



THE FLAME TREE HERALD TRIBUNE

news, views,
reviews,
& off - grid
jungle intel

IN
THIS
EDITION

FOREVER FENNEL
OUT-HOWLING
KING OF THE MONTH
THE ISLAND'S GREAT RIVERS
THE FIFTH WONDER OF ANCIENT LANKA
UNPREDICTABLE & BRILLIANT

February 2026

flamefreestate.com



“

We stayed for three days but we would have been happy to spend three weeks.

”

THE DUTCH EMBLEM OF CEYLON



The emblem used by the Dutch to administer Ceylon was almost identical to that of the Portuguese – featuring an elephant walking through palm trees with mountains behind. But they added a key new detail, one that fitted very nearly with their entire economic purpose of being on the island at all – a few bales of the ultra-valuable cinnamon crop that they harvested across the island. More interestingly, each subdistrict they governed had its own version of the heraldic arms. In Trincomalee, a mercenary soldier from Java is included. In Mannar, a plant, *hedyotis puberula*, cherished for its dyes, was adopted. A fort and a bridge dominate the shield of Matara, and a single fort the shield of Kalpitiya. Ships feature on the symbols of Chilaw and Puttalam, and a clay pitcher for Negombo.

“ The indoors are covered with eclectic art pieces making it a lively and homey hotel to spend more time than you originally planned for. ”



OUT- HOWLING ALL OTHER OWLS



Also known as the Devil Bird in Sri Lanka, The Spot-Bellied Eagle-Owl is the owl to out owl (or out-howl) all other owls on the island and heard at night at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.



It is a massive raptor, some 3 feet in length, and is the world's sixth-largest owl; it is well distributed in Sri Lanka's forests. Its grey and white markings make it easy to spot, and the ledge-shaped tufts that lie horizontally over its eyes give it a learned and quizzical look.

But it is its savage, human-sounding shrieks that have granted it the greatest notoriety, for on the island it is also known as the Devil Bird and its cry is said to portend death.

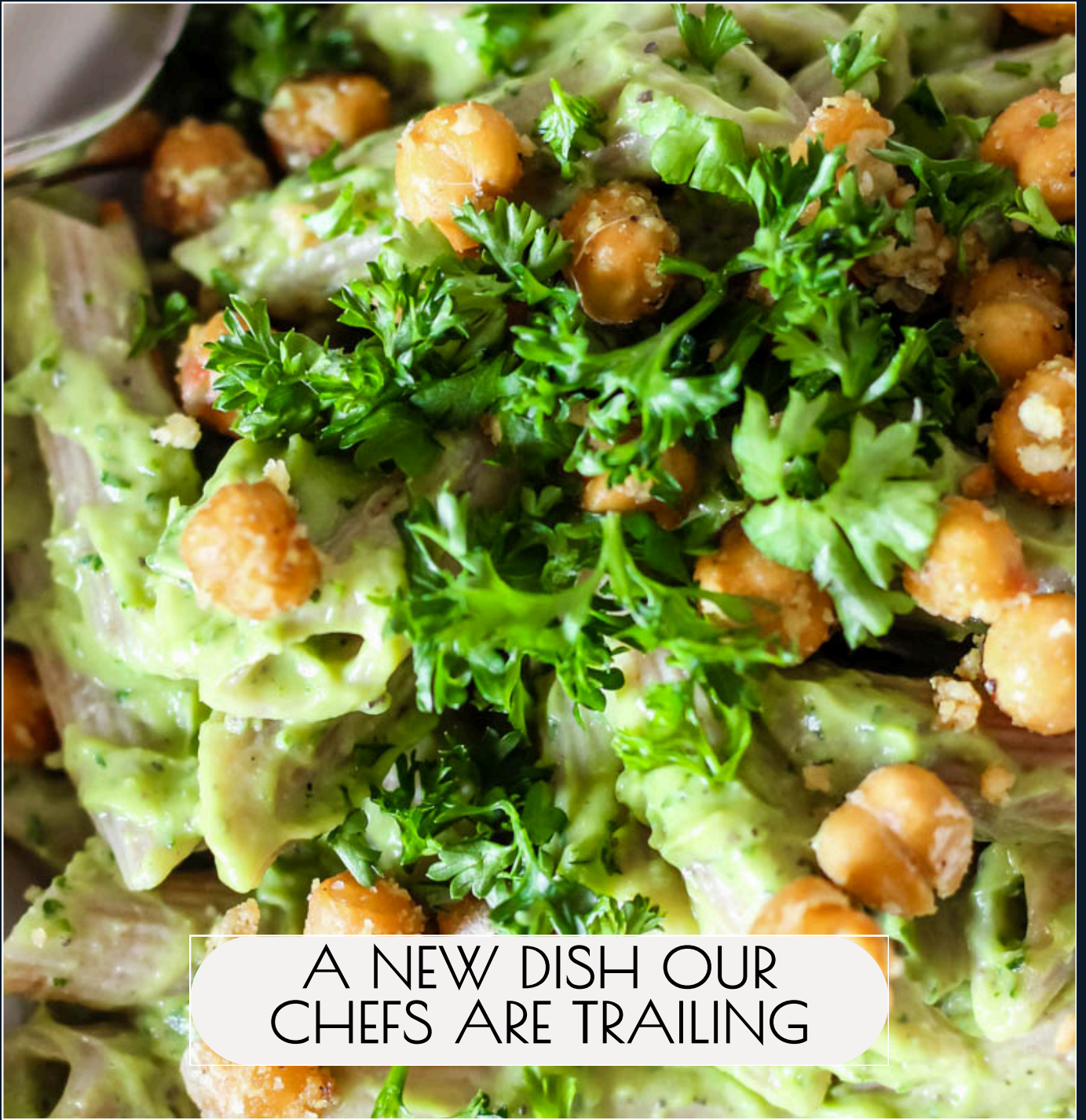


“

Magnificent
hotel located
in an
exceptional
setting!

