

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The simple accommodation at 5 Stars of Dondra; the open air living and yoga space; pounding surf at the village beach; an Ayurvedic oil treatment.

Hilltop healing

IN A SECLUDED AREA OF SRI LANKA, BETWEEN RICE PADDIES AND THE SEA, SITS 5 STARS OF DONDRA; A RESORT OFFERING TRADITIONAL AYURVEDIC WELLNESS TREATMENTS AND TOTAL TRANQUILITY

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

As I search the eager faces waiting at Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport, hand-scrawled signs held aloft, I realise I have not planned this weekend well. I am spending a few days exploring Ayurveda at 5 Stars of Dondra, part of the Healing Hotels of the World collection of wellness retreats. My eyes move frantically from one signboard to another as it dawns that I don't have the driver's number, I don't know where Dondra is, and I am not into wellness.

It's with some relief that I spot my name on a makeshift board, the driver's grin dividing his weathered face. He is a wiry man, as brown as a coconut. And quick. I jog after him as he nimbly parts the crowds and dashes along the pavement to the minivan. "How long until we get to Dondra?" I ask him, pointing to my watch. He thinks for a moment before holding up six fingers, leaving me wondering whether it is six minutes, sixty minutes, or a whopping six hours.

After six minutes we are still on the outskirts of Colombo. The city is a hive of activity, tiny stores packed into rows like crooked teeth. The women wear colourful saris, their midriffs peeking out at the sun from under their draped shawls, while the men are wrapped in sarongs, cool in the midday heat.

After sixty minutes, we are in central Colombo, my heart sinking as I resign myself to six hours of manic traffic. The driver catches my eye and points out the window. "Highway," he says excitedly and I perk up. "Not open," he

adds as an afterthought, dashing my hopes. By the time we reach the open highway, the motion of the car has lulled me into a stupor, each blink lasting longer than the previous one. I catch glimpses of the country through my drooping lashes – a tea plantation climbing up a hill; a father and son out flying a kite; a small house peeking through the verdant greenery.

I wake when we hit the coast. The waves are pounding the shore, and road-side local fishermen sell the day's catch. We turn onto a narrow, partly-paved road, palm trees casting tall shadows across the asphalt and trundle through a small village, past a beach lined with fishing boats at rest. Finally, after four hours, we turn into 5 Stars of Dondra, where Lina Menzel rushes out to greet me.

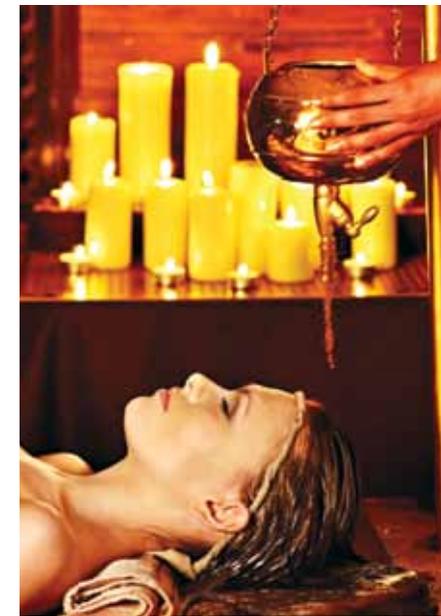
The resort-haven is Lina's creation, built on an old plantation. Perched on a hill, it overlooks vast tracts of green space, the muffled sounds of village life drifting on the air currents. Chipmunks dart amongst the undergrowth playing hide and seek, and two native peacocks strut through the gardens, masters of their domain.

My room is simple, yet comfortable, the bed draped in flowing mosquito nets. There are only six rooms here and Lina has no plans to expand. She takes a personal interest in every guest, using Ayurvedic principles to work through their ailments and set them on the right path. "Ayurveda is not a treatment. It is a way of life," she is quick to tell me.

At dinner, I meet James and Erika, both checked in for three weeks. The minimum programme length here is two weeks. While there is no prescribed treatment formula, the Panchakarma programme, designed to eliminate toxic elements from the body, starts with a week of cleansing. It is the second week where the magic really happens.

Lina dines with us – a deliciously spicy pumpkin soup, followed by a light curry and vanilla pudding. Every detail of the resort follows Ayurvedic principles – from the herbal shampoo and Ayurvedic beauty soap in my bathroom to the food preparation. Despite being a dedicated carnivore, I am satiated by the tasty, home-style vegetarian food offerings.

Lina knocks on my door in the morning – I have slept through my alarm. I stumble out of bed and slip into loose clothing, ready for the morning yoga session. Upstairs James and



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Erika wait patiently on rubber yoga mats. Lina spreads a pack of cards on the ground and we each select a card to guide us through the day. Mine is tolerance – respecting and accepting different points of view. As an impatient and forthright person, this is a lesson I take to heart.

Lina guides us through breathing exercises and stretches as we limber up ready to tackle the day. During a meditative moment, my eyes flicker open in time to see a troupe of monkeys tumble through the garden. When we flop forward, releasing our spines, there is something wrong – I am stiff and awkward, my

head a long way from my knees. Lina places her hand on my neck, gently pushing my head forward. I can hear the wheels clicking. "We will talk about this problem later," she says.

Lina's background in psychology, combined with training in shiatsu then Ayurveda is what has led her from Germany to Sri Lanka. She is passionate about what she does, yet exudes an air of calm contentment. "What we are doing here is Panchakarma, a really old system from Ayurveda. It's 5,000 years old; the oldest medical system in the world," she explains. "Ayurveda is a knowledge of life. It is

not only what you eat or what you do with your body, but also what you do with your mind."

"Most of the people who come here need three or four days to collect the toxins, and then we have systems of how to release them, but this is different for everybody," she continues. While I am skeptical on the spiritual elements, Lina quickly analyses my issues, mostly related to a fast-paced lifestyle. She takes my left hand and presses firmly. "What you have is that your main *dosha* [the components that make up your constitution according to Ayurvedic theory] is a double *dosha*; a combination of fire and earth. You are stable, with good energy. But you do too much. Your fire levels are too high." By the end of her scrutiny I find myself inexplicably close to tears.

My treatment starts with a four-handed massage. I slip into a sarong and relax on the sun-lounger outside the treatment rooms. Birds chirrup and a breeze swirls in the sun-warmed air. The massage is quite different from a spa-massage. Both therapists have strong hands and they firmly stroke my body in unison, pushing and pulling, twisting and manipulating, until I am putty in their hands. The face and foot treatment in the afternoon is equally as calming. By evening I am relaxed and sedate, all too ready to collapse into bed.

"I was recently diagnosed with Parkinson's disease," Erika discloses at breakfast. "I've had a lot of improvement since I've been here. Before I came, my hand used to shake all the time," she says, indicating her left hand resting steadily on the table. The longer I am here, the more I am forced to re-examine my beliefs on traditional therapies.

After my treatments I walk through the village; a conglomeration of small houses. Locals rush out to greet me, grinning, eager to use their few words of English. At the beach, the fishing boats are breaking through the pounding surf. Judging the best entry angle, they take a run up and fly through the breakers, speeding into the sand, where the fishermen leap into the shallow water and beckon me to join them in pushing the heavy wooden craft up the beach.

Whether it's the pull of the sea, the treatments, or the healthy food, life here is simple. It's about early nights, balancing mind, body, and happiness. Perhaps we all need time out to breathe. As Lina wraps me into a motherly farewell hug, I seriously consider booking in for a few weeks. ☺