

**SLEEPING
BEAUTY**

A beautiful Buddha carving in the ancient Isurumuniya Vihara temple in Anuradhapura

Paradise Regained

WHEN CYNTHIA ROSENFELD LAST VISITED **SRI LANKA**, CIVIL WAR CAUSED HER TO FLEE ON THE NEXT FLIGHT OUT. THIS YEAR SHE RETURNED TO MARVEL AT ANCIENT CITIES, CULTURAL WONDERS AND MAGNIFICENT NATIONAL PARKS THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY ALL BUT OUT OF BOUNDS

“I MAGINATION IS BETTER THAN KNOWLEDGE,” says my Buddhist scholar-cum-guide, Charitha, quoting Albert Einstein as we walk towards Jethavana Stupa. The ancient structure is one of three main temples in the 4,000-hectare Unesco World Heritage Site of Anuradhapura, the remains of a Buddhist city in the north of Sri Lanka that thrived under more than 100 kings from the third to 11th centuries.

“We have lost most of the information from those times,” Charitha continues, a hand sweeping along the stupa’s age-worn exterior, “so we must try to imagine the stories behind each brick.” This would pose quite a challenge to anyone’s creativity – the number of bricks used to build Jethavana alone stands at about 93 million. That we are here at all feels almost unimaginable to me.

On my previous visit to this teardrop-shaped island nation off the southern coast of India, my flight touched down at Bandaranaike

TRAVEL

Great Escapes

International Airport during the final attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the nearby capital Colombo, and I bribed a soldier to help me escape on the next available flight. During Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war between the LTTE, seeking a breakaway homeland in the north, and the ruling Sinhalese, the United Nations estimates that at least 80,000 people perished before the Sri Lankan military's victory in 2009.

"Everything's changed," the email sent to me earlier by Miguel Cunat, the CEO of luxury travel specialist Sri Lanka in Style, had said in response to my enquiry about returning to the country. Cunat added that the huge influx of post-war tourists generally headed south, along the Southern Expressway that opened in 2011, and so I should head north. When I questioned his advice (I remembered the roads as slow, of poor condition and thoroughly congested), he replied, "To show Sri Lanka at its best, we get our guests off the ground."

And so, a few weeks after our email exchange, I boarded the spiffy new GA8 Airvan of Sri Lanka's charter airline Simplify and headed north to what's known as the country's "cultural triangle", and which is perhaps best known as the dramatic backdrop to Duran Duran's 1983 video for the song *Save A Prayer*. I'm not sure what took my breath away the most – that the journey took less than an hour, about one-fifth the road time, or winging over the fifth-century rock fortress capital of Sigiriya that rises majestically from the otherwise flat, palm-dense landscape.

We landed at an empty military airfield. "The war that impeded our operations now facilitates it," the pilot said before I climbed out and continued for 30 minutes by road to Ulagalla Resort, a newly opened, 20-chalet luxury escape spread across 23 hectares. I arrived as dusk closed in, and yet the resort's vigilant electric-buggy driver still managed to spot two monkeys swinging overhead, a peacock spreading its tail

feathers and a delightfully antediluvian monitor lizard as we headed to my sleek wooden chalet set on stilts above the tropical fauna. I fell asleep making a list of the Ulagalla activities I would try: a dip in my outdoor pool, kayaking around the lush property's meandering waterways, horseback riding and a Sri Lankan cooking class using ingredients from the organic gardens. Though rain precluded sunrise bird-watching plans, I spotted an electric-blue kingfisher from the resort's open-air dining room the next morning while devouring impressively flaky croissants (as rare in South Asia as any bird I might have witnessed).

The lush area around Ulagalla remained safely distant from the main battlefields during Sri Lanka's civil war, but there were some fatal incidents that dissuaded many, including me, from visiting, at least until now. My guide Charitha, however, grew up among these ancient ruins while his mother worked as a

conservationist in the area, and I find myself so captivated by his tales of learned monks – from dozens of monasteries, and who came here to study – that I barely notice the guard posts, the occasional soldier and other remnants of the region's brutal past.

Charitha leads me on walks along *sandakada pahana*, or moonstones (semi-circular stone slabs), that ancient artisans ornately carved with elephants, bulls, lions and horses to symbolise the Buddhist cycle of samsara. When I express frustration at the endlessness of this cycle, Charitha points to a lotus that, he tells me, depicts the ultimate attainment of nirvana.

Next morning, I climb aboard Simplify's Jet Ranger helicopter, which will save me from another five or so rough-and-tumble hours of road travel. We head west to Wilpattu National Park, which was closed for 16 years of the war due to skirmishes at the park's fringes. The Tamil Tigers are gone but, "Elephants may

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NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Ulagalla Resort offers cooking classes using ingredients from its organic gardens; there are 20 private ecological chalets at the resort; a view from the ancient city of Sigiriya; a Nikaweve Villa bedroom





NATURE TRAIL

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

A peacock in the sunset; Wilpattu roughly translates from Tamil to “land of lakes”; guests get up close and personal with free-roaming wildlife; monkey business; Sri Lanka is famous for leopard spotting

“Elephants may come to drink by the stream in front of your room”



come to drink by the stream in front of your room,” says Noel Rodrigo, founder of Leopard Safaris, a company that runs ecotourism camping adventures in Sri Lanka’s national parks, as he points to my waterfront tent. “Don’t run or scream if you see one.”

