of Wild Coast Tented Lodge, the safari resort he – nevertheless – has built at the edge of Yala National Park, on Sri Lanka's southeast coast. "I thought the park was too commercial," he continues, "but I picked a plot anyway. It was only when I got here that I completely fell in love."

"Here" is a gorgeous tranche of dense bush and pounding ocean lying in the buffer zone adjacent to Yala, and within 10 minutes of the park's thriving populations of elephants, leopards, crocodiles, sloth bears and eagles. Fringing the jungle, the beach is a steep, wide ridge of golden sand, carved with dunes and small inlets and set with the occasional wind-strafed tree and huge, flat lozenges of rocks upon which the rough swells of the Indian Ocean slam in spumes of white spray. It is beguiling, even without the additional thrill of leopard prints in the sand at dawn and the elephants taking evening reconnaissance of the kitchen block.

The location encapsulates much of the allure of Sri Lanka's southern seaboard, a stretch of palm-shaded coast that breathes with that numinous quality people who travelled to Kerala or Goa, Tulum or Bali 30 years ago speak of with such wistful longing. Specifically: a slow-paced gentility, quiet corners, empty beaches, mosques and temples in kissing distance, a romantic fort decorated with a white lighthouse like the candle on a birthday cake, and an inland of green villages where peacocks sit high in the mango trees and toffee-coloured cattle nose gently through the rice paddies.

"Imagine the best of India," I tell friends interested in travelling here, "but with the volume turned down." I'm being glib, of course, since Sri Lanka has its own feverishly unique colour, culture, religion – Buddhism predominates – and beauty in abundance, more than enough to distinguish it from its noisy northern cousin. But the description contains a kernel of truth. The civil war, which raged until 2009 and deterred all but the hardiest of travellers, also preserved the island from the ravages of mass tourism. Instead of big-brand behemoth resorts, Sri Lanka's coastline is awash with small-scale, owner-operated, experience-rich places to stay that capitalise on their distinctiveness. All of which are now being discovered by the kind of informed, metropolitan crowd that summer in Ibiza or Paphos and have made this coastline their winter hotspot. At Christmas the beach at Wijaya, a shoreside restaurant and bar with a surfer vibe and

This picture: the stretch of sand in front of KK Beach resort, which runs from Galle to Koggala. From far left: part of Wild Coast Tented Lodge's dining room, which is skirted by an infinity pool. The lodge's main draw is its proximity to Yala National Park, which has one of the highest densities of leopards in the world

Guests might spend the morning viewing leopards and the afternoon searching for blue whales

Clockwise from above: the "Jules Verne meets steampunk" Cocoon accommodation at Wild Coast Tented Lodge. The dining room at Wild Coast serves dishes such as steamed grouper and tomato rice salad. The resort also offers private dining experiences in its grounds, which are unusually open and spacious for a safari lodge

fantastic food, is packed with such discerning types. At the New Year revels four years ago, I spotted Jonathan Saunders, now creative director of Diane von Furstenberg, dancing on the sands.

The camp that Fernando has built at Yala – at once specific to its location and brilliantly otherworldly – will be a further draw to this coast. Fernando, scion of the Dilmah tea empire, is the driving force behind the high-charm Sri Lankan lodgings that form the company's Resplendent Ceylon portfolio. Where others might have fashioned a standard safari beach resort, importing tents from India or Africa, Fernando "improvised" to create 28 Cocoons (pictured top right): long-line, elevated tents of pale PVC-type fabric stretched over a steel exoskeleton, inset with angled glass walls, and punctured with portholes. For families, eight of these Cocoons also come with separate Urchin tents to house overspill. These tapered, bulbous pods, constructed of the same PVC skin and porthole windows, resemble alien landing craft. Both tent iterations are furnished in a style Fernando dubs "Jules Verne meets steampunk". Translation: delicately industrial bronze piping fashioned into taps and washstands and a four-poster bedframe, plus a brass bathtub, woven rugs and colonial touches in a campaign desk and a trunk for a minibar. "We worked without a template," says Fernando. "It's quite mad, but it works."

