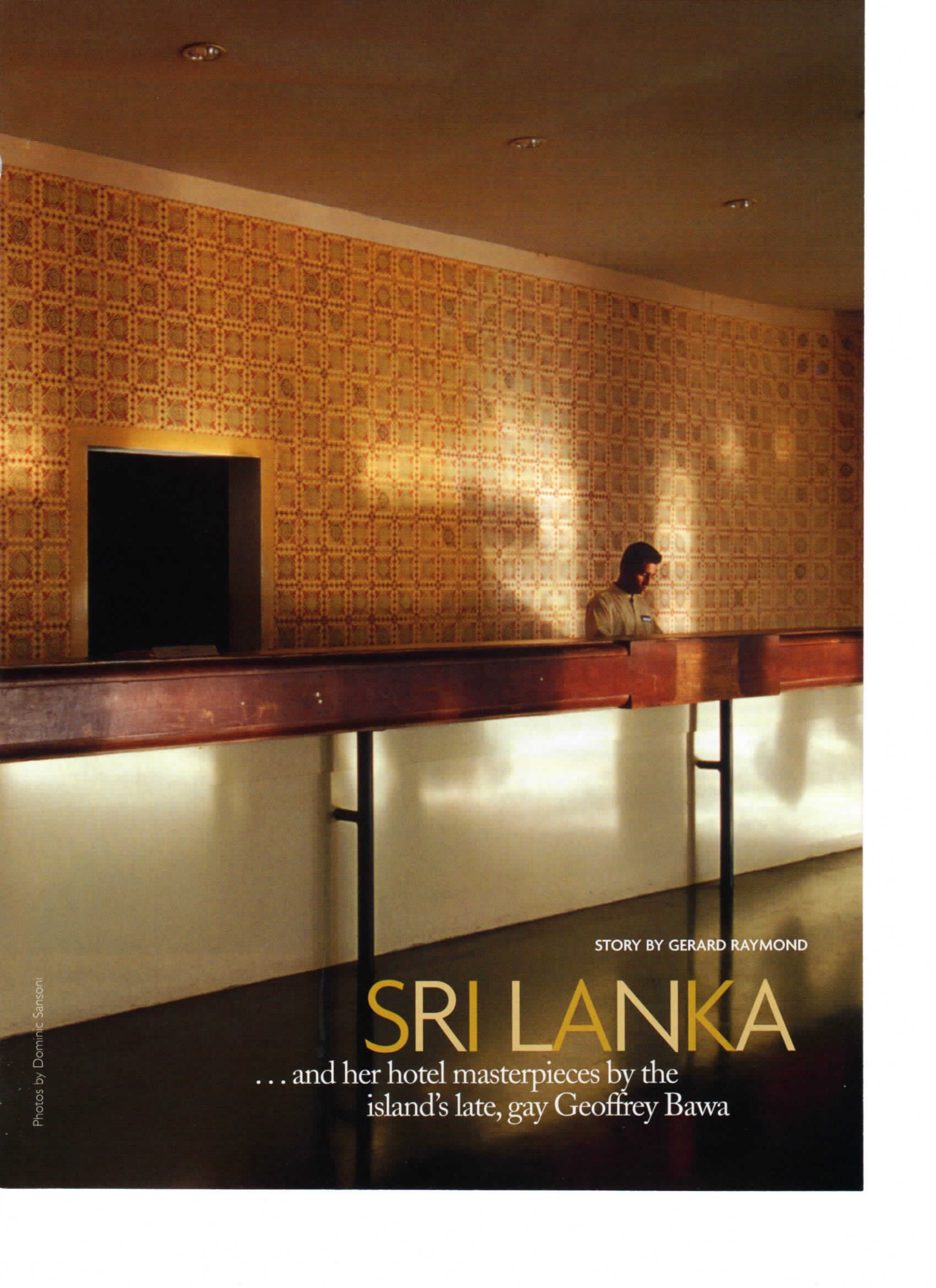


Space and shadow
interplay on the
terrace at Bawa's
Lighthouse Hotel.
At right: Light and
form take shape in
the lobby of his
Kandalama Hotel.





