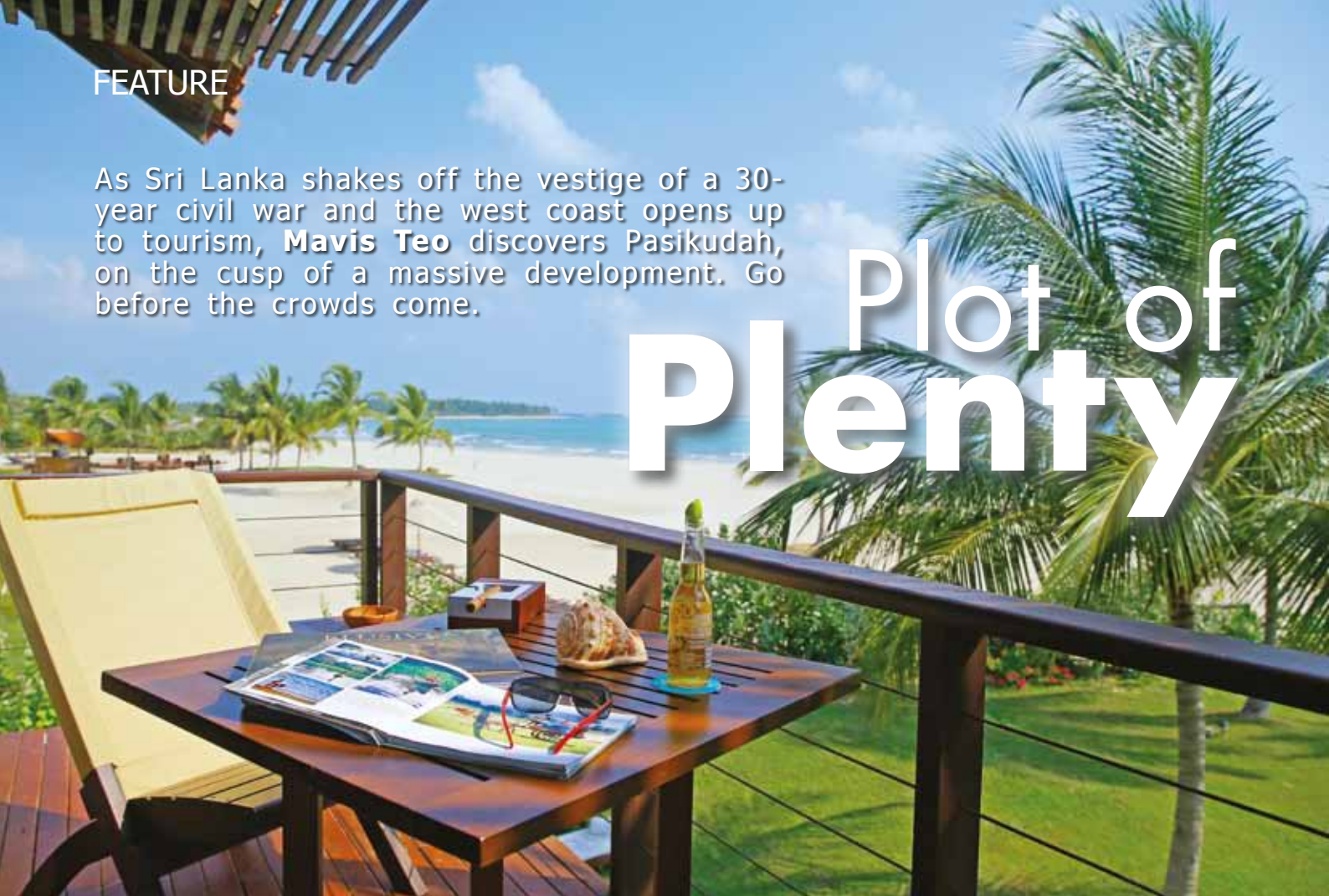


As Sri Lanka shakes off the vestige of a 30-year civil war and the west coast opens up to tourism, **Mavis Teo** discovers Pasikudah, on the cusp of a massive development. Go before the crowds come.

Plot of Plenty



Waking up to a view like this every morning is enough to convert any vacation at Uga Bay's Beach Villa Terrace into a longterm hiatus



Postcards from the edge ...of Uga Bay

Sri Lanka claims to have one of the highest literacy rates in the world – about 91 percent. In Colombo and Galle, former colonial outposts, the Sinhalese majority speak impeccable English, some even with a plummy British accent. Smiling children pedaling on roads to schools now tell a different story, of course.