As does the main dining room (pictured on previous pages). Skirted by an infinity pool, it is a curvilinear cathedral of teak shingles, bamboo and steel struts, built in defiance of symmetry and approximating the smoothed silhouette of the granite boulders that stud the camp's plot. The view (pictured left) from the dining room, where delicious steamed red snapper and okra salad are served beneath a vaulted ceiling, speaks of how the lodge differs from the usual safari experience. "Even in Africa, you are usually in the middle of the bush," says Fernando. "You have to eat and move around in quite a controlled space. It's rare to have a beach. Here people are free to roam." Guests might spend the morning viewing leopards on safari and the afternoon searching for blue whales in the deep channels that lie a few nautical miles offshore. Or discovering the many fascinating nearby religious sites, including the temple of Kataragama (pictured overleaf), to which thousands of devotees travel on foot for the yearly Padayatra. In the national park itself, centuries-old rock temples and water tanks are evidence of the era when the area was the domain of ancient kings.

The lodge's principal draw, however, is the park's animal kingdom and, in particular, its more than 200 (at last count) apex predators: leopards. It's one of the highest densities of the animal in the world. I go in search of them in the company of naturalist Chandika Jayaratne, a former conservation lawyer. The area we are in is particularly forested, he warns, and the game might be tricky to spot. Yet within 15 minutes of our entry we come upon a leopard lying in the middle of the road. She enters the jungle just as three other vehicles draw up.

Safari is busy in Yala, with tales of traffic jams and animal sightings surrounded by packs of vehicles. Being in easy reach of Galle means the park can feel overrun. But Fernando, who recalls camping in Yala as a child, says, "Since we bought the land in 2013 we've been lobbying the government to open up new blocks for our vehicles and to gain new access and exit points." Fernando is also lobbying to create a conservancy in the buffer zone to allow for exclusive safari by bicycle and foot. And the lodge will host its own leopard research unit, the first of its kind in the area. "The sightings are extraordinary here," he says. Indeed, as Jayaratne and I turn to make our exit from the park, we spot a leopard padding over rocks. She turns and stares at us with spectacular yellow eyes.

Fernando's Resplendent Ceylon currently encompasses Cape Weligama (pictured overleaf), a sexy clifftop resort just down the coast from the imperial fort of Galle, open since 2014; and, since 2005, Ceylon Tea

Supremely comfortable, refurbished planters' bungalows are dotted among the slopes of the Bogawantalawa Valley

Trails (pictured right), which includes five supremely comfortable, recently refurbished planters' bungalows with clawfoot baths and croquet lawns – dotted among the slopes of the Bogawantalawa Valley, the tea estates that shaped the Dilmah company's fortune and history. Bogawantalawa (where Sri Lanka's up-and-coming Teardrop Hotels has just opened a competing property, called Camellia Hills), is a hidden, highlands valley of green hills drifting with mist, a moss-coloured lagoon, air that's cool and crisp and scented with wood smoke and row upon row of tea crops, as clipped as box hedges. Resplendent's properties are all linked by seaplane, and impending openings in the cultural triangle and Trincomalee on the northeast coast will connect in the same way, Fernando says.

For the moment it's a three-hour drive from Wild Coast to Cape Weligama, which, as the first venture into resort hospitality for a company owned by tea-makers, makes a good case for firms expanding their ambitions. The hotel is spread over several acres of prime clifftop estate, with views onto the crashing waves below – and the surfers, tiny as Lowry figures, slicing their boards through the foam.

Clockwise from top: the view from Cape Weligama, which covers several acres of prime clifftop estate. Ceylon Tea Trails, where accommodation includes refurbished planters' bungalows. Religious sites such as the Temple of Kataragama are within easy reach of Wild Coast Tented Lodge

Rooms are predominantly suites and villas, tropically styled, with cane chairs and dark wood panelling, and low, terracotta tiled roofs the same ochre hue as the cliff's crumbling sands. There's whale-watching here and plentiful opportunities to laze, at the half-moon infinity pool, or the spa, where poultices filled with aromatic tea leaves are pressed against tired limbs.

