



Cliff-top views at Il Mare.

Chasing Calm

Sleepy Tangalle, on the south coast of Sri Lanka, is getting new investments on its perfect sands.

Head there soon, before you have to share the waves. BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN

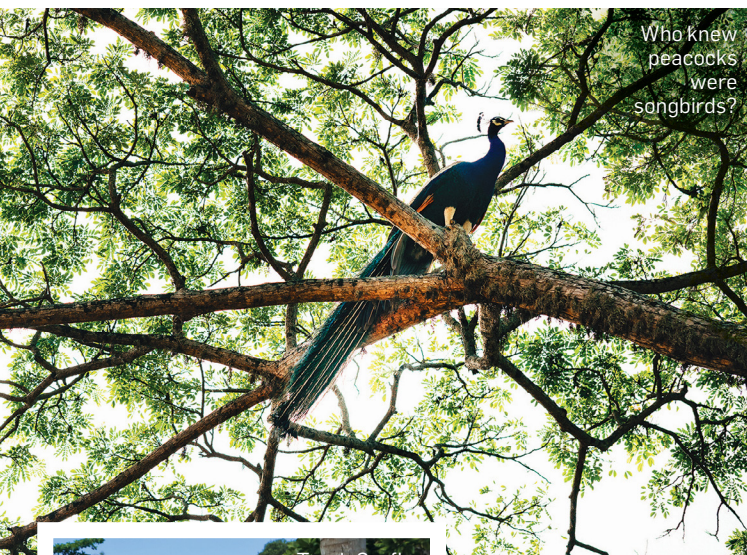


Coconut delivery at Anantara.

AS WE GLIDE OVER A BRIDGE towards the neighborhood of villas, some unusual activity below has me halt my driver. A man is in a rowboat, in a slow-motion chase. His prey? A wily duck, flapping in the stream trying to escape bedtime. The audience includes a safe of other ducks, already confined to their cage but seeming to cheer on their defiant compatriot. After a comedic, aquatic back-and-forth straight out of a Laurel and Hardy movie, the duck wrangler manages to use his paddle to propel the naughty bird in the direction of the cage, where three small women tussle, toss him in and shut the wire door behind. I can't stop laughing.

"Every night," my butler Kanishka Sandaruwan shakes his head with a smile, turns a key, and restarts his electric rickshaw. It's edging near dusk at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, time for sundowners facing the sea as the skies go violet, canary, persimmon. I've got to get to my villa to change, but I also want to drink in as much of the resort as I can before night falls. It feels like a real village, an echo of the world beyond its gates. Kanishka points out the path the coconut ladies will bike during the day. "Just call them if you want some water," he says. "It's for the whole neighborhood." Indeed, the next afternoon I'm sitting at my pool and spy two women carting coconuts. I wave, they come over and hack one open on my deck. I sip it in my lounge chair as I watch the peacocks hop among the treetops. >>

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF ANANTARA PEACE HAVEN TANGALLE RESORT; LEO MCHUGH



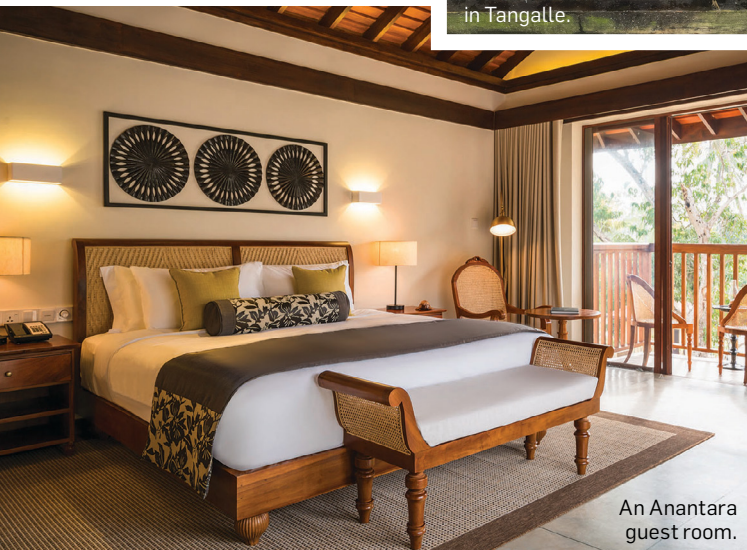
Who knew peacocks were songbirds?



