



Poolside dinner setup at Kalu's Hideaway

Just a stone's throw away from the Udawalawe National Park, amidst the sparse, sun baked setting of these parts Kalu's Hideaway is a welcome respite of comfort and hospitality.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

Surrounded by an ensemble of young teak trees and landscaped garden patches this two storey bungalow absorbs you into its cool and rustic folds upon entering. What was initially begun as a holiday home for personal use, its owner, former Sri Lankan cricketing star and hotelier, Romesh Kaluwitharana, was soon inspired to transform it into a getaway for travellers to Udawalawe. An ardent lover of nature and wildlife, Udawalawe had always held a special allure.

"I used to visit at a time when Udawalawe was not well known, the drive and the surrounding vegetation have always offered a rare scenic beauty and it is just three and a half hours away from Colombo," says Kaluwitharana of his choice of location.

The polished cement floors and the tasteful embellishments of the lobby area greet guests who are at once offered the relief of wet towels and cool welcome drinks by the gracious staff. A cool and airy passageway connects to the interior with cozy nooks for sitting areas

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complete with soft sofas to lounge around. A curious rectangular Japanese style timber seating area is the centrepiece here and invites one to take a moment and absorb the interesting features of the hall. Large panels of photograph displays adorn the walls as though exhibits of a gallery and are close encounters of the wild captured at the Udawalawe National Park. A display of cricket memorabilia that would surely trigger fond memories of the '96 World Cup is also part of the decor. A stash of books and magazines and board games are readily available in this area and a pool table in the adjoining space for guests to indulge in some recreation.

Beyond lies the airy restaurant and sitting area open to the elements at the farther end overlooking a long length of the shimmering swimming pool - easily a tempting dip for guests amidst the quiet and natural surroundings. Strolling along the paved walkways and grassy lawns one can easily become submerged in a timeless escape of one's own design and lose all concept of time.

A babbling brook stemming from the Walawe river meandering below the land, a small paddy field and vegetable patches nurtured in the premises authenticate a singular rural charm. The vegetable and fruit gardens are carefully tended to by the employees and are a source of organic fruits and vegetables used in the preparation of the hearty meals served at Kalu's. Much emphasis is laid on meals that go hand-in-hand with the ample comforts. Particularly cuisine derived from the fresh produce is transformed to starters, and a lavish spread of five course western meals. Authentic Sri Lankan flavours aside from rice and curry, include pittu, string hoppers, hoppers and much more. Guests may also enjoy BBQs beside the pool or a candle-lit dinner under a starry sky.

There may be ample rustic charm in and around Kalu's Hideaway, but this is not to say that comforts are wanting. Recently extended up to 14 deluxe rooms inclusive of two chalets, the tastefully furnished and spacious accommodations are complete with modern amenities to cater to every imaginable comfort. "When you come here it's very rustic and eco-friendly but it's geared primarily towards comfort and guests can expect all the essential facilities including air conditioned rooms, hot water, wifi, and satellite tv," asserts Kaluwitharana. A new addition is the honeymoon suite that enjoys a breathtaking panoramic view of fields and landscapes against the mountainous backdrop in the distance. A curious inclusion is a naminang tree planted in the middle of the balcony! Guests can take their indulgence further at the 'The Foot' - the spa designed with quaint, traditional thatched roof and mud hut walls. Yoga is also a free offering on the cards that would be made available for guests in future.

The more outdoorsy can find hammocks for a dose of blissful slumber and the tree house too

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where one can watch the many varieties of birds - more than 40 - that visit the gardens. For the more adventurous, the banks of the brook are fitting for a spot of camping or they can plan excursions to nearby attractions such as the Udawalawe National Park and the elephant transit home, Maduwanwela Walawwa and the picturesque falls, Vavulpane caves and for a bit of history the Sankapali temple. Kalu's Hideaway also makes for a restful and convenient centrepiece enroute to longer excursions to Kataragama, Yala and even Nuwara Eliya which is two and a half hours away.

Befitting its affinity and proximity to nature, Kalu's Hideaway has adopted eco-friendly measures that include the use of solar panels. All in all Kalu's Hideaway is more than an idyllic getaway for travellers. "It is a dose of authentic Sri Lankan in style and our services are always with a smile," says Kaluwitharana.

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