Apart from the Marriott in the next bay (a hulk of a resort, towering far above the "as tall as the highest palm tree" building rule, and the subject of a lot of sighing and hand-wringing among locals), big hotel brands, for all their fevered interest in this patch of seaside Sri Lanka, are few on the ground. Which is good news for the likes of Cape Weligama and a coastline that, for now at least, has been saved the ruinations effected upon the likes of Bali and Cancún.

"My guests inevitably wanted to spend time on the beaches, so I thought, why not open my own property here?" says George Cooper, the British owner of jungle resort Kahanda Kanda, a hilltop eyrie of secluded, traditional villas thick with atmosphere and romance. By contrast, his KK Beach (pictured overleaf), open since last year, is a handsome, clean-lined, sugar cube of a

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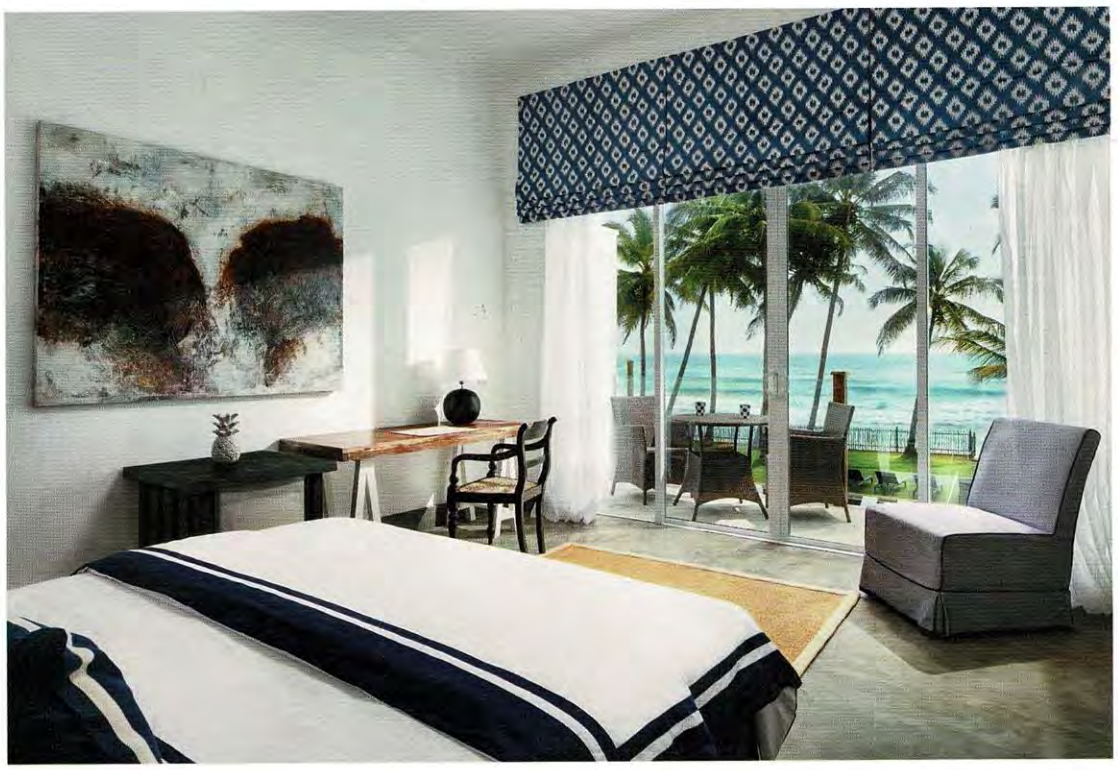
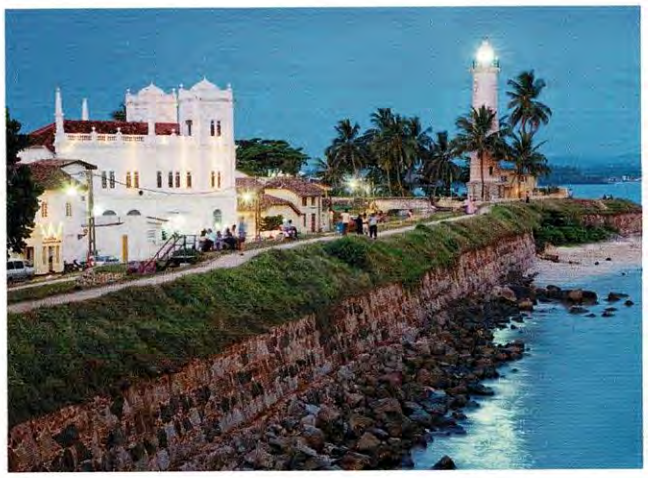


