Treading through a distant past: Nuga Gama back to our roots

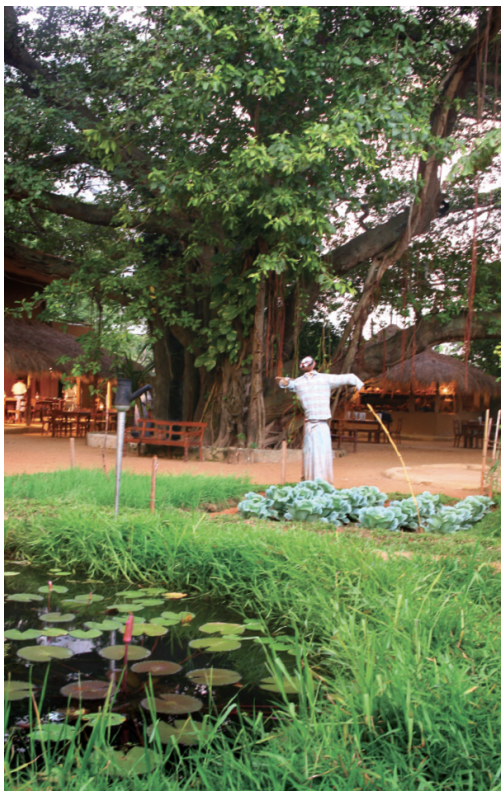
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Photography by Menaka Aravinda



From the busy streets of Colombo I enter into the lobby of Cinnamon Grand Hotel and walk past the Coffee Stop, I venture downstairs and through the Cheers Pub and onto the gravel path outside. I see a bamboo stick gate and a wooden sign informing me that I had arrived at Nuga Gama – back to our roots.



I curiously walked along the dimly lit path wondering what to expect. I felt as if I had travelled through time as I passed a bullock cart or *Karatte* which was used to transport people and goods during a time when vehicles were a luxury. I am enveloped in a distant past; a weary traveller seeking refuge. Soon I am greeted by the Ambalama – a resting place complete with utensils for whipping up a quick meal and a large pot of water or *pintaliya* placed at the entrance reminding us of our altruistic forefathers.

I took a step further and I could not believe my eyes, revolving around a central ‘Maha Nuga’ tree was a tradi-tional Sri Lankan village – a Gama. The Arachchi or Village Head greeted me with a warm ‘Ayubowan’ while young lads dressed in blue and white sarongs and white vests scurried busily. Created by Cinnamon Grand Nuga Gama is not just a restaurant it is much more. It is a return to the roots of Sri Lanka where both locals and tourists can savour cuisines, experience the ambience and listen to music of a simple and traditional past. With the vision to propel Cinnamon Grand to become a tourist icon in Sri Lanka Rohan Karr, General Manager of Cinnamon Grand says, “with the end of war came a new and positive outlook and

we felt the need to actively con-tribute towards tourism in the country.



Ambalama



The *Pokuna* or pond

We want to be the best five- star hotel but it doesn't mean we have to be a western-oriented one, instead we want to offer the best of both worlds." Thus dawned the idea of creating something innovative and uniquely Sri Lankan. In effect arose Nuga Gama, faithfully true to all the elements of a typical traditional village. On to one side is the Gama Gedara or a typical village house, snuggled humbly in its simple bearings with clay walls and a thatched roof. Within its cosy interior are a welcoming antique armchair and other household objects. "It's a nice place to come and read books and I've seen visitors sitting under the shady part of the Gama Gedara to have a cup of tea. It's a place to relax, wander around and escape the hustle and bustle," says Rohan adding, "I've even seen people coming to simply take pictures." Nearby stands a well and the house can be approached along-side a 'Pokuna' or the pond where Nil Manel blooms; the national flower of Sri Lanka, nods from its surface. A little bridge also runs across this pond painting a quaint picture of simplicity.



Close by is a patch of vegetation or a home garden that provides a source of organic food. To the far corner stands a ‘Bissa’; an inventive structure used to store the paddy harvest. The servings for the taste buds at Nuga Gama are also authentic traditional village dishes prepared by the seasoned hands of the *Ammes,* (women folk of the village) recruited from different parts of the country. “We want you to say, this reminds me of my child-hood, this is how we ate, washed our hands and cooked. We are proud of it so why not share it?” says Rohan.

Accordingly the food is prepared in clay pots and the *Ammes* in the kitchen blow to kindle the fire of this traditional stove. Even the egg hoppers are made with village eggs instead of the farm eggs, to provide an experience of how life was once led

back in the day. Refreshments offered at Nuga Gama include a variety of vegetable and fruit juices such as *amberella* and *sepathilla* and home made ginger beer. In the evenings one can buy crispy snacks of manioc or Bitter Gourd chips off the mini *karrata* near the village shop and relax and rejuvenate in the many 'hangout spots' in the surroundings. With Sri Lankan tea and home made sweet-meats such as 'Naran Kevum', 'Kiri Dodol' and 'Aluwa' to name just a few, visitors can enjoy a complete tea session with friends. The 'Kamatha' where the harvest is laid out to be threshed, offers a place for evening entertainment including harvest dances, drama troupes and performances by traditional drummers. Engulfed in the serenity of the surrounding I am lulled by dulcet tones of an oriental band playing at the 'Salawa' or the village hall. It is also a gathering area and serves as a place for indoor dining as well. "On Poya days we wish to have a medi-tation session in the mornings under the tree, conducted by a professional guru. Visitors can meditate, have a healthy breakfast and leave refreshed. We also have a variety of educational classes for children every Saturday on arts, culture, crafts, history and traditions. It's going to be more than just a place to dine," says Rohan. The 'Kade' is another characteristic feature of Nuga Gama.

A traditional Sri Lankan shop, it is the pulse of village life selling 'bulto' sweets, *wade a*nd roast pan (bread) among other goodies that sweep you with a sense of nostalgia. Adding to the authenticity of this atmosphere is a village fowl that roams about the premises much to the astonishment of the visitors. Nuga Gama has already captured the attention of many, from heads of state, to ministers, to CEOs and tourists. "They're full of praise and are very positive about it. You can easily get addicted to this life style," says Rohan. The gallery is another feature at Nuga Gama, exhibiting work that embodies Sri Lankan art and culture. The paintings are by the art association artistes and add to the experience of the visitor. I stand now, dwarfed under a shade of a 200-year old banyan tree, after which the village is christened. Having weathered many storms it stands a silent witness of the many changes over its long existence. "It conveys our experience, we've gone through a lot of hard times and emerged from them. What a way to celebrate our success or peace, underneath this tree," says Rohan Karr poignantly. As I gaze through the boughs of this wizened tree I catch a surreal glimpse of the tall buildings of the city skyline and I feel I am a world away…

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