

**CHRISTO**

**SURFACE**

ISSUE 148  
JULY/AUGUST 2018

THE TRAVEL ISSUE



# Contributors



## FRANCISCO NOGUEIRA

Photographer, “Castles Made of Sand” (page 96)

**The best view you’ve ever seen?** “Seeing my son Bart being born was the most memorable thing I’ve ever seen. I got to photograph it with happy tears. In a few weeks I’m having a daughter, so I can’t wait for the same spectacular view!”

*Nogueira is a Lisbon-based photographer with a background in architecture, documenting the appropriation of space and the man-made landscape. He has published two books about the architectural heritage of former Portuguese colonies in Africa: Bijagós: Património Arquitectónico and As Roças de São Tomé e Príncipe.*

## SARAH KHAN

Writer, “Force of Nature” (page 102) and “Destination: Mumbai” (page 59)

**The happiest mistake you made while traveling?** “Road-tripping through Namibia, we were warned to make it to our destinations by nightfall—the roads are treacherous enough by day. Once, we made too many stops and wound up in complete darkness. As we drove along nervously, a pair of elephants suddenly appeared in the headlights.”

*Sarah Khan has lived in five countries on three continents, and has crisscrossed the globe to report for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Conde Nast Traveler, and others.*

## GISELA WILLIAMS

Writer, “Castles Made of Sand” (page 96)

**Where in the world do you wish you were right now?** “I am almost always happy to be in the place I am at any given moment. Currently, that’s on a wooden deck overlooking the Baltic Sea on Blidö—one of thousands of islands that make up the Swedish Archipelago.”

*Gisela Williams has lived in Bali, Bermuda, and Brooklyn, before settling down in Berlin with her husband and three children. She covers culture, design, and travel as a European correspondent for The New York Times T Magazine and Departures, and in a monthly column for Elle Decor.*

## AART-JAN VENEMA

Illustrator, “Force of Nature” (page 102)

**Your favorite location to sketch?** “The best place to sketch is outside in nature, where I can draw what I see or whatever I’m thinking about, without distractions. In the end though, I always end up behind my computer, looking up all kind of reference images for the job.”

*Venema is a Dutch illustrator whose work has appeared in the Guardian and The New Yorker. He loves to set a scene with lots of little stories and details for the observant reader to discover. Cicada Books is releasing his first children’s book at the end of 2018.*



(FROM TOP) An outtake from Francisco Nogueira’s shoot in Comporta, Portugal for “Castles Made of Sand.” A sketch by Aart-Jan Venema for “Force of Nature.”



# Force of Nature

The work of Sri Lanka's most famous architect has come to define the country's landscape. One writer sets out on the Geoffrey Bawa trail to see his legacy for herself.

BY SARAH KHAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY AART-JAN VENEMA

When I first glimpse the building that I've driven four hours to see, carved into a mountain at the center of Sri Lanka, I almost miss it entirely. All I can make out from the road below is the shimmering of light as it dances off panes of glass nearly imperceptible beneath dense coils of vines. As the car winds up the road, I spy sharp edges and clean lines piercing through the lush veil—but mostly it's as though I'm ascending into the jungle.

Even as its peek-a-boo facade plays tricks on the eye, Geoffrey Bawa's Kandalama hotel is a quiet triumph that dazzles with restraint. The construction's harmony with its natural setting is one of the hallmarks of the Sri Lankan designer's style. "His architecture recedes—it's invisible," says C. Anjalendran, a former assistant of Bawa's. "In Western architecture, the architecture should be an object. [But] Kandalama disappears into the jungle—it is a backdrop to look at the view and nature."

With a career spanning half a century, from 1958 to 1998, and a portfolio of homes, hotels, and public spaces from India to Indonesia to Fiji, Bawa

is one of Asia's preeminent architects. He's also become one of Sri Lanka's heroes, creating the foundation for a new, homegrown design vernacular on the heels of the island nation (formerly known as Ceylon) achieving its independence from British rule, in 1948. As Sri Lankans attained more wealth and prosperity, and the country opened up to tourism in the '60s, Bawa returned to the country's indigenous roots while borrowing from a Modernist sensibility from the West. He rejected the impractical colonial-era models of stuffy villas meant to keep the elements at bay and invited in the seasons with airy, environment-embracing abodes deeply rooted in their surroundings.

With an approach that encompassed both a revival of the past and a drive toward a new future, Bawa became an icon, inspiring a new generation of talents—Channa Daswatte, Kerry Hill, and Mok Wei Wei among them—while also drawing a cult following among laypeople who might otherwise have ignored architecture. But for Sri Lankans in particular, Bawa has reached superstar status—perhaps now more than ever before.