Photos by Dominic Sansoni

STORY BY GERARD RAYMOND

SRI LANKA

... and her hotel masterpieces by the island's late, gay Geoffrey Bawa

Nothing prepares you for your first spectacular view of Kandalama Hotel. Drive into the nondescript red dirt road that runs through scrub jungle in the central region of Sri Lanka and, 10 minutes later, a luxury tourist hotel materializes, seeming to sprout organically from the rocky outcrop ahead. Foliage grows wild on the flat concrete roof, throwing green tendrils along the stone pillars to give the impression that the jungle has enveloped the building. To get to the dazzling lobby, you walk through a serpentine corridor that incorporates a chunk of the rock it is built upon. Once there, the elegant minimalist design draws your gaze outward—to a clear blue pool that drops precipitously into the surrounding jungle and a large reservoir below. Nearby, the ruins of the ancient capital cities of Anuradhapura (founded in the fourth century B.C.) and Polonnaruwa (dating to the 12th century) and the fifth-century rock fortress Sigiriya await exploration.

Kandalama Hotel is an expression of the cross-cultural imagination of Sri Lanka's greatest architect, Geoffrey Bawa, who died in 2003 at the age of 83. He left behind an impressive portfolio of work that includes some 40 private residences, 20 hotels, and a wealth of civic buildings, including the Sri Lanka Parliament. With theatrical flair Bawa drew from the country's ancient cultural legacy as well as its colonial heritage, adapting the international modernist style to harmonize his interior spaces with the natural beauty of their tropical surroundings.

Bawa's mixed parentage—Muslim, German, Scottish, English, and Sinhalese—reflects the rich ethnic tapestry of this mango-shaped island paradise, which hangs below the southern tip of India. Don't say "India lite" to a Sri Lankan: Although it shares many similarities with its great neighbor, the rich island formerly known as Ceylon possesses its own unique culture and cuisine. Ruled in ancient times by the Sinhalese and Tamils, Sri Lanka became a colony of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the British from the 16th through mid 20th centuries. An independent nation since 1948, Sri Lanka experienced widespread ethnic fighting in the '80s and '90s between the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamils that dealt a heavy blow to the country's tourist industry. But now, with peace holding fast for the most part, for nearly

three years, foreign visitors are flocking back in ever increasing numbers.

For the gay and lesbian visitor, Sri Lanka presents a friendly yet contradictory face. Legally, you can face prison for same-sex liaisons, but the law has not been enforced so far. Paradoxically, while homosexuality is not generally accepted in the culture, a current cabinet minister—a close confidant of Sri Lanka's president, no less—is openly gay, and according to local rumor, as many as four former leaders of the country were gay. Science fiction guru Arthur C. Clarke, who teasingly responds he's "mildly cheerful" when asked if he's gay, has made his home here for the past 48 years. Bawa himself was very private, and you have to read between the lines for discreet references to his sexuality in David Robson's definitive biography *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works* (Thames and Hudson, 2002). But you can detect a queer aesthetic in the playful elegance of his work.

The best way to savor the joys of the island is to establish your base at one of Bawa's fabulous hotels. "Water and the play of light and shade were what gave me most pleasure, and that pleasure enhanced by a line of wall or

the shimmering wraparound swimming pool. Then, stretching to infinity, the blue ocean.

A three-hour drive along the southwestern coast from the port city of Colombo brings you to the Lighthouse Hotel and Spa, located near the city of Galle, a former colonial bastion. Bawa's design for this 63-room hotel, perched on a promontory lashed by the waves of the Indian Ocean, incorporates a Dutch veranda and Moorish elements—architectural influences from countries associated with the history of the region.

