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IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN AHANGAMA

On the south coast of Sri Lanka
a sleepy surf town will have you
pondering a sea change.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHRIS SCHALKX



*A signature
A-frame
cabana at
Palm.*



WITH

PALM TREES shooting from the earth like daytime fireworks, year-round balmy weather, and the Indian Ocean licking its craggy coastlines and caramel-colored beaches, the south of Sri Lanka has all the trimmings of a paradisiacal hideaway. But it's no

longer the secret hippie commune it once was. Now, 300-plus-room resorts have cropped up on its shores and gift shops line the road from Unawatuna to Matara.

Ahangama, however, a small village just 40 minutes east of Galle, has been spared. Despite the influx of surfers, yogis and Crossfitters settling down in its terracotta-roofed villas, it still feels like a dusty, palm-fringed little secret. Roti shops, not souvenir stores, still line the coastal road, and the air is perfumed with dried fish and frangipani. In-the-know expats have long kept it for themselves, but things are finally starting to buzz now that a slew of boutique hotels has opened.

In 2017, Australians Phoebe Taylor and Seddy Di Francesco were among the first to found a boutique stay in this sleepy village. Taking over a colonial villa in a quiet alley off Ahangama's busy coastal road, their homestay **The Kip** (thekipsrilanka.com; doubles from Rs11,500) was, in their words, "a way to inspire and bring together a community." And they did. Over the past three years, The Kip has become almost



synonymous with Ahangama's laid-back, clean-eating, digital nomad-y lifestyle. It attracts travelers and expats from nearby surf towns in droves for its candle-lit suppers and brunches of (mostly) vegan tapas, using ingredients from sustainable, local sources—as local as the vegetable patch in their backyard. I pick up some house-made jams in their new ethical and eco-minded corner store, where nut milks and low-waste toiletries are also available. If you plan to stay, the four airy bedrooms are cozy all-white affairs with rattan furniture and handwoven linen.

Further inland, a bone-shaking *tuk tuk* ride past rainbow-like fruit stalls and lush rice paddies brings me to **Palm** (palmhotelsrilanka.com; doubles from Rs20,000), the latest addition to Ahangama's flourishing hotel scene. "We were looking for somewhere that still felt relatively untouched by tourism and time," says owner Miriam Haniffa, who left behind a tech career in London to rediscover her Sri Lankan roots. Together with husband Laurie Spencer and their two lovely little girls in tow, she set up six A-frame cabanas in a coconut grove flanked by wild jungle. "The stunning beaches and near-deserted coves were obviously a huge draw," she tells me, "but it was the inland scenery that we really fell in love with here... we could see so much potential for creating a secluded hideaway that really showed off this stunning setting."

Design inspiration came from East London's industrial warehouses; steel shipping containers were transformed into a semi-open central pavilion with design riffing on Brutalist architecture (lots of black corrugated steel, polished concrete and huge black-frame windows), given a tropical touch with roll-up bamboo shades



Clockwise from top left: Coconut roti with honey at Palm; The Kip's breezy lobby; Colombo sights; Miriam Haniffa of Palm; welcome to The Kip.

Clockwise from top left: A glimpse of the past in Ahangama; Palm's no-fuss interiors; a flowery entrance at The Kip.





Clockwise from top left: On the beach at Ahangama; a feast at Maria Bonita; Sri Lankan tea fields; drinks at Abode; retro details at the boutique hotel.



and rattan furnishings. The pavilion also houses a kitchen where days start with honey-topped coconut roti and end with Sri Lankan fusion food like buffalo milk *gnudi* (little gnocchi-like dumplings) and moreish egg curry with string hops. As the night falls and I doze off after one too many arrack-spiked cocktails at the pool, I'm lulled to sleep by the distant squawks of wild peacocks and the sound of monkeys rustling through the trees above my open-air bathroom. I'm starting to understand Ahangama's magic.

Some lazy pool days later, I set out for a change of scenery. Slightly closer to the beach I find **Abode Ahangama** (abodeboutiquehotels.com; doubles from Rs13,500), the new Sri Lankan sister property of Abode Bombay, a boutique bolt-hole in Mumbai's hip Colaba district, beloved by the fashion set for its eclectic interiors and local touches. The Ahangama outpost ticks the same quirky boxes: furniture from reclaimed wood, colorful textiles from north India, and an array of artsy keepsakes. With just four rooms spread over a whitewashed 1950s-era Art Deco-style villa surrounded by a lush garden and swaying palm trees, it feels more like a private residence than a hotel. Pool-lolling is the name of the game here, too (and I faithfully indulge), but Abode's spot just minutes from the shore also calls for explorations around town. Their handy printed guide directs me down tiny pathways ending at abandoned stretches of sand and sun-drenched swirling backstreets where curry shops alternate with yoga *shalas* and grazing buffaloes.

"People stay longer and don't come here for the parties like in Mirissa and Weligama," says Cristina Rodriguez Cruz. "It's more grown-up." The Barcelona-born former flight attendant spent the last two years hopping around the south coast

but was ultimately drawn to Ahangama's relaxed atmosphere. At her new café/B&B, **Maria Bonita** (mariabonitasrilanka.com; doubles from Rs6,000), tucked away behind Ahangama's bus station, we drink watermelon smoothies and feast on tangy cauliflower tacos and hummus-topped salad bowls—all vegan, of course—then set off for some toes-in-the-sand time at the beach just beyond.

At sunset, I mingle with more nine-to-five escapees at blissed-out beach bar **Driftwood**, on a cove where stilt fishers maintain the tradition of waiting for their catch each night. Opened by a French-Indian couple who tired of their hectic careers in New York City's fashion industry, the boho-chic lounge (swaying bamboo lanterns, sisal rugs, macramé wall hangings) boosts the town's F&B offerings with their French tartines and charcuterie platters, which were almost impossible to find before these guys opened their cocooning sleeping-and-eating compound, **Illusion Cove** (illusionlanka.com).

While sipping cucumber gimlets from Colombo-made gin and watching the sky turn from pale orange to peachy pink, I can easily see why people have a hard time moving on from this lo-fi little town. From the conversations I had, it became clear that the community works hard to keep Ahangama in the slow lane. Thinking back to the late-afternoon strolls through its dusty backstreets, ogling beautifully weathered villas with overgrown gardens, my mind wanders off into a hazy daydream. A fixer-upper would be fun? I could take up surfing? Dozens have settled here before me—I might just join them. ➔



Clockwise from top: The pool at Abode; the day's catch at Ahangama market; traditional stilt fishers outside Driftwood; a room at Maria Bonita.