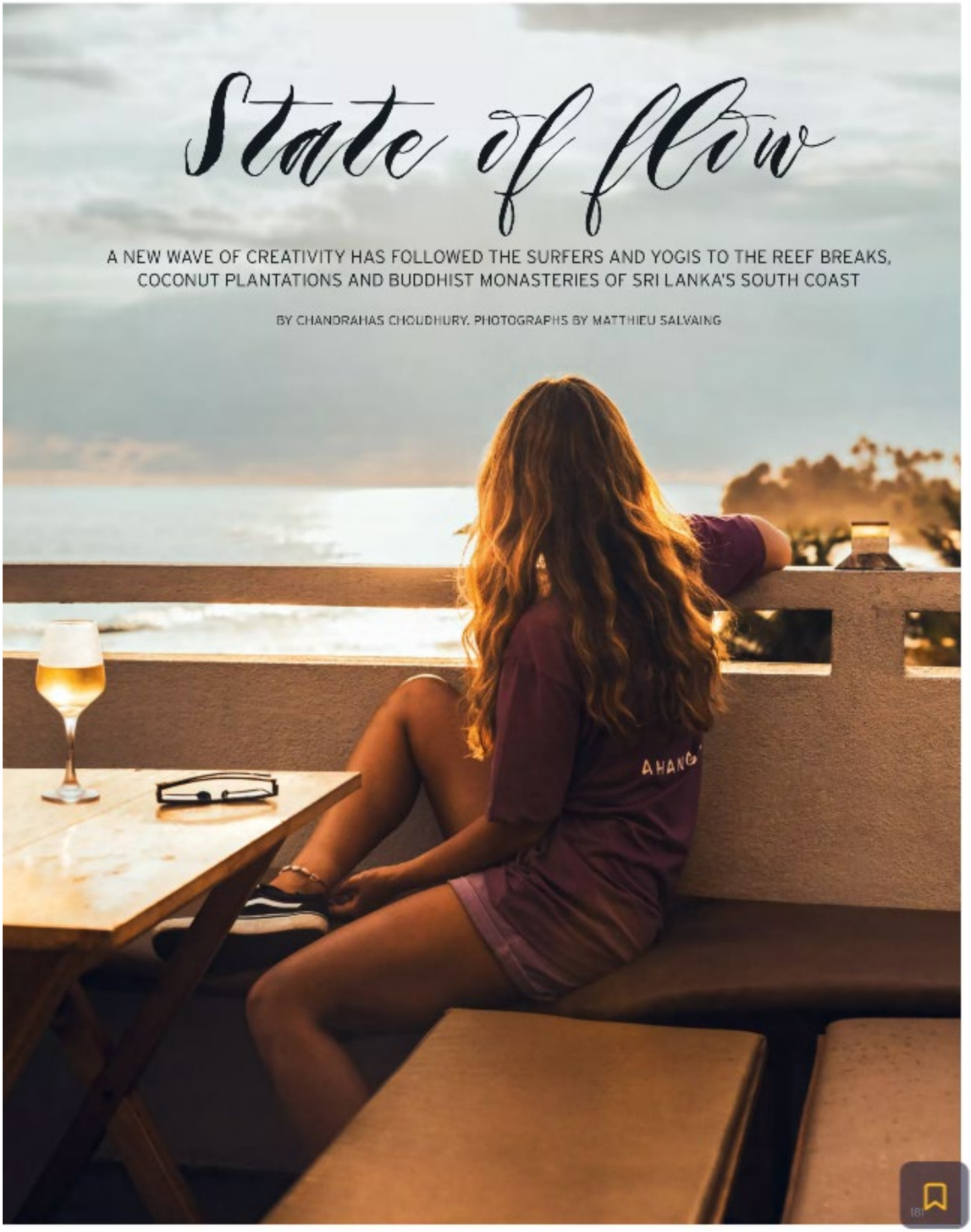
