

# Escape

## South Asia Surprise

BY PAUL RUBIO

*Sri Lanka's south coast stuns with palm-laced beaches, fascinating wildlife, riveting history, and ultraluxe hotels*



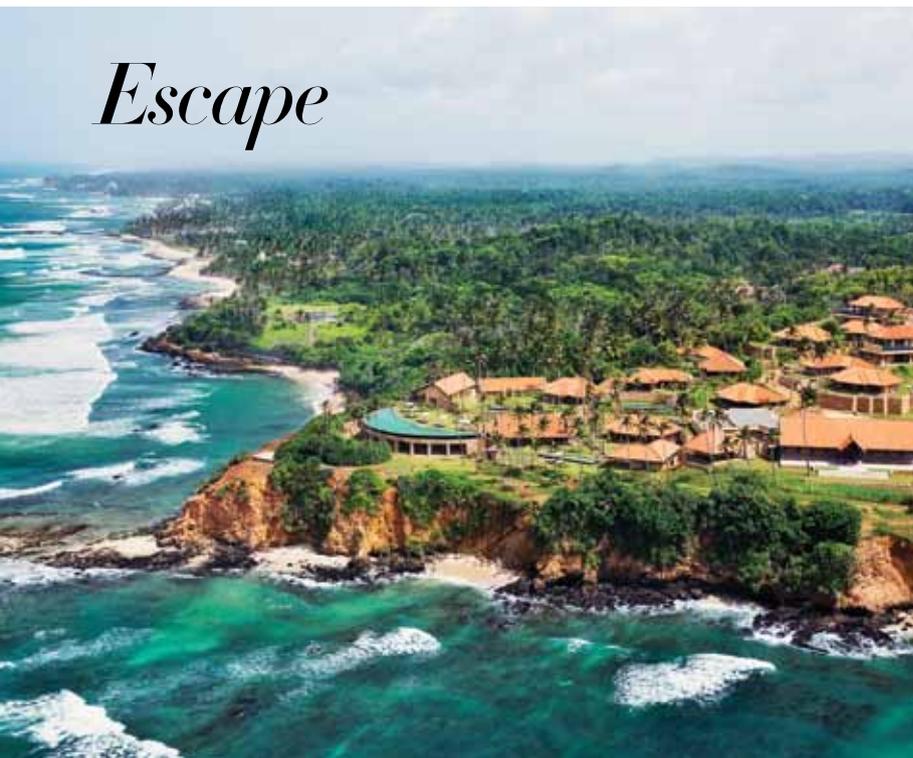
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**SRI LANKA'S BEACHES ARE AMONG ASIA'S MOST COVETED. INSET: OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE AT ANI VILLAS.**

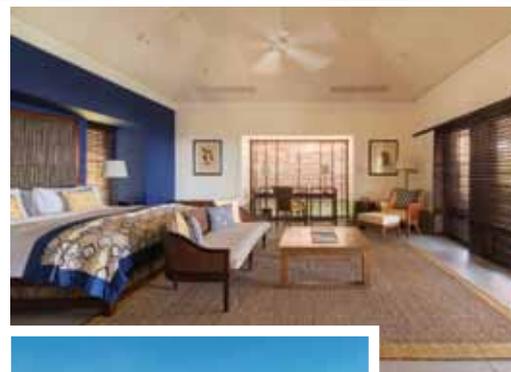
Just a decade ago, it was hard to imagine Sri Lanka garnering a star on the global map of luxury travel. But since emerging from a 26-year-long civil war in 2009, the country has shed its tarnished past and is now dazzling investors with 25,332 square miles of unexplored natural splendor.

In this compelling post-war chapter, the floodgates of tourism have also opened, and savvy travelers are honing in on the charms of this pear-shaped isle in the heart of the Indian Ocean, specifically the undeveloped south coast. We explore the hotels and sites establishing Asia's fledgling haute coast.

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NESTLED ON 12 ACRES IN A SLEEPY FISHING VILLAGE, CAPE WELIGAMA BOASTS SUCH LUXURIES AS OPEN-AIR PAVILIONS, WELL-APPOINTED SUITES, AND A CRESCENT-SHAPED INFINITY POOL.



## BEACHFRONT BEAUTIES

Sri Lanka's south coast epitomizes wild beauty, and such allure has prompted hoteliers to stake a claim in this newfound paradise.

In 2004, Aman Resorts hedged its bets on this unknown tract of exotica when it tasked celebrated Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa to develop the region's pioneering resort, Amanwella ([amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)), on a prime swathe in the town of Tangalle.

In the last year, however, Sri Lanka's luxury scene has exploded, relatively speaking, with three posh newcomers longing to steal the spotlight from the coast's original five-star showstopper. In October 2014, the fishing village of Weligama woke up to big changes

when Cape Weligama ([capeweligama.com](http://capeweligama.com)), a cliff-top estate strewn with 39 mega-villas and open-air pavilions, debuted to a groundswell of rave reviews.

