

INDIAN OCEAN

Ibiza-style beach vibe comes to Sri Lanka

Hip new hotels on the island's southern coast make a great base for exploring

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The ten-suite Kahanda Kanda retreat is set on a lush green-tea plantation

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It's dawn off the southern tip of Sri Lanka and I'm bobbing about in a two-tiered boat when something rather thrilling happens. Until now the Indian Ocean off Mirissa Beach has stayed calm, but as the sun rises, the silvered sea parts to the curved back of an enormous blue whale. Out it arcs, sleek and smooth, roiling the water before disappearing with a final slap from its anchor-shaped fluke.

This is a taster of great things to come. After only an hour the ocean explodes again and again to vaporous eruptions from blowholes. Our final whale count: seven blues and two Bryde's.

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It sounds like a Hollywood title, but that’s appropriate because spotting these, the world’s largest mammals, is big-screen stuff. So too the statistics our guide, Ru, reels off: “That last one

was probably 20 metres long and 100 tonnes. Blues have hearts as big as cars and aortas so large a man could crawl through them.”

I don’t want the action to stop, but eventually it’s time to leave the whales to their krill and head away from Mirissa’s buzzy cafés and beach shops. A short ride away is my base, the KK Beach at Habaraduwa, a cool, six-suite boutique hotel that opened in mid-December. And very lovely it is, exquisitely styled by its British owner and interior designer, George Cooper, and ideally placed for exploring.

The look is sleek and open-plan with a breezy restaurant and lounge and a bar where squishy cream sofas face abstract canvases by local artists. A large infinity pool fronting the pounding ocean comes with rattan daybeds, while upstairs chic, sea-facing bedrooms are furnished with block-printed fabrics, bronze sculptures and lamps with twisted driftwood bases.

KK Beach is the latest of a new breed of boutique hotel on this southern coastal stretch, which has a cool, Ibiza-style vibe of pared-back beachy glamour. Others include the Tri Hotel at Lake Koggala, which has a fabulous jungle setting and a sharply contemporary look, and the Owl and the Pussycat beach hotel at Thalpe, a breezy dream of handcrafted furnishings in 16 bright rooms and a cool beach shack for cocktails. More boutique properties are to come — a welcome move towards smaller developments in the area, which is better known for the tourist-friendly party towns of Hikkaduwa and Unawatuna, and impersonal chain hotels.

There is emptiness too, especially between Galle and Weligama. Many beaches are as idyllic as those in Goa, yet without the crowds, and I spend late afternoons tackling the hot, white sands of Habaraduwa beach, where unfathomably slender palms slant towards the ocean. Coconut husks rather than sunbathers litter the sand and hidden among the palms are shacks serving cold Lion beer and seafood.

That's about the sum of it, yet farther along, at Ahangama, I find a highly local scene: fishermen perching on narrow stilts of kaduru wood, their heads turanned against the sun as they scan the sea. There are other stilt fishermen near Galle, a 20-minute tuk-tuk ride west of my hotel.

Oh, how I love these Sri Lankan tuk-tuks, with their chatty drivers and kitsch decor: everything from flapping tinsel and charms, to posters of blond, blue-eyed babies.

Galle new town blasts with noise: the thwack of balls from schoolboys practising in the nets at the cricket stadium; the blare of diesel-belching buses drowning the chatter of sari-wearing housewives at Galle's Green Market. Along the promenade, sellers crouch before wide mats of just-caught fish and the baker's tuk-tuk rings out a tinny version of *Für Elise*.



A fisherman perched on a stilt of kaduru wood at Ahangama

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It's an altogether different scene from that in adjoining Galle Fort. This village-sized enclave, ringed by bastions and stone walls, was built by the Dutch East India Company. Its narrow streets run with deep gullies, the remains of their sewage system.

Five years ago Galle Fort was dusty and pot-holed, its buildings in need of repair, but today I find grandly restored merchant houses and an almost too pristine scene of chichi shops selling overpriced batik, high-end jewellery and scented oils.

Out at sea there's nothing but ships, marine life and 6,000 miles of ocean until one reaches Antarctica. It's a giddy-making thought, but I've the region's hinterland to explore, so midweek I move to KK Beach's country-based sister, Kahanda Kanda.

The ten-suite retreat is set on a hillside in Angulugaha, on a lush green-tea plantation, and my room is enormous. Because each suite is a stand-alone building, they are all grand in scale, and furnished with quirky colonial-era antiques and supremely comfortable mosquito-netted beds.

I fall asleep to the chatter of monkeys, wake to peacocks' haunting shrieks and drink tea on my balcony, my gaze following eagles spiralling in the sky above the palms. It's an idyllic spot.



The lighthouse at Galle Fort, a village-sized enclave built by the Dutch East India Company
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I take a boat trip on the saltwater lagoon, which stretches for 4km. While we putter along, spindly legged egrets and black cormorants watch from the rocks. Eagles circle, and the volume crescendos as we pass the mangroves of Bird Island. At Temple Island, home to 20 Buddhist monks who live in a string of picturesque wooden beach huts facing the shore, I spot orange robes and Y-fronts hanging from washing lines. One monk snoozes in the morning sun. A short walk brings us to a wonderful little temple covered with scenes of Buddha's life.

At Cinnamon Island I watch an old man strip a branch then curl the fragrant bark into a cigar-shaped stick. Sri Lanka's cinnamon, a prized commodity of the Dutch East India Company, is still considered among the best. I buy powder and oil while drinking tea prepared by the man's wife.

Ah, tea. You can't escape it on this island. Near to Kahanda Kanda is a small-scale enterprise that is famous for the rarest of them all: virgin white, the only tea, I am told, that is untouched by human hand.

The factory at Handunugoda Tea Estate still uses 145-year-old Belfast-made crusher and roller machines to process the glossy leaves of its bushes. "Our virgin white tea is high in antioxidants and will promote a very long life," says our guide. Inevitably I buy some. Yet at £12 for four bags, it would need the wealth of a plantation owner to test his theory to the full.

Need to know

Louise Roddon was a guest of Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770, ampersandtravel.com), which runs bespoke tours to Sri Lanka. A seven-night luxury tour, including five-star B&B at Kahanda Kanda and KK Beach, costs from £1,900pp, including flights.