

## Home Overseas

Children play cricket on the beach with a homemade mango-wood bat. Fishing boats of sun-bleached blues and ocean greens rest up on the sand, and enticing smells advertise just-caught crabs and fish coconut curry. Nearby, at the edge of the beach, there's a gate fashioned from crooked cinnamon branches.

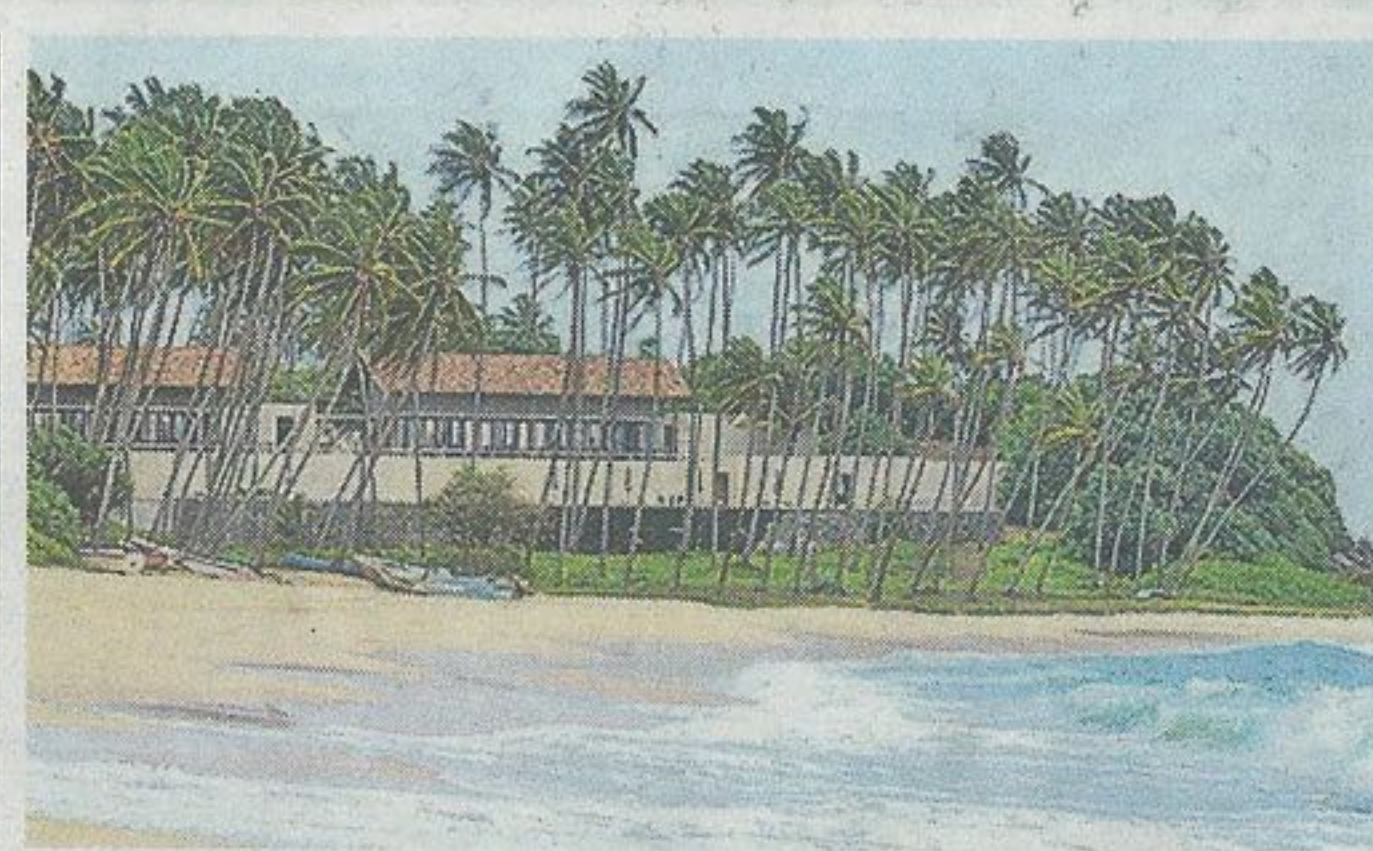
On the other side are hammocks slung between trees, a sarong-clad young man sweeping the lawn with a palm-frond rake, and another servant netting neem leaves from the courtyard pool. The cry of peacocks fills the still, hot air, a monkey scampers across the baked terracotta tiles of the colonnaded walkway and Lucky, one of five rescue dogs, blinks a sleepy eye.

