



*Undercover*  
**LUXURY**

Sri Lanka's east coast is still wonderfully  
unspoiled, writes LEE TULLOCH.

Photography TONY AMOS



Visit its many uncrowded beaches, take in its temples and ancient monuments, wander through its verdant tea-planted hill country.



**T**here is so much beauty and abundance in Sri Lanka, but the teardrop-shaped island has suffered more than its share of misfortune. The 2004 tsunami, which claimed 30,000 lives, the 26-year civil war, the Easter 2019 bombings, and last year's economic crisis, which saw scenes of peaceful protests at the Presidential palace, have all had a severely dampening effect on tourism over the past two decades.

And yet, you would not have an inkling of this now as you cycle down its shady lanes, visit its many uncrowded beaches, take in its temples and ancient monuments, wander through its verdant tea-planted hill country, or take a thrilling safari in its eastern jungles. The war ended in 2009, the economic crisis has been averted and the incredibly resilient people are the most welcoming in the world. Wander through any village and you're likely to be invited in for a cup of tea.

Sri Lanka was once thought of as a backpacker's destination and even though a few coastal towns such as Hikkaduwa attract the sort of tourist that might gravitate to Bali's Kuta, there are hundreds of beaches that see few people except local fishermen, even on the busier southern coast. Now the country is seen as a luxury destination, with a very high standard of service and accommodation, but still relatively inexpensive, due to a good exchange rate with the rupee.

This is what brings us to our resort. ĀNI Private Resorts, a collection of exclusive-use, all-inclusive resorts in Thailand, the Caribbean and now Sri Lanka, has set the bar high with its south coast estate, which sprawls over two manicured hectares, directly accessing a scarcely populated beach that stretches five kilometres, edged with natural jungle. In line with the major trend for multi-generation and celebration travel, ĀNI Sri Lanka can house up to 30 guests in two separate, distantly spaced modernist villa complexes, making it the premium destination on the island for a big blow-out celebration, a small wedding, or a gathering of friends or family. ▶



**Clockwise from above right: ĀNI chef Cyril Human with a basket of fresh produce; a selection of dishes at ĀNI's restaurant; ĀNI's family suite. Opposite: the outdoor dining pavilion by the pool. PREVIOUS PAGES Left: the idyllic setting of ĀNI Sri Lanka. Right: Villa Monara's living room with ocean views.**





It doesn't have to be a big event – the resort takes a smaller number of guests, from six, on a sliding scale of tariffs. Of course, if you really value isolation, and have got the funds, you can book the whole estate, and its team of 30 staff, just for yourself.

ANI is about a three-hour drive from Colombo's Bandaranaike airport, although you can take a 35-minute seaplane ride to nearby Marwella Lagoon or a helicopter if you wish. Sri Lanka's roads are vastly improved and even from the highway there are views of jungle, temples and the occasional brave peacock crossing it.

We arrived by car, after lunch at Fort Bazaar hotel's restaurant Church Street Social in the UNESCO heritage Galle Fort, an hour away, followed by a visit to Handunugoda Estate, a tea plantation where rare white tea is picked with "golden" scissors and processed on machines that are more than a century old. Both excursions are available to guests at the resort, which is ideally placed for exploring villages, popular surfing spot Dickwella and wildlife reserves such as Yala National Park, where you might come across a leopard.

The welcome with a traditional candle lighting takes place in the arrival pavilion at the top of the hilly property, which looks out to an expanse of uninterrupted ocean. It's where we'll be greeted



Clockwise from top: vibrant frangipani; surf's up at Hiriketiya Bay; ANI staff place flowers in the water. Opposite: a view of Villa Monara with its outdoor pool.



with cold towels and cool drinks after every excursion. Our group of about 14 people are then taken to their respective suites, some housed in Villa Monara (meaning "peacock," which sometimes pierce the peace with their cat-like calls) and the others in its almost mirror image, Villa Divia ("leopard") on the other side of the property.