TropicSurf's buoyant instructors.



Market-fresh fish in Tangalle.



An Anantara guest room.

Sometimes the amount of wild peacocks in Sri Lanka makes you feel like you're in an aviary-zoo park; in fact, here, they're as common as pigeons. But the peacocks are so tame that they come when you call—or, if you just hit the right notes. “One evening I flung open the windows only to find peacocks staring at me,” says Kathrine Hinds-Kobrin, the wife of the general manager, Tamir Kobrin, who ushered the resort to its opening last year. “Something told me to sing. So I sang to them and they stayed. Tamir thought I was crazy, singing to peacocks.” We are all dining in Il Mare, the Italian restaurant that's among the most expensive eateries in the country. That's not as dubious a distinction as it sounds. Rather, it's a testament to the change finally afoot that the economy can support, three hours from Colombo (residents of the capital have been known to make the trip for special dinners), an upscale larder hawking homemade pastas, protected designation of origin cheeses and delicacies, and an oeno-snob's dream of a wine cellar.

Tangalle is on the rise, and that's a particularly feel-good fact considering the scale of the devastation wrought here by the 2004 tsunami. Some villages and hotels took a decade to rebuild or relocate, and it is still slow-going, but investment is coming. In nearby Hambantota there's a futuristic convention center presumably meant for folks arriving in the area's shiny new airport, though it only hosts domestic flights for now—a good thing for spotlight-shy travelers seeking their own patches of palm fronds and sand. This stretch of south coast between fort town Galle and Yala National Park is drawing increasing trickles of visitors who are learning what intrepid wave-chasers have known for years: there are empty beaches with consistent waves perfect for surfing or sun-worship; there are cetaceans, pachyderms and predators aplenty to spy offshore and inland; heritage sites worthy of your inner archeologist wait nearby; and the photogenic town of Tangalle bustles with lots of real life and practically no one selling tchotchkes.

LITTLE KIDS WEARING ALL-WHITE, the girls with identical braided pigtails, roam the streets. A guy is getting his hair cut in a barber chair in the produce market. New recruits march in formation past the Art Deco-style war memorial tower on the ocean promenade. On the fishing dock, business is old school. Two guys with a ledger sit at a folding table, marking weights and prices with pencils. The grimy scale on the slick asphalt is of the cheap bathroom variety. Bushels of shiny silver and fat red fish are unloaded off the boats tied together 10-deep, and passed forward across bows in the absence of a pier.

I wonder what the chances are that I'd seen these fishermen the morning before. I had chugged out from Mirissa, about an hour west of here, at sunrise for a >>

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whale watch. As the headlands shrank behind us over the three-hour sail out to deeper waters, we kept passing these little boats on their way back in. I was shocked that so many of what looked like jury-rigged tubs plied such rough seas, so far from home.

Possibly even less seaworthy was one of the other tourist boats with which we found ourselves circling the whales. Our comfortable boat, of Mirissa Water Sports, had only 20 people and space to spread out; this one, by contrast, was top-heavy. It looked like it had 100, all on its upper deck, and every time a whale appeared, all the passengers would rush to that side, making the boat visibly list, and leaving three poor crew members to run to the other side, and hang their bodies off the boat for ballast. Take note: sectors of the tourism industry are still nascent so be sure to do your research before booking potentially dangerous excursions.