”

AVOCADO PASTA WITH PARMESAN ROASTED CHICKPEAS



A NEW DISH OUR
CHEFS ARE TRAILING

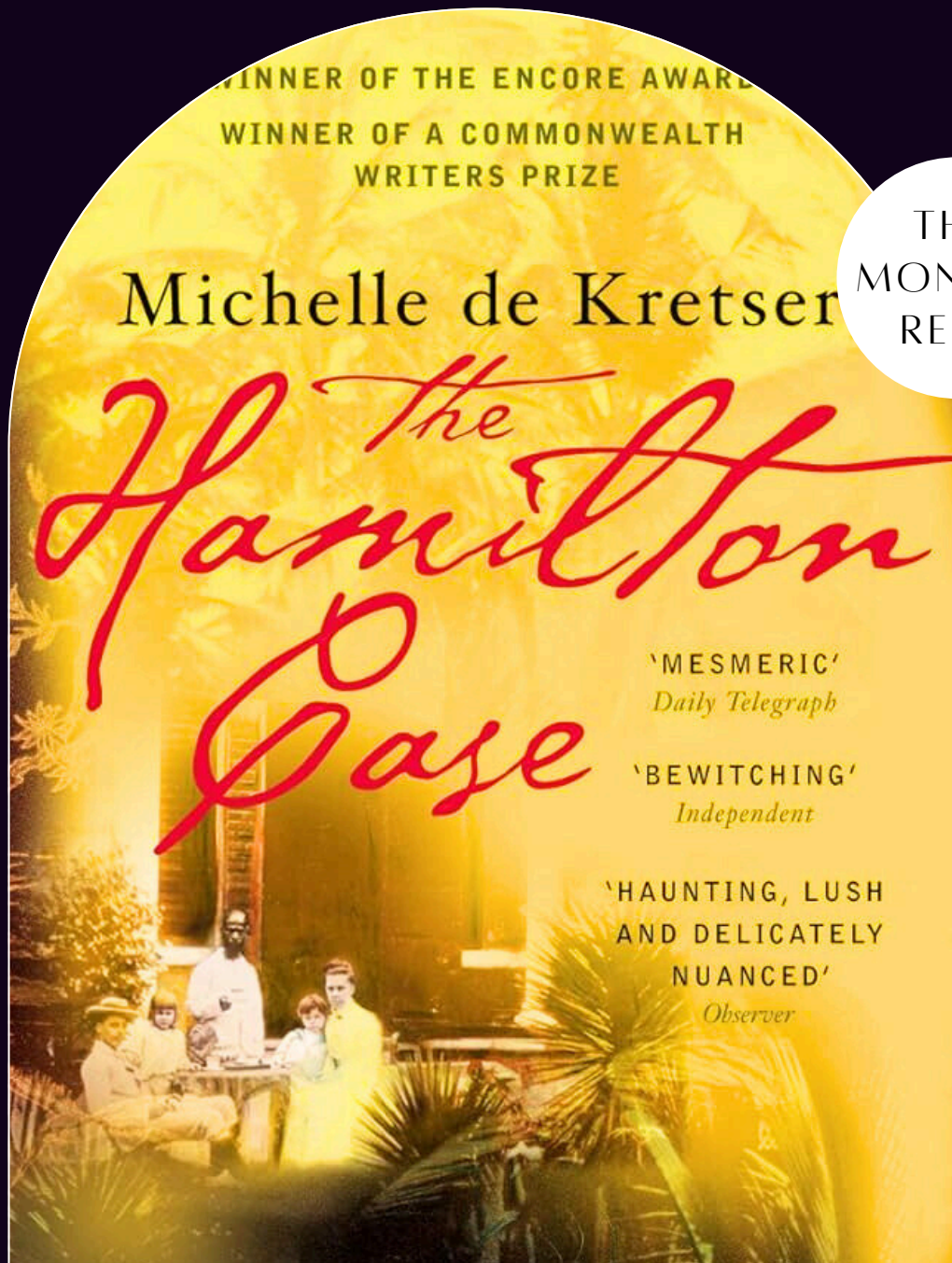
Cashews; Chickpeas; Extra-Virgin Olive Oil; Parmesan; Sea Salt;
Freshly Ground Black Pepper; Avocados; Lemon Juice; Yeast; Basil;
Fresh Parsley; Garlic Cloves; Pasta.

“ One of the nicest places we've stayed at and a highlight of our Sri Lanka trip. ”



UNPREDICTABLE & BRILLIANT

MICHELLE DE KRETSER



THIS
MONTH'S
READ

An emigree Sri Lankan since her teenage years, Michelle de Kretser is today a major Australian Sri Lankan writer. "I think he glimpsed, obscurely," she was to write once, "that we were being written by the grand narratives of our age. Nationalism, empire, socialism, capitalism. It was necessary to choose between them."