These days, as the country embraces a revival as a burgeoning tourism hot spot following the brutal 26-year civil war that ended in 2009, Sri Lanka has become synonymous with two things: beaches and Bawa.

"I think Geoffrey would find it amusing that everyone is on the Geoffrey Bawa trail," Dominic Sansoni says of the architect's posthumous popularity. Sansoni, a photographer and owner of Colombo's popular Barefoot boutique, gallery, and café, took over the textile emporium from his mother, Barbara Sansoni, a celebrated Sri Lankan Burgher artist and a close friend and collaborator of Bawa's.

It is indeed on Bawa's trail that takes me to Colombo, the starting point of my journey, but I soon realize that one need not be chasing Bawa to constantly find oneself in his shadow; plotting an itinerary through the highlights of Sri Lanka invariably means navigating a circuit of his greatest hits. I set off on a clockwise route through the island from the capital, where he lived and worked for most of his life; deep into the interior to Sigiriya to see Kandalama, his







most heralded hotel; south through the highlands of Sri Lanka's verdant tea country, ringed in photogenic cascades of mist; and along the coast, where some of Bawa's finest hotels and homes take advantage of dramatic seaside settings and embrace Sri Lanka's steamy climate.

Today, Bawa is hailed as the father of Tropical Modernism, an international movement that evolved during the 1950s and '60s that tempers and adapts the principles of Modernist design to sultrier climes. But according to those who knew him and his oeuvre best, he really shouldn't be.

"When he started practicing in 1958, [Bawa] began with Tropical Modernism," says U.K.-based David Robson, a former professor, Bawa expert, and author of *In Search of Bawa: Master Architect of Sri Lanka*. "But he very quickly abandoned that [approach] as inappropriate. One of the essences of Tropical Modernism is the idea that the

same architectural language could be applied everywhere. Geoffrey Bawa's architecture is suffused with ideas about Sri Lanka."

Being of Sri Lanka and for Sri Lanka were indeed the driving forces behind Bawa's projects. He fused colonial and indigenous styles, incorporating materials (local stone and timber) and layouts (high roofs, cross-ventilation, vast overhangs) specific to the nation's monsoon climate and storied architectural history—from the cave monasteries of the Anuradhapura period to the feudal Walauwa style of manor houses. They are marked by their sustainability, long before that became a global buzzword; a porous boundary between indoors and out; and interiors brimming with local art and textiles.

Though he only embarked on his career as an architect at 38 (having studied English at Cambridge and law in London during World War II, before enrolling in that city's Architectural

Association), Bawa's background made him a fitting, if unlikely, figure to steer Sri Lanka into its post-independence future: Born to a Muslim father and a Dutch Burgher mother, he was of Scottish, German, English, Arab, Dutch, and Sinhalese heritage, a reflection of the cultures that had commingled on Sri Lanka's shores for centuries.

"Sri Lanka is a very small country—it's one-fiftieth the size of India, but it has a very rich architectural heritage which goes back 2,500 years," Robson says. "Within that small island there's an enormous amount of variety. His work became a mixture of the sort of Modernism that he had studied when he was a student in Britain plus all of his observations of Sri Lankan architecture."

"When you look at the better examples of what remains to us of these earlier buildings," Bawa wrote, in 1968, of Sri Lanka's precolonial design, "you will find that they all look at life in

Ceylon squarely in the face. They look at the rain, the termites, at the social needs, at the view to be had from verandas and windows—at the needs of life at the time."

One need look no further than to Bawa's private residence, 33rd Lane, composed of four adjacent bungalows in an upscale neighborhood of Colombo, for a window into his style: The house is a series of hallways that open onto unexpected courtyards exposed to the elements. It comes together like a maze, with eclectic finds around every corner: Chettinad columns; Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist religious statues; Dutch colonial-era cane furniture; and a concrete dining table embedded into the ground surrounded by white Eero Saarinen chairs.

"He was asked, 'What are three things that make a monsoon house, a tropical house?'" Anjalendran remembers. "He said, 'Verandas, courtyards, and no glass.'" And it's at 33rd Lane where I first experience his philosophies brought to life. It's 90 degrees Fahrenheit and muggy, but in the living room, just off an open courtyard, it feels positively mild and breezy. Light filters in at various angles, birds fly in and out, the lines between outside and in are blurred—the two spheres coexist in harmony. Sri Lanka may not have invented heat and humidity, but Bawa reinvented how best to inhabit it.

When Bawa passed away, in 2003, after a stroke left him paralyzed for the last five years of his life, the Geoffrey Bawa Trust converted the residence into an archival museum that offers daily tours and a guesthouse with two rooms that Bawa devotees can book for the night. His former office was reborn as the Gallery Café, a restaurant and art showroom where his long desk now displays an array of cakes and diners feast on tandoori-marinated salmon and lobster, prawn, and fennel lasagna in a tree-shaded courtyard.

