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SRI LANKA SPECIAL

SHOP SURF AHANGAMA ADVENTURES STAY

EAT GUIDE TO GALLE DRINK PLAY



GETAWAY

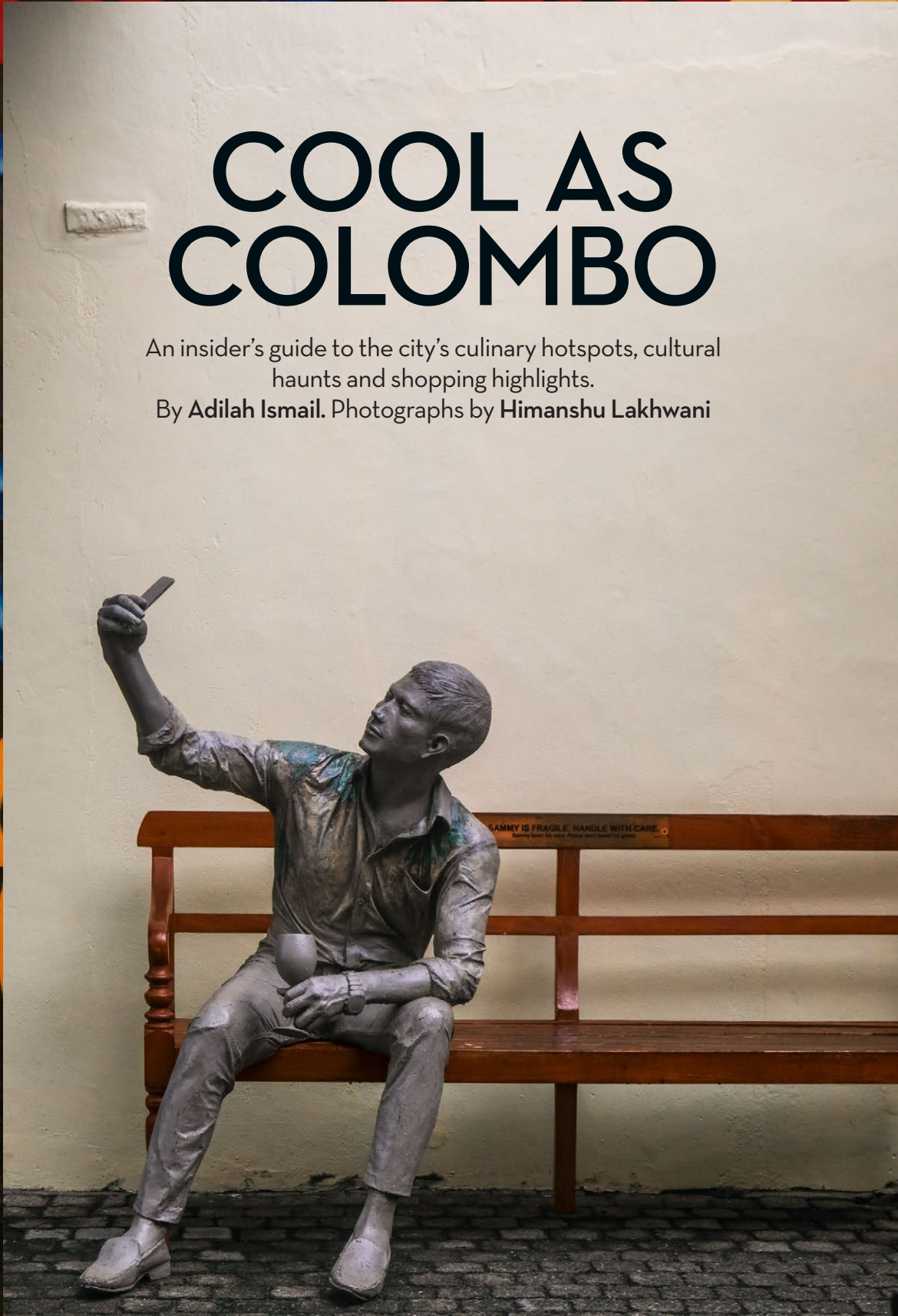
Lotus Tower in Colombo.
Opposite page: **art installation**
at Park Street

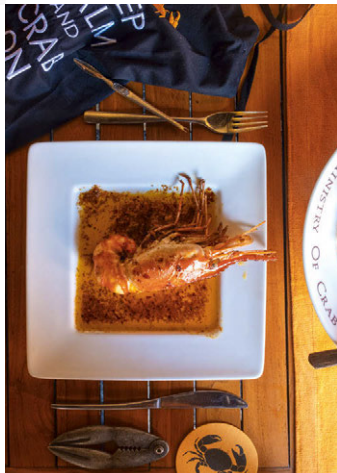
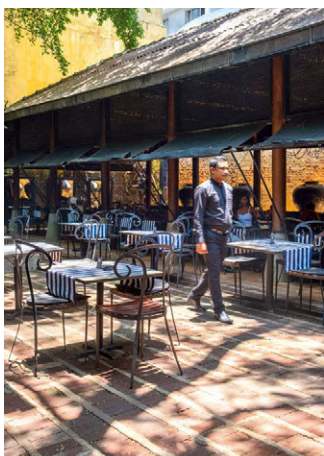


COOL AS COLOMBO

An insider's guide to the city's culinary hotspots, cultural haunts and shopping highlights.

