

## Island Of *Serendipity*

Vivienne DuBourdieu

On The Ayurveda  
Trail In Sri Lanka – Part I

Just flying in over Sri Lanka is as sensual as sinking your teeth into a juicy mango. Tropical greens, lagoons, coral reefs and sandy beaches are lapped by the intense blue of the Indian Ocean as far as the eye can see. And there is always a faint whiff of frangipani blossom in the air.

When a country has recently been at war, it is hard to know what to expect. However, the only battlefield I encountered in Sri Lanka was the traffic. On the roads, elderly buses, overladen trucks, noisy tuk-tuks and people on bicycles, elephants and bullock carts all battle for a path through the chaos; everybody toots, yells or rings bells as they approach and pass: like ants.



Sri Lanka is primarily a Buddhist country and abounds with temples and monasteries serving the 80% of its populace who follow this faith. Hindu temples and Islamic mosques are also to be found, primarily in the main cities and in the north. My brief was to find out about the historical and practical aspects of Ayurvedic medicine in this tear-drop shaped country. With hindsight, that was rather ambitious. Over the next few days, I learned there really are no shortcuts with Ayurveda.



Hindu Temple,  
Colombo

## at the horathapola estate

After an hour's drive from the airport, we turned down a dirt path towards an elegant, early 20th-century English planter's mansion. With elephantine ankles from two flights and the tropical heat, I headed straight upstairs for a long, cool shower in my vast, breezy bathroom.

As local artist Anupvega was due to arrive, there was barely time to unpack and look around my antique-furnished bedroom with its king-size four-poster bed and starched white linen. This opened onto a vast veranda looking over lawns ideal for cricket and croquet. Beyond this, as I was to discover, lie 50 acres of coconut, rice, cashew nuts, mangoes and other fruits, as well as spices and hardwood trees. Occasionally, a laid-back bullock can be found in the long grass with a bird in attendance – to remove annoying little bugs. Nature is marvellous.

Meanwhile, downstairs and still on Day One, we discussed art and mystical matters until it was time for a cooking demonstration on the preparation of Ayurvedic

food. In charge of the kitchens at Horathapola are Wije and Nalin, who cook much of the food in earthenware pots on a traditional wood-burning stove.

Dinner that night included home-grown brown rice, eggplant moju, karavila sambal (bitter gourd), garlic curry, okra curry, black pork curry and mango curry. What a stunning introduction to the subtle flavours of Ayurvedic food. Some of the spices used here are chilli powder, salt, cloves, peppercorns and cinnamon sticks. Additionally, there is roasted curry powder, turmeric powder, cardamom, fenugreek and cumin seeds. Plentiful coconut milk softens the hotter elements and freshly-chopped herbs and grated coconut are used to great effect.



If food and art both lift the spirits at Horathapola, the mixture of natural friendliness and attention to detail by the staff is something to be cherished. Agreeing to meet manager Mark Forbes at dawn for a trek around the estate, I slipped away early from dinner to get a few hours' sleep. An early start seemed propitious (it was my birthday) but there was nobody else up! Later, coffee was served under the vast canopy of a 100-year-old frangipani tree and I had my walk around the estate. Then there was a bullock cart ride. After bumping around the property for a while, modern transport seemed much more attractive.





## angam - the sri lankan martial art

After breakfast, we left to see a demonstration of Angam at an academy in Colombo – the lone surviving link to a very special part of Sri Lankan culture and pride. Practised in Sri Lanka since kings ruled the land, when the norm was for the fittest to survive, Angam remains a practice for those who are both spiritually and physically strong. The practice is carried forward from generation to generation from father to son. Angam includes many innovative fighting techniques, such as crowd-holding; their execution requires the unified strength of the body and the power of the



mind. This traditional form of Sri Lankan self-defence is thrilling to watch.

The academy in Colombo is headed by renowned Guru, G. Karunapala. Both Guru Karunapala and another senior, Dr Wickremasinghe, had a stillness and detachment to their movements and attitude that affected me deeply. The good doctor said the Academy planned to take Angam north to teach youngsters positive ways in which to express their energies.

## thalangama vilas

Colombo, on the west coast, is the largest city and former administrative capital of Sri Lanka. The government is now situated in a modern building designed by "super architect" Geoffrey Bawa by a lake at Sri Jayewardenepura, a short distance from the city.

Talangama Lake, near the new capital, emerged in the 1970s as a waterfront development. It is a short drive past the parliament buildings. We had an Ayurvedic lunch close to the wetlands of Talangama, an area that has a large bird population and has adapted well to the urban environment around it. Talangama Villas is a small boutique hotel. Two bedrooms on the first floor share a bathroom. The spacious master suite has a delightful bathroom, open to the wild. There is a great deal of living space – inside and outside the villa.

