

Timeless elegance

A revolution in Sri Lanka's hospitality industry began 17 years ago when lifestyle guru and luxury shopping innovator Shanth Fernando opened The Gallery Café. Nine years later he followed up with his trendsetting boutique hotel, Tintagel, and the rest is history.

Words Royston Ellis



At Tintagel the chef excels in innovative presentation as well culinary skill

I am lying in the bed that Charles, Prince of Wales, slept in during his visit to Colombo in November 2013. The mattress is so seductively comfortable that I fear I'll never want to leave it. I am staying in one of the two Royal Suites leading off the broad front balcony of Tintagel, Colombo's premier boutique hotel.

Opened in 2007 in a house that has been home to three prime ministers since it was built in 1930, Tintagel is unique among hotels in Sri Lanka. The difference is apparent from the moment you walk in the door, the Asian flamboyance of Shanth Fernando's vision setting the tone for the opulence found throughout.

The stately residence has been transformed with antiques and carefully placed objects like bowls, vases and ancient boxes, into a warm and welcoming mansion. The décor, while lavish, is surprisingly reassuring, the stress of travel and sightseeing vanishing in the comforting timelessness of the setting.

There is a newly opened bar lounge with a connoisseur's range of wines and spirits, plus original antique maps of Sri Lanka on display. Off the central parlour is a library that offers a contemplative retreat for reading – it's well stocked with both leather-bound books and the latest publications. Opposite is the formal dining room, and beyond, in the courtyard, a swimming pool overlooked by a first-floor gym and spa.

Tintagel has an alfresco restaurant, surrounded by high walls draped with creepers for privacy and a soothing garden atmosphere. Pots topped by bushes

trimmed like pom-poms punctuate the space, and tables with broad parasols are set out on the cobbles, with two large circular tables for guests on the eight-columned veranda. Lighting at night is from chandeliers with real candles that cast a warm glow over proceedings.

My choice of main course for dinner is ossobuco, rarely found in Sri Lanka. This slow-cooked veal shank in red wine and vegetable sauce, oozing with bone marrow and sensational in flavour, is served with a green salad. The next day, after I prise myself from that comfortable bed, I enjoy a hearty breakfast of puffed-up, spicy egg white omelette with heaps of bacon, grilled mushrooms, tomato and sausages.

“Tintagel and The Gallery Café are all about the ambience”

Back in the Royal Suite I discover the secret of the bed’s extraordinary comfort: overlaid on the luxurious, thick mattress is a futon filled with feathers. The bathroom is pretty luxurious too: it’s huge, with a square bathtub of polished concrete and a rain shower in a chamber of blue mosaic.

In the suite’s lounge, which has access to three balconies, there is a desk below a representation of the heraldic feathers and motto of the Prince of Wales: “Ich Dien” – I serve. It’s a reminder of the prince’s visit, as well as a fitting summary of the hotel itself: an establishment that excels with its mature, knowledgeable service.

Shanth Fernando’s entry into the hospitality industry began, after his success with the Paradise Road brand of designer goods and stores, with The Gallery Café. The businessman took the former office of the late, iconic architect Geoffrey Bawa and transformed it into an impressive art gallery, café, bar and restaurant.

The restaurant is in a covered area in a courtyard where mirrors on the rustic walls create an impression of light and space. Tables set up for alfresco dining are popular with smokers.

I eschew the many intriguing starters and opt for the seasonal special: beef and lamb moussaka. This dish of layers of cinnamon-spiced beef and lamb, aubergine, tomatoes and white wine sauce is real comfort food, rich in flavour. There are more specials planned for December, including succulent turkey.

I go over the top with a dessert (one of 28 on the menu) that is reminiscent of the candy floss of my childhood: ice-cream made with fresh cream, and slithers of jaggery topped with spun jaggery sugar threads.

Shanth Fernando watches everything that goes on but does not intrude on his guests. Tintagel, he tells me, is popular with visitors and corporate diners who want the privacy they can't find in a mainstream hotel. He explains that he does not stint on ingredients. "When a recipe calls for virgin olive oil or saffron, that's what we use, not cheap substitutes.

"With all our dishes," adds Fernando, "it's the taste that's most important. In Tintagel and The Gallery Café we concentrate on the flavour, supported by appetising presentation. When I'm asked what kind of food we serve, I reply, 'Good food'.

"At The Gallery Café we are consistent in our standards and both visitors and Sri Lankans come here again and again because they respect and appreciate that."

He shows me a guest book. Every comment is enthusiastic. Fernando explains: "Tintagel and The Gallery Café are all about the ambience; the price isn't solely for the food, it's for the experience, the setting."

He closes the book with a smile. "I read the guest book every day. It peps me up."

And that's precisely what a stay at Tintagel and a meal at The Gallery Café does for guests.

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