Since first publishing "The Rose Gower" in 1999, a romance-cum-thriller set during the French revolution, she made it clear that her theme was precisely whatever she wanted it to be, unbounded by any duty of heritage or paternity unless so chosen. Her second novel, published in 2003, "The Hamilton Case" tells the story of a famous beauty "gone native" in the jungle, a girl who once danced with the Prince of Wales.

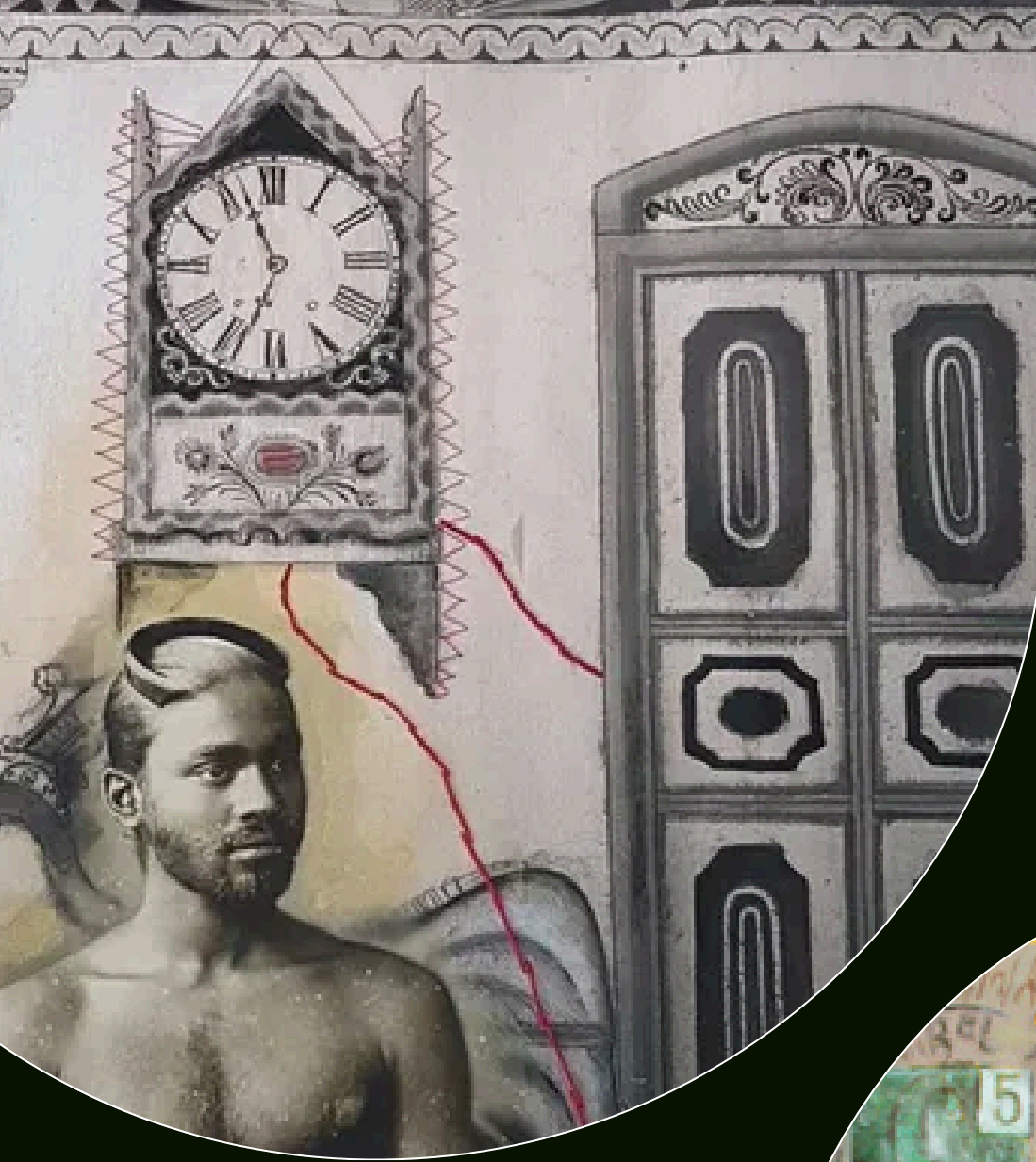
Her utterly unpredictable and brilliant third novel, "The Lost Dog," published in 2007, seems to be all about a professor searching for his dog in the Australian bush. Except that it isn't. Her fourth novel, "Questions of Travel," is a soulful narrative about two people enthralled by traveling, one a publisher, the other an unwilling tourist. In 2014 she released "Springtime: A Ghost Story" set with wonderful *éclat* in sunny, suburban Australia.

In 2017 she returned to the themes of travel with her novel, "The Life to Come", set in Australia, France, and Sri Lanka. Her reception and rich success is also marked out by a brilliant track record of literary awards from across the known world. Her books include: "The Rose Gower" published in 1999 "The Hamilton Case," published in 2003. "The Lost Dog," published in 2007. "Questions of Travel," published in 2012. "Springtime: A Ghost Story" published in 2014.



