

SINGAPORE

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THE PEAK

THE BUSINESS OF DIVERSITY & INCLUSIVITY

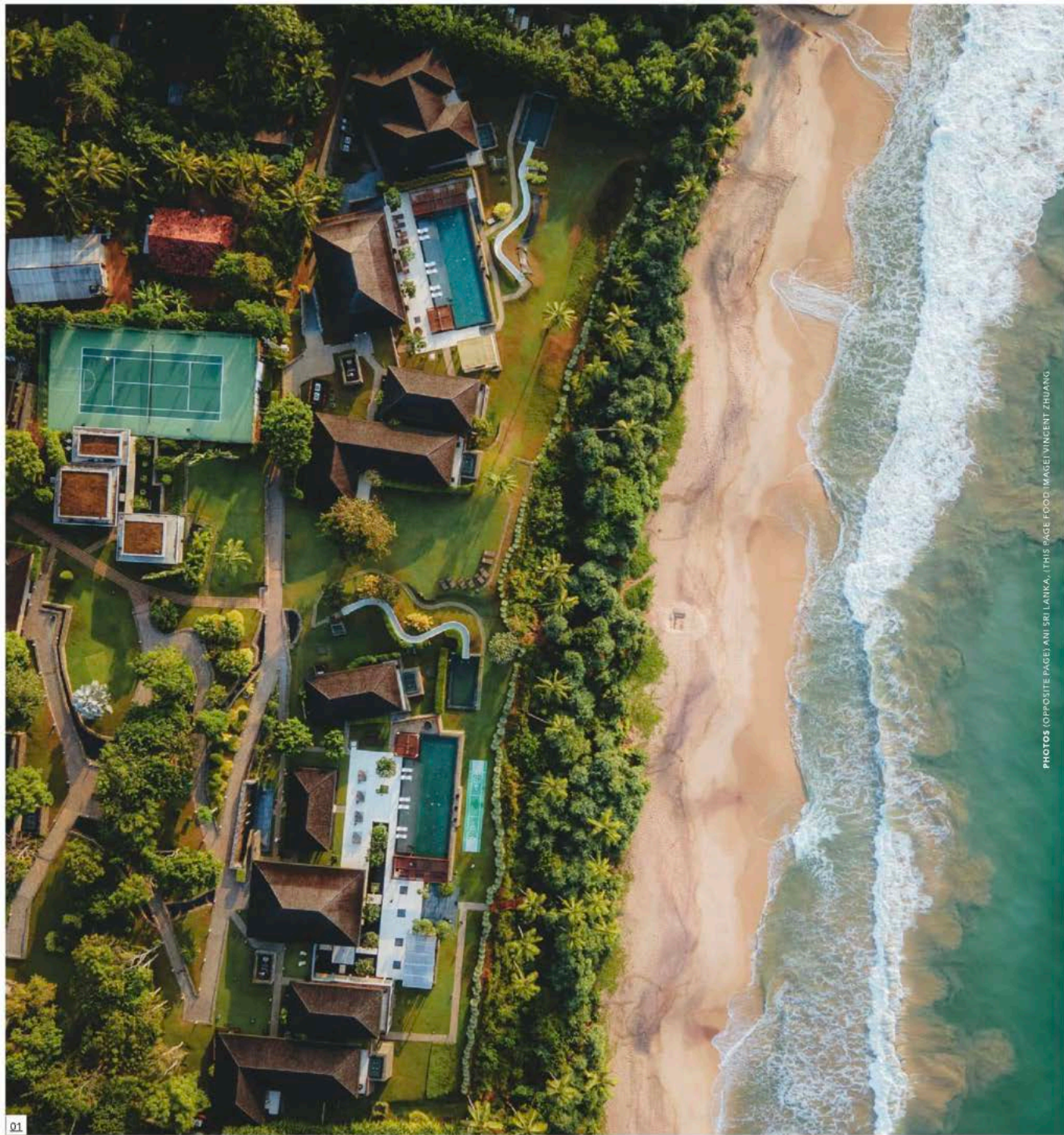
TAKASHI MURAKAMI X HUBLOT | 2024 DINING TRENDS | LOTUS' FIRST ELECTRIC SUV

CHRIS CHEN

The DE&I Lead on the importance of accountability.



