



Royston Ellis visits Trincomalee and finds a Sri Lankan resort to rival those in the Maldives.

There has been a lot written recently in the Sri Lanka press about Chaaya Blu. The second night (and several nights afterwards) that I ever spent in Sri Lanka over 30 years ago was at Club Oceanic, as Chaaya Blu was in its previous life.

I stayed there whenever I could over the years and was always impressed by swift and friendly service, delicious food and rooms that opened right on to the beach, with no fence keeping outsiders out and guests in.

What changes have been wrought? I wondered, as my vehicle swung into the hotel's car park.

The first change is the lobby. It has been transformed with mirror walls and glittering mirror mosaic pillars and low slung wooden deck-chairs into a vibrant pavilion of light and space. There are bar stools with cushions covered in cast off denim jeans at the counters, where guests can sit while chatting to the receptionists.

From a drinks trolley we were offered a choice of cocktail or fruit juice, a cold towel and such a welcome from the staff, it was clear Chaaya Blu was going to chase away any blues developed during the 263 km drive from Colombo.

The revamping of the hotel is magnificent, keeping the breezy charm of the setting and adding some ultra modern sophistication. I have seen it described as Retro but that's just a label for the brilliance of the redesign. The view from the lobby is of a broad boardwalk stretching to the beach alongside a huge glimmering swimming pool. At its end is a pair of wooden deckchairs poised by the beach, commanding a royal view of the sea.

We were led to what is called a beach chalet but in fact was an up-stairs room (number 411) in a block of four. Entrance is actually onto the balcony of the bedroom with its day bed and a private view of the beach. A wall of glass panels (with denim blinds) gives access to the room.

With walls and furniture of white with orange cushions galore and a denim half counterpane

on the bed, the room was as bright and as cheerful as the hotel's sunny beach setting.

Denim upholstery is a neat idea because it doesn't get tainted by the ocean, and there are not only denim seat covers but denim also forms the door of the wardrobes. This is practical as it allows air to circulate and stops clothes getting stuffy. A kettle to make tea and the mini bar are hidden in a central white painted wooden console, but the vanity desk is of cement.

The big surprise was the bathroom, with its entrance door between two denim-clad wardrobes. It stretches the width of the room with brushed cement walls and light streaming in from high latticed walls. The shower borrows something from the Maldives; it is open to the sky and wonderfully refreshing. I never thought I would warm to so much cement décor but it works beautifully here.

Three new blocks of rooms have been added so there are 81 in total, including 36 deluxe beach rooms. The one I stayed in 30 years ago is better than it ever was thanks to a mosaic of blue tiles behind the bed creating a fun atmosphere, repeated in the bathroom with a mirror of mosaic, a rain shower and sleek fittings. Even the dull red clay tiles of the roofs have been brightly whitewashed.

Energy saving innovations and recycling practices have been introduced so the hotel is sustainable as well as enjoyable. The staff wear uniforms that fit the holiday theme with denim breeches and bright shirts with palm tree motif. This adds to the easy atmosphere.

There are lots of things to do at Chaaya Blu but I was content to relax and appreciate the sensational food. The Monday lunch time buffet in the open-sided main restaurant was astonishing as it offered a greater variety of intriguing dishes (papaya and prawns, cuttle fish and mushrooms, steak and liver cottage pie) than the special Sunday buffets of west coast beach resorts.

One evening at The Crab specialty Restaurant and Bar I indulged in, of course, the famous Trincomalee crab, first as an ingredient in the chef's unique Caesar Salad and then in an extravagantly fragrant crab curry prepared Jaffna style. There was crab on the buffet the next evening but we had whole fish baked in a thick salt crust, one of the chef's many specialities.

The main bar adjoining the lobby is a real bar, not a lounge with a dispensary but with a huge horse-shoe counter with stools and a foot-rest railing for convivial drinkers. Bar and

restaurant prices include service charge and tax so there is no sudden surprise tacked on to the end of the bill.

For me, the surprise was to discover in Sri Lanka a hotel that can rival upstart Maldives resorts for style, fun and sensational cuisine.

Traditionally Trincomalee has been regarded as a place to visit from May to October. With the opening of Chaaya Blu it seems set to become a year round holiday destination. And because it is so relaxed and bright, with innovative cuisine and staff proud to be there, it outshines the dull old beach hotels of the west coast.

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