But it was two of Bawa's public-use projects that became his most iconic landmarks in Colombo: the Seema Malaka, a Buddhist temple commissioned by a Muslim patron and seemingly afloat in Beira Lake; and the Sri Lankan Parliament, whose asymmetrical design and pitched roofs took inspiration from the classical architecture of the Anuradhapura period, which lasted from the third century B.C. to the 10th century A.D. When it was unveiled, in 1982, the

parliament cemented Bawa's status as a national figure and made him a household name.

"Even if you ask a tuk-tuk driver, 'Who built the parliament?' they can say, 'Geoffrey Bawa built our parliament!'" says architect Channa Daswatte, who worked closely with Bawa in his final years and is a trustee of the Geoffrey Bawa Trust.

In fact, it seems like everyone wants to claim a piece of Geoffrey Bawa. I quickly surmise that the Sri Lankan equivalent of "George Washington slept here" is "Geoffrey Bawa built this." Pride in Bawa's contributions to Sri Lanka's collective national identity has resulted in Bawa builds becoming prized social status symbols. In *In Search of Bawa*, Robson confirms my suspicion that Sri Lankans are eager to herald whatever tenuous connection their national treasure may have to their home: "[T]he property magazines of Colombo regularly advertise houses 'in the Bawa style' and claim Bawa authorship for houses on which he never clapped eyes." Today, travel companies offer Bawa itineraries to eager visitors and Bawa hotels are some of the most in-demand properties across the country. >





“When you get to Kandalama it has the feeling of an ancient palace, sitting on a rock,” Robson tells me. And when I finally reach the hotel, crowning a cliff overlooking a reservoir in Dambulla after a long, winding drive, and walk past the check-in desk to a tunnel sculpted out of stone, I feel as though I’m descending into a primordial cavern—even though the building was completed in 1992. The vibe is no coincidence: Off in the distance stands the rock fortress of Sigiriya, a fifth-century citadel that makes up the southernmost point of Sri Lanka’s well-traveled triangle of World Heritage sites. And yet, Bawa did not create a Disney-fied sendup of the region’s history; instead, he carved out something eye-catching yet subtly woven into the terrain.

“It brings memories of the cave temples that dot the landscape,” says Daswatte, whose first collaboration with Bawa was Kandalama. “At the same time, it’s almost like a James Bond

lair in the middle of the Sri Lankan landscape. There’s no hotel like that in this part of the world.”

I stay in Room 507, a corner suite with an oversize jacuzzi, where Bawa would always stay during his visits; he favored the lake and forest vistas. The resort is a design of open walkways and enclaves meant to maximize views over the lake, but the inconspicuous design ensures that, when looking back from the reservoir, the hotel is barely visible. One of the property’s most memorable elements is a larger-than-life iron owl seemingly in flight above a staircase, the work of Lakshman “Laki” Senanayake, an artisan and draftsman from whom Bawa commissioned countless works.

When I learn that Senanayake lives on an estate not far from Kandalama, I call to see if I can swing by for a visit. I’m not alone: Laki’s water garden at Diyabubula has become a destination in its own right for Bawa buffs who’ve been blown away by Senanayake’s contributions to the architect’s work.

“Follow the music,” a staff member tells me when I arrive. I climb up the steps to an open-air pavilion overlooking a pond surrounded by whimsical sculptures of horses, rhinos, and birds, with jazz playing from speakers strategically placed across the water. Presiding over the idyllic scene is Senanayake himself in a red sarong, eyes half closed, gently waving his hands to the music as if conducting it.

Senanayake is charming and irreverent, regaling guests with unfiltered anecdotes of his time with Bawa. “He was ungenerous and mean,” he says with a laugh. “I used to say, ‘Why is it, this nasty, ungenerous man, whatever he wants to do, we do it for him?’ We admired his style. We respect the aesthetics.”

“What I see from Geoffrey is to want something that is wonderfully beautiful around you. It was a pleasure to the eye. Which is why most of my artwork ended up with him, because they were in superb pieces of architecture.”

