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FOOD & DRINK

THIS TINY BEACH TOWN IN SRI LANKA HAS ONE OF ASIA'S BEST BARS

The south coast of Sri Lanka is one of our favorite places in Asia, and this adorable, community-minded surf town is a prime example of why.



By Katie Lockhart

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H Lanka's south coast is Hiriketiya, or "Hiri," as the locals call it. Known for its spectacular surf and a vibe that's almost too laid back, this teeny, tiny surf-town has just a handful of restaurants and bars. One of them was just voted among the best in Asia.

Opened in early 2020, Smoke n' Bitters has made waves in Sri Lanka's culinary scene. Named No. 91 on Asia's 50 Best Bars list (they expanded the awards to 100 spots this year), it's become a destination in and of itself for travelers and locals looking for some of the best bites and beverages in the country.



Bartender Gihashan

"Hiri attracts a cool, young, fun-loving and inquisitive type of traveler, so it's a perfect place to put a concept not found elsewhere on the island," says owner Don Ranasinghe. "The area came as an easy choice, especially with the beautiful spot we found. From first sight we knew it was the place to create something new and special."

The perfect surf in Hiri draws chilled out beach bums and expats looking to relax in this small stretch of sand framed by massive palms. Tuk tuks drive the hilly roads, while locals' and visitors' flip flops slap the pavement on their way to the beach. As with most small towns, everyone knows everyone else, but unlike in many, everyone supports everyone else's businesses, promoting their offers on their own social media.

digital-nomad community. **MOND** is a tropical minimalist cafe and hotel serving fresh juice and just recently fiber optic WiFi (a luxury in the area). **Bom Bora**, a small boutique hotel with bohemian vibes has a rooftop pizza place and bar with sunset views of the beach. Directly across from the waves is **Bahia**, creating gourmet pizzas and some of the area's best craft coffees.



Coconut trees galore

Smoke n' Bitters, styled by local designer Avisha De Saram, has a handful of reclaimed, locally made tables with a coveted ocean view of Pehembiya Beach. Coconut tree pillars prop up a roof covered with antique tiles while live coconut trees surround the convivial outdoor space. The small building housing the kitchen is adorned with reclaimed window shutters and doors. The locally sourced pendant lights made from terracotta hang over their open bar as bartenders furiously make cocktails and eager customers perch on handmade wood stools.

True to their name, smoked flavors are their game. A changing menu includes inventive cocktails, bites, bowls and addictive sandwiches with Sri Lankan and Asian flavors. "For us, the ingredients that go into our drinks are actually more important than cocktails themselves," says Ranasinghe. They painstakingly make their own range of bitters using locally sourced ingredients from the island. All syrups, liqueurs and spirit infusions are made in-house, too.

*Housemade bitters**Behind the bar*

They pull from various 24 housemade ingredients, including grenadine, passion fruit liqueur, allspice dram and coffee liqueur. Their list of ten cocktails is on rotation depending on what's fresh, but you can count on their signature Mai Chai to make the cut.

This ode to Sri Lankan spices and tea plantations takes three days of preparation until it can be poured and served. It includes their house-infused chai rum, chai tea from local, small-batch, Peekoh Tea, housemade orgeat, chai syrup and triple sec topped with some fresh mint.

When Asia's best bars were announced, Ranasinghe didn't see it coming. "We were super surprised! Sri Lankan bars have never made the cut before, and it's fantastic and humbling," he says. "It's an amazing first step and a fantastic motivator for us to keep doing what we do considering the minimal affordable access we have to a lot of the traditional ingredients you need to run a top-end cocktail bar."



Mai Chai



Peniceylon



locally from Sri Lanka's coastal county. One of their standouts is the smoked and pan-fried pork, served on a sandwich with a fried egg or on a roti from their podi plates (small plates) menu. Another mainstay of their podi plates is kurumba calamari, a vegan dish made from tempura coconut flesh then topped with a smoked salsa.

As the place is perpetually busy, a reservation is recommended. It's the only place within 20 kilometers for a killer margarita, so you can be sure that's a popular order. We ate here multiple times a week, eventually customizing our favorite dishes like a jumbo serving of the teriyaki tuna, marinated in homemade (of course) sauce.



Smoke n' Bitters is currently expanding their kitchen and their seating to include 20 more covers. Ranasinghe says they'll also be focusing more on outdoor cooking this year. Guests can expect to take advantage of the larger space for sunset cocktails and dinner by the end of the year, just in time for surf season on the south coast.

All photos courtesy of Smoke n' Bitters