By Adilah Ismail. Photographs by Himanshu Lakhwani





Clockwise, from left: **lemon and ginger chicken at The Gallery Café; Barefoot Garden Café; chef Dharshan Munidasa and garlic chilli prawn, both at Ministry of Crab; interior, The Gallery Café**

There are three versions of Colombo that travellers encounter: the city that was, the city that is and the city that it aspires to be. From an old colonial asylum in Cinnamon Gardens that was converted to a plush shopping arcade, now derelict, to sleek skyscrapers in a neighbourhood where Dutch colonisers once held slaves, and a constant remaking of its public spaces, every now and then, all three versions of the city converge with each other.

Any Sri Lanka itinerary that skips the capital is missing out. An inchoate city still discovering itself and always shape-shifting, Colombo is open to endless explorations. Here's an insider's run through the city's mind-blowingly diverse food, ancient and contemporary cultural scene, its priceless bargains and shopping spots.

WHERE TO EAT

Dutch Hospital Complex in Colombo's heart is home to the globally lauded **Ministry of Crab**, a seafood restaurant founded by chef Dharshan Munidasa and cricketers Mahela Jayawardene, and Kumar Sangakkara. The restaurant pays homage to Sri Lankan crab, playfully offers bibs to diners and invites eating with hands. Highlights of the menu include dishes such as pepper crab, garlic chilli crab (their signature preparation), clay pot prawn curry mopped up with wood-fired bread, and coconut crème brûlée. A meal for two (without drinks) can work out to ₹12,000.

To ward off Colombo's heat, leafy alfresco dining is the ticket. On Sunday afternoons, the **Barefoot Garden Café** (inside the legendary Barefoot boutique on Galle Road, founded by Barbara Sansoni) hosts live

jazz in its courtyard. Even on any other day, this is a lovely brunch spot, often hosting regular art exhibitions by local artists. **The Gallery Café**, which used to be renowned architect Geoffrey Bawa's office on Alfred House Road, is stunning in the evening—a romantic date location with sophisticated cocktails and desserts. **Rare bar + kitchen** has alfresco as well as indoor and private dining. Expect modern international cuisine interpreted with Sri Lankan flair. The restaurant is in one of the city's liveliest nightlife quarters, the cobblestoned Park Street, where crowds spill out of its popular bar, **Uncle's**, and restaurants, **Monsoon, Kuuraku** and **Park Street Trattoria**.

If you're in Colombo on a Saturday, head to the Race Course Grounds where **The Good Market** takes place every weekend, bringing together

pop-ups from responsible businesses across the country. There's a large range of food and drink available, making it an excellent spot for breakfast after a morning walk around Independence Square, built to commemorate Sri Lanka's independence after British rule. Picture hoppers loaded with different toppings, milky kiribath paired with a tart, fiery katta sambol, lavariya (a steamed rice flour dumpling stuffed with coconut and jaggery) and more.

For brunch, **Café Kumbuk** on Independence Avenue offers a contemporary riff on local, seasonal produce with multiple vegan and vegetarian options. The **Black Cat Café** in Colombo 07 has no black cats, only cosy nooks to sit in, an easy ambience, good coffee and food. For lunch, head to **VOC Café** at the **Dutch Burgher Union**, known for its lamprais. →

GETAWAY

Clockwise, from left: **Shahili Gomes-McCoy and Binu Wickremasinghe, clothes, both at The Design Collective; dessert, interior, Café Kumbuk; skincare at The Design Collective. Opposite page: Galle Face Road**



A beloved staple of the Sri Lankan Burgher community (locals of Eurasian ancestry), the lamprais is slow-cooked rice simmered in a flavourful broth with frikkadels, seeni sambol, brinjal pahi and blachun, steamed in a banana leaf. Call ahead and reserve your lamprais as these sell out fast, and wash it down with DBU's homemade ginger beer.

There's a variety of authentic Sri Lankan cuisine to pick from. Try village-style chicken curry, roast paan, a seven-in-one vegetable curry and buffalo curd with treacle at **Upali's** in Colombo 07. You can also opt for **Palmyrah**, another old reliable located inside the basement of Renuka City Hotel, which centres flavours from Sri Lanka's north in dishes such as mutton poriyal, Jaffna crab curry, fried fish pittu and odiyial kool—seafood soup from the north.

Love cake, a Sri Lankan cake made with semolina, cashew and crystallised pumpkin, travels well and has a long shelf life. **The Cake Factory** in Kollupitiya does an excellent version. Local baker Nanditha Peiris Gamage also has a sinfully fudgy, cashew nut-laden milk toffee that can be picked up on order.

