

# Aitken Spence Hotels Is a Diverse Trendsetter

Based in Sri Lanka, Aitken Spence Hotels ([aitkenspencehotels.com](http://aitkenspencehotels.com)) opened its first tourism venture there in 1973, slowly and thoughtfully expanding its construction and management of properties in Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives and Oman. Today, it has 24 hotels and resorts in its portfolio with more in the development stage.



Aitken Spence is not really my idea of a multi-national hotel “chain” implying a recognizable signature and physical format inside and out. The company’s style is more a “collection” with each hotel and resort reflecting a distinctive personality, theme and widely-varying surroundings. However, long-term success is not only based on such diversity: beneath the surface of individual properties, there are strongly intertwined threads of business practice and philosophy that drive the company’s successful direction, making it a trend leader over several decades in hotel design, building and management.

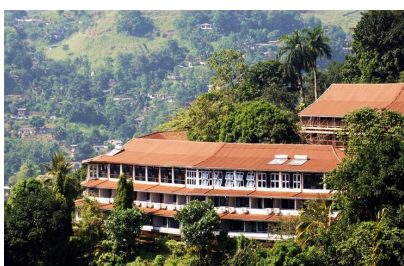
Beyond owning a number of city hotels, Aitken Spence has chosen four fundamental directions (so far!): luxurious beach and desert vacation properties, heritage/heritance properties where meticulous restoration and living the history is the mission, bold environmentally-friendly experiments that point the way to genuine sustainability, and in-depth health and wellness destinations where expectations go well beyond an hour or two of spa treatments. While most of its portfolio serves a higher-end market, there has also been a deliberate effort to serve the budget traveler with specific properties. Let’s look at some examples.



The Heritage brand combines two words, Heritage and Inheritance, transforming a region’s local culture and history into a unique hospitality experience, “Where tradition is alive”. All four of the Heritage properties to date are in different parts of Sri Lanka, from the seashore to the mountains. Nestled in what remains classic Ceylon tea-growing country, my favorite is Heritage Tea Factory, whose plantations were established by British colonials in the 1860s and 70s. Originally built as a factory in the 1930s and meticulously converted to a 54-room luxury hotel in 1996, the size of the structure is testament to the

importance of the tea industry over time. Guests are invited to learn about tea while picking their own leaves, then presented with a souvenir package from their personal labors to take home. To date, Heritage Tea Factory has won 26 awards for its architecture, heritage and environmental policies.

Mixing and matching objectives, Ayurveda Maha Gedara in Sri Lanka is both a Heritage property and a specialist hotel dedicated to holistic healing while promoting long-term rejuvenation and a healthy lifestyle. A minimum one to two weeks' stay is required for each program to be effective in gorgeous, comfortable surroundings. Within a dedicated focus of environmentally-innovative practices, Poovar Island Resort in southwest India's Kerala state also has its own Ayurveda health and wellness village in the larger resort grounds. Mostly European clients check in for a highly-motivated wellness holiday while other resort guests come for rest and relaxation and a remarkable natural environment along Kerala's magical backwater canals. (See the full Poovar Island Resort story in TROM's April 2012 issue [here](#).)



Aitken Spence is not just relying on its past and present success but looking to future travel trends that will shape their business in the 21st century. Identifying a shift in the guest experience from service to care, the company is working effectively with its staff to emphasize that it is the head working with the heart and hands (the three H's) that is the formula for leadership success in the hotel industry. Guests will be able to tailor every aspect of their hotel experience, making it more personal, connected and responsive to the individual. The company is also embracing contemporary frontiers like sports tourism, an expansion of healthy lifestyles travel and medical tourism, the use of advanced technology as part of the guest experience and harnessing social media, mobile technology and web marketing at a cutting edge level.

However, the company is equally committed to its local and global community responsibilities, proudly standing among the first 38 companies in the world and the first in Sri Lanka to endorse the United Nations' Women's Empowerment Principles. It is also one of the first companies in Sri Lanka to support the Caring for Climate initiative to promote positive climate action in business. They take pride in improving infrastructure in surrounding communities, and support local hospitals, child and eldercare homes, all these actions respected and appreciated by guests as never before.

Neither is the environment treated lightly with substantial acreage around some properties being preserved as conservation forests to ensure that bio-diversity is protected. And the coral reefs surrounding the resorts in the Maldives as well as the mangroves and other greenery within the atolls are actively being preserved.



“By integrating sustainability into core business processes and stakeholder management,” declares Renusha Gomis, Assistant General Manager, Public Relations & Promotions, “Aitken Spence recognizes its ability to create both social value and corporate value. For example, the Arts and Crafts Centre of Heritage Ayurveda Maha Gedara epitomizes the commitment to preservation of heritage and culture through traditional craftsmen and women of coastal Sri Lanka. In 2011/12, the Aitken Spence School of Hospitality conducted training for 62 students from less economically–stable backgrounds and from conflict–affected areas in Sri Lanka. All 62 were absorbed into the Group’s operations,” she adds proudly. “In fact, 60% of our staff is currently hired within close proximity to the hotels and resorts.”

**By Alison Gardner**

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