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KAREN TEE



PHOTOS (OPPOSITE PAGE), ANI SRI LANKA, (THIS PAGE) FOOD, IMAGE/MICENT, ZHUANG

Soulful Sojourn

With lush land and seascapes, bountiful wildlife, and an unparalleled private bolthole, the coastal tip of Sri Lanka has just about all the experiences a nomad could wish for.

Standing atop the weathered ramparts of Galle Fort on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, the brisk sea breeze is whipping my hair into a tangled mess as I take it all in. In many ways, this bustling Unesco World Heritage site is a microcosm of the pearl of the Indian Ocean.

Dating back to the 16th century, it is one of the best-preserved examples of a European-built fortified city in the region, and its Portuguese, Dutch, and British architectural influences are a visual reminder of the country's complex history.

In recent times too, the country has had its share of woes, in the past few years, COVID-19 travel lockdowns and last year's presidential uprising sparked by an economic crisis

and supply shortage have made it challenging for the tourism industry. But now that things have stabilised, the country is more than raring to welcome back travellers.

COMMUNITY-CENTRIC LEISURE

At Galle Fort, it is just another beautiful day in this tropical destination. I can just about discern the distant cheers

of schoolchildren playing cricket over the rhythmic sound of waves splashing against the fort's stone walls. Around me, peddlers hawk sunhats and refreshing cold drinks to sunburnt travellers.

Tucked within its winding alleys and cobblestone streets are a plethora of art galleries, boutique shops, cafes, and restaurants offering local wares and produce. A highlight is Barefoot, which offers a curated collection of apparel, textiles, artwork, and books sourced from local brands. This blend of modern creativity and historical charm imbues Galle Fort with its unique sense of place.

I am here in Sri Lanka at the invitation of ANI Private Resort, a collection of all-inclusive, private

01 A bird's eye view of ANI Resort.

02 Students working on their craft at the ANI Art Academy.

03 An ayurvedic lunch with bitter gourd sambal, baby jackfruit curry, and a local fish with brown rice.



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“Proceeds from the resorts are channelled towards the running of the six non-profit ANI Art Academies around the world.”

luxury resorts with a philanthropic purpose. The resorts are intended specifically for single group bookings of up to 20 to 30 guests at a time, and there are currently four locations in Phuket, Thailand, Anguilla, the Dominican Republic, and Sri Lanka.

Proceeds from the resorts are channelled towards the running of the six non-profit ANI Art Academies around the world, including one in Sri Lanka. The Academy provides intensive, multi-year full-time fine arts scholarship education to apprentices aged 18 and up.

This luxury resort-meets-philanthropic concept is the brainchild of Ani’s founder and arts patron, Tim Reynolds, who wanted to offer artistically inclined individuals the opportunity to pursue their passion while making a living through their work.

Galle is, but our first stop, and the team is already showcasing the brand’s inimitable style of thoughtful

hospitality. As our small group of journalists pops in and out of small shops and cafes, I notice how activities manager Nilantha Kumarage is almost always in sight to point us in the right direction lest we get lost and dehydrated under the blazing sun.

The resort itself is located about an hour’s drive from Galle and nestled between the two market towns of Dickwella and Tallala. There, a veritable army of up to 30 staff are on hand to tailor every detail of one’s trip both within – and outside – the resort.

GETTING CLOSE TO NATURE

It is priceless to have these travel experts at hand to help make plans for day trips, especially with such an embarrassing wealth of experiences to explore in this region, from jungle safaris to offshore ocean adventures such as whale-watching.

For instance, wildlife lovers can travel to Bundala National Park for birdwatching, Udawalawe National

04 The Wewurukannala Temple.

05 A typical tuk-tuk in Galle.

06 A food spread at ANI Sri Lanka.



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PHOTO (TUK TUK & TEMPLE) VINCENT ZHUANG, (FOOD) ANI SRI LANKA

Park to visit an elephant orphanage and sponsor a baby elephant, or Yala National Park – home to the elusive leopard – for a safari.

The ANI team will collaborate with locals to curate an extra memorable experience where possible. For instance, at Yala National Park, guests get to enjoy a private picnic during their safari drives.

Further afield, where Sri Lanka’s famed tea plantations are located, most travellers drive along winding mountain roads or take a slow train to go “upcountry”, in a journey that can



take up to half a day. But for ANI guests with the budget, all it takes is a speedy seaplane charter to get to the misty mountain tops within 90 minutes, leaving plenty of time to savour the lush jungles and waterfalls before hopping on the seaplane back to the resort – just in time for tea.

