

# HAVEN

# The Great Outdoors

*Ride the heat wave in style with hits of colour, brightness and expansive interiors that let the exterior in*



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- + THREE ECO-LUXE VILLAS
- + DAVID ROCCO'S TASTE OF SUMMER MENU
- + KELLY HOPPEN'S LONDON HOME

TRAVEL

# *Labour of love*





*Ocean breeze and by-the-sea bliss at the Kumar family's architecturally stunning new villa in Talpe, Sri Lanka*

Text **Diana Khoo** Photography **SooPhye**

Living in Malaysia, a country that is flanked by the relatively calm waters of the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea (monsoon season aside), the tempestuousness of the great Indian Ocean is something to behold. And it is a serene patch of beach in Talpe, contrarily buffeted by wild waves, along Sri Lanka's South Coast that particularly captivates me.

A quiet village along the Galle-Matara coastal road, Talpe is set away from the resort hubbub of nearby Unawatuna and yet is still conveniently close to the Unesco-listed charms of Galle. It is idyllic, all golden beaches and swaying coconut palms, and it is easy to see why the Kumar family chose it as the site of their new holiday villa. Sri Lanka, after all, is not known as the island of serendipity for nothing.

Christened Villa Sielen Diva, the house takes its name from the ancient Greek name for the island, although other historical texts argue that it was the 6th-century Greek merchant and explorer later turned monk, Cosmas Indicopleustes, who named it so. The seven-room property hides behind high walls along the coastal road and it is only when you enter the property, past the gates and onto the grounds, that the architectural beauty of the space overwhelms you.

In a country dominated by the design style of the late great Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's foremost architect, it is refreshing to see that Villa Sielen Diva cuts its own bold path, adopting a predominantly white palette and composed of sharp, angular lines tempered by objets d'art, pops of colour and soft textured furnishings. Here, the family worked with the architectural talent of Sara Franco and the keen eye of interior designer Philippe Villeroix. The only concession to Bawa may, perhaps, be detected in a general melding of the outdoors with the indoors, an expansive courtyard and wide open spaces.

Although originally conceived as a private holiday home, the family decided it was simply too lovely to



have it occupied only a few times a year. From a practical point of view, it also made sense as things tend to fall into disrepair easily if not tended to, particularly in the hot and humid tropics. So last September, Villa Sielen Diva opened its doors to also receive paying guests. Once past the gates, a wall, painted deep red to reference the colour of monks' robes, comes into view and a small flight of steps leads you up to the main house, evoking the feeling of ascending towards a temple or a sacred pavilion.

Taking pride of place in the garden courtyard is a massive one-tonne Ganesha statue. Here, Hinduism's revered remover of obstacles, sculpted from black granite in Mahabalipuram, India's city of renowned sculptors, sits serenely under the shade of a young red plumeria tree — red being the colour most associated with Ganesha. The tree is also planted on a patch of sacred *durva* grass, the three-blade grass that represents the three principles of the primal Shiva, Shakti and Ganesha and which is said to have the highest ability to attract the elephant headed god's aura.

Guests then make their way through a long passage-way that immediately teases you with glimpses of the ocean and the sound of the surf. Once in the living area and main dining hall, the magic begins. A salt-kissed breeze buffets you and, somehow, a tall glass of chilled tea sweetened with *kithul*, a type of local treacle, or perhaps a beautifully carved, bright orange king coconut, a variety native to the island and known locally as *thembili*, finds its way into your hand.

Set on an acre of beachfront land, the views and ocean breeze are completely capitalised on, thanks to the clever use

**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:** The villa is located in Talpe, a sleepy village away from the hubbub of Unawatuna but still conveniently close to Galle's Unesco-listed charms

The lap pool is crafted using stone from Jaipur, India

A photograph of a bull elephant dominates the living room

Meals are a gourmet's delight, thanks to the in-villa chefs





**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:** Yoga sessions may be held on the expansive lawn

Sip iced *kithul* tea or king coconuts by the pool

The corridor on the first floor is lined with original artworks by Segar, Sri Lanka's greatest living artist

Villa Sielen Diva's owners, VU and Suria Kumar

of glass folding walls by Parthos, allowing for a great sense of openness and feeling of vastness. The lounge is dominated by a massive black-and-white photograph of a bull elephant by the KL-based restaurateur and entrepreneur Abbi Kanthasamy — a housewarming gift to the family — and elsewhere are artfully placed works by Malaysian artists Abdullah Hamdan and Mahzurah Shaari.

