



‘Sri Lankan cuisine is like South India meets East Asia: it’s an incredible combination that will make your head spin’

Elizabeth Winding takes a gastronomic tour of this teardrop-shaped nation, which is fast becoming the next foodie hotspot





Curry night at the Kandy House hotel is an epic feast. Out on the candlelit veranda, a dizzying variety of dishes cover the table, from a tangle of fried banana flowers to cardamom-spiked black pork. There are crunchy poppadoms, two types of rice, and lime-laced coconut sambal; curried beetroot, fiery pineapple and spicy cuttlefish. Lanterns flicker around the lawn, and fairy lights are strung from the trees. Somewhere in the velvet darkness beyond, bullfrogs serenade the pool. ‘Welcome to Sri Lanka!’ says hotelier Tim Jacobson, raising his arrack sour.

A teardrop-shaped island off India’s southern tip, Sri Lanka has seen some troubled times, from 26 years of brutal civil war to the devastation of the tsunami. Now, seven years since the end of the war, visitors come here for all kinds of reasons, from leopard safaris in Yala National Park to surfing the east coast breaks. But the real hook for me is here on our plates: Sri Lanka’s heady cuisine. Half a world away in London, it’s emerging as a hot trend, thanks to buzzing street-food stall Weligama and Soho newcomer Hoppers, whose Bombay-born co-founder Karan Gokani is obsessed with the island’s food. ‘You’ll find familiar Indian flavours like curry leaf, mustard seeds and fenugreek, but also lemongrass and pandan,’ he tells me when I visit for dinner. ‘For me, it’s like South India meets East Asia: an incredible combination that will make your head spin.’ He leaves me with a lengthy list of dishes to try, and a final word of warning. ‘Watch out for the arrack,’ he says. ‘The hangovers can be pretty lethal.’

A week later, armed with his recommendations, I’ve landed in Sri Lanka, on a whistlestop tour kicking off at the Kandy House. Remembering Gokani’s advice – ‘You’ll find vegetables and herbs you’ve never seen in your life!’ – I head to Kandy’s Central Market. He’s right. Even familiar

produce proves disconcertingly different, from knobbly cucumbers to tiny white aubergines. Amused, the stallholders offer us curiosities to try: slippery-sweet granadilla seeds and delicate mangosteen; scarlet-fringed rambutan and a scoop of ripened jackfruit pulp. Weaving through the stalls, Kandy House’s chef Harshi points out local staples, from the pungent dried fish that adds a salty tang to curries to baskets of avocados – eaten as a sweet here, laced with treacly *kithul*. Medicinal properties are key, he says: so-called snake gourd is good for the stomach, while soursop is said to slow cancer.

From Kandy, our road lies south, through the hill country, where Sri Lanka’s black tea is produced. The air is colder, the clouds a bruised blue-grey above the rolling hills, contoured with endless terraces of tea. Next year marks 150 years since tea was first grown here, cultivated by a quick-thinking Scotsman after the coffee crops failed. It was a masterstroke, staving off ruin for the then-British colony of Ceylon. ‘The tea fields of Ceylon are as true a monument to courage as is the lion at Waterloo,’ trumpeted Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Today, the area has a curious time-warp feel, with its colonial bungalows, neat cottage gardens and British-named plantations. Tamil women in bright saris still hand-pick the tea, baskets braced on their backs, pinching the bud and top two leaves with a practised flick of the wrist. It’s arduous, poorly paid work, despite the incredible backdrop.

Along the way, our guide describes the grades of tea, from top-quality orange pekoe down to everyday broken-leaf teas, then the leftover fannings and dust, often used in teabags – everyone’s least favourite in the tasting that follows. Quality also depends on plantation height, with the most prized leaves grown at altitude. Here in the highlands, the ‘mid-grown’ tea is citrusy and aromatic; we leave with a fragrant parcel, and a new appreciation for its subtleties. >

PREVIOUS SPREAD: the curry feast at Kandy House. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kandy Market; the Sri Lankan spread at London’s Hoppers; a tea plantation worker; the windswept beach at the Last House

‘The tea fields of Ceylon are as true a monument to courage as is the lion at Waterloo’

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



FROM TOP: luxury dining at Kahanda Kanda; the fishermen along the coast. INSET: an egg-filled hopper at Koslanda



ANYONE FOR A CUPPA?

