

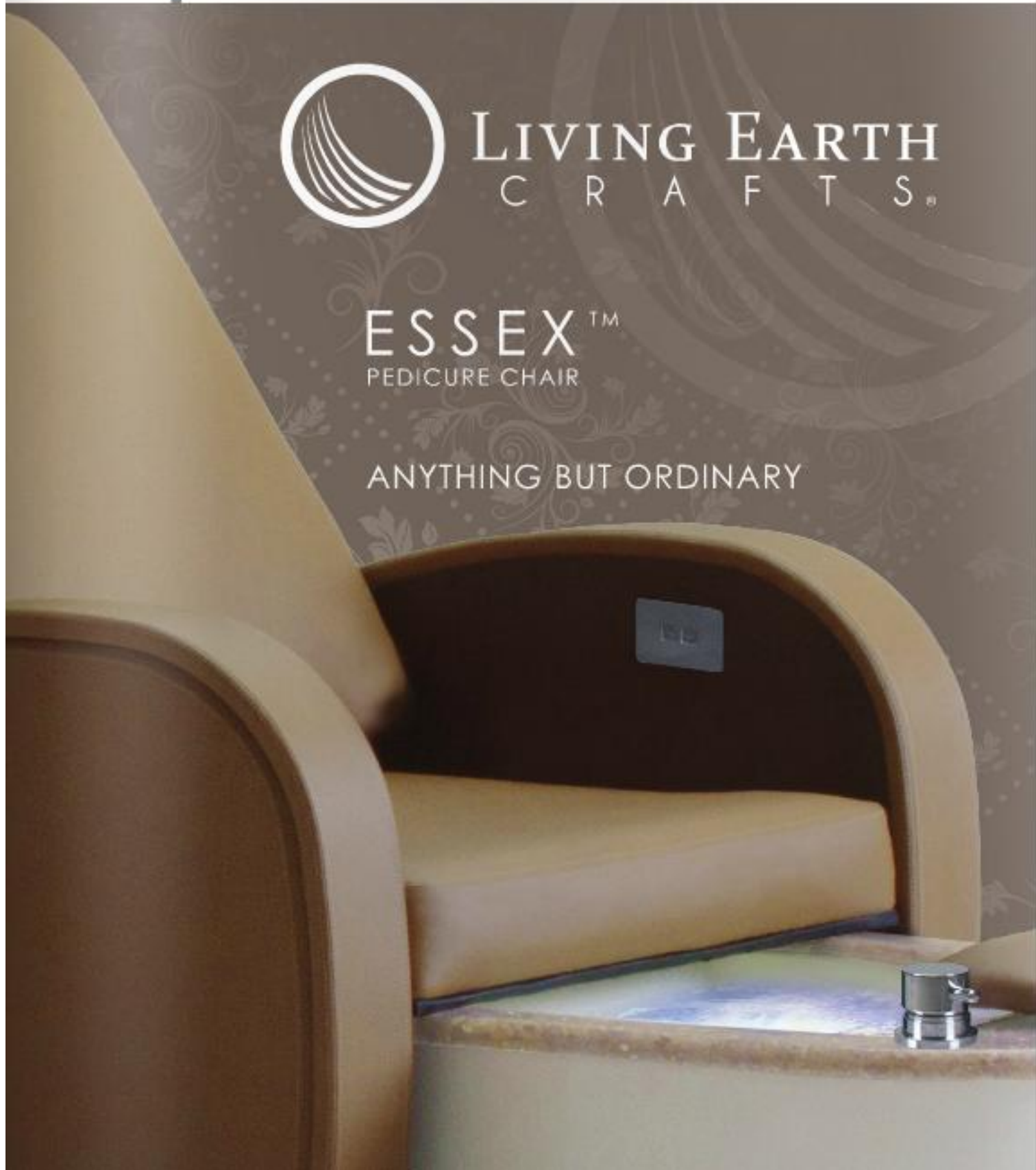
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A LAND OF WELLBEING?

Can hotels which have a strong wellness focus play a role in Sri Lanka's reinvigorated tourism story? Neena Dhillon visits the Pearl of the Indian Ocean to find out

At the first tourism and hotel investment conference hosted recently by hospitality consultants HVS in Sri Lanka, the government revealed a strategy that seeks to position the country as one of Asia's most sought-after destinations. It aims to double the expected tourist arrivals of 2.2 million this year by 2020, turning the sector into the largest contributor to its Foreign Exchange Earnings.

The potential is undeniable: the teardrop-shaped island not only benefits from a concentration of UNESCO-listed World Heritage sites, it also offers stunning beaches, national parks teeming with wildlife, cultural treasures and hospitable people, making this a round-trip location with an average length of stay of 9.9 nights.

