

KANDY SAMADHI CENTRE – FOR THE LUXURY OF TRANQUILLITY, BEAUTY AND SIMPLICITY

By Caroline Phillips



It's almost possible to touch the white clouds that move slowly across the hilltop in front of my terrace. There's a hammock hanging between vintage wooden pillars and monkeys swinging in trees watching me watching them. Lying there is great too for listening to the orchestra of birds and crickets. Sweet music conducted by tree frogs, with backing vocals from a singing river and wild boar rustling in the bush. There's a view of the Knuckles Mountains and of paddy fields, bamboos, forests of mango, jack trees and guava. It's like waking up in Heaven a few years too early.

This is the Kandy Samadhi Centre: a former tea plantation turned yoga, Ayurveda and switch-off and write, dream and paint retreat. It's a 50-minute drive north of Kandy, Sri Lanka. It's the creation of antiques dealer and organic farmer cum self-dubbed '21st century hippy,' Waruna Jayasinghe, an unusual hotelier. He's wearing an abundant beard, bone and silver jewellery (his own designs) and a sarong. "I'm on a spiritual quest to link humanity," he says. "People come to Samadhi to work out their karmic issues."

But let's rewind. On arrival, I'm given fresh papaya juice and a torch, then shown to my pavilion — led for five minutes along a jungle path by a barefoot man with my suitcase on top of his head. The hotel's website warns that there may be snakes and spiders. So I stamp my flip flops fiercely and shine my torch menacingly. Reader, I have to tell you something. Over the course of six nights, I run across animals sharp of tooth and claw — known in Sinhalese as a 'balalā' and a 'ballā.' (Respectively a 'cat' and a 'dog').



My bedroom is Bohemian — with a wall of pebbles, frescos of naked ladies, and lamps fashioned from vintage tea urns. Its guest book bears testimony to many joyful stays: words like 'spiritual,' 'magical,' and 'healing' are sprinkled across its pages. Next morning, I move to another

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bedroom, still closer to the abode of the gods. It sits atop the hill with the aforementioned magisterial view.

All the rooms boast antiques, and many have vintage showers and freestanding claw-footed bath tubs in bathrooms with sides open to the jungle. In his Kandy antiques shop, Waruna sells everything from museum-quality saris to wicker snake baskets; from Hindi, Buddhist and mother goddess figures to vintage cooking utensils, and old signage and 17th century Sri Lankan exorcist masks. Many such pieces are in the Samadhi bedrooms. "Material accumulation is a headache," Waruna claims. "My project now is to bring Ayurveda and yoga to the world."

So far, his reach is 26 pavilions set in 18 acres at Samadhi (accommodating 40 guests). Waruna designed everything, despite having no formal architectural training. "Samadhi is the place to get in touch with your higher consciousness," he says. "Somewhere to find your purpose in life." The architecture is, he says, inspired by meditation and temples of tranquillity. After days, I am still finding hidden joys, like the pavilion for reading on the river. And even though my stay is during peak season, there are only four guests: a peaceful number.




So what of the food? At 7:30pm (everything happens early here), I make my way to dinner: the kerosene lamps (like hanging tea pots) are lit all along the stone paths to guide the way to the open-sided dining room. It's beside the river and with vintage lamps on the tables — their flaming wicks flickering in the inky night. There's a buffet for all meals, served in rustic terracotta pots warmed over naked flames. It's simple and organic, home-cooked village fare that's mostly plucked from Waruna's garden, and all freshly prepared. Even the rice is home grown.

There are dishes like bean curry, dhal, red rice, mushroom curry and string hoppers (a Sri Lankan staple made of rice flour). And cassava, egg curry, and milk rice. And just occasional chicken, fish and eggs. There's no alcohol. Just mountain spring water, teas and fresh juices. Dr De Silva, Samadhi's Ayurvedic doctor, pops up suddenly during dinner. He stands waiting patiently beside a guest, an artist from London who's supping on a fluorescent green, liquid herbal Ayurvedic concoction with added ghee (clarified butter). "Eat all your soup," counsels the good doctor. "It's good for bowel movement."

I fall quickly into the rhythm of Samadhi. I rise daily with the sun to do group yoga in the open-sided Meditation Pavilion. Waruna's wife, Yumi, has taught since 2005, and offers her own eclectic practice with "everything that has worked for me, and a lot of emphasis on the upper back. Westerners are all hunched when they come here." Originally a cartoonist in Tokyo turned Buddhist and yoga teacher, she takes us through a fast-moving class that does indeed tackle my journalist's hunchback.





After a consultation with Dr De Silva — who trained in Colombo for seven years, hails from a traditional healing family and specialises in Panchakarma cleansing cures — I visit Samadhi's Ayurveda Spa daily. They offer an authentic experience including wooden Ayurvedic massage tables (albeit with added cushions for over-indulged Westerners) and coconut husks as mugs for drinking medicinal brews. Instead of relaxation muzak, there's the sound of the gurgling river.

The treatments range from Shirodhara (warm nutty oil dripping on the forehead to stop those pesky thoughts) to full body massages and a detoxing sweat with Ayurvedic herb leaves in a coffin-style 'Nardy' steamer. For wannabe Cleopatras, there's a bath in asses' (in reality cows') milk — well, two therapists actually pour the warm milk over me from brass teapots — which makes me smell like yoghurt but leaves my skin soft as Indian silk.

I go on one river walk through verdant tropical vegetation to waterfalls where palm-size butterflies flit in the air, and I sit on my own in contemplative silence. I take a dip in the chilly waterfall, its cascading waters cleansing the air. I don't do much else during my stay. I don't want to.



I slow down, and start savouring the moment. It's hard to get a mobile signal, there's no Wifi in the bedrooms and — even close to the router, which is way down one of the many paths that meander through the jungle — the signal is patchy. So I surrender and go with the flow. Yes, there are local sights like the Udawela cave temple, Hantana tea museum, a tour of Kandy, a trip to watch elephant bathing, or an outing to the Dambulla cave temples. Or a Sinhala cookery lesson at Samadhi. But they can wait until next time. I do almost nothing. Simply think, dream and lie in a hammock.

"A breatharian came to Samadhi and didn't eat for a year," claims Waruna. "Another woman came and discovered her inner child and her past incarnations." Who knows? Certainly it's a quirky place beloved of dreamers and eccentrics, writers and artists. Where Westerners have a chance to escape cities to savour old-style village life, get back to nature, peace and to be creative. Where the luxury it offers is tranquillity, beauty and a simple pace of life. And somewhere with soul and magic, where life in the slow lane seems too fast.

FURTHER INFORMATION

A week at Kandy Samadhi Centre starts from \$1250 for two including full board and seven yoga sessions each. From \$300US (single or \$450 double) for a 2-night yoga package (which includes room, full board, and two daily yoga sessions), from \$320 for an Ayurvedha package or from \$380 for two nights yoga and Ayurvedha. Visit www.thekandysamadhicentre.com for more about the Centre, and www.warunaantique.com for more about the antiques gallery.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WEEK

