

HONEYMOON HEAVEN: FROM BALMORAL TO BOTSWANA

TOWN & COUNTRY

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Hampton Court Palace*

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SPECIAL

Princess brides,
fairytale
flower girls,
treasured tiaras
& homegrown
bouquets

Onwards &
UPWARDS



A tropical beach scene with palm trees, a large rock, and waves crashing on the shore. The sky is overcast and grey. The water is a mix of green and blue, with white foam from the waves. The sand is a light tan color. The palm trees are tall and green, some leaning over the water. A large, dark rock is in the middle ground, partially submerged. There are some buildings or huts in the background, partially obscured by the trees.

THE SPICE OF LIFE

From the days when cinnamon was synonymous with Ceylon, to the colourful charms of contemporary Sri Lanka, this teardrop-shaped island in the Indian Ocean has enticed travellers for centuries.

By Anna Murphy

TRAVEL

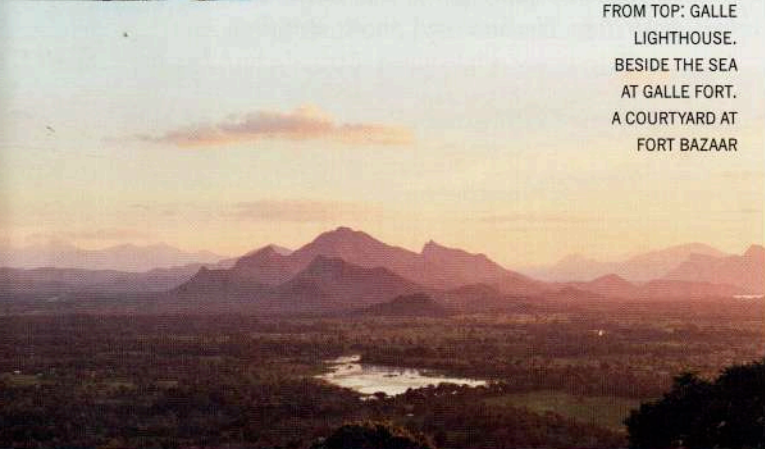
I wanted to feel I had travelled far, far away; I needed a rest and to feel restored rather than challenged. I knew Sri Lanka would fit the bill. That this island should be referred to as 'India Lite' is, to my mind, superlative praise. It provides much of the same sensory overload and here, too, life is lived in Technicolor. The food is delicious and given fabulous new dimensions, courtesy of the spices that prompted first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the British to invade. In *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje's atmospheric memoir of his Sri Lankan family, he recounts how, 'when ships were still approaching, ten miles out at sea, captains would spill cinnamon onto the deck and invite passengers... to *smell Ceylon* before the island even came into view'.

Yet in Sri Lanka there is none of the stress that is an inevitable part of the India experience. I adore India and have been there many times, but sometimes I just can't quite face it. In contrast to the onslaught that now represents a visit to, say, Kochi in Kerala, let me conjure for you a wander around the historic centre of Galle Fort, a Unesco World Heritage site on Sri Lanka's south coast.

Here is one of the most picturesque places you will ever visit, yet you will be left alone, utterly undisturbed, un-touted. The only voice calling out in the street will be the vegetable-cart man, with his pendulous snake gourds, countless different aubergines and mountains of tomatoes, or perhaps the fish vendor, cycling past with a set of scales and an antediluvian cool box strapped to the back of his bike. You might see an elderly lady collecting white temple flowers



FROM TOP: GALLE Lighthouse.
BESIDE THE SEA
AT GALLE FORT.
A COURTYARD AT
FORT BAZAAR



REAL LIFE HASN'T BEEN DISPLACED BY OR, WORSE STILL, THEME-PARKED FOR THE TOURISTS



from the trees at the side of the road in order to make an offering, or witness a group of young men playing warp-speed cricket in a square, using a bin as impromptu stumps. (But linger here at your peril, because even the amateurs in this cricket-obsessed land are terrifyingly good, and the ball goes everywhere, fast.)

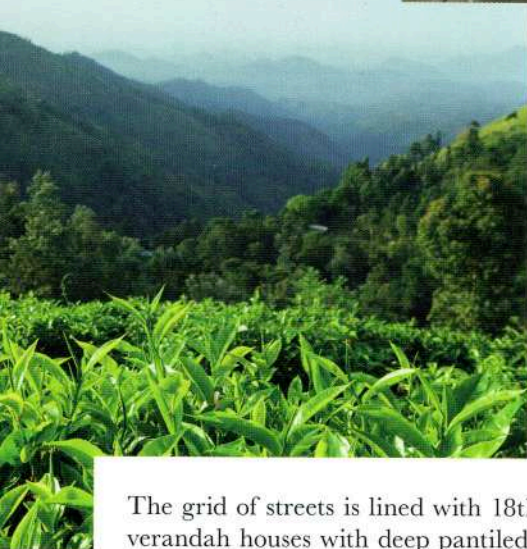
Beyond the walls of Galle Fort is a sprawling, modern city, but inside, real life hasn't been displaced by or, worse still, theme-parked for the tourists. I almost have to force a chatty old man in an antiques shop to sell me a piece of china, a local variation on the theme of Blue Willow that is black with a schooner at its centre, just one of the manifestations of the charming cultural medley that ensued from its history as one of the most important ports in Asia.

