

Change of pace

Having sold their house in Wiltshire, Charlie and Tweenie Wrey decided on a whim to move to southern Sri Lanka, where they have built a calm, comfortable house in the local architectural vernacular and embraced a relaxed way of life

TEXT EMILY TOBIN | PHOTOGRAPHS JAMES FENNEL





SEATING AREA This open-sided space was built around a large santol fruit tree. The reinforced concrete pillars were clad by hand in plaster. A compilation of local screen prints hangs on the far wall. The storage alcoves were not part of the Wreys' original plan, but Tweenie had them installed as an experiment while the house was being built





Since 2008, Charlie and Tweenie Wrey have lived in Sri Lanka. Their house is perched on the crest of a hill, with views across dense vegetation and acres of tea plantation to the Indian Ocean beyond. This is a far cry from the Wiltshire countryside where the couple spent most of their married life, but when their sons left home and a neighbour expressed an interest in buying their farmhouse, they decided they would take a punt and sell up.

Unsure what to do next, Charlie and Tweenie flew to Sri Lanka to visit friends who were living on the south coast. Before long, says Charlie, 'we blagged our way into running a hotel, which gave us a roof over our heads and time to reflect'. Within months, the pair had fallen in love with the island and started to look for somewhere they could build a house. They eventually settled on eight-and-a-half acres of land in Galle, incorporating a tea plantation, a handful of dilapidated outbuildings and a thick muddle of jungle.

Charlie and Tweenie swiftly erected a small bungalow to live in temporarily and enlisted Sri Lankan architect Sunela Jayewardene to help realise their vision. Building the house was a feat, including three months of rock blasting before they were able to lay the first foundation, and while the location afforded spectacular views, it also meant hauling every last bathroom tap, kitchen pot and lampshade up the precipitous path to the summit. 'We quickly learnt to stop flexing our muscles and accept that things weren't going to happen in a nanosecond,' says Charlie. 'But that's part of the charm of living here.'

Within two years, the six-bedroom house was complete. Built in the local architectural vernacular, it has high, vaulted ceilings and a vast, open-sided seating area, designed to accommodate a lofty santol tree with branches that stretch through the roof and up to the sky beyond. Its impressive stature is echoed by an equally towering pair of pillars. 'It looks fantastic, but take caution,' warns Charlie. 'The heavens

SEATING AREA (*opposite top*) The sofas here were made by local craftsmen to Charlie and Tweenie's design. The painting on the far wall was bought in Colombo, where art students display their work on railings at the annual Kala Pola art fair. **KITCHEN** (*opposite bottom*) Three reclaimed pendant lights are suspended above the island. **ENTRANCE** (*this page both pictures*) A small concrete seating area, surrounded by a pond, offers views of the garden and tea estate. The cushions are covered in a fabric designed by the Wreys and printed in Colombo



open, the rains come in and the polished concrete floor becomes a skating rink.' Treacherous floor aside, it is a comfortable room with plump sofas and pretty printed fabrics. By closing the shutters and rolling down the concealed *bata palali* rattan blinds, the Wreys are able to keep the worst of the rain out.

The interiors were Tweenie's domain and almost everything was sourced on the island, from the mattresses to the Thirties steel bathtubs, which once resided in the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo. Many of the Indian-style window frames and doors were found in antique shops and reclamation yards in the north of Sri Lanka. This meant the apertures were made to fit the frames, not the other way around. 'The frames are made of good hard wood so, termites permitting, they will last quite well,' says Charlie.

Unsurprisingly, the Wreys play host to a constant stream of guests and the house is available to rent, but the clever layout, which splits down an east-west axis, means there is plenty of room for several people to coexist. There is even a massage room and a yoga pavilion. Revenues from the tea estate help to cover the cost of running the house and give the couple 'a lovely garden for nothing'. The road leading up to the house is lined with pineapple plants and there are countless frangipani trees. 'It's a flattering place to be a gardener,' says Charlie. 'Everything here grows miraculously quickly.'

The Wreys have happily settled into Sri Lankan life. 'It's a jolly attractive lifestyle. You have to learn to change gears and, when you do, it's amazing how little you can achieve in a day,' says Charlie. So, the momentous decision to move has proved a success. 'Some of the biggest decisions you take are the ones you spend the least time thinking about,' says Charlie. But as Charlie and Tweenie's house demonstrates, such decisions can also have the best results □

The Wreys' house, Sisindu T, is available to rent from \$1,500 a night; visit sisindu.com

SPARE BEDROOM (*opposite top left*) The panel on the wall was originally displayed in a Buddhist temple. **TERRACE** (*opposite top right and bottom left*) Monkeys like to play on the earthenware roof tiles, which also have to withstand storms. The Thirties bathtubs here and in the bathroom came from the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo. **BATHROOM** (*opposite bottom right*) Eggshell paint is not available locally, so a matting agent was added to Dulux Master Palette 'Hillside View' gloss paint for the window frames and doors. **MAIN BEDROOM** (*below left*) The bed was made locally, with a polished concrete base and a wooden frame for mosquito nets. **SWIMMING POOL** (*below right*) The pool is lined with Sukabumi stone tiles from Indonesia