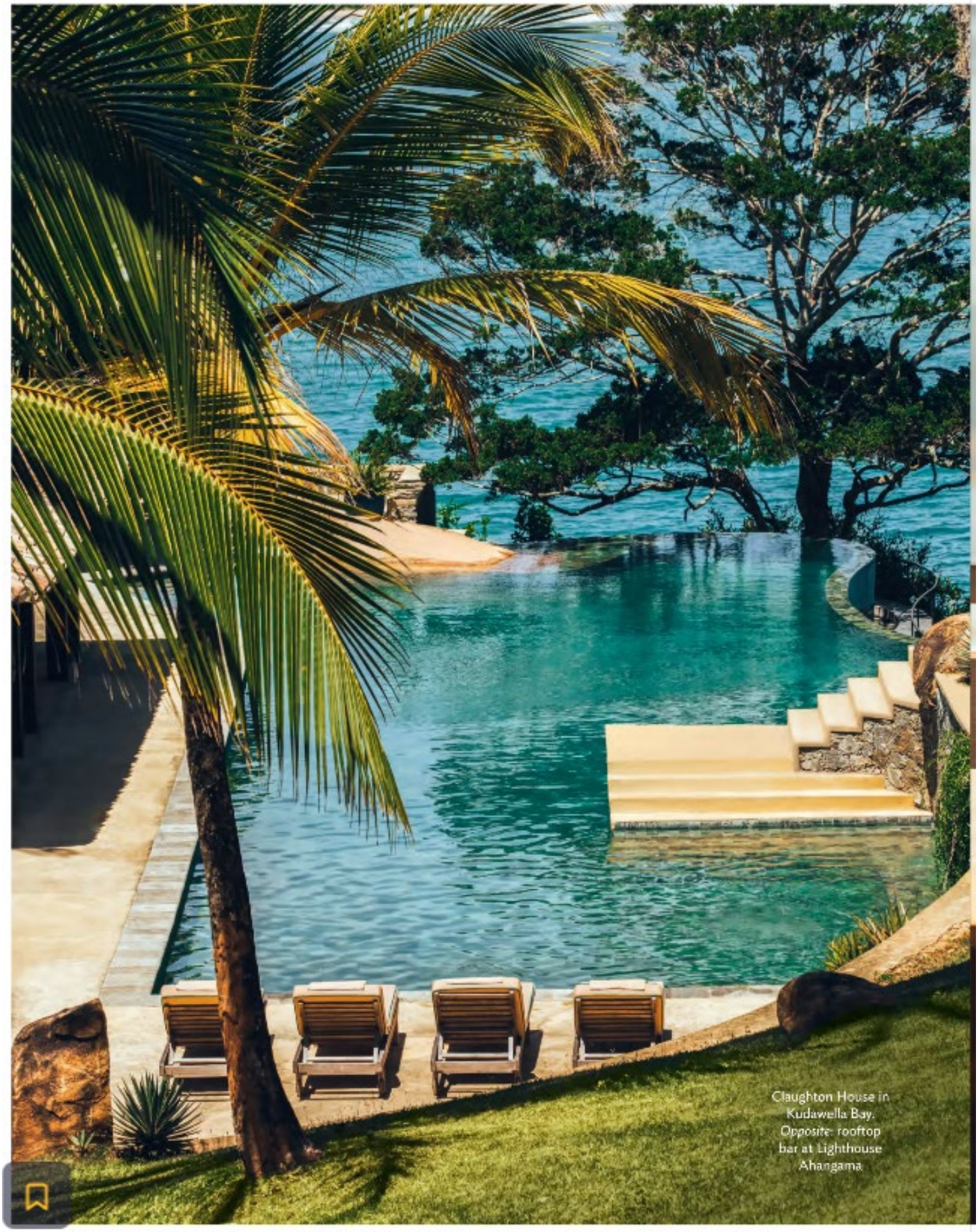
State of flow