Welcome to Thalassa, home of the writer Charlotte Breese and her husband, Irfan Husain, a political columnist.

For 11 years, they've divided their time between London, Dorset and Mahawella Beach, near Tangalle, on the deep southern coast of Sri Lanka. Their 8,500 sq ft house, built in the "inside out and outside in" style of the Sri Lankan modernist architect Geoffrey Bawa, is set in 1.25 acres (or 206 perches, by the measure used locally) and overlooks the crashing waves of the Indian Ocean.

Sri Lanka has long seduced adventurous Brits looking for a tropical retreat. They have traditionally headed to tea estates in the misty hills, or to Galle, but as property prices have risen and seafaring availability has become scarce, Tangalle has emerged as the new hotspot.

Here, 50 miles along the coast from Galle, a trickle of international folk – their numbers increasing since the 30-year civil war ended in 2009 – have built or renovated beachside villas, breathing



new life into houses by paddy fields, and opening boutique hotels for guests who come to visit the Yala and Udawalawe national parks (famous for leopards and elephants, respectively), surf on the beaches of Hiriketiya or go whale-watching at Mirissa. The region has ancient Buddhist temples and shrines, turtle hatcheries, birdwatching and banana plantations.

The award-winning Kadju House, completed in 2007 and

overlooking Seenimodera Beach, is a striking design by the go-to Sri Lankan contemporary architect Pradeep Kodikara – think a minimalist tropical aesthetic and a stylish blurring of interior and exterior. It has five bedrooms and can be rented from £455 a night. "It's somewhere to read, chill and contemplate," says Verena LaBrooy, who left the UK 13 years ago to manage this and five other properties owned by Brits.

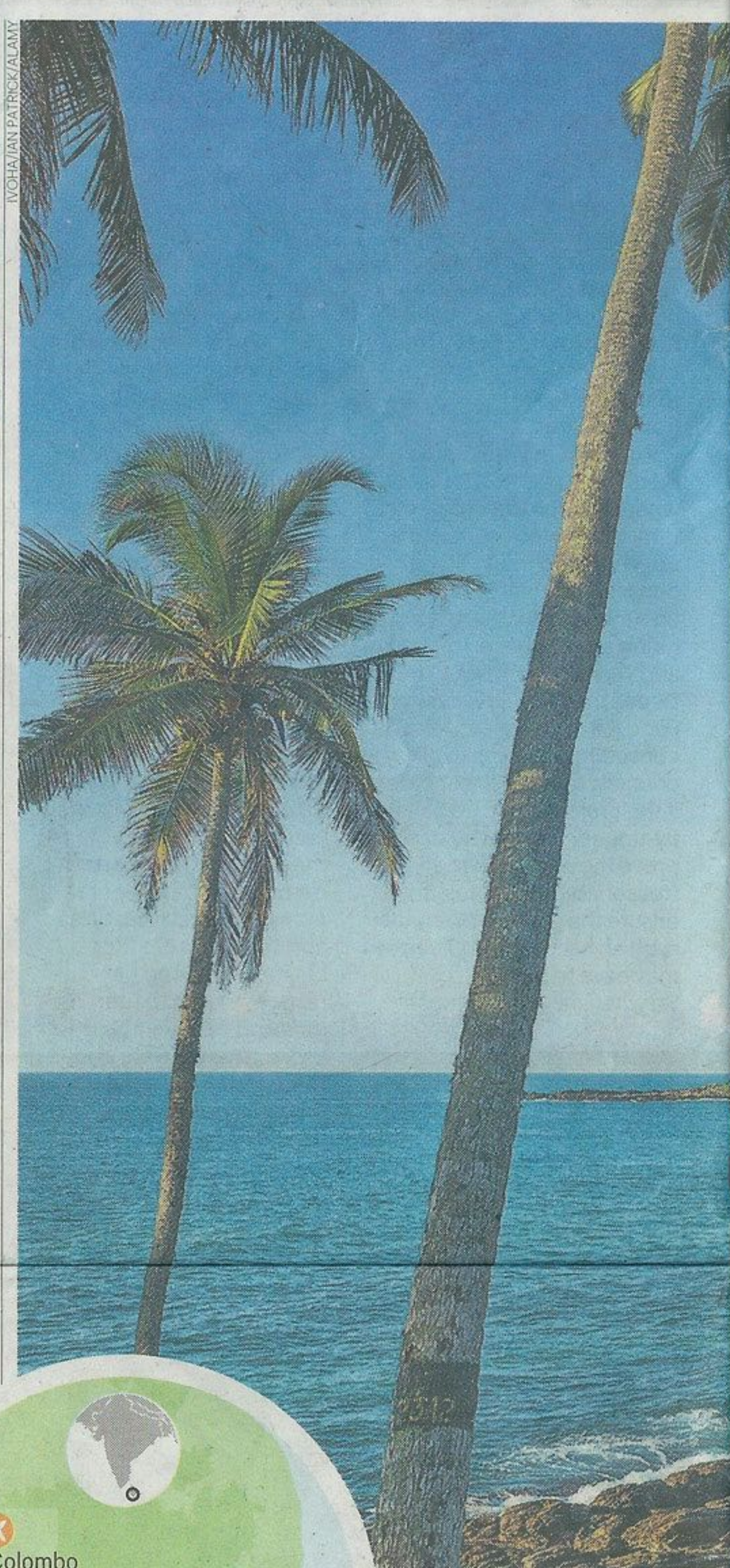
"The Tangalle Riviera, as we call this stretch of coast, is what the area's really about," says the hotelier Tim Jacobson, a former Citigroup banker who first bought land in 1996 and now has five properties. "This includes Seenimodera and the mile-long Mahawella Beach, the country's finest."