Yes, there are more visitors to Galle Fort now than when I first came, but many of them are Sri Lankans, as excited as the Westerners to gather on the ramparts in the early evening and watch the sun go down while the sea froths dramatically below. And the old town's architectural gallimaufry remains not only extant, but improved, with once-forlorn structures now newly watertight, and some showing signs of the more sensitive variety of expat upgrade.

TRAVEL



BELOW: TEA PLANTATIONS IN THE HILLS. ABOVE: THE POOL AND A VILLA (RIGHT) AT KAHANDA KANDA



YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF BEGINNING TO TELL THE TIME BY WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR IN THE BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE

The grid of streets is lined with 18th- and 19th-century verandah houses with deep pantiled roofs, alongside art deco masterpieces that look like landlocked, Lilliputian ocean liners. There are also numerous cool-but-historic hotel options, such as the Fort Bazaar, with its kookily tiled floors and airy inner courtyard.

A short drive inland to the low-country tea plantations, and you come to Kahanda Kanda, one of the earliest of the island's boutique hotels. It is decorated in shades inspired by the robes of Sri Lankan monks, topped off with Balinese design flourishes, and bears witness to the British owner George Cooper's previous life as an interior designer.

Spend a day or two in the planter's chair on your spacious balcony and you will find yourself beginning to tell the time by what you see and hear in the beautiful landscape laid out beneath you. First thing in the morning is when the tea-pickers are out, plucking at the rows of tea bushes before the day gets too hot, and you can see wildlife such as white-bottomed monkeys, parrots, peacocks and golden orioles. Later, there might be a short, sharp rainfall that leaves the scenery looking shiny and new, as if freshly polished. The only thing that disturbs the peace are the tintins,

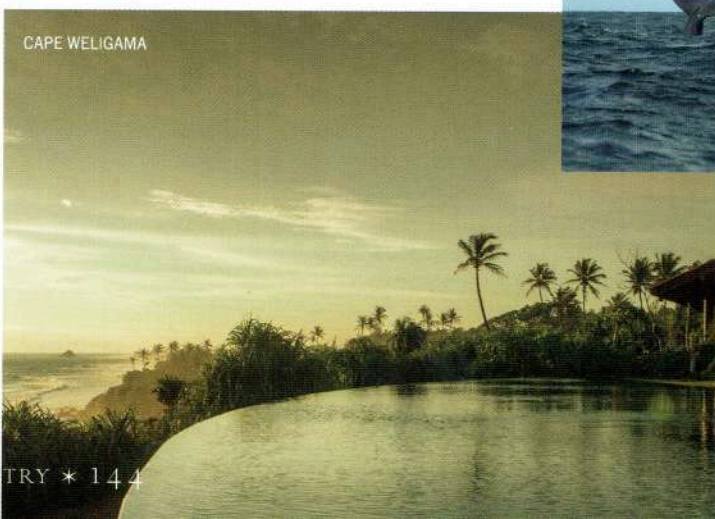
a cross between a squirrel and a chipmunk, which occasionally hot-shoe-shuffle across the roof wearing what sounds like clogs.

The most strenuous activity for me during my time at Kahanda Kanda was cycling through the surrounding countryside with a guide from a company called Idle Bikes. I saw so much in a mere two hours, including six kingfishers perched in a row on a telephone wire, and vast water buffalo grazing in the paddy fields. We passed crumbling rococo bungalows from the days of the Empire adorned with stucco flowers, and shops selling stacks of terracotta pots and multicoloured rugs that the locals put outside their front doors.

Back on the road, you'll come across Cooper's hip new six-bedroomed guest-house KK Beach, which opened at the end of 2016, before reaching Cape Weligama, a luxurious hotel where each private bungalow shares a pool with only one or two others. A big draw of both properties is that you can actually swim in the sea. While the Sri Lankan coastline is breathtakingly beautiful, its waters can be rough; but not at Cape Weligama, where you can also enjoy gardens filled with violet jacaranda, yellow oleander, red ginger, and white and blue sky vines.

One more reason to stay here is to go whale-watching on a boat straight from the hotel. After a couple of hours at sea I find myself face-to-face with two blue whales, swimming near the surface and trumpeting through their blowholes, before they flick their tails and descend into the depths below. The captain tells us that we have 10 minutes to wait

before they are back, and amazingly he is right. It has been another magical day on the island Ondaatje calls 'a pendant off the ear of India'. Truly, a jewel indeed. □ *The Ultimate Travel Company* (020 3051 8098; www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) offers a 12-night stay in Sri Lanka, from £2,790 a person, including stays at Fort Bazaar, Kahanda Kanda and Cape Weligama (+94 11 774 5730; www.resplendentceylon.com/capeweligama), plus SriLankan Airlines flights from Heathrow and private transfers.



CAPE WELIGAMA

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