Both villas have a variety of split-level suites, classic suites and family suites, and each villa has its own 25-metre saltwater infinity pool, two-storey living sala with indoor and outdoor dining areas, bar, wine cellar, library and games room. Elsewhere on the property there's a fully equipped gym, yoga sala, hard-surface tennis court, and a double treatment spa suite. Kids will love the kids' pools in each villa, each with a twisting water slide. (Ours had a resident monitor lizard.)

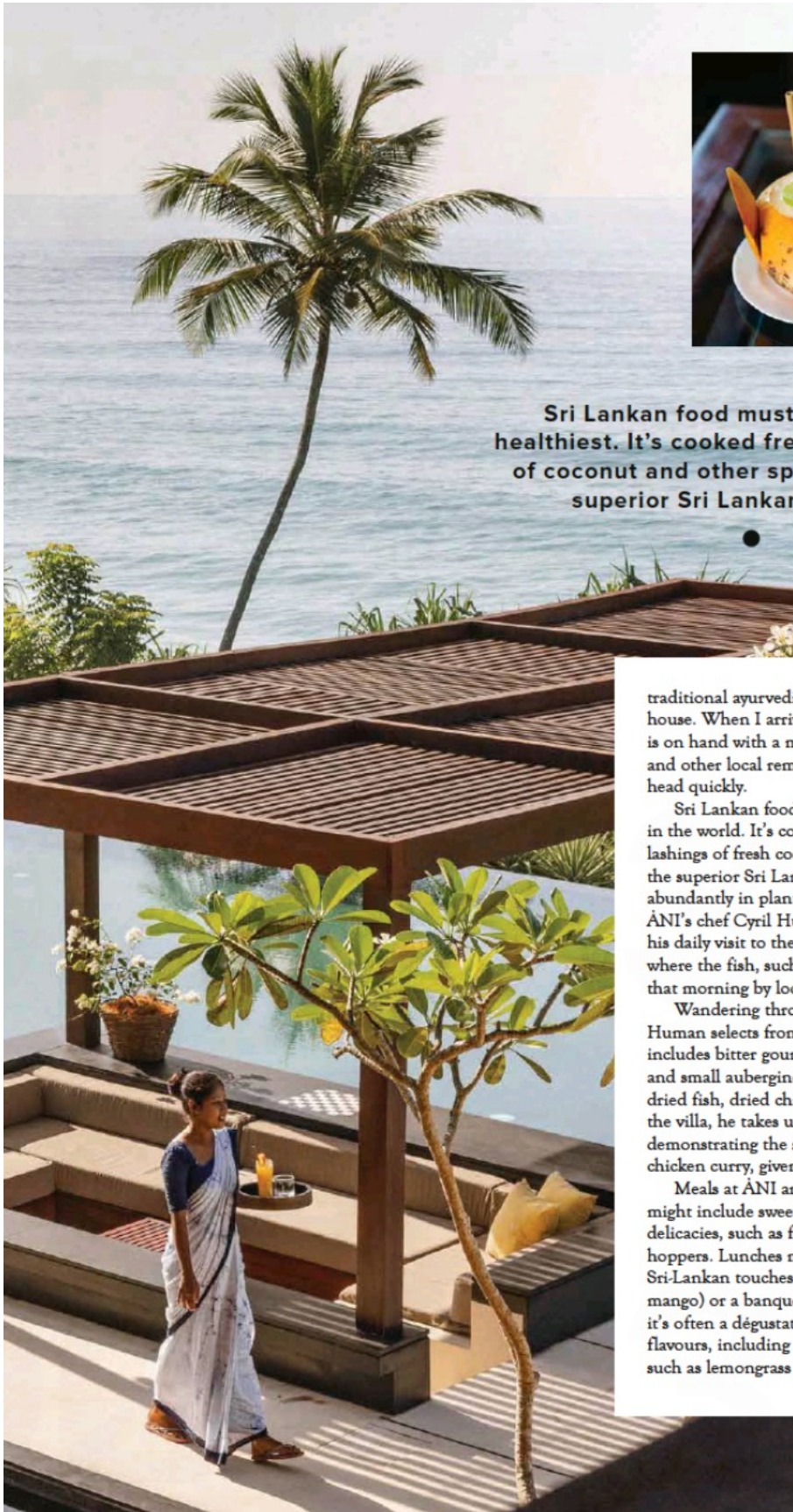
We're staying on the ground floor of a split-level suite in Villa Divia, with garden terrace and plunge pool. The room is vast, opening onto the exquisite gardens, filled with fragrant and tropical fruit trees (and glimpse of sea.) Langur monkeys rustle through the jungle and we're visited by lizards, mongoose,

peacocks, and kingfishers. The two villas are a good walk apart, and self-contained, so if you aren't fond of a particular family member, perhaps, you might never see them. The only sounds are birds and the rhythmic crashing of waves on the beach.