“ And boy,
is it a
hidden
gem! ”

SUJEewa KUMARI



Born in 1971, Sujeewa Kumari is one of the country's leading contemporary artists, her work focused on identity and women. Her paintings, starting as colonial photographs, are strikingly multi-dimensional, with paint, pencil and needlework used to transform and reinterpret history.



“

And everybody
loves David's
five schnauzers,
who are, let's
face it, the real
bosses of the
place.

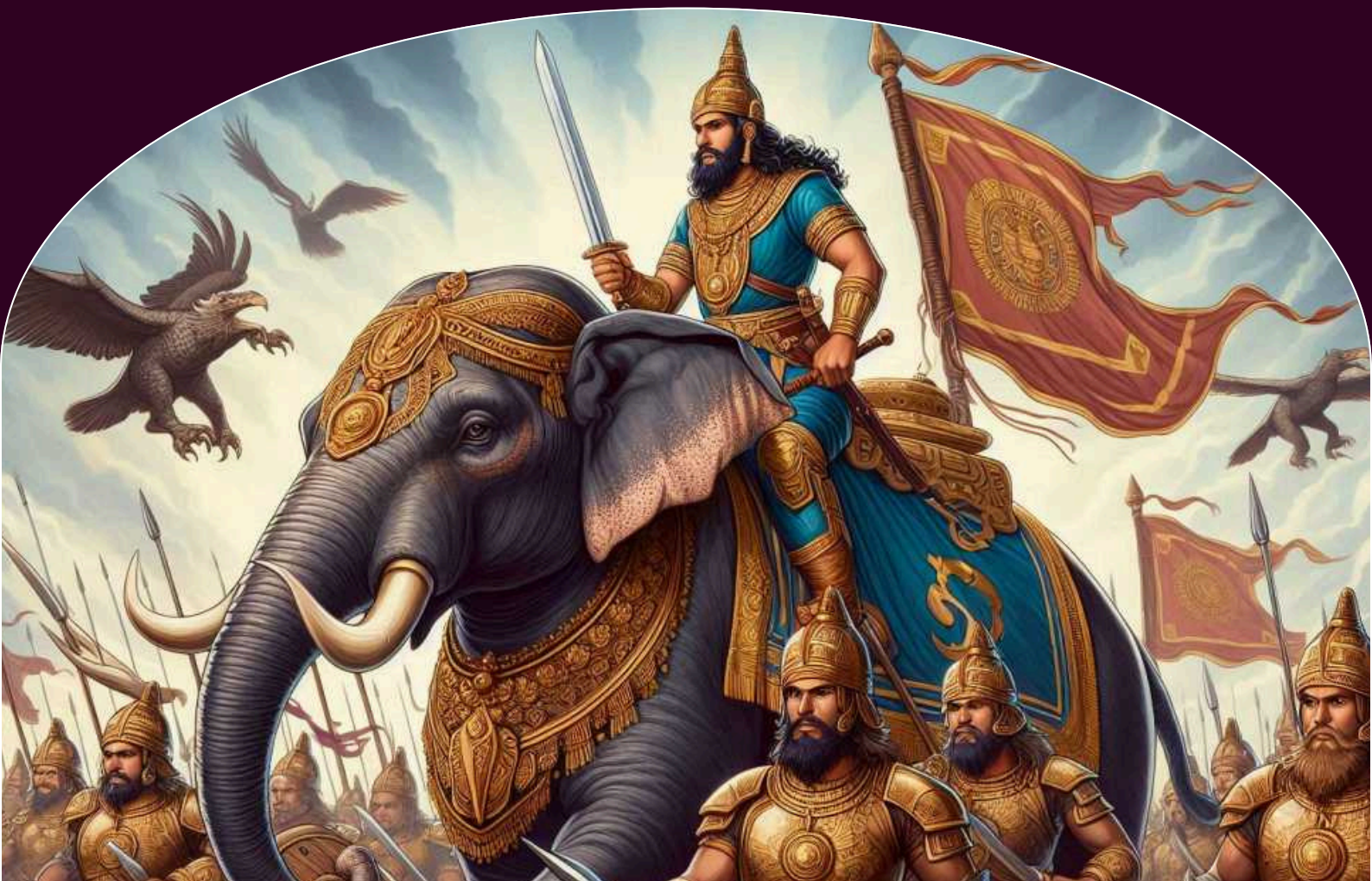
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KING OF THE MONTH

ILANAGA, KING OF ANURADHAPURA

The forty-second monarch of the Vijayan Period (543 BCE - 66 CE), the dates of his reign being 35 CE – 35 CE; and then, after an interregnum, 38 CE – 44 CE. Nephew of the slain Vijayan King, Amandagamani Abhaya, Ilanaga managed to dethrone the sitting monarch, Sivali, King, Amandagamani Abhaya's daughter in 35 CE. In so doing, he turbo-charged the unrest and insurrection that was beginning to eat away at the kingdom. Within months, Ilanaga had fallen out with the Lambakarna clan, a most significant noble family within his court. In the ensuing turmoil, he had to flee the country, leaving the Lambakarna in nominal charge, and no doubt fluctuating. Hunted somewhat ineptly, Ilanaga managed to hide in hill country before catching a ship to South India. He was to return 3 years later, at the head of a borrowed Chola army, to reclaim his throne in 38 CE. His reign lasted another 7 years, ending with his surprisingly natural death in 44 CE.

