

HOW TO WRAP AN ISLAND

When a fabric company set out to drape the Sri Lankan island of Taprobane in red cotton, everything conceivable went wrong

(Homes & Gardens, 2002)

The island of Taprobane is a pocket-size paradise lying 200 metres off the south coast of Sri Lanka. Until the 1920s it was merely a rock, rising 60 feet out of the sea; but then a romantic Frenchman called the Comte de Meauny bought it, built an exquisite Palladian villa on the top, and laid out an equally exquisite garden, rich with orchids, palm trees, bougainvillaea and frangipani. Today it belongs to Geoffrey Dobbs, a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur renowned for his parties, which are wild, and his temper, which is unpredictable.

It was at one of Dobbs's parties last Christmas that Julie Howell, art director of the London fabric company Malabar, suggested that the island should be wrapped. 'I don't know how seriously Geoffrey took the idea,' she says, 'but he stopped dancing and said, "Wrap and be damned!"' Which is pretty much what happened: 'It isn't the hardest job I've ever done,' the project's co-ordinator, Steve Gott, was to remark on the final day, 'but it *is* the unluckiest.'

Julie Howell discovered Taprobane in October last year. She and Malabar's owner, Peter Sterck, had been visiting suppliers in southern India; they felt in need of a break, and of inspiration for their next collection. Taprobane provided both, and the range launched this autumn is full of rich, subtle silks echoing the colours and shapes of the plants, leaves and feathers that they found on the island.

‘It was like *The Secret Garden*, when she goes through the door,’ says Julie. ‘I wanted to take that beauty and capture it in the fabric.’ She also wanted what she calls the ‘Wow!’ factor: and being a fan of Christo, the celebrated wrapper of the Reichstag, it occurred to her to follow his example. ‘I walked around the island with a tape measure, and saw that there were enough trees and bulges to support the fabric; and then I swam around it and thought, “Yes, this is possible”.’

Julie started with two great advantages: she had worked as a set designer in Bollywood, and her father was an architect. Together they sat down and worked out how the fabric should be tethered, and what kind of stress it would be subjected to. ‘We decided that it needed to let the wind through while looking solid,’ she explains, ‘and be light enough to pull up onto the trees.’ She settled on a medium-weight cotton, choosing bright red as the colour so that it would stand out ‘like a huge hibiscus flower in the ocean’; 2,000 metres were ordered from Malabar’s weavers in Kerala.

The wrapping was to be combined with a shoot for the company’s new catalogue, and on this basis a team of nine was assembled, with skills ranging from sewing to photography; extra workmen would be hired on arrival. When we met on a Monday in the middle of May, less than a week before the departure date, Julie broke the first piece of bad news: the fabric had been caught in a dock strike in Madras. The strike might be resolved quickly, or it might not. She proposed to delay the expedition by two days.

Flights were rearranged: four of us would fly out as an advance party on Saturday. But by Wednesday the situation was still not resolved: ‘I’ve resorted to bribing people,’ Julie told me on the phone. At midday on Friday she rang again: the fabric was on its way – the wrapping was going to happen.

Two acres in size, Taprobane is a tidal island, which means that you can walk, wade or swim to it according to the time of day. Strong currents rush in from either side, meeting at a white jetty, which leads to a white archway flanked by a white balustrade. Behind this elegant proscenium a temple tree spreads a constellation of blossoms, and steep steps lead up to the octagonal villa.

On our first morning, we breakfasted on the terrace with a dreamlike view of fishing-boats bobbing on an eau-de-Nil sea. But if this was a private paradise, it was a wretchedly hot and humid one, with the temperature rising towards 100 degrees. In these enervating conditions, even slicing a mango presented a challenge.

The forecast was for storms, which meant that the fabric would be tested to the limit. Steve Gott set about creating a cat's cradle of ropes around the trees on the perimeter of the island, supported by steel and bamboo poles; from this the fabric would be hung in 100-metre lengths. The wind, it was hoped, would pass between them rather than ripping the whole thing apart.

