

LOUISE GOLDSBURY

Before daybreak, armed with a torch, I creep through the bushes and frangipani trees to reach the beach near Dickwella on Sri Lanka's southern coast. I light up a path to take a stroll alone on a shoreline that stretches indefinitely in both directions. In the distance appears a man, also waving a torch, and we stop for a chat.

Sarath introduces himself and asks if I am staying at Ani Private Resort. He's searching for turtles to show the guests; instantly, I decide to join him on his quest. Within minutes we find a tell-tale sign, like the tracks of a bulldozer, that a large turtle has crawled from its nest to the ocean.

"We're too late," he says, "but if you can be here around 10pm, that's the best time to see them coming back in from the water."

Thrilled to be invited on a night-time adventure, I agree to reconvene after dinner. I later discover that Sarath is not on staff, but a former employee who loves the resort so much he continues to spend every day at Ani, cleaning the pools and observing the marine life. When I am torn between our expedition and an open-air movie by moonlight, he and team member Kanchana go searching for turtles with a promise to send for me if they find one. Unfortunately, there are no sightings tonight.

Blame jet lag, the prospect of turtles or the shimmering sunrises, but I am awake every morning at 5am. Ani is designed for cloistered relaxation, yet I cannot resist the morning temptations outside its palm-lined perimeters. On my five-night stay, I start each day with a beach walk as the rising sun gradually reveals the sand's swirls of red, gold and charcoal. After a daily chat with Sarath, I head to yoga, followed by a dip in the pool – sometimes entered via the waterslide – and a massage. With everything included, there is no hesitation to do it all.

For breakfast, I request pol sambol (coconut, onion, lime and chilli relish) with my hoppers (pancakes made with rice batter and coconut milk), as recommended by a Sri Lankan friend. Executive chef Cyril obligingly whips it up on the spot with a smile.

All week, the food and service are flawless. Lunch, served beside the main infinity pool, is a superb spread of curries, condiments and salads, accompanied by Lion beer and wine. Afternoon tea is exquisitely presented on a low table surrounded by comfortable couches on the lawn. At sunset, lanterns hang from the trees where we enjoy three-course dinners. Any cuisine is possible, but we stick with local specialties, except for one day of sensational sushi.

Between meals, the spa is a popular venue, with Ayurveda massages, head and foot rubs, reflexology and facials included in the rates. During my reflexology session, therapist Manjula diagnoses issues with my shoulders and digestion. (The same afternoon, a palmistry reading identifies the same thing.)

My other favourite place is my suite, which is more spacious than my home. The decor is inspired by tropical modernism, connecting indoors to outdoors, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows inviting the sea breeze inside. The huge bathroom has a circular tub and a second shower outside. Bamboo ceilings and terrazzo floors are complemented by hand-carved antiques, black and white photography, and a king bed facing the garden. Other suites in higher positions have ocean views from expansive terraces. The minibar is replenished twice a day with ready-to-drink coconuts, juices, soft drinks, cashews and chocolates. I spend hours on the poolside daybed, reading, napping and snacking.

Despite these unlimited indulgences, our group of 10 does much more than eat, rest and accept pampering. Beyond Ani's generous inclusions, external experiences can be organised by the concierge, from scenic helicopter tours to a leopard safari in Yala National Park. Ocean pursuits include deep sea fishing, surfing lessons, scuba diving, and catamaran cruises to spot dolphins and blue whales.

As a private resort, Ani is booked exclusively by a single group of guests at a time; up



Learn the art of slow living in Sri Lanka



to 30 people can be accommodated in its 15 suites within two-storey villas. A staff of 30 curates every detail of dining, cultural, fitness and wellness activities. Families can tailor a children's program, choosing from baking classes, kite-flying, treasure hunts, nature tours, arts and crafts, or releasing baby turtles from a local hatchery. Beach or pool volleyball, archery, cricket and soccer matches are also arranged on request.

One of the unique offerings is a guided

tour of Ani Art Academy, sponsored by the resort operator. There is one near each of the six Ani properties, in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Anguilla, the Dominican Republic and the US (New Jersey and Philadelphia). The first resort was founded at the same time as its academy, with the intention for its profits to fund the art organisation.