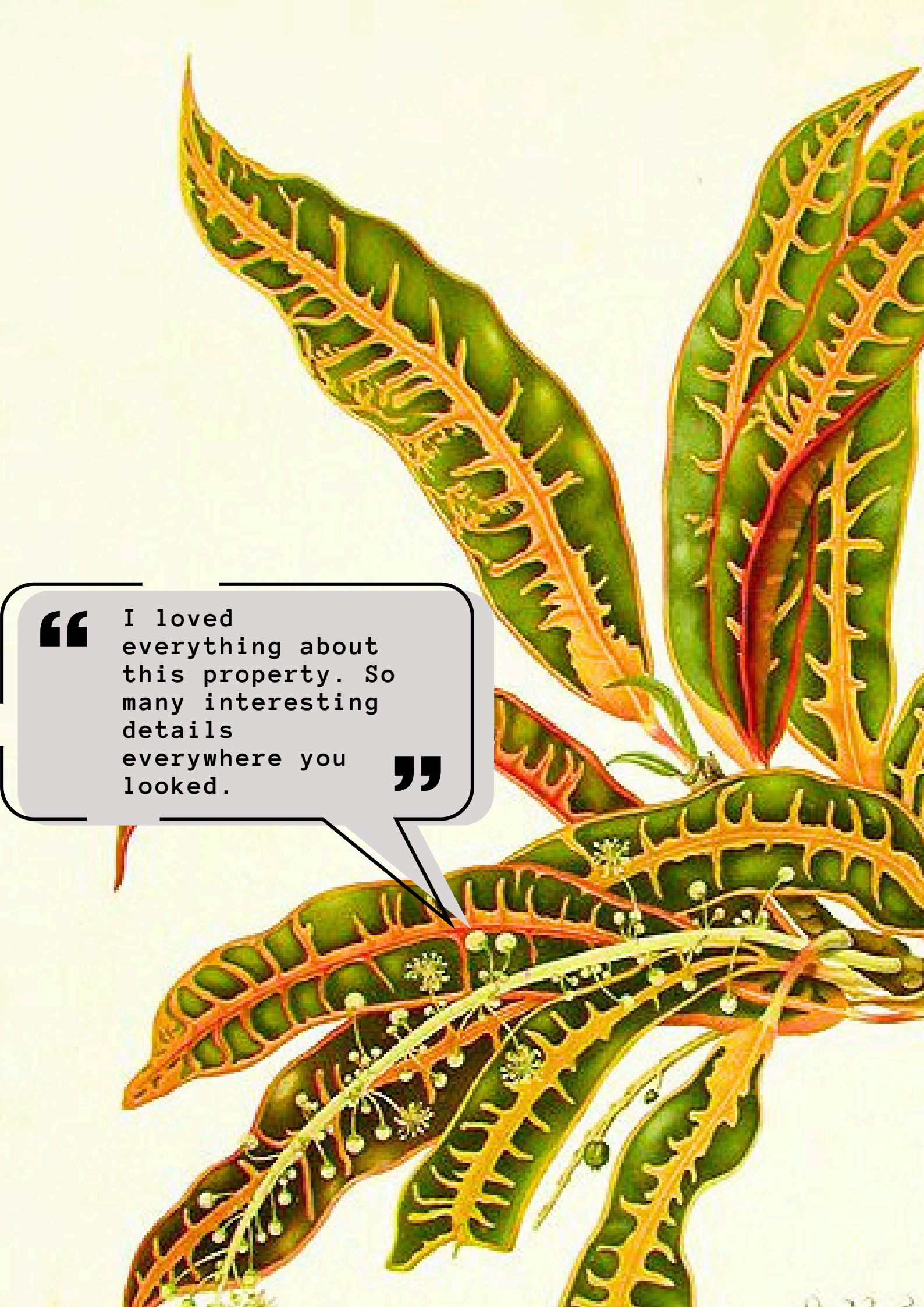


“

a place of
pure comfort
and delight

”





“

I loved everything about this property. So many interesting details everywhere you looked.

”