A NEW WAVE OF CREATIVITY HAS FOLLOWED THE SURFERS AND YOGIS TO THE REEF BREAKS, COCONUT PLANTATIONS AND BUDDHIST MONASTERIES OF SRI LANKA'S SOUTH COAST

BY CHANDRAHAS CHOUDHURY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHIEU SALVAING





Claughton House in Kudawella Bay. *Opposite:* rooftop bar at Lighthouse Ahangama

We are on different planes, me and them, perhaps even different planets: Land and Sea, Stillness and Speed. On a grassy bluff at the southern tip of Sri Lanka, I clasp a negroni, my feet pointing downhill towards the Indian Ocean. Snatches of jazz float into my ears from Cape Weligama's Surf Bar. On the horizon, a cluster of roseate clouds echoes the amber of my drink.

Down in the ocean, there is traffic. Half a dozen surfers using the last light of day to glide balletically into a reef break created by a headland. They are rapt in their quest. Their histories and identities dissolved by the low light and the immensity of their stage, these stick figures remind me of fishermen in an old Japanese woodblock print.

But in truth, their appearance here on the south coast is of fairly recent vintage. In the past decade, between December and April, when the first of Sri Lanka's two monsoons has spent itself and the weather is balmy, a long band of this coast – an arc of about 55 miles from Hikkaduwa in the west to Hiriketiya in the east – has become a cosmopolitan revel centred around surf culture, with a side of yoga.

Everywhere on the rim of the island – which I peregrinate with my companionable driver G Douglas Wijerathna, on an itinerary ➤

Clockwise from above: bedroom at Villa Mine; pool at Malabar Hill; Galle Fort lighthouse; The Jungalows; boats in Hiriketiya; cocktail at The Surf Bar, Cape Weligama. *Opposite:* surfing Sri Lanka's south coast

Clockwise from this picture: surfboards in Hiriketiya; ornate arches at Malabar Hill; Smoke & Bitters; coconut drink at The Jungalows; local in Dikwella

thoughtfully laid out by Ampersand Travel – I see scooters and tuk-tuks ferrying surfers to beaches and breaks, surf schools and camps. At sunrise and sunset, the sea is speckled with every kind of surfer: paddling out to sea, queueing to catch a wave, clustering in groups around coaches or lying on loungers quaffing orange thambili – the water of the delicious "king coconut" native to the island. An alien making landfall in the new surf towns of Ahangama or Hiriketiya might easily conclude that earthlings are an amphibious, chilled-out species attached to two totems. Twice a day, they park their phones and head to sea with their boards.

This beeline to an undiscovered shore is a familiar arc in the surfing world. On Sri Lanka's south coast, though, the surf revolution has also sparked great stores of home-grown creativity. It has drawn to this part of the island an artistic, culinary and entrepreneurial force not directly linked to the surf scene, opening out a new frontier crackling with a million-flowers-bloom energy not found in Colombo or along the Buddhist and tea trails. These include tea mogul Malik Fernando's Resplendent Ceylon and Reverie, two lines of boutique resorts where I delight in highly worked-up visions of Sri Lankan beauty – from a deep-tissue massage soundtracked by the muffled boom of the sea at the sublime Kayaam House to a dreamlike stay in a retro-futuristic canvas cocoon on the edge of a nature reserve at the Wild Coast Tented Lodge. And the beach town of Ahangama, formerly best known for its 19th-century Buddhist temple and stilt fishing, is now also home to Palm, a modernist A-frame jungle fantasy where, in the words of its owner Miriam Haniffa, "Shoreditch meets Sri Lanka".

Meanwhile, the best cocktail bar and smokehouse in the region is not in Galle, the majestic Dutch colonial city that was historically the south's biggest draw. At Smoke & Bitters, in the jungly open air in the tiny village of Hiriketiya, Lahiru Perera and Don Ranasinghe direct boozy evenings of Ceylon arrack, silvertip-tea vermouth and house-made bitters alongside playful locavore food: "calamari" ingeniously concocted from coconut flesh, dragon-fruit ceviche and smoked jackfruit sandwiches. The region has, in one long breath, drawn a large, diverse cast of people who believe their best life is here.