Clockwise from left: the fresh and contemporary rooms at KK Beach have ikat blinds and polished concrete floors. The city of Galle's Unesco-protected fort and lighthouse. Indian thali served with Sri Lankan rice served at KK Beach

Galle Fort is the coast's gem, its bewitching, winding streets encased within 16th-century ramparts



building set a few metres back from the crashing waves and creamy sands that make up a stretch of beach (pictured on opening pages) that runs from Galle to Koggala and beyond. The feeling is fresh and contemporary, with abstract canvases by Sri Lankan artist Vikum Bandara on the walls, white sofas and ticking tablecloths in the public areas, and blue and white ikat blinds and polished concrete floors in the spruce bedrooms – soon to number 10, when the hotel's new block opens in December. "I believe you need owners to give a hotel character," says Cooper over a lunch of grilled mahi mahi and pomegranate studded salad. "Experiential travel is the thing now, and part of that is meeting the owner and hearing about his or her life here and history with his or her particular hotel."

The Unesco-protected fort of Galle (pictured above right) is the coast's gem. Its bewitching, winding streets are encased within 16th-century ramparts, where each evening families walk and lovers dawdle, stealing kisses beneath the shade of an umbrella. Cricket matches are played on its grassy verges – outfielders positioned in the road, dodging the occasional tuk-tuk. In the streets, pillared verandas and carved wooden doors give onto courtyard properties with secret gardens and roof terraces offering views of the lighthouse and the mosque, the muezzin singing on the salt air.

Teardrop's Fort Bazaar, which opened in 2016, further enhances Galle's captivating qualities. The interiors mix north African textiles in muted hues with bright red café chairs in the airy Church Street Social dining room and tree-lined courtyard. A sophisticated shade of dusty, olive-green paint used on shutters and doors, plus painted signage and vintage posters of 1920s Ceylon, lend the place a nostalgic elegance. And it's lovely being embedded in the fort itself. One morning I step onto my balcony beneath the hotel's sloped, tiled roof to watch a pack of naval cadets jogging through the streets, and a snake handler, without a tourist in sight, singing to the python coiled in his lap. For all the incremental change here, and the imaginative ambitions of hotel owners, there is yet a feeling of time captured on this piece of coastline, of things as they should be. All charms left intact. ✦

COAST WITH THE MOST

Charlotte Sinclair travelled as a guest of **Ampersand Travel** (020-7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com), which offers eight nights in Sri Lanka from £4,100 per person based on two sharing, on a B&B basis at **Fort Bazaar** (+94773-638 381; teardrop-hotels.com) and on an all-inclusive basis at **Cape Weligama**, **Ceylon Tea Trails and Wild Coast Tented Lodge** +94117-745 730; resplendentceylon.com, with direct flights, private transfers, sightseeing and excursions, including two game drives at Wild Coast. **Kahanda Kanda** +94914-943 700; kahandakanda.com, from $450. **KK Beach** +94772-035 555; kkbeach.com, from $300. **Wijaya Beach,** +94777-903 431; wijayabeach.com.

ALAMY. CHANDIKA JAYARATNE. REINHARD SCHMID/4CORNERS IMAGES. SEBASTIAN POSINGLIS. TIM EVAN-COOKE (4). TOM PARKER