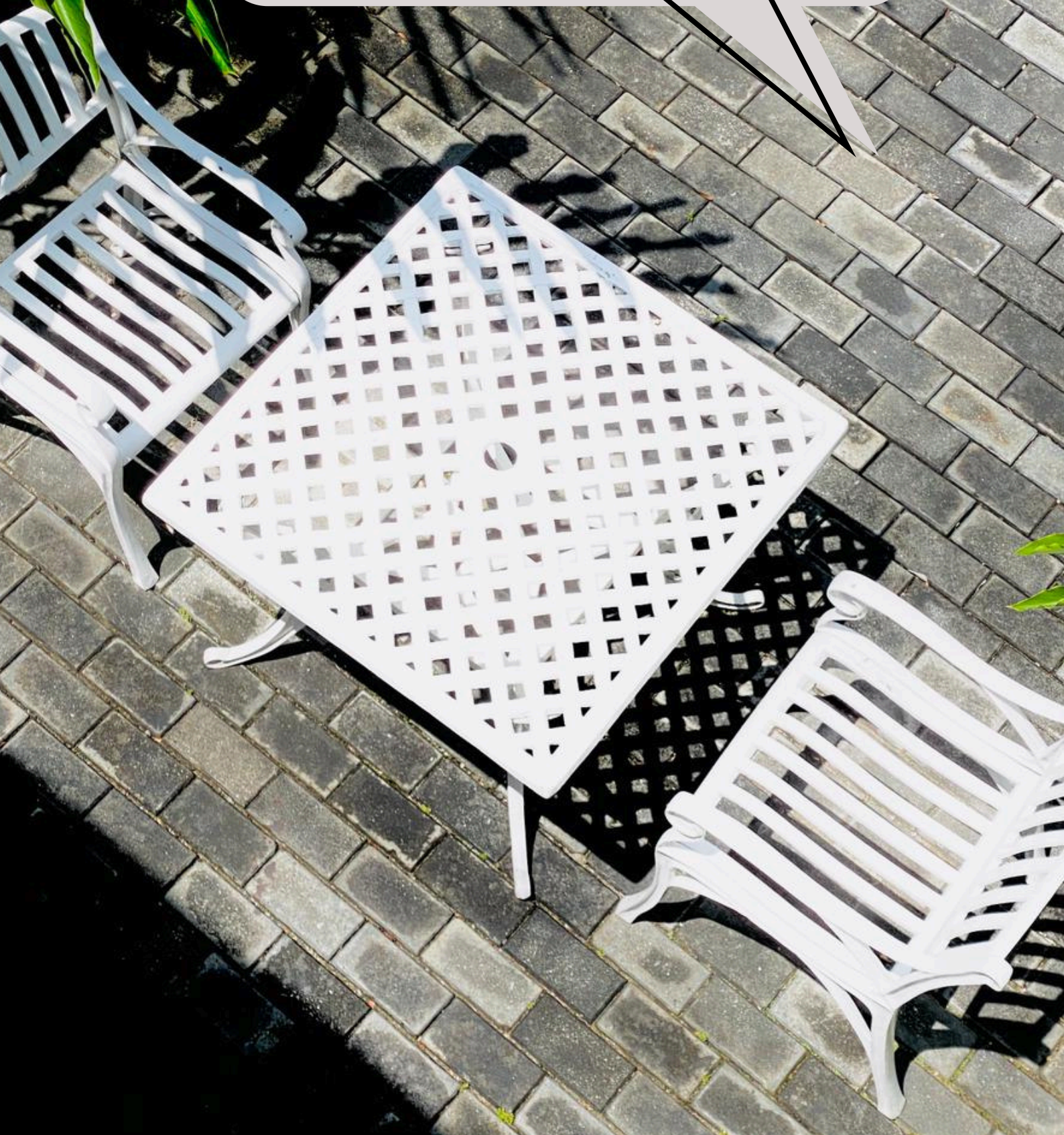


FENNEL



Fennel owes its remote DNA to carrots. It is a staple ingredient in the Sri Lankan kitchen, prized for its sweet, liquorice-like flavour, the Paddington Bear of the spice world, easy to grow from seeds in full sun, its base bulb ready to harvest after just three months. It is prone to gluttonous slugs and insects, and so grows in The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel with the sort of protection a junior Vice President might receive. Native to the Mediterranean, the plant was widely known across the ancient civilisations of the region and travelled swiftly and almost unnoticed to Asia and beyond – including Sri Lanka, one of the many discreet gifts of the Indian Ocean trade. Its sweet, grassy taste is often incorporated into many Sri Lankan dishes, from curries to Watalappan. It is a component of many traditional medicines used to relieve colds and digestive problems. Modern science seems to validate this, with studies showing how one of its main compounds, anethole, helps relieve stomach ailments. And, perhaps more interestingly, further research indicates it can also be used to help prevent liver disease.

“ Serene
place to
relax and
unwind. ”



THE FIFTH WONDER

Despite their iconic status, the original seven wonders of the ancient world come up short when compared to the seven wonders of ancient Lanka.

The world's first Seven Wonders comprised a garden, two tombs, two statues, a temple, and a lighthouse. It featured the Pyramids of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Sri Lanka's list, though, is not all architecture with a nod to gardens – it is comprehensive, including as it does a painting, a monastery, a book, a piece of revolutionary new technology that enabled a treasured dish, a shrine, a tree, and a lake.

Its first great wonder was a lake - Panda Wewa; and its second the Sri Maha Bodhi. Its third was to comprise Asia's equivalent of the three great pyramids of Giza – the three great stupas of Anduraupura: the Ruwanweliseya; the Abhayagiri; and the Jetavanaramaya. Ancient Sri Lanka's fourth great wonder was a palace built to escape death and suffering - the Brazen Palace, or Lowamahapaya.

But Sri Lanka's fifth great wonder is a mystery. Perishable, yet still found in almost every island household at some point in any week, its origins may be obscure but historians appear to agree on one thing: it is uniquely Sri Lanka, originating here at some very distant point in the remote past before being adopted in many other parts of South Asia, and even further afield.

THE 7 WONDERS OF ANCIENT LANKA





Uniquely, it is also a wonder that can be constructed by almost anyone who knows how to boil rice. The recipe is simple. After boiling, add coconut milk to the rice and cook for 5 more minutes, until no liquid remains. Then slice it into shapes – diamonds are a favourite - and leave it to cool and dry a little more.

Kiribath, the name of the dish, is the ultimate comfort food. And yet, like Dior's little black dress, it is immensely versatile too. It can be served with anything: poached eggs, foie gras, curry, marmalade - but by far the best consumable accessory is Seeni Sambol, a sweet, tangy, caramelised onion flavoured with all the spices for which the island is so famous - tamarind, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, curry and pandan leaves, chilli and turmeric.