ANI's personable and accomplished staff, led by general manager Dinesh Hewavitharana, will arrange whatever you desire within reason, from scuba and surfing excursions to a tuk-tuk exploration of local villages, cultural dances with fire eaters, and even a scarily accurate palm-reader. One of our birthdays was celebrated with a light-dotted fairy bower, a huge chocolate cake and fireworks, followed by a movie under the stars.

Up to 15 spa treatments are included per day for a large group, the treatments supervised by Manjula Wijekoon, who is the resort's secret ingredient. A talented therapist and ayurvedic practitioner, he's a brilliant masseur and reflexologist, and all-round positive spirit, guiding us on cultural excursions, including a visit to a local Buddhist temple and ►





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traditional ayurvedic lunch in an historic colonial house. When I arrive with gastro from the flight, he is on hand with a mixture of coffee and lime juice and other local remedies to knock the illness on its head quickly.

Sri Lankan food must be one of the healthiest in the world. It's cooked fresh on the spot, using lashings of fresh coconut and other spices, such as the superior Sri Lankan cinnamon that grows abundantly in plantations surrounding the villa. ANI's chef Cyril Human takes guests with him on his daily visit to the modest local village, Rathmale, where the fish, such as glossy bluefin tuna, is caught that morning by local fisherman.

Wandering through the fruit and vegetable stalls, Human selects from a curious array of produce that includes bitter melon, morning glory, ash plantain and small aubergine. From a shop he buys Maldivian dried fish, dried chillies and jaggery. Then back at the villa, he takes us through a cooking class, demonstrating the surprising simplicity of making chicken curry, given its rich flavours.

Meals at ANI are worth lingering over. Breakfast might include sweet tropical fruits and Sri Lankan delicacies, such as fish curry with string or egg hoppers. Lunches might be Japanese-themed with Sri-Lankan touches (sushi with strawberries or mango) or a banquet of Sri Lankan dishes. At night, it's often a dégustation dinner with Italian or French flavours, including soup and an elaborate dessert such as lemongrass parfait in a chocolate shell. But



#### Booking info

A stay at ANI is all-inclusive, including personalised meals, beverages, spa treatments, excursions and kids' activities. Tariffs depend on the number of guests: six suites from \$19,500 per night, rising to 15 suites from \$33,000 per night, low season: five-night minimum stay. [aniresorts.com/ani-sri-lanka](http://aniresorts.com/ani-sri-lanka)



it could be a barbecue if you wish, with huge local prawns and big juicy lobsters sizzling on the cliff-top grill. Afternoon tea is served under a wild almond tree on the lawn.

In Villa Divia there's a small art gallery, showcasing the work of the 45 students who are undertaking a highly coveted, three-year art degree at the ANI Art Academy, which provides full scholarships for young local artists, training them in the rigorous skills needed, not just for an art career but in life. It's an initiative of ANI founder Tim Reynolds, partnering with art educator Timothy W. Jahn, who have collaborated to set up academies in four resort destinations, Sri Lanka, the Dominican Republic, Thailand and Anguilla.

The Academy is set on an immaculately equipped, architect-designed campus in a beautiful jungle location near the resort, and guests are encouraged to visit the artists at work. It's possible to purchase a work to take home, with 100 per cent of the price going directly to the artist, a thoughtful memento to add to the many pleasurable memories imprinted from a stay in this gorgeous corner of the world. ●



Clockwise from above: a game of chess by the pool at ANI; the breakfast spread at ANI; the dining room; students at the ANI Art Academy studio. Opposite, from top: king coconut water; the terrace overlooks the pool at Villa Monara.