Consider Raffael Kably. I meet Raff one warm morning in his own kingdom: Soul & Surf, an eight-room B&B he is managing at the time of my visit (he has since left). On the edge of a blue cove in Ahangama, it is ringed by coconut trees and has its own little strip of beach. I imagined Raff would be Sri Lankan, but right away I place his Mumbai accent almost down to the exact postcode. We grew up, it turns out, only a few miles apart in the western suburbs of the megapolis. There the similarities end. Sea-suave in blue shorts and a crisp white half-sleeve shirt showing off his tattooed forearms, this former DJ and film producer is the consummate insider. In concert with Soul & Surf's founder Ed Templeton (also a former DJ), he's watched the local scene burgeon and given it a distinctive accent.

Sri Lanka had always attracted a small pool of surfers focused on the waves of Arugam Bay, the highly rated spot in the east of the island. Indeed, these hardy souls, largely indifferent to political and economic turbulence, were the mainstay of the tourist economy during the civil war that besmirched the lives of an entire generation from the 1980s onwards. Then, as tourism began to take off again after the end of the war in 2009, the south started to acquire a growing reputation, especially as a place where surfing beginners and intermediates could make progress. ("The waves are more forgiving here," explains Raff, "because the reef is only about two metres deep.") It also helped that surf season in the Sri Lankan south – unlike in Arugam Bay, where it starts in May – coincides with winter for so many potential visitors.

Around 2017, the scene really took off, sparked by reports on social media broadcasting the variety of breaks on offer: a lush sun-kissed landscape of swaying coconut trees, wild almond and pandanus; the charms of fresh seafood and thambilis on tap; and the growing number of establishments able to serve as one-stop portals to all the pleasures of this world. Soul & Surf, which started off as a pop-up surf camp, had already set down roots on its current site. And in 2018, Raff moved to Ahangama for good, both to ride and guide the wave. "After I surf in the morning, I find I just cruise through my day," he says. "I love setting up the same pleasure for others. Although here we're not just into surf surf surf. We're after a more discriminating kind of surfer and traveller."

The shared values are aquaphilia, mindfulness and multiculturalism - carpe-diem cool with an eco-warrior edge

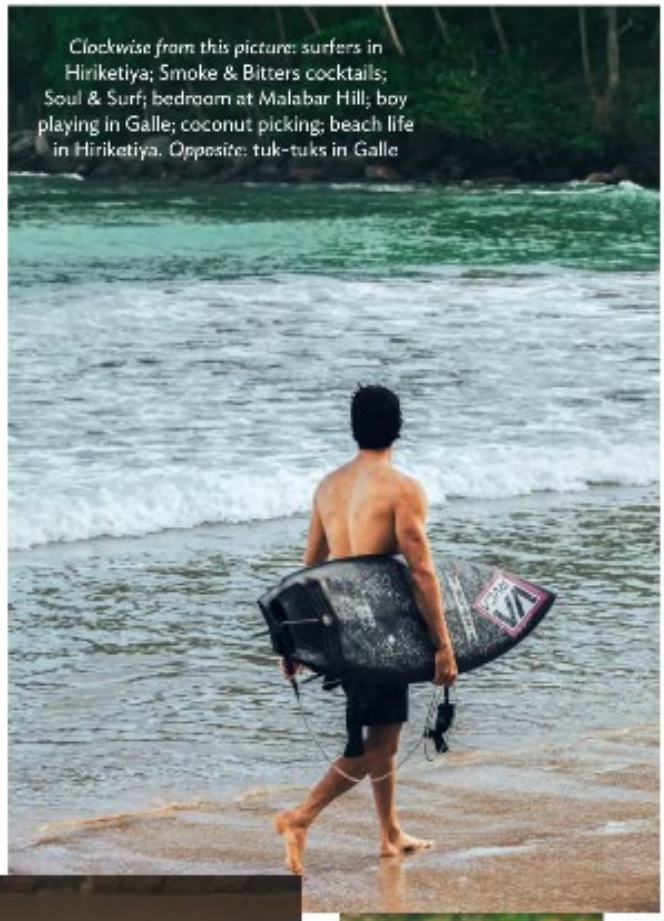
To that kind of traveller, establishments such as Dots Bay House in Hiriketiya, Soul & Surf and The Jungalows in Dikwella offer a community of like-minded people, a full menu of activity, pleasure and self-discovery, and an authentic connection to place. Here, the shared values are aquaphilia, mindfulness and multiculturalism – a kind of carpe-diem cool with an eco-warrior edge. Participants (guests seems too passive) are as likely to gather for beach clean-ups as sundowners. Soul & Surf has even come up with a manifesto of surfing as a way of life, which means caring for the planet, living in the present and practising blue health (the idea that being near water is good for you). Almost a Dhammapada, or Buddhist scripture, for surfers, including the very meta idea of not taking surfing too seriously.