Most, if not all, the food made on the island can be found elsewhere: in India, of course, but also the Maldives, Malaysia, the Arab world, Portugal, Holland, and Britain. These shared dishes have, over the centuries, evolved into distinctly Sri Lankan dishes, but only kiribath appears to have originated on this island.

It is also the only food item to have inspired a stupa – the Kiribath Vehera in Anuradhapura, a small, barely standing and much overlooked stupa of almost unimaginable antiquity that once was said to house the sacred tooth relic itself, whose own origins, like the dish itself, are equally opaque.

Yet Kiribath's very existence signifies several fundamental things about Sri Lanka that reach far further than mere corporeal cravings. Like so many other Asian countries, rice is the country's staple food, more so even than bread in the West. Sri Lanka devours over 2.4 million metric tons of it annually.

A semi-aquatic plant, rice needs water to grow – around 2,500 litres of it for every kilo of harvested rice. Had ancient Sri Lanka rested on the calibre of those distant aquatic laurels that gave rise to Panda Wewa in the 4th century BCE, the country would have evolved little further than a few modest kingdoms. To grow the vast amounts of rice required, then, as now, significant advances in water technology were necessary.

And these are best epitomised by bisokotuwas – cutting-edge sluices, their design and position modified and perfected by the kingdom's hydrogeological engineers, the Quantum Computing scientists of their day. Their revolutionary innovations were far in advance of anything else in the world. They ensured that water could exit a reservoir without imposing sufficient pressure on the dam embankment to cause collapse. But at scale – for this was the breakthrough. The new sluice designs greenlit the possible size of reservoirs, allowing them to scale up to unprecedented levels; and water of unimaginably large quantities could be collected to extend agriculture, support ever larger and more urban populations, and produce crops whose surplus would rapidly and exponentially enrich the young state.

One of the oldest bisokotuwas can still be seen at Kudawilachchiya, an ancient, abandoned tank within Wilpattu National Park. It was constructed here sometime after 67 BCE by the first Lambakanna king, Vasabha. The stone slabs used on its inner face fit so perfectly together that there is no room for even the modest weed to grow. Rising above it, the sluice tower itself can still be seen.

At the time, it would also have sported many other refinements that maximised water availability - inceptor zones, for example, created between the tank and the paddy fields by planting 77 types of trees and plants whose well-developed root systems would absorb the salts and heavy metals from the water before it reached the paddy. Tree belts were planted well above the water tank to stop wind, waves, and evaporation. Sedges, grasses, and special shrubs were planted to purify water run-off. Large catchment forests were planted to improve the groundwater table and regularise the water supply.





to the tanks in the dry season. And in the nearby upper catchment areas, small dams and miniature tanks were constructed to deliberately make the land marshy and capture silt that would otherwise run into the tanks.

Vasabha is also credited with building lengthy canals to transport water over very long distances, using natural gravity to propel the water along its course by creating a gradient of 10 centimetres per kilometre. "It is possible," wrote a Mr Bailey, Assistant Government Agent of the District of Badulla in 1885, "that in no other part of the world are there to be found within the same space, the remains of so many works of irrigation, which are at the same time of such great antiquity and of such vast magnitude as in Ceylon. Probably no other country can exhibit works so numerous and at the same time so ancient and extensive, within the same limited area, as in this Island."

These innovations propelled the modest Anuradhapuran Kingdom into the political stratosphere, creating such rice surpluses as to underpin an economy that would maintain a flourishing and confident international presence in South Asia and within the Indian Ocean trading zone. But of the many benefits water technology and the exponential expansion of paddy land created, none is so great a wonder as that most refined and delicious of rice dishes: kiribath, the country's fourth and only consumable wonder.

“

it has an almost
dreamlike quality
to it: wandering
through rooms
filled to the brim
with old photos,
doodads from all
over the world