## in war and in health

That evening, we visited Ayurveda 2009, an exhibition geared to foreign investors and exhibitors. It came just as war had ended in Sri Lanka and the two events fused together in my mind. In Sri Lanka, Ayurveda is regarded as the future of medicine and healthcare. They see the world as turning away from chemical myth to natural herbs and towards traditional medicine. The identity of Sri Lanka, then, has been linked decisively with the image of Ayurveda and the National Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka has named the new approach as "a national mission of indigenous healthcare".

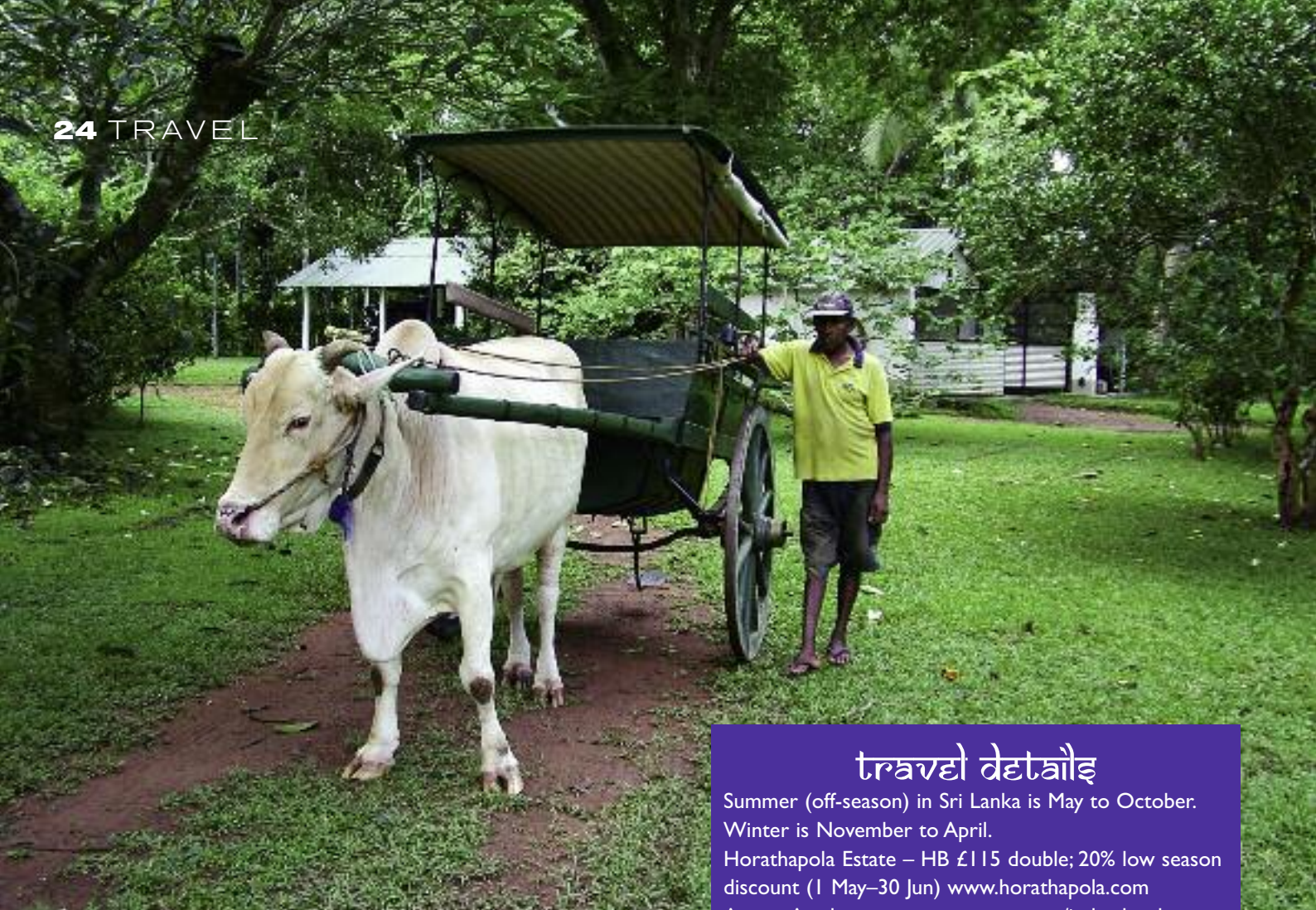
If Ayurveda provides a powerful symbol of holistic integrity in the country, it is to be hoped that the ending of war in Sri Lanka provides a similar opportunity for its inhabitants to work together as a whole. The opening address by the President and Commander-in-Chief of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, at the historic Parliamentary fourth session on May 19th, 2009, seemed to bear this hope out.