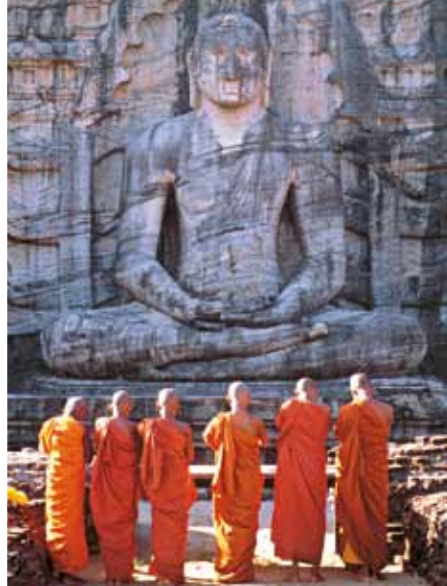
A star on the rise is **Pasikudah** on the east coast, home to a crescent-shaped bay with curved coves and fine glistening sand. It was earmarked for development as a



Bird's eye view of Pasikudah from the seaplane

Marco Polo once described Sri Lanka as "one of the finest islands in the world" – where swaying palm trees fringed soft golden-hued sand, where people spoke in gentle tones and carried themselves with quiet pride. Therefore it is hard to imagine the violence that prevailed from 1983 to 2009 when the country was virtually closed off to the rest of the world world as a civil war raged between Hindu separatists, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who occupied the east and the north, and the Buddhist Sinhalese government.

Photo credits: Sri Lankan Tourism Development, Uga Bay, Sun Aqua Pasikudah, Andrew Vecchio, Sri Lanka Diving Tours and Mavis Teo



Clockwise from top: One of many archaeological heritage sites; Take a naturalist tour of nature preserves; Pay a visit to an elephant orphanage; Vibrant colours of a kingfisher; Monks pray before a seated image, one of four rock relief statues of the Buddha within Gal Viharaya carved into the face of a large granite rock; Entrance to Gal Viharaya, the rock temple of the Buddha situated in the ancient city of Polonnaru in North Central Province

holiday destination. Large, luxurious holiday bungalows were built, but the war put a stop to everything. The bungalows were blown up to prevent the Tamil Tigers from using them as hideouts.

In 2004, the tsunami came, claiming the lives of over 30,000, mostly from the south and east coasts. The west, central and south recovered first. These areas were the first to open up to tourism, given the generally more affluent and educated locals there, as well as a wealth of attractions such as a rich colonial history of tea plantations (a legacy of the British) and teeming wildlife in safaris.

The east, with its unspoiled beaches, pristine waters for scuba diving and snorkeling, wildlife sanctuaries and home to one of Sri Lanka's last tribes of indigenous people – the Dambana, took longer. However, the government's efforts to rebuild the area are showing. Property developers' investments have paid off, as an increasing number of tourists mainly from Europe flock to the resorts during the European summer vacation.

For marine lovers, Pasikudah scores high. The coral reefs and marine life here are thriving, and the waters are immaculate, given the fact that they are still relatively unexplored. Sri Lankan waters are also literally littered with wrecks, making them popular with divers.

Given the potential of Pasikudah on the tourist radar, local hoteliers and a sprinkling of foreign investors are building luxury resorts. Right now, there are just five completed and fully operational ones, tourists are still a rare sight outside of the hotels. I arrived in a Cinnamon Air seaplane at the mini dock in **Batticaloa**, to find a small welcome party of local villagers happily snapping photos of the plane and its passengers. This novelty might wear off in a few years time when more developments are completed – bringing the total number of resorts to 13 in the foreseeable future.

I stayed in two of the most reputable hotels in the area: **Uga Bay**, where rooms have to be booked way in advance during the peak months of June to September; and the latest kid on the block, **Sun Aqua** opened by a Maldivian businessman.

As a resort that bills itself as "naturally playful", you can expect **Sun Aqua Pasikudah** to be suitably decorated in a colourful and cheerful theme with large open spaces to let the powerful (and sometimes fierce) Sri Lankan sun in. Fuschia and aquamarine are the dominant hues. Luxury here is not in the interiors, though there's a spacious bath and plenty of space even in the most basic suites, but in the details such as F & B choices (the hotel claims to have the largest wine cellar in the country) and the little touches.