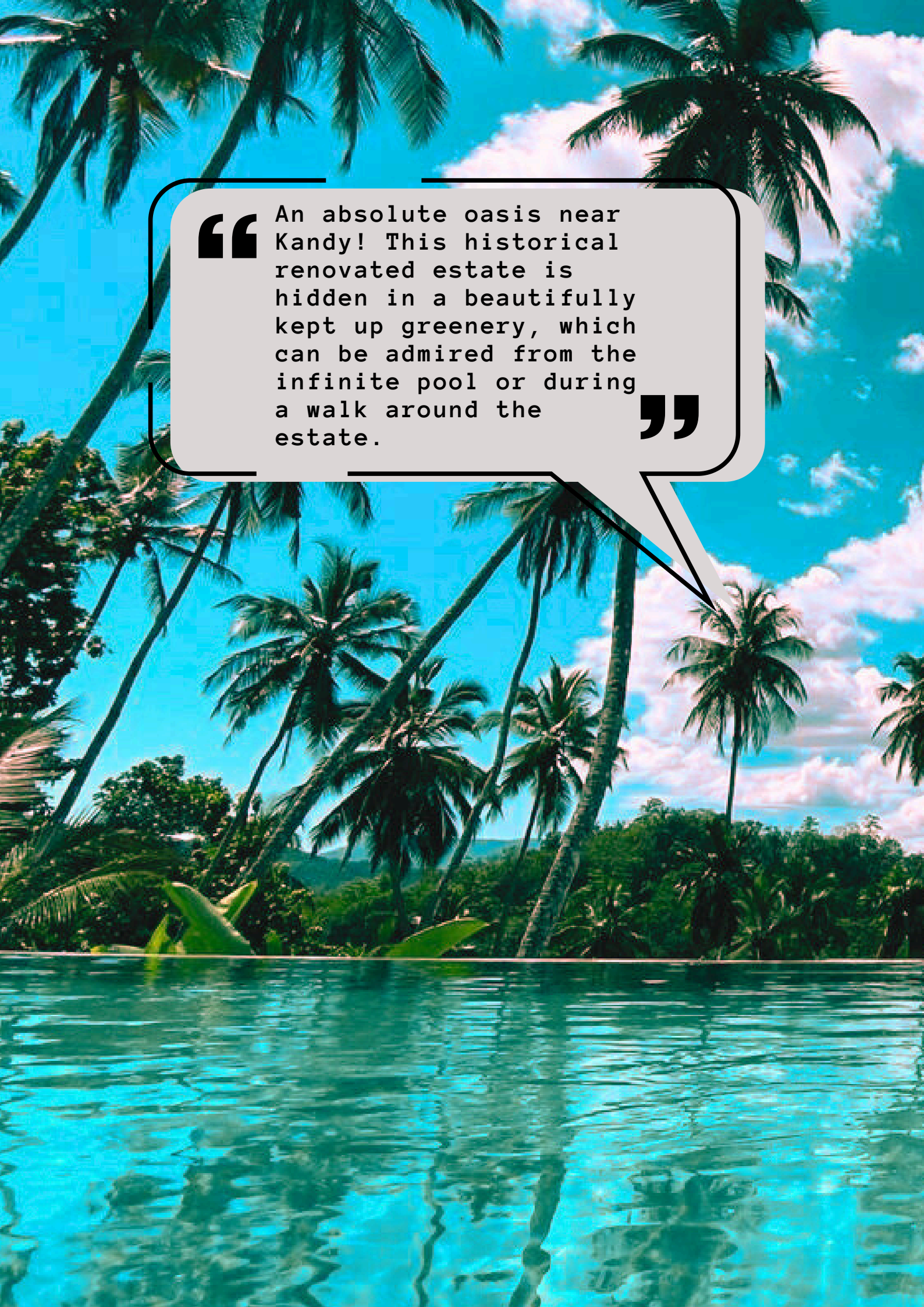
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THE KALU GANGA



At one hundred and twenty-nine kilometres, the Kalu Ganga is the country's tenth longest river, collecting its waters in Seetha Gangula and draining them out in Kalutara. Few rivers could have so illustrious a footprint for Seetha Gangula is one of several streams that runs out for Adam's Peak, a site revered by almost all the country's religions. Even so, the best is yet to come, for the Kalu Ganga moves on to flow through Sinharaja, the Jurassic era rainforest that is the country's greatest biodiverse zone. As it runs, it passes through Ratnapura, with its history of throwing up glittering gemstones from riverbanks and on past Richmond Castle, an Edwardian palace as grand and sad as a disposed Tsarist princess. It finally reaches the western seaboard and the Laccadive Sea at Kalatura, home to the mangosteen. This fruit is rarely seen beyond the island – an quarantining that could quite possibly be deliberate, to moderate the inordinate moral damage its decadent and fragrant flesh has on the lips of anyone so fortunate as to bite into it.



“ An absolute oasis near Kandy! This historical renovated estate is hidden in a beautifully kept up greenery, which can be admired from the infinite pool or during a walk around the estate. ”

AYUBOWAN

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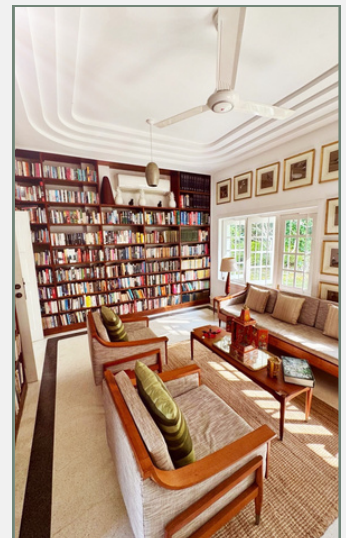
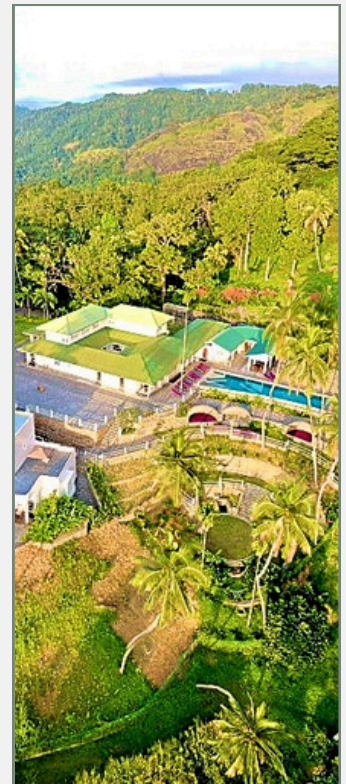


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“ What an amazing
experience it was to
stay at this
beautiful, original
and welcoming hotel
hidden in the jungle
of Sri Lanka. ”