Ani Villas Sri Lanka ([anivillas.com/srilanka](http://anivillas.com/srilanka)) arrived next in August. Composed of a pair of private-hire estates along Dickwella Beach, Ani Villas is the ultimate in luxury travel. Each compound has either seven or eight mammoth Reda Amalou-designed bedrooms as well as an oceanfront infinity pool, a private wine cellar, and a personal staff.

Most recently, the growing Anantara brand expanded its portfolio into Sri Lanka with the 152-key Anantara Tangalle Peace Haven Resort ([tangalle.anantara.com](http://tangalle.anantara.com)), capturing all the

hallmarks one would expect from a property on par with Ritz-Carlton or the Four Seasons.

Regardless of which of these four resorts you choose, each will deliver its own incarnation of paradise, fostering the ultimate settings for languid days of rest and relaxation.

## WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

By land and sea, southern Sri Lanka's biodiversity astounds. A short car or boat ride from most points on the southern coast yields once-in-a-lifetime encounters with wildlife.

Embark on a marine safari in the coastal town of Mirissa, sailing into the Laccadive Sea to spot Earth's largest creatures: blue whales. Stellar sightings of fin whales, sperm whales, dolphins, and orcas are an added bonus when surveying the Sri Lankan coastline during whale season, which lasts from November to April.

For an African-style land safari, head to Yala National Park ([yalanationalpark.com](http://yalanationalpark.com)) along the coast's eastern reaches. The 378-square-



SPORTING A GLAMOROUS YET UNDERSTATED AESTHETIC ON POINT WITH THE AMAN RESORTS BRAND, THE 27-SUITE AMANWELLA LURES JET SETTERS TO ONE OF EARTH'S MOST UNTOUCHED CORNERS.



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AMAN RESORTS

**ABOVE: SPOT LEOPARDS AND THE GREEN BEE-EATER AT YALA NATIONAL PARK. LEFT: THE AMANGALLA HOTEL REFLECTS GALLE'S HISTORY.**



**DESPITE MEASURING ONLY 90 ACRES, THE STREETS OF GALLE ARE PACKED WITH ARCHITECTURAL GEMS SPANNING FOUR CENTURIES.**

mile protected area hosts one of the planet's highest densities of leopards, 215 bird species, 47 types of reptiles, and 43 other mammals, including elephants and sloth bears. Daily jeep drives produce prime interactions with charismatic wildlife and postcard-perfect photos, possibly featuring fierce leopards on the prowl or musters of peacocks in full plumage.

Unlike its African counterparts, Sri Lanka has yet to embrace the complete luxury safari experience. Don't expect sundowners in the bush or cold towels after a long day in the park. Do anticipate comfortable and stylish lodging with beach access and bragging rights for visiting this road less traveled. Check in to one of the park's two upscale lodges, Cinnamon Wild Yala ([cinnamonhotels.com/cinnamonwildyala](http://cinnamonhotels.com/cinnamonwildyala)) or the just-opened Jetwing Yala ([jetwinghotels.com/jetwingyala](http://jetwinghotels.com/jetwingyala)), and revel in Yala's untamed environs.

### LIVING HISTORY

Links to Sri Lanka's colorful past are alive in the present, underscored by the south coast's fort city of Galle. The walled city at the island's southwesterly tip has been restored as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, structurally recounting the island's colonial history, which included occupations by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

Beyond the more obvious, official sites such as the Portuguese Flag Rock Bastion,

the Dutch Hospital, and the British Fort Walls, each small boutique, cafe, and hotel in Galle reveals a complex history. For example, the 30-room Amangalla hotel ([amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)) includes an adaptive reuse of a 1684 edifice that served as Dutch barracks and the frameworks of one of the world's first luxury hotels circa 1863, the New Oriental Hotel.

In close proximity to Galle, the Hundugoda Tea Estate ([virginwhitetea.com](http://virginwhitetea.com)) offers a glimpse of Sri Lanka's more recent history as the world's top producer of tea. Learn about the formidable role this commodity has played in the country's economy and sample one of the globe's most expensive teas, Virgin White Tea. For more in-depth pursuits in Sri Lanka's wonderful world of tea, head north to the country's mist-shrouded interior and stay at Ceylon Tea Trails ([teatrails.com](http://teatrails.com)), a Relais & Châteaux resort in the heart of tea country.

Thankfully, Sri Lanka's contemporary history as one of Asia's fastest-growing economies is mainly confined to the capital city of Colombo, along the is-

land's west coast. Home to the country's sole international airport, Colombo is a requisite stop when traveling to Sri Lanka. If flight schedules or curiosity lands you in the capital overnight, reserve a suite at Casa Colombo ([casacolombo.com](http://casacolombo.com)), an eclectic boutique hotel that embodies the pulse of modern Colombo.

Despite Colombo's grit, Sri Lanka's all-around unspoiled state calls to travelers searching for one of Earth's final off-the-beaten-path destinations. Before globalization transforms the enchanting southern coastline into just another resort town, be one of the first to experience its prolific treasures of nature, history, and—now—luxury. ◀◀

**IMMERSE YOURSELF IN SRI LANKA'S TEA CULTURE AT CEYLON TEA TRAILS.**