Not taking surfing too seriously, though, is not a notion that Shaggy can take seriously. Of all the people I meet here, no one embodies the new ethos of this world more completely than this local surfing eminence. Shaggy – he seems to have jettisoned his birth name entirely – is small-built, wiry and voluble, with a topknot (updos appear to be mandatory among young Sri Lankan surf coaches), a smile to light up a concert hall and an Instagram account (@shaggy2557) where

ined Raff would be Sri Lankan, but right away I place his Mumbai accent almost down to the exact postcode. We grew up, it turns out, only a few miles apart in the western suburbs of the megapolis. There the similarities end. Sea-suave in blue shorts and a crisp white half-sleeve shirt showing off his tattooed forearms, this former DJ and film producer is the consummate insider. In concert with Soul & Surf's founder Ed Templeton (also a former DJ), he's watched the local scene burgeon and given it a distinctive accent.

– is small-built, wiry and voluble, with a topknot (updos appear to be mandatory among young Sri Lankan surf coaches), a smile to light up a concert hall and an Instagram account (@shaggy2557) where
he strafes the visiting smartphones with his best moves, sometimes in slow motion.

Shaggy received his first surfboard when he was seven years old, a present from a British tourist whose name, Gary Wills, he still remembers. "In the 1990s we were 10 guys sharing a board, five waves each at a time," he says, in the lilting, long-vowelled English of the island. "We'd go surfing, then climb a coconut tree, drink up and go ➤



Clockwise from this picture: surfers in Hiriketiya; Smoke & Bitters cocktails; Soul & Surf; bedroom at Malabar Hill; boy playing in Galle; coconut picking; beach life in Hiriketiya. *Opposite:* tuk-tuks in Galle

Clockwise from top left: dining with a view at Malabar Hill; by the beach at Dots Surf Cafe; bathtub at Villa Mine; boats and local surfer in Hiriketiya

surfing again." Shaggy came of age perfectly in sync with the rising tides of the south, realising, even as many friends pondered emigration due to the island's economic downturn, that the world had started flowing towards him. He now runs a small, thriving operation called Shaggy's Surf School in the village of Midigama, close to five surf breaks with resonant names: Coconuts, Plantation, Ram's, Lazy Left and Lazy Right. "Playing cricket is a waste of time," he says with a scowl, demolishing the reigning passion of scores of his countrymen in one strike. "Me, I dream of the beach."

Over the days I work out a way of shuttling between, even joining up, the bright new universe of the ocean rim and the older world that lies a few miles inland. (The border between the two is often very clear: the coastal railway line running south from Colombo to Beliatta). On the seaward side, behind the arcing silhouettes of coconut trees and the colourful rows of stacked surfboards in beach shacks, are shoals of surfers gliding on a shimmering blue. On the landward side are women with parasols and schoolchildren coasting on bicycles alongside emerald-green paddy fields that harbour a wealth of wetland birds: pond herons, darters, sunbirds.

The seaside is froth and laughter, bass beats and boot camps; faces from far lands flushed with excitement – delightful to contemplate in a country where pleasure and freedom have so often been shadowed by darkness and foreboding. Calling me inland are the undulating slopes of the Handunugoda Tea Estate; the giant statues of the Buddha in serene hilltop viharas, where the sun-baked stone scorches bare feet; and the conical towers of the Old Dutch Trade Centre in the market town of Matara. While the many seaside villas are surrounded by sculptural frangipani, the Buddhist monasteries inland often exist among thoughtful banyan trees with great rustling canopies.

And just like the low murmur of the sea is the gently coaxing voice of Douglas, conjuring up little nuggets of history as we coast, pointing suddenly to a shrine lit up in the sunshine or a bird hidden in a bower, the very embodiment of the goodness and grace that exists in so many people of this land. All they need is someone to listen.

