



photography by kind permission Mandala by Lake Villa

## Mandalay

Just minutes away from Sri Lanka's crowded coastline, Savan Wijewardene discovers the magic of the interior – at Mandalay Lake Villa.

A light mist lifts off the lake's still, emerald skin to reveal a string of tropical islands and red-roofed villages dominated by white temple domes.

In the channels and flat expanses between the islands, fishermen cast their antiquated nets into the extraordinarily rich waters, as a meditative Buddhist chants float across an equally serene landscape.

The scene is absolutely timeless, with nothing to suggest the encroachment of the 21<sup>st</sup> or even the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But this extraordinary paradise is not some distant and unexplored part of the country: a forgotten valley deep in the hill country, or a Shangri-la on the east coast. It is, in fact, the Koggala Lake, mere minutes from the tourist epicentre of Galle.

Hardly a mile from the famous southern coast this is the interior; the island's green hinterland long ignored by travellers and tourists who tend to be dazzled and distracted by the blue sea and golden sands. Beyond the beach, however, there exists a private and ancient world entirely worth discovering – and for the time being

Mandalay Lake is perhaps the outside world's only outpost in the quaint and quiet lakeside village of Kathaluwa.

The handsome villa stares out onto the vast expanse of the Koggala Lake, and from the four-poster bed in the luxuriously spacious and open master suite you can watch monitor lizards slip through the mangroves, and make out the silhouette of an ancient temple in the distance as ancient fishing canoes float past a perfectly pink sunrise.

Islands half-visible in the morning light rise out of the water and low hills materialise in the distance; only the electric blue streak of a kingfisher's dive stains the heavy, humid lakeside air. The scene is so intensely and utterly tropical it could have fallen out of a novel. And indeed this is storybook country – immortalised by Sri Lanka's most beloved and renowned vernacular author, Martin Wickramasinghe.

The island of Madolduwa, the centrepiece of Wickramasinghe's novel of the same name, stands just metres away from Mandalay Lake's in-house pier. Swim the

short channel between the villa and island, and you can literally throw yourself into the classic Sinhala story of Tom Sawyerish boyhood adventure. Copies in English are provided at the villa and are fully worth the minutes it will take to skim the 50 or so pages of the novella.

Mandalay Lake fits effortlessly into this fictional world, and the vast white-washed and understated villa somehow appears to have stood forever overlooking the timeless panorama of lake, lagoon, and sea.

But the villa is in fact thoroughly modern, designed by the late and legendary Geoffrey Bawa, with architectural flourishes – immense terraces, a perfect pool, and claw-foot baths – that provide startling but discreet luxury.

It's the feeling of complete seclusion that really sets Mandalay Lake apart from the other extravagant villas that dot the south coast, and from its privileged position the property offers a window onto another world.

A small staff – gardener, houseboy,



## CONCIERGE

Spend a day lounging in the utterly private pool. Shallow ledges are provided so you can read, eat, and snooze without ever leaving the clear blue water.

Swim across to explore the tangled trails of the near-mythical Madolduwa island.

Rent a dug-out and explore the vast expanse of the lake, its other islands (including the appropriately-named Fish Eagle island and Cinnamon Island), hidden villages, or just experience life on the lake.

Visit the Giniwella temple at sunset – seek out its ancient frescoes and enjoy sunset over the lake.

Negotiate with passing fishermen for the freshest crabs and prawns at a fraction of normal market price.

Take a trishaw (*tuk-tuk*) to Galle, or the nearby beaches of Thalpe, Unawatuna and Mirissa.

Head to Mirissa harbour for dolphins, and the now-famed whale watching tours.

watchman, and cook – serve as your eyes and ears to the outside world, pointing out local highlights such as the fabulous Giniwella temple, or fetching local produce, and ensuring that you are not entirely isolated. Yet the service is so exceptionally efficient and discreet that you always feel like you have the entire villa to yourself. And it is this absolute sense of privacy which allows you to feel more completely at ease than you ever can at a resort or even the most secluded and private boutique hotels.

This is your own tropical escape – you can spend all day lounging in the separate living and dining area by the pool, or commandeer a fishing craft for your own adventure on the lake. For the more indolent there's hardly a reason to leave the fabulous and enormous master suite.

Meals can be taken anywhere and at any time, and the talented in-house chef ensures that feasts of fresh curries, steaming seafood, and crisp salads appear in the blink of a languid tropical eye.

While the chef is able to cater to a wide range of tastes, every facility is provided for self-catering. And barbecuing your own fish so close to the water from which it was reeled out only moments before is deeply satisfying. Particularly as the lake's waters are so rich that, with the rods supplied, it more than likely you would have hauled your meal out of the water yourself.

There is something extraordinarily self-contained and faintly Crusoe-esque about the Mandalay experience – cast away not on a desert island but in the folds of rural Sri Lanka.

Of course for the complete castaway experience just throw yourself into the cool Koggala waters and swim the 20 metres to the mythical Madolduwa. Clambering onto a tropical island is a genuine adventure, and the few acres of the island, with their spectacular views and tangled paths, provide several hours of excitement. For the less adventurous – or perhaps more sensible – a canoe to the island can be hired for a nominal sum.

While Mandalay Lake clearly specialises in romantic seclusion the villa is equally suitable for a group. With three well-appointed double rooms, a small group can have the villa to themselves at a very affordable price.

Plenty of board games are available, and the ready-made adventure of the village and surrounding islands Mandalay Lake is perfectly suited for a group of friends or for families on holiday.

Ultimately, the villa is what you make of it; but with its fabulous architecture, the lake, the beach, the pool, and a host of easily accessible islands, the property is so rich in the resources of relaxation that it would be difficult to enjoy anything less than an ideal escape. 🌿

For bookings and further information, visit [www.mandalaylakevilla.com](http://www.mandalaylakevilla.com)