Although the tropical isle has much to achieve to shrug off the legacy of its brutal civil war – which came to an end in 2009 after 26

wearying years, but effectively stunted the development of tourism – it's capturing the attention of many leading international hotel chains.

Minor Hotels opened its third Sri Lankan property at the end of 2015 (see p95), while Shangri-La has just revealed a 145-acre (59-hectare) resort in Hambantota boasting a signature Chi, The Spa. Other global operators are looking to make their mark this year too. Oryx is introducing its Aman brand in Galle, with the 172-room resort featuring a branded Breeze Spa; Riu Hotels is unveiling a 500-room property featuring a Renova Spa in Atungala, through a joint venture with Aitken Spence; and Sheraton is arriving with two properties (both incorporating spas) in Colombo and Kosgoda.

So, as Sri Lanka reclaims its place on the map, we ask fledgling and established hoteliers about the country's potential as an emerging restorative destination and where spas fit in.



Minor Hotels CEO, Dillip Rajakarier (above), was born in Sri Lanka and is bullish about its prospects

“The government has a clear focus on stimulating tourism”

Anantara

Having entered Sri Lanka back in 2011/12 with two Avani branded properties, Minor Hotels marked the end of 2015 with the opening of Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort on its southernmost coast.

Realised through a joint venture with Sri Lankan conglomerate Hemas, Minor Hotels has invested US\$200m (€180m, £148m) to introduce the Anantara experience. This figure divided between Tangalle and a sister property launching soon in Kalutara.

Sri Lankan-born Dillip Rajakarier, Minor Hotel's CEO, is bullish about the country's prospects, saying: "I'm confident we will launch more hotels because the island offers a responsive business climate, actively promotes foreign investment, and the government has a clear focus on stimulating tourism."

The Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort provides one of the country's biggest spas, at 4,887sq ft (454sq m), and GM Tamir Kobrin has a keen understanding of the issues operators face in setting up such facilities. "Some challenges are the limited awareness of wellness beyond traditional ayurvedic healing therapies, lack of formal training among therapists, language barriers and few chances for supplementary local training," he says. "In terms of recruitment, there's a lack of understanding among community and families about the professionalism and safety offered by a career in the five-star spa sector."

But he does see potential to position "Sri Lanka as a restorative destination".



Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle opened in late 2015 and a sister property in Kalutara will make its debut imminently



SRI LANKA

Nawagamuwage (left) worked for Deloitte in the US before returning home to make his mark in tourism. The offering (below) has a unique edge over the typical sun, sea and sand packages of the 1970s/80s



“I started using wellness services and practising yoga over five years ago to avoid burnout”

• Santani

When first-time hotelier Vickum Nawagamuwage opens Santani this August, he'll reveal “the first purpose-built wellness resort in Sri Lanka”.

The new resort will draw on the country's Buddhist heritage of mindfulness, its ayurvedic traditions and a forest setting on the edge of the Knuckles Mountain range. It will also place an emphasis on customised experiences, aiming to create balance through clean air, space to detoxify the mind, global spa therapies, outdoor activities and healthy cuisine with a fine-dining twist.

It's a concept close to his heart. “People don't have balance in their stressed-out lives, with little chance to escape emotionally from the working day because of technology,” he points out. “I started using wellness services and practising yoga five years ago to avoid burnout.”

Born in Sri Lanka, the entrepreneur moved to the US when he was 30 to study for an MBA, quickly being snapped up by



Santani, set on the edge of a forest, will draw on Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage of mindfulness

Deloitte for a global consultancy career. As soon as the civil war was over, he engineered a return, advising Malaysian and Singaporean investors on tourism, all with the view to establishing his own project. “I turned down a partnership because I believe that one of Sri Lanka's strongest global assets is tourism. But our industry seems to be lacking in direction beyond the sun, sea and sand concept associated with the 1970s/80s.”

After identifying a pristine 48-acre (19-hectare) location in central Sri Lanka, Nawagamuwage has worked with

architect Thisara Thanapathy to create a 20-room sustainably-built resort, free of air-conditioning thanks to the comfortable temperatures of its elevation 850m above sea level. “One of the central tenets of ayurvedic healing is panchakarma detoxification including the nose cleanse,” says Nawagamuwage. “In this rainforest environment, the respiratory system starts to cleanse naturally.”

Of its minimalist design, he says: “Our four spa treatment rooms for bodywork are uncluttered and cut out artificial stimuli, allowing the mind to relax.”

SRI LANKA

While short stays are available, Santani is geared towards all-inclusive packages of three to seven nights, each including a consultation with a wellness concierge to determine background and goals. This is followed by a full assessment with an ayurvedic physician and the head of wellness – Narayana Prasad, formerly of Four Seasons Maldives and Song Saa Private Island.