From Dambulla, I veer south to Sri Lanka’s famous tea country, making stops in Kandy and Nuwara Eliya before boarding a train to watch the terraced plantations fly past from the rails. I seek out other Bawa builds en route to the coast: the Nazareth Chapel of the Good Shepherd Convent in the unassuming town of Bandarawela, which, with its granite floors, rubble masonry, and wall of glass windows, harmonizes with the wilderness that surrounds

it; the Last House hotel in Tangalle, which was, as the name suggests, one of Bawa’s final projects; and the Jetwing Lighthouse, near the colonial-era Galle Fort. The hotel’s standout feature, and perhaps one of the most jaw-dropping monuments for pilgrims on the Bawa circuit, is a three-story staircase that guests ascend on their way from the porte cochere to the sea-facing arrival pavilion, lined with dozens of life-size sculptures by Senanayake depicting the Portuguese invasion of Sri Lanka led by Lourenço de Almeida.

Much of my two weeks in Sri Lanka is spent under the ominous threat of imminent downpour, but it’s not until I arrive in Galle that I experience the country in all its tropical glory. Opaque sheets of water cascade out of a pallid late-afternoon sky, obscuring everything more than three feet in front of me in a glassy haze. It’s the kind of weather I would normally gird all the windows and doors against. But at Lighthouse, with the protection of Bawa’s broad overhangs, I fling them wide open to the balcony. I feel none of the moisture but inhale the earthy musk of monsoon air. And then, just as suddenly as the deluge had started, it’s over.

“Mr. Geoffrey was a very ‘natureful’ person,” my guide Dielon tells me solemnly on site at Lunuganga—Bawa’s own beloved country house in Bentota, on Sri Lanka’s southwestern coast, and the most celebrated home in the architect’s pantheon. And indeed, every corner of Lunuganga is designed to maximize the setting’s natural beauty. Bawa conceived areas meant to be enjoyed at various times of day, depending on the position of the sun: a southern terrace for breakfast in the mornings, with a view toward a Buddhist shrine on a distant hill; a lunch table under a jackfruit tree, with a bell salvaged from a temple used to summon the staff; a shady spot for afternoon tea; a sunset corner with space for a few folding directors chairs; and a dining table in a veranda near his beloved frangipani tree.

As at 33rd Lane in Colombo, guests can check in to one of five suites at the estate, which he purchased in 1947 and spent the next 50 years designing. It’s here that Bawa’s friends would visit him—an elite group of like-minded individuals, Barbara Sansoni, Laki Senanayake, architects Ulrik Plesner and Ismeth Raheem, Australian artist Donald Friend, and batik artist Ena

Silva among them, working to define a post-independence Sri Lanka. (Nearby stands the home he built for de Silva, another of his finest residences, now only viewable by special arrangement; it was constructed in Colombo and then relocated to Bentota brick by brick and tile by tile.)

After his death, his ashes were scattered across Lunuganga’s 26 acres.

**The final stop of my Bawa circuit** is the beach town of Kalutara, where Bawa was commissioned to refurbish the Sinbad Garden Hotel in the 1990s. As of 2016, it’s been reborn as the Anantara Kalutara, but its very existence is something of a miracle. Eighteen months after Bawa began working on it, Sri Lanka’s ongoing civil war escalated and brought construction to a halt. Then, the 2004 tsunami wreaked havoc on what was left of the foundation. When Anantara finally took over what remained in 2012, they enlisted Daswatte, who had worked with Bawa

on the original concept, to complete it as close to Bawa’s vision as possible. “We had all the drawings and sketches at the Bawa archive,” says Daswatte. “I used those and my own memories of my conversations with Geoffrey—I think he’d be very pleased with the architecture.”

Bawa purists such as Robson and Anjalendran vehemently disagree with counting the hotel as part of the Bawa canon, since it was completed long after his death and the design evolved from the original plans in the ensuing decades. But after journeying across the country on the Bawa trail, I can see his spirit in the cavernous main building: in its soaring eaves and airy corridors; in the incorporation of Dutch colonial-style furniture; in the use of massive batik hangings from the late Ena Da Silva’s workshop; and in the seamless integration of a public road into the design, much as he did in Lunuganga. There’s even a Geoffrey Bawa Library, filled with framed drawings of his designs, and exclusive

guest experiences like a private high tea at Lunuganga, an hour away.

In some ways, Sinbad Garden Hotel’s rebirth as the Anantara Kalutara parallels Sri Lanka’s own rebirth after its decades-long civil war: The country is once again throwing open its doors to international tourism, and reviving its heritage in the process by revisiting a Bawa vision that was almost lost to the dual ravages of war and natural disaster. And while it’s true that no new hotels can lay claim to a Bawa pedigree, his ethos and influence persist throughout Sri Lanka.

“Now we just take it for granted. But what he did at the very end of the colonial period and beginning of independence is that he was able to demonstrate to the people of Sri Lanka that their culture and traditions had meaning and validity,” says Robson. “And as the new country was being built in the 1950s, he was one of a group of people trying to explore the possibility of creating a new Sri Lankan culture—and that’s what he did.” ●