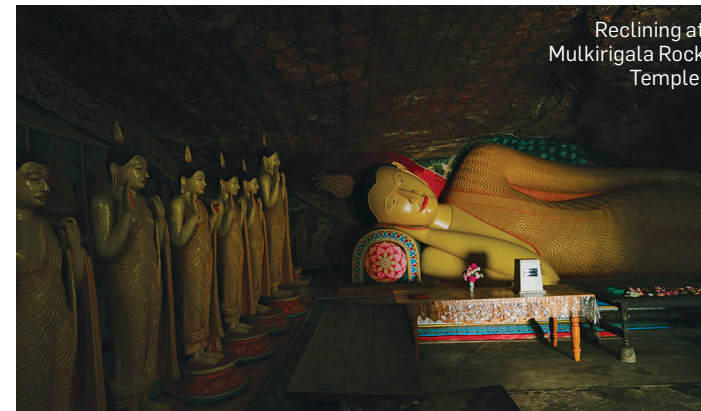
TropicSurf, for instance, takes me out into the waves—and these are guys you can trust with not just your safety but also your self-esteem. They’ve scouted all the area beaches to see which are best suited for every level surfer. As a virtual beginner, I’m brought to a lovely, calm arc of a bay that is completely empty, and feels like a lagoon with its consistent meter-deep water table and soft rolling waves. Harrison Biden, my early-twenties Australian instructor, stands at the point before they break, lines me up if I am crooked, and gives me a little push if I am paddling too slowly. I catch and stand up on every single wave, and not swallowing a liter of seawater nor struggling against an unseen riptide does not make the morning any less gratifying.

It is still however, exhausting, so upon my return to the Anantara, I practically run to the spa—or, I would if Kanishka didn’t intercept me with his rickshaw. The treatment rooms are two-bedroom-apartment huge, and the therapists of the highest order, but oh, my, the relaxation rooms. It’s a simple



The Anantara mojito cart is a sweet ride.

LEO MCHUGH



Reclining at Mulkirigala Rock Temple.

idea: juices, nuts, fresh and dried fruits in shaded courtyards with feng shui water walls to help you keep riding that Zen wave for as long as possible.

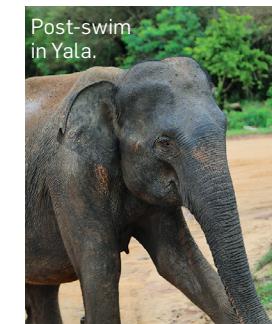
There’s one last ride I want to take, and that’s the champagne cart parked at the main pool. It’s attached to a tricycle, like an ice cream cart, but filled with booze. A bartender sees me sniffing around and hustles over for a mojito-making lesson. He’s unimpressed with my muddling skills (it seems I need less upper-arm thrust, more wrist action), and even less so when I start pedaling his bar away. “Don’t worry,” I call over my shoulder. It’s a slow-speed chase, and I’m a naughty duck. But this time it’s the other guests at the pool cheering. I’m heading their way with mojitos. ☺

THE DETAILS

Anantara Tangalle Peace Haven Its own little village—including a standalone cooking school and a vast spa—on a private bay, right near town. The local singers greeting you at the entrance are just the first members you encounter of a wholly friendly staff who seem nothing but overjoyed to be here; lucky you if charming, thoughtful Shehan organizes your private dining experience. tangalle.anantara.com; doubles from US\$235.

ACTIVITIES
Mirissa Water Sports Whale watches usually spot dolphins too; daily boats at 6:30 a.m. mirissawatersports.lk; US\$53.
Mulkirigala Rock Temple Reclining Buddhas and fantastical murals in caves sprinkled up 206-meter-high stairs. admission Rs200.
TropicSurf The biggest swells are April to October; from November to March the waves are smaller and conditions calmer. tangalle.anantara.com; lessons from US\$75 per person per hour.

Udawalawe National Park Rivals the best savannah reserves in Africa for spotting elephants, who roam all over these lightly vegetated 308-square-kilometer lands. dwc.gov.lk; admission Rs3,500.
Yala National Park With the highest density of leopards in the world, this coastal reserve on the southeast corner of the country also has sloth bears, mongeese and elephants. yalasrilanka.lk; admission R3,688 for foreign adults, R1,037.52 for foreign children, plus jeep fees of US\$40 for half-day, US\$75 for full day.



Post-swim in Yala.

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