Depending on the package focus – which could be healthy lifestyle, detox, stress, yoga or ayurveda – the experience could include a customised food plan, movement classes, lifestyle coaching, personal training, massages, mild cleansing treatments, energy balancing and meditation.

“We’re not about shocking the body,” Nawagamuwage points out. “We’ll introduce dietary changes slowly, giving guests a taste of juicing or explaining how bitter melon can work to reduce sugar levels and where to find a similar acting vegetable at home.”

“Similarly, if guests are exhausted, we’ll encourage them to recuperate by relaxing in our thermal salt-water bath – the first in Sri Lanka – or trying a water release treatment in the hydrotherapy area.”

Through its website and apps, Santani’s multinational spa team of eight will provide guests with practical follow-up advice to take home.

“We’re setting our package rates at US\$600-700 [€539-269, £408-476] per room, per night, making Santani a better value proposition for two people than regional competitors such as Chiva-Som,” adds Nawagamuwage.

Santani has just 20 rooms and rates start at US\$600 a night



Drummond, from the UK, runs Tri with his wife Lara who heads up its many yoga sessions

Tri

Having moved to Sri Lanka in 2001, British-born Rob Drummond serendipitously stumbled upon a 6-acre (2.4-hectare) plot of beautiful land flanking Koggala Lake in Galle District two years later and eventually opened Tri – an intimate hotel – in late 2015.

“I became a hotelier in a roundabout way,” he says. “Most of my Sri Lankan friends are in hospitality and I was aware there was a lack of good-quality rooms, for which there would be a demand. Still, I didn’t start out with a business plan – rather Tri is a creation of love.”

Working with Raefel Wallis, co-founder of AOC Architecture and a leader in sustainable design, Drummond explains that they “approached Tri as a landscaping project, choosing optimum spots for the placement of buildings and taking cues from the views presented in between particular trees, including an ancient banyan.” From here, a spiral-shaped wheel emerged following the folds and compression of the land, neatly mirroring nature’s Golden Ratio. Of the geometric

“I didn’t start out with a business plan – rather Tri is a creation of love”

construction, Drummond observes: “Really the architecture serves as a platform for the land’s natural beauty, which is so peaceful and relaxing that it lends itself to a feeling of wellness.”

One of the first facilities to be positioned was the elevated yoga shala, partially open to the elements to form a serene space in which to practise. Drummond’s wife Lara Baumann, originator of the Quantum Yoga method that taps into ayurvedic principles, lends a timetable of classes with four free sessions offered weekly and guests able to book one-on-one tuition. Drawing on her personal network, Baumann also organises a visiting practitioners’ programme through which specialist yoga teachers and spa therapists are invited for a month-long residency. Visiting

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Tri's wellness offering will evolve in response to market demand

► practitioners are typically paid on a 50/50 split basis with the hotel, in addition to accommodation and food being covered. Since the 11 rooms, suites and villas at Tri (catering for up to 30 guests) do not always create enough demand, they seek yoga teachers who are also trained in a therapy to keep them fully occupied and make residencies worthwhile. The local community is another source market.

"With limited rooms, and since it's difficult to source female Sinhalese bodywork therapists [cultural norms limit physical interaction between the sexes], making the sums work for visiting practitioners can be tricky and we're not quite there yet," explains Drummond.

"We would consider adding more hotel rooms in future but in the meantime we're generating a lot of latent interest in retreats." With this in mind, Tri is on course to introduce yoga weekend workshops and longer high-end retreats offering a mixture of yoga sessions with a focus on pranayama, asanas and inversions, physical activities such as hiking or kayaking, along with nutritious meals and juicing.

Drummond is keen to underline that Tri's wellness offering will evolve in response to market demand, with all

activities optional to guests. Still, in just over six months of operations, at least one person from every room has participated in a yoga session with the spa's capture rate per room standing at 70 per cent. Drummond and Baumann both hope to have a Sri Lankan head of spa in situ soon to guide the direction of the small

Tri is built on an island (below) and has been constructed according to geometric and Golden Ratio principles. The yoga shala (top) is a key facility

facility consisting of two treatment rooms and steamroom, although therapists also use the yoga shala for massages. "The most likely expansion would be the addition of a small ayurvedic spa," adds Drummond. "We've already had a practitioner giving ayurvedic bodywork but it would be interesting to beef up the ayurveda element, linking into the yoga and holistic approach here."

His story, along with the experiences of those involved in the Anantara and Santani projects, provides food for thought for spa brands hoping to share in Sri Lanka's renewed tourism landscape. ●



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