The days passed, and the storms did not arrive – but neither did the fabric.

This time it was stuck in customs in Colombo. The island's manager was sent back and forth negotiate, always returning with assurances that the fabric would be released the next day. It wasn't.

On Tuesday the rest of the team arrived, and the photographers started work on the catalogue. Tom Mannion set up still-lives of the silks in the gardens which had inspired them; Chris Tancock marshalled ants and crabs for ingenious close-ups; and on one exultant afternoon we sat open-mouthed as two fishing boats zigzagged across the shining bay with Malabar sails and pennants streaming in the wind. The big prize, however, looked increasingly elusive.

On top of everything else, Steve, the powerhouse of the team, had injured his foot after slipping on some rocks: only when he returned to England did he discover that he'd broken a bone. By Thursday, half the time allotted for the wrapping had gone, and Julie was on the verge of cancelling the project. Nobody, however, was quite ready to give up: we would wait one more day.

At ten o'clock the following evening, we were told that the fabric was about to arrive. We filed down to the jetty and watched the headlights on the shore road as lorry after lorry accelerated past. Then, quite unexpectedly, a figure climbed out of the darkness, bent under the weight of a hessian sack. Before long the villa was piled with bolts of red cotton,

The first task was to sew a pocket along each length so that a rope could be threaded through it. Julie, her assistant Emma and seamstress Fey Green sat down at ancient Singers (borrowed from local tailors) and started work. Rolling the finished cloth onto bamboo poles, we seemed to have set the textile industry back a hundred years. When a power cut hit the island for eight hours and the machines could only be operated by treadle, the regression was complete.

Of the handful of workmen recruited to help, the most important was Sunil, a professional coconut-collector. A short, stocky man of amazing strength and agility, he could shin up a palm tree in seconds to haul a length of fabric into position and secure it with rope and wire. The biggest problem was manoeuvring the fabric up over low, protruding branches: this involved scrambling on rocks or wading waist-deep in the sea to pull it clear, and then pushing it skywards with poles, while hoping that it would not catch the wind like a parachute.

The operation had to be completed by Wednesday evening, but progress was worryingly slow – partly because the workmen insisted on discussing every instruction at length in Singhalese. On Tuesday

morning, Julie asked everyone to forget their sewing and photography and concentrate exclusively on the wrapping: we balanced on walls and floundered in the water, acting as human safety pins until the next rope was secured. From close up, it was impossible to see how the whole thing was going to fit together; but by dusk Julie was feeling confident. ‘We’re going to get a result,’ she said. ‘I just hope we don’t have a storm tonight.’

An hour later, as we were about to sit down to dinner on the terrace, a gust of wind hurtled in from the west and scattered every glass on the table. We hurried inside; doors were bolted, blinds lowered. The rain began to pour, and lightning flashed so terrifyingly close that we were convinced the villa had been hit. The monsoon had begun.

I awoke the next morning to wind such as I had never heard. The fabric was somehow still in place, but with a score of gaping rips. Steve later admitted that, for the first time in his life, he felt utterly defeated.

He didn’t show it, though. The wind died, and a scheme was devised to sew three extra lengths of material which would be drawn over the existing ones to mask the damage. By lunchtime the first was in position.

The next two were far more of a problem, having to be dragged over the rocks among breaking waves, which left them saturated and hard to lift. For three hours we sweated, strained and slithered – and then, suddenly and extraordinarily, it was over. At 5.15, right on schedule, Tom the photographer and his assistant Jeremy walked across to the mainland to catch the best light of the day. There before them, in a glorious blaze of scarlet, was the Comte de Mauny’s island, rising from the sea like a bouquet offered to the gods, or a gaudy man-of-war ready to set sail across the empty leagues of ocean that stretched from Sri Lanka to the southern pole.

It was a wrap.