Speaking in Tamil, he said: "All the people of this country should live in safety without fear and suspicion. All should live with equal rights. That is my aim. Let us all get together and build up this nation," adding, "This is our country. This is our motherland. We should live in this country as children of one mother. No differences of race, caste and religion should prevail here."

## cinnamon hotel

French editor Lucie and I were exhausted when we arrived, not least by failing to get to a couple of our appointments that day. The Sri Lankan Tourist Board representative suggested we chose our dinner at one of the integral restaurants and had it delivered to our rooms. Most of the service staff had been seconded to a vast, very chic wedding ceremony. So I had a solitary birthday dinner here – it was lovely to stop and chill out for a while after two days and nights of almost non-stop activity with hardly any sleep. Dinner came to my room on a mobile, semi-circular table, complete with flowers and sparkling glasses. It was beautifully laid out but I promptly spilled my drink over the tablecloth.





## ନିଲାମ୍ବେ ବୁଦ୍ଧିଷ୍ଟ ଚେନ୍ତ୍ର

In Sri Lanka, they say: "meditation means awareness. Whatever you do with awareness is meditation. Watching your breath is meditation; listening to birds is meditation. As long as these activities are free from any other distraction to the mind, it is effective meditation."

A key lay meditation centre in Sri Lanka for western travellers and backpackers, this non-sectarian monastery is located in a former tea estate above Peradeniya, under the auspices of Guru, Upul Gamage. Yoga is practiced here on a daily basis. Pupils are taught how to free their minds from the world they live in, and how to look at every situation with detachment. People who are serious about meditation can follow a strong daily schedule, with little interaction allowed.

## ଏଟ ଥେଭା ରେସିଡେନ୍ସିଆଲ୍, କାନ୍ଦି

After climbing into the clouds to visit Nilambe, we stopped on the way down towards Kandy for an experience of Sri Lankan fusion food. Theva is a brand new, five-star boutique hotel and the surroundings of the Hantana mountain range are out of this world. It has been designed to make the most of the mountains around it. If the décor is elegant and minimalistic in the extreme, all the necessary details are in place. Although I was still feeling poorly from a combination of exhaustion and heat, the head chef for Theva produced some exquisite vegetarian dishes for me, again using Ayurvedic principles; by the end of lunch, I was beginning to feel human again.

Next month in Part 2: From the Temple of the Tooth to a 2,000-year-old Ayurvedic book

## ତ୍ରାବେଲ୍ ଡେଟାଏଲ୍ସ

Summer (off-season) in Sri Lanka is May to October. Winter is November to April.

Horathapola Estate – HB £115 double; 20% low season discount (1 May–30 Jun) [www.horathapola.com](http://www.horathapola.com)

Angam Academy [www.angampora.org/index.html](http://www.angampora.org/index.html)

Villa Talangama, Hokandara – [www.jetwingeco.com/uploadimages/File/villa\\_talangama\\_book-final.pdf](http://www.jetwingeco.com/uploadimages/File/villa_talangama_book-final.pdf)

Taj Samudra, Colombo – FB £59 pppn

[www.tajhotels.com/Business/Taj](http://www.tajhotels.com/Business/Taj)

Siddhalepa Ayurveda Resort, Wadduwa – Ayurvedic treatment & FB package (single) £750 for 6 days in summer or £1060 in winter

[www.ayurvedaresort.com/index.html](http://www.ayurvedaresort.com/index.html)

Cinnamon Hotel, Colombo – FB £68 single, £90 double

[www.cinnamonhotels.com/Grand/Rooms.htm](http://www.cinnamonhotels.com/Grand/Rooms.htm)



Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Centre, Peradeniya, Kandy  
[www.nilambe.org](http://www.nilambe.org)

Theva Residencies, Handana, Kandy – Introductory rates from £76 B&B pppn [www.theva.lk](http://www.theva.lk)

Senses Holiday of Sri Lanka for travel arrangements and an English-speaking driver [www.sensesholiday.com/](http://www.sensesholiday.com/)

Meditation Centres in Sri Lanka

<http://srilanka.travel/index>

Kingfisher Airlines [www.flykingfisher.com](http://www.flykingfisher.com)