If you are captivated by his hotels, take a 90-minute drive inland from Blue Water to visit Bawa's country home and garden, Lunuganga. Over more than 40 years, Bawa designed and nurtured what he called a "garden within larger garden" on a 25-acre plot of land overlooking a lagoon. His own description of discovering the property offers an insight to his creative impulse: "This is how I found it—abandoned and uncared for—the lake hidden behind the curtain of leaves, except when a sudden breeze moving a branch opened momentarily a view of clouds and lake—promising what could be..."

A warm, hospitable people and diverse terrain make Sri Lanka an enchanting destination.



ESSENTIALS » SRI LANKA

ACCOMMODATIONS (Dial 011 before all numbers) Moderate/Expensive: **Kandalama Hotel** (Damballa; 94-11-2333-070; \$140, with breakfast and dinner) has 162 rooms and a subtle minimalist design that blends into a tropical forest environment, located in close proximity to Sigiriya—an amazing fifth-century rock fortress. **Lighthouse Hotel and Spa** (Dadella, Galle; 94-91-222-4017; \$200–\$325) has 63 rooms, and from the vantage point of the hotel looking out over the Indian Ocean, there is no land between you and Antarctica. **Blue Water** (Thalpitija, Wadduwa; 94-38-223-5067; \$100–\$300, depending upon the season, with breakfast and dinner) has 96 rooms. This simple and elegant beach resort strikes a note of serenity.

