

# ISLE UNWIND

What happens when a phone-addicted city girl goes off-grid and into Sri Lanka's remote hill country?

BY CLAUDIA DE BRITO



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antani's Wellness Concierge, Helen Langston, motioned for me to follow her, "Come on, I'm sure it's fine". I hesitated and thought, "what would Bear Grylls do?" before realising that would be madness. "Cool, go ahead, I'm right behind you", I said, not moving. Helen, a globetrotting yogi, has lived enough for two lifetimes, I wasn't ready to go just yet.

It turned out that the water buffalo I was worried about disturbing stayed exactly where they were, not the least bit interested in any gouging or charging. We made our way down to the river bank, past the pointy-horned beasts, and slid into the Hulu Ganga. I'd never swum in a river before. I felt revitalised. Then a dry leaf touched my shoulder, so I screamed and got out. When I realised I wasn't actually in any danger, relief washed over me and in I went once more.

I had come to Santani in search of some respite, and spent most of my four days there on this stress/bliss roller-coaster. There's actually a scientific explanation behind why stressed-out humans seek thrilling experiences. It's a form of contrast therapy. When an adrenaline-fuelled encounter (like coming face-to-face with a 500kg animal) is followed by a Zen experience it actually resets and quiets the brain, resulting in total relaxation.

Occupying 43 acres of Teldeniya, a tiny village surrounded by Kandy's hillside tea plantations, it's the first and only sustainable wellness retreat of its kind in Sri Lanka. The brainchild of Vickum Nawagamuwage, a wilderness-loving Harvard grad, Santani is grounded in a holistic approach to balancing the mind, body and spirit through Ayurveda and a mindful connection to nature. They provide customised packages including stress relief, weight loss and post-trauma recovery; or you can just go and do your own thing. First, they help you disconnect and relax, with activities and therapies including yoga, massage, cleansing, fitness and detox. Then they say they'll equip you with the tools to help you cope with stress once you get home. →



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A view of Kandy's Knuckles Mountain Range on an early morning hike; Santani's staggered podium villas surrounded by lush greenery; Water buffalo are vital to village life and are a common sight on the banks of the Hulu Ganga river; breakfast with a view.

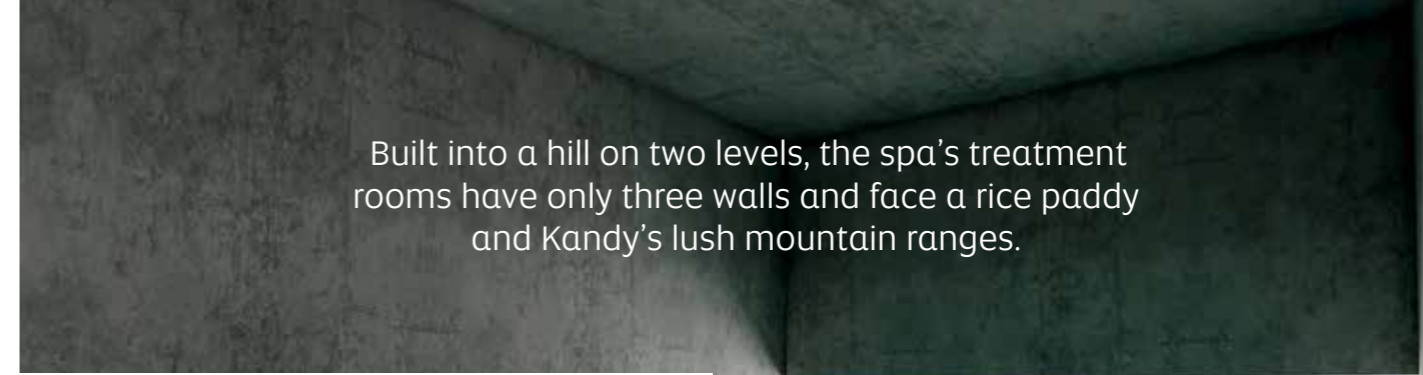






THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Sri Lanka's only sustainable wellness resort seen from a distance; a dish of Chef Wajira's silky tortellini; a headboard made of reclaimed wood; the view from the spa's thermal bath; light pours into the rooms at sunset; the intelligently designed rooms are modern and simple.