"It's relatively undiscovered – and the plots in Tangalle are bigger than Galle's, and far further from the coastal road," says Nicola Crowe Read, another pioneer who built her two-bedroom Teak House (available to rent) in 2004. In that same year, Adrian Zecher, founder of the Aman hotel group, presciently chose to build the Amanwella resort nearby.

Conditions in this comparatively underdeveloped region of the south are as ripe as a succulent mango for investment. Geoffrey Dobbs – the force behind everything from the local tuk-tuk polo tournament to the Galle Literary Festival – has been in Sri Lanka for 27 years and runs or owns five properties around the island. "If I were starting afresh and looking for the best opportunities," he says, "I'd invest in Tangalle."

There are many reasons for his optimism. The last stretch of the new expressway from Colombo airport will be completed in 2019, cutting the drive time to Tangalle by a further 40 minutes to two and a half hours, and a rail line along the south coast is under construction. Five years ago, Cinnamon Air started offering a 45-minute hop in an "air taxi" (seaplane) from Colombo to Dikwella, over palm-oil plantations and paddy fields.

On the down side, Mattala Rajapaksa airport, 40 miles from Tangalle, has proved a white elephant since it opened



Charlotte Breese and Irfan Husain, right, have divided their time between the UK and Sri Lanka for 11 years and are now selling their beach house for £1.85m. Above, the hotelier Nick Buckingham

# PARADISE FOR INVESTORS

Sri Lanka's Tangalle Riviera is the island's hottest property. Improved road, rail and air links are set to boost prices, finds Caroline Phillips

in 2013 – FlyDubai is the only international carrier using it. "But the Chinese and Indians are jousting to monetise it with budget airlines," Dobbs says. "That'll really open up this part of the country."

The Sri Lankan government is democratic and relatively stable, and the president, Maithripala Sirisena, is encouraging investment from overseas. He's also simplifying confusing property regulations. "You can get a 99-year lease as a foreign national," says Ivan Robinson, director of Lanka Real Estate.

"If you want to purchase a freehold, for about £2,300 a lawyer can create a corporate structure that respects the law while giving investors security. Stamp duty is now 1% on leasehold purchases and 4% on freehold." This year, new rules will also free up condo ownership for foreigners, paving the way for serviced villas.

"Even with the tsunami and the war, prices never went down – which shows an undervalued market," Jacobson says. The big resort

firms have clearly read the (local) tea leaves: two years ago, the Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, on a former coconut plantation, became the first full-blown, bells-and-whistles beach resort on this stretch of coast.

Nick Buckingham, a bun-haired south Londoner, is another expat who's counting his blessings. The tuk-tuk to his boutique hotel, Buckingham Place, splutters past buffaloes wallowing in ponds, monitor lizards scuttling like mini dinosaurs and roadside rambutan stalls.