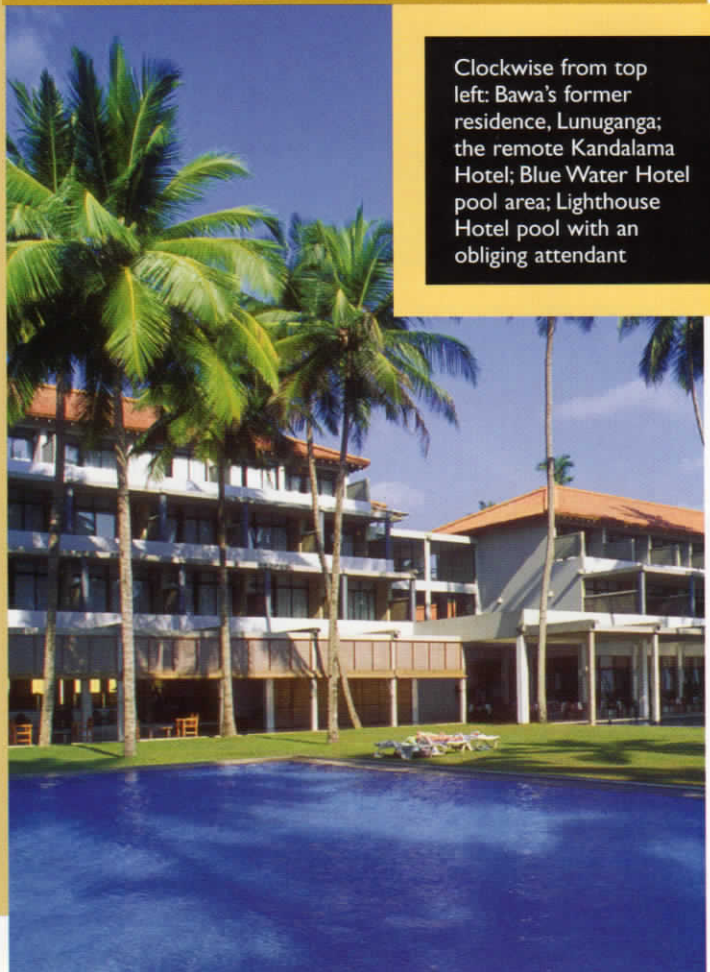
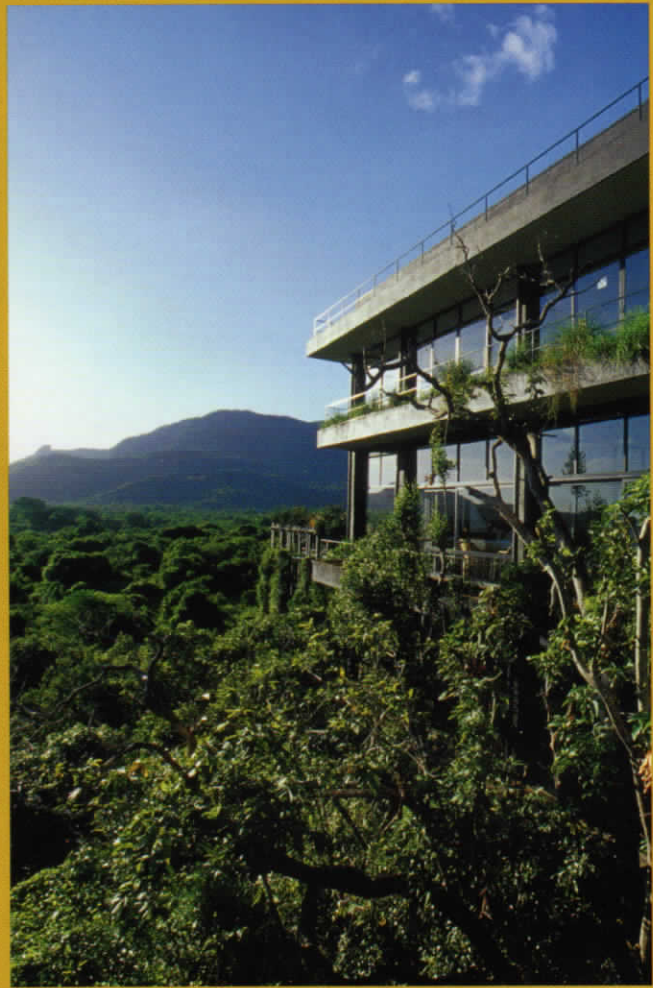
RESTAURANTS Moderate: Meet queer locals at **Koluu's Frangipani** (126 Havelock Rd., Colombo 5; 94-11-2584-174; \$8–20). This is run by Hemalalindra "Koluu" Ranawake, a well-known Sri Lankan chef and restaurateur who is famous for appearing in drag at public events. Ranawake also operates the recently opened **Tulips by Koluu** (Indra Regent Hotel, Duplication Road, Colombo 3; 94-11-2574-930), priced similarly to Frangipani, with Western/Sri Lankan cuisine. Expensive: **The Gallery Café** (2 Alfred House Rd., Colombo 3; 94-11-2582162; \$20–25) is one of Colombo's most elegant dining spaces, occupying Bawa's former offices and retaining much of his original design. It attracts a well-heeled liberal crowd and offers a Western menu with Sri Lankan flavors. Check out the remarkable 1940s black-and-white nude studies by gay Sri Lankan Lionel Wendt in the bathrooms. **ATTRACTIONS Lunuganga** (94-11-2589212; \$10) is Bawa's residence near the town of Bentota. Tours available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 10 A.M. and 3 P.M. by appointment only.

The Out Traveler Ratings: Sri Lanka

Gay-Friendly	○
Legal Domestic Partnerships	●
Adoption Laws	○
Antidiscrimination Laws	○
HIV Information	●
Gay Scene	●
● Excellent ● Fair ○ Poor	

building—geometry with nature," he once wrote. See for yourself as you enter the long corridor that leads to the lobby of Blue Water, Bawa's beach resort on the southwestern coast—the last hotel he designed prior to a stroke he suffered in 1998. First, you glimpse the blue reflecting pool to one side of the arcade. Proceed further and the eye is dazzled by

Remember a cinched-waisted Elizabeth Taylor in *Elephant Walk*, sashaying through scrub and tropical forestation, traipsing across rolling hills carpeted with Sri Lankan tea plantations? With his great masterpieces of place, atmosphere, and nature, Bawa offers gay modern travelers to this mythical island such memorable frames for extraordinary visions of paradise. ☺



Clockwise from top left: Bawa's former residence, Lunuganga; the remote Kandalama Hotel; Blue Water Hotel pool area; Lighthouse Hotel pool with an obliging attendant