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The boutique resort has 16 staggered podium villas with modern yet minimal interiors, eschewing any unnecessary extras. The structures are intelligently designed to have as little impact on the environment as possible. Built on stilts, with vents on three sides, Kandyan winds circulate in and around the villas. Which is useful, since there's no air conditioning.

The retreat's approach to sustainability is in the details. The wood that lines the dining room floor was reclaimed from a 100-year-old tea factory, and all organic waste is turned into compost to be used at their organic farm. The resort's holistic wellness extends to the community; where possible, local ingredients and suppliers are used and many staff members were recruited from the nearby village.

In order to determine a suitable treatment plan, guests are encouraged to visit Dr Sreekanth. An Ayurvedic specialist, he filled me in on the principles of the holistic healing system and how my treatments and nutrition would be determined by my *dosha* (mind and body type). A detailed questionnaire revealed that I'm a *pitta dosha*, which means that my body needs 'cooling' foods. I was advised to avoid egg yolks, nuts, hot spices, honey, and hot drinks. Breakfast looked bleak.

Thankfully, Santani believes in letting guests realise their own interpretation of wellness. For me, wellness means being happy, and I love food more than I love being skinny, so I followed the pitta guidelines as closely as possible but I ate all the delicious Sri Lankan curry and egg hoppers my little heart desired. In addition, Chef Wajira and his talented team were on hand to provide me with a menu of delicious superfood-packed dishes inspired by local flavours. Stealth health at its best.

Along with internal and external Ayurvedic treatments, the Santani spa also offers Western therapies and has a thermal bath that rivals the best in Europe. Built into a hill on two levels, the spa's treatment rooms only have three walls and face a rice paddy and Kandy's lush mountain ranges. In keeping with the rest of the resort, the aesthetic is minimalist luxury. The team is equipped to deal with whatever ails you and is bolstered by an intriguing roster of visiting therapists.

Outdoor physical activity is paramount at Santani. It comes from the Ayurvedic principle of being close to nature and harnessing its properties for healing. When I wasn't out dodging buffalo with Helen, Nirmala, the resort's dedicated naturalist, was tasked with talking me out into the wild. A passionate conservationist, he's a pro at identifying plants and spotting birds, butterflies and all kinds of other wildlife endemic to the Sri Lankan jungle. Our outings started off as leisurely strolls but quickly escalated to steep inclines, waist-deep river crossings and clambering up massive boulders. The reward was always worth the (considerable) effort. On the last day, a two-hour jungle trek led us to a secluded waterfall. I don't know if it was the exhaustion or the setting but I felt moved and connected to my surroundings. When I reached for my phone to take a picture, I realised it had been several hours since I'd last checked it.

IMAGES: CLAUDIA DE BRITO, SANTANI & SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

### FLY WITH ETIHAD

Etihad Airways offer direct flights from Abu Dhabi to Colombo. Transfers to Kandy can be arranged with the resort. For more information, please visit [etihad.com](http://etihad.com)



When Santani was conceived, there was talk of no phones on site. Realising it might be difficult to enforce, management eventually vetoed the idea. I have to admit that, post hike, I would eagerly head back to my room and its internet connection to catch up on emails and social media. Part of me felt guilty but the other part of me was convinced that I couldn't relax without knowing what was going on. Then nature intervened. One night, while I was scrolling through engagement announcements and cat videos, a giant moth flew straight into my face. I batted it away but I quickly realised we were both trapped in the mosquito net that surrounded the bed. A few frantic moments later, I managed to let him out, put my phone away and went back to bed in non-moth-attracting darkness.

A recent report by Spa Finder found that although 18-34 year-olds are most digitally interconnected, they also report higher levels of loneliness and stress than any other age group. With stress a major contributing factor for a whole host of life-threatening ailments including obesity, diabetes and cardiac arrest, a holiday has to be more than just time off. Santani gives you that option. In total contrast to my normal life, I woke up every morning, surrounded by cloud-topped deep green mountains and to the sound of monks chanting from a temple across the valley. In the end, it was hard not to let go. [santani.lk](http://santani.lk) ♦