(Top) Sun Aqua's ocean villa suites with decks that open out into the beachfront; (Bottom) Gastronomes enjoy in-villa dining

My arrival coincided with the tail end of the season in September, when the hotel isn't as fully staffed as occupancy had teed off. Yet efforts were put in to accommodate my last-minute request to visit the **Maha Oya Hotspring Wells**, a collection of six wells with waters of different temperatures; and the **Madura Oya National Park**, which is spread over 58,849 hectares of wildlife. Even along the drive, we could already see elephants in the foliage just a few hundred metres away.

Unfortunately, the much anticipated five-star PADI Centre is not ready yet. However if guests want to



Natives and tourists alike flock to the seven hot springs/wells of Maha Oya

dive or learn the sport, Sun Aqua will accommodate them through LSR Dive Centre in a resort next door. I had one particularly memorable dive with LSR at the *SS British Sergeant* wreck. A tanker had sunk in the Japanese air raid that also accounted for the aircraft carrier *HMS Hermes* (one of the most famous WWII wreck dives in the world, which is on the bucket list of most technical divers) and several other ships on 9 April, 1942. The maximum depth is 27 metres, which means only advanced divers are permitted, but there is easy penetration into some of the holds. The dive was magical as I saw large schools of Blue-Lined and Bigeye snappers, mangrove snappers, and batfish descending on me.

When I moved to **Uga Bay** (which also works with LSR to provide dives for its guests), I opted to dive with Felician Fernando, owner of Sri Lankan Diving Tours in Batticaloa, 40 minutes away by car. Fernando happens to be the only technical diving instructor in the country and an *HMS Hermes* specialist. In addition to its warring past, the *HMS Hermes* was the first purpose-built aircraft in the world.

Despite having taken 40 hits when it sank, the *HMS Hermes*, with its deepest end at 52 metres, is still



Dive site of HMS Hermes wreck and what's left of it.

largely intact. Its starboard prop is nevertheless standing upright, while the control tower and even the emergency lights are amazingly in place. Expect to see thriving schools of fishes like the Dogtooth tuna and groupers around the wreck.

Owned by elite resort developer Uga Escapes, the three-year-old property gets all the ticks on my checklist despite not having a dive centre. It has a comprehensive menu of activities to keep guests occupied: From culinary experiences such as going on a fishing trip and cooking the catch with the executive chef, to exciting excursions to historical sites, national parks, water sports, live bands, a beach bar, and an underground spa (with a beachview via a one-way window) while having a deep tissue massage by one of two Balinese therapists (since Sri Lanka doesn't have a spa culture).

Though I had the jewel in the crown – the Beach Villa, otherwise known as the presidential suite, a two-storied private villa by the sea with my exclusive open-air plunge pool, terrace and garden – all rooms and suites of any category feature ocean views and beach access.



Clockwise from top: The many faces of Uga Bay - Beach villa's master bedroom; Spacious breezy dining room; Ethereal entrance beneath starry nights; Jet skiing around the island; A private pool in the Ocean Villa backyard; Breakfast at the Ocean Studio balcony

Built on a Mediterranean theme, the property is landscaped with stretches of emerald grass and lush tropical plants. The dining selection here leaves you spoiled for choice. Indulge in a daily breakfast buffet with its comprehensive selection of Sri Lankan nosh such as string hoppers, egg hoppers, milk rice paired with a variety of dhals and curries, accompanied by dessciated coconut sambol (local term for sambal), and international cuisine, of course.

Be sure to hop aboard a catamaran owned by the Sail Lanka Charter, which works closely with the hotels in Pasikudah. Enjoy cruising on largely quiet waters on the sleek and shiny Topaz, or opt for a snorkeling trip to Elephant Reef, a huge coral reef. Nonetheless, a visit to Pasikudah is paramount, as the plot thickens. ⚓



Weather The monsoon season in the west coast is from May to October, and in the east coast, November to April. Scuba diving is off-limits in the respective coasts during off-seasons as the seas are very choppy and visibility is extremely poor.

Getting there By car or train, the journey from Colombo International Airport takes over eight hours in realistic traffic conditions and over bumpy roads in some areas. Cinnamon Air is the only commercial airline that connects to Batticaloa efficiently by seaplane in an hour. For more information, visit www.cinnamonair.com/