Meals are taken at a 17ft-long timber dining table that seats 14 and complemented by views of the garden or the big blue ocean vista beyond. And the villa's in-house chefs are particularly adept at ensuring you are loath to give up your seat at the table. Amazing spreads, from milk rice to hoppers, grilled lobster and spicy *sambols*, are laid out for your pleasure, from sunrise to suppertime.

The only possible temptations that could lure you away from a second helping of eggplant *batu moju* or devilled cuttlefish, perhaps, would be the sun-warmed waters of the 15m freshwater lap pool crafted from Jaipur stone or the sapphire blue of the ocean just mere steps from the villa. Also imported specially from Jaipur are the beautiful 1.8m-long pieces of granite tiles, giving texture, colour and a lovely seamlessness to the living space. Between laps, stop for another glass of *kithul* tea, this time taken while lounging on a recliner under the shade of specially selected Janus et Cie sun umbrellas.

There are seven en-suite rooms in total: four on the first level, accessed via a corridor lined with original artworks by Segar, Sri Lanka's greatest living artist; one by the pool; and two ocean-facing suites on the lower level, by the gardens. All the beds, however, are positioned so



you may enjoy the view fully, which changes dramatically from day to night and includes picture-postcard images of the region's famous stilt fishermen who may be seen plying their trade at dawn and dusk in the shallows. A charming touch — each room is named after the Tamil and Sinhalese words for the peacock (Mayil/Monara), mouse (Eli Kunji/Musikaya) and elephant (Yanai/Aliya) as well as the shark (Mora). Eli Kunji is also the family's childhood nickname for their daughter Lavanya. Villa Sielen Diva's rooms may be rented out individually or as a whole.

In case of inclement weather, do know also that massages may be called in to be performed in the comfort and privacy of one's own room. Yoga classes and cooking classes may also be arranged likewise. A special entertainment and recreation room, named Baba's Den and done up personally by the villa owner's daughter Priyanka, may be found on the lower level of the home. Here, amid the punchy brightness of posters chosen from the famous Stick No Bills shop in Galle Fort, feel free to choose from an extensive selection of television programmes, board games and books.

Eco-consciousness is also part of Villa Sielen Diva's ethos and little to no plastic is used on site while the roof is fitted with energy-saving solar panels. There is a rainwater harvesting system in place and even the wooden flooring is made using repurposed Jarrah





wood, which was collected from old tea plantations.

Granted, the recent Easter Sunday attacks in Colombo have only served to further batter a country that has already been through so much and plunging its just-picking-up tourism industry into shambles once again. But we all know the answer does not lie in isolating oneself but to continue travelling, seeing the world and enriching our lives through it. And believe us when we say a few languid days spent in this lovely architectural villa in a magical part of Sri Lanka will do you a whole lot of good. The quote “to get to the heart of the matter” is all too-often bandied about. We forget sometimes that what matters, instead, is heart. And you will find plenty of it at the Villa Sielen Diva. **H**

*Villa Sielen Diva is at 776/1, Galle-Matara Coastal Road, Talpe, Galle, Sri Lanka. For enquiries or bookings, visit [www.sielendiva.com](http://www.sielendiva.com).*

**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:**  
All the beds are positioned to maximise the stunning views

A variety of charming towel art awaits guests each day

Shopping trips to Galle Fort or for fresh lobster for the evening's barbeque is a breeze at Villa Sielen Diva

The famous still fishermen of Sri Lanka's South Coast

Even a soak in the tub comes with a million dollar vista