The south coast stays

GALLE

The best places to stay are clustered in Galle Fort, the Unesco-listed 16th-century peninsula south of town. History, romance and colonial grandeur emanate from each of the 11 suites in the **Galle Fort Hotel**, a 300-year-old Dutch mansion recently restored by renowned Sri Lankan architect Channa Daswatte. The Admiral Cheng Ho Suite, named after the great Ming Chinese admiral and regular Sri Lanka visitor, is a highlight with its boxy antique opium bed and spiral staircase up to a sly loft level. Sumptuous breakfasts (hoppers, curry, sambol, fresh fruit) are served beneath fragrant frangipani trees in a colonnaded courtyard, while drinks are taken on the long veranda facing the street. Just up Church Street, **Amangalla** is every bit as imperious in a beautiful 17th-century sandstone corner building. Even if you don't stay, it's worth visiting for the three tiers of high tea on the blue and yellow Portuguese-era tiles of the veranda. On a hilltop inland from Galle, the five-bedroom **Villa Mine** sits in its own 9,000 square metres of undulating landscaped garden, with a hilltop dining pavilion, swimmable lake and pool among groves of mango, palm and rambutan.

HIRIKETIYA AND DIKWELLA

Around these two surfing honeypots, the stays tend to be laid-back, surf-driven and eco-focused – from the thatched huts and solar-powered showers of **The Jungalows** in Dikwella, which has an almost boot-camp approach to its surf teaching, to **Dots Bay House** in Hiriketiya, where Dots Surf Cafe serves great locavore food and doubles as a workspace. The vibe is more secluded at **Claughton House**, a capacious five-bedroom seaside villa on a coconut plantation, with chef and private butler, overlooking the pristine and private Kudawella Bay. Designed by the late Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's pre-eminent modernist, the space flows like an Indian Ocean breeze, right down to the show-stopping infinity pool. With its little pavilions and undulating terraces, Hiriketiya's alfresco **Smoke & Bitters** creates a flow state for wondrous Ceylon arrack and coconut-flesh calamari.

TANGALLE AND YALA

In Tangalle, more than an hour's drive east of Galle, the recently opened **Kayaam House** is a minimalist, light-saturated villa in white, blue and brick tones. The sound of the waves and the gurgle of cascading water radiate a monastic serenity, and the spa has a fine selection of hot-stone and deep-tissue massages. Two hours east of Tangalle on the edge of Yala National Park lies **Wild Coast Tented Lodge**: 28 giant pods set down on the ocean's edge with copper fittings, porthole windows, leather chairs and Bluetooth speakers to distract you from game drives in search of jaguars and elephants. Children have their own extension pods in the eight Family Cocoon Suites.

WELIGAMA AND AHANGAMA

The south coast stretch with the widest portfolio of pleasure. Beside a turtle-friendly lagoon close to a surf break, the Ahangama outpost of the **Soul & Surf** brand (also in Kerala and the Algarve) hews to a well-grooved formula of sea-facing yoga, healthy communal meals and serious but beginner-friendly surf coaching with video analysis. Further inland at **Malabar Hill**, the arches and pillars of old Rajasthan have been audaciously reproduced amid 33 acres of hillside, with private pools and panoramic views in each high-ceilinged villa – and there are bird walks, nature trails and bike rides into the surrounding wetlands. In a former Ahangama coconut plantation given new life by ex-Shoreditch first-time hoteliers Laurie Spencer and Miriam Haniffa, **Palm** is equally serene, but more future-facing, with six black A-frame cabanas and two suites on stilts with butterfly chairs, outdoor showers and a prevailing sense of concrete-and-rattan tropical modernism.

HOW TO DO IT

Sri Lanka is a key destination for tour company **Ampersand Travel**, whose founder James Jayasundera is half Sri Lankan. The team can organise tailor-made itineraries along the island's south coast, with suggested options including a 13-day ultimate beach holiday from £4,650 and a nine-day luxury surfing tour from £4,400.
ampersandtravel.com