Intrepid foodies can try **Abdul Hameed Street** (or Aluthkade) in north Colombo, a night market for street eats which is especially vibrant on weekends and includes everything from dolphin kotthu (a type of kotthu with larger roti pieces), smoky mandi rice and oxtail soup to offal dishes and colourful novelty drinks. Crowded and chaotic, the quality can vary wildly—take cash and your curiosity to guide you through the frenzy.

One of the cornerstones of Sri Lankan snacking culture is short eats or portable snacks

such as cutlets, rolls, patties, kimbula buns and fish buns, which are freely available from outlets like **Fab, Perera and Sons, Caravan Fresh** and **Tasty Caterers**. Occasionally, you may see a choon paan truck belting out a tinny version of Beethoven's "Für Elise", selling these tiny bites around selected neighbourhoods.

Like many countries, Sri Lanka has its adaptation of Chinese cuisine. **The Station**, by the Dehiwala beach, has a robust Sri Lankan Chinese menu and is particularly known for its hot butter cuttlefish (HBC)—calamari dusted with cornflour, and fried and tossed with chili paste, spring onions, minced garlic, butter and sugar.

WHERE TO SHOP

Barefoot, the 60-year-old boutique founded by Sansoni, a writer and artist, has built

an international reputation for its kaleidoscopic, colourful handlooms, home furnishings, clothing, accessories as well as souvenirs, food gifts and a book shop which stocks many Sri Lankan writers.

Social enterprise **Selyn** has a boutique on Fife Road and is prized for its fashionable collection of fair-trade handlooms. Both **Lakpahana** and **Laksala** (a state-owned gift store) offer a wide range of spices, including Ceylon cinnamon (far superior to the more freely available cassia cinnamon), Sri Lankan arts and crafts and souvenirs. **Paradise Road** in Colombo 07 can be a good stop for artfully crafted, contemporary gifts, homeware, souvenirs, crockery and more. **The Design Collective**, on Stratford Avenue, founded by Shahili Gomes-McCoy and Binu Wickremasinghe, showcases →



GETAWAY

Clockwise, from left: **Red Mosque, Pettah**; sketches, exhibit from **The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva** show, at **MMCA Colombo**; gallery, curio, at **Barefoot**



close to 50 independent and sustainable fashion brands from South Asia, in a multi-concept store with jewellery, accessories, clothing and skincare. Wellness brand **Spa Ceylon**, known for their beauty line, has stores throughout the city, while luxury Ayurveda spa, **Kemara**, on Reid Avenue inside the Lakpahana premises, offers rejuvenating massages and spa treatments.

Colombo is a hub for classic ceramics and crockery; tourists often stop by the outlets of Sri Lankan brand **Dankotuwa** and Japanese brand **Noritake** in Colombo 07. The **Midaya Ceramic Company**, which supplies to Disney, Harrods and Anthropologie, has stores in One Galle Face mall and Nugegoda.

There is no dearth of gemstone shopping here—for established vintage and craftsmanship, try **Colombo Jewellery Stores** at Alfred House Gardens,

Vogue Jewellers and **Raja Jewellers**, both on Galle Road. Local entrepreneur **Ruwini Jayarathne**, who fuses semi-precious stones and modern design, has a store in the World Trade Centre.

WHAT TO DO

Evenings in Colombo are best spent at its cherished sea-facing promenade **Galle Face Green**, enjoying sunsets while eating manioc chips, achcharu (fruit spiced with chili salt) and sampling street food from various vendors. If you're in the mood, drop by the 160-year-old **Galle Face Hotel**, a heritage icon, for drinks and live music at the open-air space **Checkerboard**.

This is a city with deep cultural roots and, to immerse yourself in it, visit its many temples and shrines. One of the oldest temples here is the Buddhist place of worship

Gangaramaya temple. Opposite to it is **Seema Malakaya**, a temple designed by Geoffrey Bawa on Beira Lake. Pettah's **Red Mosque**, in the Indo-Saracenic style, is famed for its pomegranate-shaped domes, and red-and-white facade.

For art lovers, **the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA)** is a good starting point. Tucked away in an old shopping mall, the museum curates regular exhibitions and free talks and events. At **Sapumal Foundation**, a gallery housed in portraitist Harry Pieris's old house, you can dive into the works of greats like Lionel Wendt, Justin Deraniyagala and Ven. Manjusri Thera, founder members of the '43 Group, the first modern art movement in Sri Lanka.

The **Collective for Historical Dialogue and Memory (CHDM)** organises regular memory walks,

screenings, exhibitions and talks, highlighting forgotten or neglected aspects of Sri Lanka's past. A recent exhibition shed light on the history of the Malayahyas—Indian-origin Tamils who were indentured labourers in the country's coffee and tea plantations under British rule.

Keep a day to experience Colombo's natural wonders. Its urban wetlands **Beddagana Wetland Park**, **Diyasaru Park** and **Thalangama Wetland** are havens for birding and fishing cats. Small Cat Advocacy and Research (SCAR) holds bi-monthly wetland walks.

Given that Colombo is still rebounding from the 2022 economic crisis and tourism is a key driver of its current growth—tip generously wherever possible. Instead of thinking of the city as a hurried layover, take your time to ease into it and you'll be pleasantly surprised and charmed. 🍷