Sri Lanka's tea industry started with a single plant, a *camellia sinensis*, brought from China by the British in 1824. The humidity, rainfall and temperature helped it thrive, paving the way for today's \$1.5bn industry. Harvested between eight to 12 days old, year-round, it makes the strong, malty Ceylon black tea Sri Lanka is famous for. Variations of the plant also produce oolong and pu'erh.

Over the days that follow, we settle into Sri Lanka's lazy rhythms. It is, as author Sebastian Faulks wrote, a place 'to talk and dream and eat'. Nowhere does this seem more apt than Living Heritage Koslanda, a four-suite hideaway in the remote Beragala Hills. Set in a serene valley, it centres on a traditional *ambalama* (pavilion), its terracotta roof supported by handmade wooden pillars. 'Everything's been made the old way,' says owner Lucy Adams, who built Koslanda with her late husband, filmmaker Manik Sandrasagra.

Life here proceeds at a gentler pace, in tune with the surrounds. Elephants pass through on their annual migrations, and monkeys steal the mangos, while squirrels have been shredding the cushions for their nests. 'We're trying to catch them with toast,' Lucy sighs. 'We're very Buddhist here.' In the kitchen, spices are ground between stones or with a pestle and mortar, while curries simmer on a clay hearth over a wood fire. Outside the big cities, Lucy explains, this is how most households still cook.

Instead of metal pans are handsome, pot-bellied *walang* (clay pots). The difference in taste is amazing, says Lucy, and the older the pot, the better the flavours will be. Sure enough, that night's meal is charged with spices and slow heat, from juicy mango curry and tempered potato to aromatic black pepper chicken. There are leafy, shredded greens (*mallung*) and coconut-based sambals – the latter served alongside almost every Sri Lankan meal, often including breakfast.

We spend the last few days exploring the island's south coast, with its wild, palm-edged beaches and fishing villages. Seafood is king here, and at Tangalle's quayside market are fish of every shape and size, from toothy barracuda to enormous yellowfin tuna. Staying at the Last House, just outside town, we feast on black tuna tartare and lime-spiked grilled red snapper. Both are in season this full moon, explains chef Ananda, taught to cook by his grandmother.

He's one of a new generation of chefs, respectful of the old recipes, but keen to add his own twist. 'As much as I love updating things, I still appreciate the old ways,' he says. 'But I'd never change my grandmother's recipes – for me, they're still the best.' Since he started cooking, local attitudes have changed, he says. 'Before, it was something for the home, not really respected. Now you can be proud to be a cook.'

Come breakfast-time, the kitchen sticks to tradition with hoppers: fermented rice-flour pancakes, shaped like little bowls. Back in London, Gokani had firm ideas on the hopper, his restaurant's namesake dish. It should, he insisted, have



crisp edges, a soft, spongy base, and a sunny side-up egg at its centre. I'm pretty certain he'd approve of this particular rendition, with its thin, lacy edges and perfectly runny egg, accompanied by a side of chilli-flecked onion relish.

The trip almost at an end, we follow the coast west, past fishermen perched on traditional stilts. There's one brief night at Koggala lake, at the beautiful Kahanda Kanda, with its lily ponds, sculptural, orange-painted walls and exquisite, antique-dotted suites. After a cookery lesson with the chef and glorious bicycle ride through the dappled paddy fields, it's onwards to Galle and the final night of the trip.

Our last day is spent wandering Galle Fort, a perfectly preserved colonial town, sheltered by the old fort walls, which is being gentrified apace. In the early evening, though, boys still play cricket on the green, and families fly brightly coloured kites, while a throng of street-food stalls do a roaring trade in 'short eats'. There are prawn-topped lentil *vadai* and tongue-searing pickles; salty cassava chips and cones of candyfloss. Best – and noisiest – of all is the *kothu roti*, a moreish hotchpotch of curry and roti, chopped and mixed at fearsome speed on a clanging metal hotplate.

Afterwards, in a backstreet grocery shop, I find what I'm looking for: a small, bowl-shaped pan with a green lid, and a bag of rice-flour batter. I'm not sure they'll meet Karan's standards, but my plan is to make hoppers. ♦
Scott Dunn offers a seven-night tailor-made trip to Sri Lanka from £2,495pp including flights, accommodation, experiences, private driver and guide, scottdunn.com