Wilpattu roughly translates from Tamil to “land of lakes”, and more than 50 bodies of water dot its 131,000 hectares. It is Sri Lanka’s largest national park and, according to Rodrigo, the best place to spot barking deer, sloth bears, elephants and the country’s famous leopards, the promise of which has lured me out of my element and into a tent, which was not on my original itinerary. Cunat, perhaps, sensed my inner camper. “Noel Rodrigo is another Charitha,” he had promised by email when I had admitted to some camping anxiety. “There is no one better to show you our leopards.”

Having settled in at camp, I venture out at sunset to discover a cocktail bar, complete with Absolut Vodka, Bombay Sapphire Gin and tonic water, has been set up under the jungle canopy. There follows a candlelight dinner of spicy Sri Lankan prawn curry and string hoppers – an addictive local speciality resembling spaghetti. No elephants arrive during the night, and I sleep wonderfully under crisp white linen. We are on the move before sunrise the next day.

“When the time comes, say very calmly, ‘There’s a leopard’, without pointing fingers because that will trigger his fear,” Rodrigo says



as his jeep whizzes towards the park entrance. We are less than a kilometre inside the park when a crocodile slithers into sight, then quickly disappears into the mud. Next, I spot a barking deer just as Rodrigo’s German wife Cecile points out a serpent eagle overhead, followed by a crested hawk-eagle. With all eyes on the sky now, we see, in order of appearance, two bright green common emerald doves on a tree branch, four black-headed ibis, dozens of hornbills in the treetops, a white-breasted kingfisher, a common bee-eater with its uncommonly vibrant blue and orange feathers, and several other jungle fowl. Wilpattu is home to at least 194 bird species, so I soon stop looking up every time someone sights a white-bellied drongo, a Ceylon grey hornbill or an orange-breasted green pigeon. I want to spot the park’s bigger inhabitants.

“There, I see one,” I call out at around 10am,

pointing – exactly as I was told not to. We all watch quietly as the male leopard peeks out from the bush, walks back and forth along the path directly behind us for five captivating minutes. The cat is looking directly at us when a female darts across the path so fast I catch sight only of her long and elegant tail. Just as my heart rate returns to normal, the male follows his mate into Wilpattu’s dense jungle of sculpturally twisting trees, leaving my chest pounding yet again.

Cunat, it appears, was right. As the long and painful civil war gradually recedes into memory, the wonders of the country’s north – its majestic leopards included – are finally revealing themselves, and safe for all to see and enjoy. **T**

DON’T MISS IN THE CAPITAL

STAY

COLOMBO COURTYARD

These generous polished-concrete suites will appeal to fans of native architect Geoffrey Bawa. From US\$170; www.colombocourtyard.com

PARK STREET HOTEL Another colonial bungalow, this one was revived with modern Sri Lankan art and an open-air rooftop eatery. From US\$190; www.parkstreethotel-colombo.com

EAT

MINISTRY OF CRAB The country’s first export-quality crab outlet is located inside the 400-year-old former Dutch hospital and is co-owned by local celebrity chef Dharshan Munidasa and cricket legends Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara. www.ministryofcrab.com

GALLERY CAFÉ Colombo’s see-and-be-seen al fresco eatery for 16 years, and still going strong. Loved for its chargrilled black pork curry and an array of homemade cakes. www.paradiseroad.lk/gallery_cafe

EUPHORIUM TEA SALON The insider’s address for bespoke tea blends. Tel: +94 11 523 0523.

THE SKY LOUNGE The illuminated dance floor of Colombo’s latest after-dark gathering place overlooks the Indian Ocean. www.thekingsbury.lk

SHOP

BAREFOOT Synonymous with Sri Lanka for its technicolor textiles and homey charm. New lines include women’s fashion collection M Fact and silver jewellery by Shaestha de Costa, as well as handmade zip necklaces embellished with Swarovski crystals and semi-precious stones by Ayne Nalir. www.barefootceylon.com

MELACHÉ Stocks viscose jersey frocks reminiscent of early Donna Karan and finished off with local textile touches by Dimuthu Sahabandu. www.melache.com

SELYN A cavernous emporium for hippy chic dresses from Deneth, as well as unusual recycled-newspaper necklaces and movie-poster evening bags. www.selyn.lk

SISI COLLECTION Colombo’s coolest children’s wear comes via Dutch designer Irstel Jansen and can be viewed by appointment inside Colombo’s Galle Face Court 2 commercial complex. www.sisiforkids.com