“Our team travels to the destination in advance to ensure a smooth journey for our guests – and where possible, we will make arrangements for a private and exclusive experience,” says general manager Dinesh Hewavitharana. He adds that there is no detail too small,

down to sourcing for venues with suitable toilets for road trip pit stops.

IMMERSING IN LOCAL CULTURE

Where I truly feel the TLC is during our forays out into the fishing town of Dickwella and its vicinity. On a sunny Saturday afternoon, we hop into tuk tuks for a 10-minute ride to the bustling weekend market with chef Cyril Human to shop for fresh tomatoes, leeks, and all manner of spices for a cooking class – and our Sri Lankan dinner. When the shopaholics break away from the group to browse

for handmade wares such as woven baskets and Sri Lankan batik textiles, Manjulah Wijekoon, the resort’s head of wellness, thoughtfully accompanies us to act as the translator.

On another afternoon, we are brought to a 200-year-old colonial house. This building was once an ayurvedic clinic, where patients would pay the doctor with whatever they had, such as fresh produce from their gardens. Today, while descendants of the doctor still live here, the family no longer practices ayurvedic medicine.

Nevertheless, the family welcomes



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PHOTO (LIGHTHOUSE & TEMPLE) VINCENT ZHUANG, (AYUREVEDA COLONIAL HOUSE) ANI SRI LANKA

07 Interior of Wewurukannala temple.

08 Galle lighthouse.

09 Ayurveda Colonial House.

us into their home, proudly showing family photographs and the old toolkit the doctors used to work with, while the youngest child curiously peers at us from behind her father's sarong.

To honour this traditional practice, the ANI team has specially prepared a lunch inspired by ayurvedic principles and ingredients, such as a bitter gourd sambal said to help manage diabetes and detox the body and a baby jackfruit curry, which has antibacterial properties. With its green, herbal flavours, the meal offers a lighter touch compared to the richer curries typical of South Asia and, to our delight, does not induce a post-lunch food coma — all the better to enjoy even more activities in the afternoon.

And while some of the country's most culturally significant temples are situated further north in the Kandy region, there are also interesting — and less crowded — temples in the vicinity. The Wewurukannala temple in Dickwella, known for its intricate statues depicting scenes of Sri Lankan lore and the Buddha's various incarnations, is popular among locals who visit to leave offerings of lotus flowers and chant the scripture under the shade of the bodhi tree in the courtyard.

On our final morning, we take a 10-minute stroll along the resort's beachfront to a nearby temple to receive blessings from the local priest, while curious children attending classes at the temple giggle and wave at us.

HOMEGROUND DELIGHTS

Even with so much to explore, it is certainly worth allocating sufficient time to luxuriate within the resort's idyllic grounds. There are 15 suites positioned around two

double-story Tropical Modernism-inspired living salas, where much of the activity happens.

For instance, there is no fixed location for meals. Instead, the team varies things up by staging elaborate setups at different gazebos on the lawn and once, on the shallow end of the infinity pool.

The wellness team can offer up to 15 spa treatments per day, including traditional ayurvedic massages and Shirodhara therapy, where warm medicinal oil is dripped on the forehead for a relaxing yet invigorating effect. There is also a games room, shuffleboard, tennis court, and group or personal fitness sessions such as aqua aerobics, yoga, or tennis lessons to blast excess calories.

We even get to enjoy excellent local entertainment within the resort itself. One evening's pre-dinner entertainment comes in the form of a traditional dance performance by a Colombo-based dance troupe. And on a languid tropical afternoon, a palm reader drops by the resort to give personalised readings that turn out to be startlingly accurate for many in the group.

To cap it all off, travellers may even depart with the ultimate souvenir — an artwork created by one of the ANI Art Academy artists. They are trained to use charcoal, pastels, or oil paints to create hyper-realistic images that are often a blend of portraiture and their own imaginations, and many of their works can be viewed in an art gallery within the resort.

It is also possible to commission a bespoke portrait, though it will take months before the completed creation can be delivered to one's home. Still, with all proceeds given entirely to the artists, it is abundantly clear that not only is patience a virtue but that travelling with a conscience is its own reward in itself. 🌿



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