These academies provide an intensive, multi-year education to aspiring young artists. Students receive free tuition, supplies and

lunch, which allows them to stay on campus all day at no cost to their families. Their artworks are displayed in the resorts, where guests are encouraged to buy them as meaningful souvenirs, with all proceeds going to the students. After visiting the Sri Lankan academy, several people in our group purchase small sketches.

During the week, we also take in attractions such as Handunugoda Tea Estate and the UNESCO World Heritage site, Galle Fort, a fortified city founded in the 16th century by the Portuguese. Closer to base, we take tuk-tuks to the golden "Big Buddha" statue towering over Wewurukannala Vihara temple.

At a restaurant in the Southern Province, we have an Ayurvedic meal full of vegetables and spices, learning that a big lunch is important because the sun, pitta energy (element of fire) and our agni (digestive fire) are all in alignment between midday and 2pm. The feast includes jackfruit curry, white cucumber curry, green lentils, pickles, tuna, sambol, rice and tropical fruits.

On the last day, we join chef Cyril shopping for fresh produce at a nearby village. As we walk along the streets lined with family-run stores and roadside stalls, I wonder if the Dickwella area will be transformed by increasing tourism. It feels like a destination



A beach at Dickwella, top; Ani Art Academy, above left; Ani Sri Lanka suite with plunge pool, above right; Wewurukannala Vihara temple and the golden Big Buddha, left; and an aerial view of Dickwella on Sri Lanka's southern coast, top right



IN THE KNOW

Ani Private Resorts Sri Lanka accommodates one group of friends or families, allowing exclusive use of the property. The beachfront villas can host six to 30 people for a bespoke getaway, assisted by a team of 30 staff. All-inclusive rates start at \$US13,000 (\$19,909) a night plus service charge and taxes for six suites including all meals, drinks, spa treatments, onsite activities, excursions, fitness classes, personal training, tennis lessons and mountain bike hire.

The resort is a three-hour drive from Colombo, with airport transfers for an extra charge. Also available is a VIP arrival and departure experience, including fast track through immigration and customs and a private lounge. aniprivateresorts.com

Dickwella feels like a destination that I could revisit to find it's been overtaken by influencers and magazines

that I could revisit to find it's been overtaken by influencers and magazines announcing the best new places to travel. For now, we almost have it to ourselves.

Two decades ago, this region was busier, but then it was hit by the devastating tsunami caused by the Indian Ocean earthquake in 2004. More recently, in 2019, a terrorist attack in Colombo impacted the flow of visitors. Add the pandemic and last year's political crisis and it's no wonder Sri Lanka fell from the minds of travellers. While the domestic issues are by no means resolved, there have been no major protests since last summer and people have resumed their normal lives. At every turn, the atmosphere is peaceful, and the locals are incredibly welcoming.

This year sees exceptional value, with lower prices reflecting the depreciation of the rupee and national efforts to lure tourists. Australian dollars go a long way in restaurants, bars, shops and markets. A fresh coconut, sliced open to sip with a straw, costs 50 cents. Prices are higher in hot spots such as Smoke & Bitters, a new listing in Asia's Best 50 Bars. Surrounded by palm trees, this laid-back venue opposite Pehebiya Beach is renowned for its cocktails created with local ingredients and house-made syrups and liqueurs. As we sit barefoot in a straw-matted hut, the waiter delivers our assortment of beverages. Old Ceylon arrives in a glass dome full of Halmilla wood smoke, a nod to the wooden vats used to age the quintessential Sri Lankan

spirit, arrack, which forms the base of this tasty blend with coconut sugar, vanilla and bitters. My second choice, Smokey and the Bandit, is a not-too-sweet mix of rum, port, ginger, honey and pineapple.

Ari's minivan is waiting to take us back to the resort, where our farewell dinner is held under an enchanting canopy of fairy lights mirroring the starry sky. Gathered around a barbecue, three chefs serve chargrilled seafood, meats and vegetables from the morning's market shop. Hooked on these heavenly settings and fresh fare, we prolong the dining experience for as long as possible, and I cancel my plans for a final sunrise stroll. I may not have found turtles on this trip, but I have slowed down to their pace in an unwitting tribute.

Louise Goldsbury was a guest of Ani Private Resorts.



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