Buckingham Place, which has a 5.0 rating on TripAdvisor, is on the edge of a beach and nature sanctuary at Rekawa, just east of Tangalle town. "It started as a hobby, a midlife crisis, building six cabanas, then became more extreme," says Nick, who is wearing traditional kurta pyjamas.

He broke ground in 2003 – "very slowly at first, because I'd never even built a garden fence". He planned to be in Rekawa for just a few weeks a year, but in 2010 his driving-school business in

**“If I were starting afresh and looking for the best opportunities, I'd invest in Tangalle**

Britain collapsed. He opted to trade his old life and five-bedroom house in Kingston upon Thames for a "simple and satisfying lifestyle" as a hotelier. He'd constructed just enough to open half of Buckingham Place in 2010, and has now built 16 bold concrete villas dotted around the lush grounds, with a "Bawaesque" restaurant and a newly finished spa. "It's all cost £1.3m," he says. "I was just offered £4m for it, but I'm not selling."

What are the drawbacks? "It's not for the faint-hearted," Buckingham says. "The British High Commission gives prospective investors a warts-and-all picture. Bureaucracy here is like wading through treacle, and everything's steeped in superstition – my rural builders had mysterious reasons for not crossing beams or making walls parallel."

Stories abound of battles over land titles, of power cuts, geckos pooing on the Egyptian bed linen, and the monkeys – and moist sea air – destroying furnishings.

Despite all this, local estate agents' market predictions are bullish. "I expect property prices on the beach to double in and around the Tangalle area when the highway is completed," Robinson says. "Beachfront prices in and around Galle have gone from £3,500 per perch (£13 a sq ft) in 2014 to £20,000 now, with the expressway."

"In 2017, prices went up by about 10% on Tangalle's beaches and 33% on Galle's. Seafloor land in Tangalle is

currently about £400,000 an acre, but inland it's just £80,000. That's still five times cheaper than comparable properties in Bali or Phuket."

Many owners deify their costs with rentals, and these are on the up, too. "The UK remains the most significant rental market," comments Jack Eden, the founder of Eden Villas (and great-nephew of Sir Anthony). "As the island is an emerging destination, luxury villas offer great value."

"An upmarket beachfront villa sleeping 17, with seven bedrooms, a private chef and a 65ft water slide, can be let from £7,700 per week. A year-on-year increase of 7% in rentals by British expats from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as well as the UK, is making yields more appealing to investors." The high season for lettings runs from December to April and July to September, outside the monsoon season.

Like most Brits with houses here, Breese and Husain came first on holiday. "We stayed for the beach, sunshine, intense history and wildlife, and to



MIRISSA

Villa Pointe Sud is set in three acres of tropical gardens next to a Buddhist temple, with direct beach access. The Palladian-inspired home has five bedrooms and is a 2½-hour drive from the airport. **00 94 777 720249, lankarealestate.com**



WELIGAMA

Between Galle and Tangalle, this fully furnished five-bedroom villa is one of four designed by a young Sri Lankan architect. It overlooks a secluded cove fringed by palms and a white-sand beach. **00 94 777 720249, lankarealestate.com**

**Come on in**  
The lush coastline near Tangalle. Far left, the Amanwella resort

create an escape to share with friends," Breese says. "Now, with grandchildren all over the world, we're selling."

It turns out that their house is Dame Maggie Smith's favourite tropical retreat. Thalassa has a 38ft by 22ft drawing room with soaring ceilings ("The teak floor is reclaimed from a hill-station ballroom"); an open-sided sitting room twice that size, with a rough-hewn stone floor; six bedrooms decorated in colonial style, with fans and wooden ceilings, but with polished concrete ensuites that are partially open to the warm rains, lush tropical foliage and fireflies that sparkle in the inky sky; and a "massage temple" nestled in the jungle. It's on the market for £1.85m.

"We'll make a return of a £1m-plus when it sells, on our outlay of about £400,000," Breese says. "We let it for only three weeks a year, which covers our annual costs of £24,000, including all utilities, maintenance and staff wages."

The staff, English-speaking and attentive, may stay on with the right buyer. They include the housekeeper, Nandi, who is a dab hand at creating delicate fresh okra, tuna and coconut curries, and Samantha, who keeps his tuk-tuk by the gate to whizz guests to the temples, hidden coves, lagoons and local fish markets that make this coastline such a draw.

thalassasilanka.com; enquiries@thalassasilanka.com. SriLankan Airlines flies daily to Colombo, with fares from £500; srilankan.com

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