

Wild about Sri Lanka

From cycling tours of ancient ruined cities to leopard-spotting safaris and sunrise beach treks to walks of old Colombo, agents on the recent *ttgluxury* Experience trip came back raving about this jewel-shaped island

AUTHOR: APRIL HUTCHINSON

TIt's never easy getting that wake-up call at 4.30am but it's a little less of a struggle when there is the promise of a beautiful sunrise and the prospect of seeing wildlife.

As we met whispering in the darkness, some were especially bleary-eyed after a night rendered sleepless by a loud storm. But as we walked out on to the wild beach fringing Chena Huts, one of the newest hotels in Sri Lanka, all was forgiven as we witnessed a rising sun staining the sky a glorious pink over crashing waves.

We walked single file as instructed by ranger Steuart Roelofs, who was keeping a vigilant eye out for anything else that was up and awake as early as we were; sadly we didn't spot anything, but for a city-girl like me, it was just a wonderful chance to be among nature and roam along this stunning beach and through the jungle. All perfect justification too for a hearty breakfast and refreshing shower; by 7am returning to Chena, it must already have been 25C.

Opened in December, Chena Huts was built as a luxury option for visitors to Yala national park – the country's most visited and second largest – and one of the stops on our most recent *ttgluxury* Experience, which saw a group of six travel advisors flown by Oman Air to spend a week on this jewel-shaped island among the five hotels of Uga Escapes.

Chena Huts has just 14 rooms, all individual

"huts"; or cabins, with a unique eco-chic design reminiscent of an African safari camp but also rooted in local tradition. For years, people have farmed small clearings in the forest called "chena" and slept beside their crops in modest huts to protect them from hungry elephants. These huts were the inspiration for the unusual shape of this modern-day version, which appear as large domed cabins scattered among the jungle; inside, every luxury is considered. Incredibly spacious, each also has a raised terrace from which to watch deer roam past, birdlife, or even monkeys, and a private pool. Surrounded by wilderness, the cabins are on platforms connected by raised wooden walkways, so there is minimal impact on the environment. Inside, colonial touches mix with modern amenities, and the bed is the central focus designed with an intricate wooden frame.

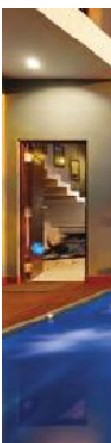
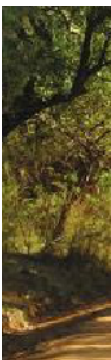
Audley Travel's Rowena Butterworth was in the country for the first time and says of Chena: "It's an amazing property that undeniably has the

wow factor; it was genuinely such an honor to stay there. We had a lovely welcome by the staff, who were brilliant considering how recently the property had opened."

Of course, the reason for staying at Chena is to go on safari in Yala, said to be home to around 50 leopards. Only authorised safari vehicles are allowed into the park, so all guests must use these drivers – but Chena has its own knowledgeable rangers that accompany guests.

The vehicles picked us up for an early safari and while leopards proved elusive, we sat and watched an elephant across a lily-spotted lake, saw a usually shy little sloth bear snuffling around in the undergrowth, endless pretty deer, water-wallowing buffalo, crocodiles and myriad birds, from brightly-coloured kingfishers to funny-looking toucans.

With renewed interest in the destination, Yala does sadly get very busy these days. But as Chris Radford, product manager and marketing co-ordinator at Real Holidays, says: "The game



How to sell it

"Sri Lanka is my favourite place. I love the diversity, culture, dramatic contrast in scenery and the hospitality. I have been to many hotels, but Uga Escapes' properties are up there with the best.

"Ulagalla gives a wonderful warm welcome, is a beautiful Small Luxury Hotels member and full of character.

"Jungle Beach has a relaxed atmosphere and a good vibe – a lovely well designed property for a relaxed stay,

"Uga Bay is larger and modern compared with the other Uga hotels in the portfolio, set on one of the best beaches I have seen in the country.

"As for Chena Huts – wow! I was blown away by its design and elegant, rustic charm. I also loved The Residence in Colombo, an oasis of calm in the hustle and bustle of a growing city."

Karen Williams, Travel Counsellor

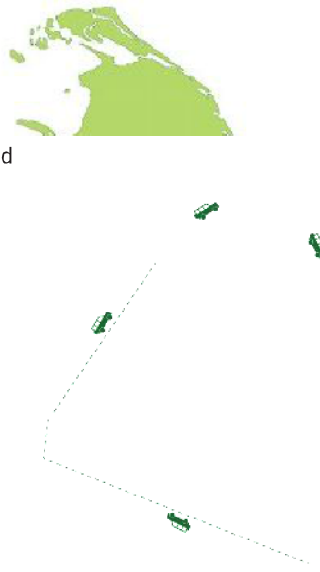
drives were brilliantly done, and the team did a great job of taking us away from main routes to avoid the crowds.”

On the morning safari, we pulled into a quiet spot at 9.30am when cakes, snacks and tea were magically produced for a peaceful breakfast. Later on, while I and a couple of others chose to rest and enjoy Chena after many early starts, those who opted for a second afternoon safari were lucky enough to see a leopard, thanks to the eagle eyes of Roelofsz.

Other highlights at Chena included the afternoon tea and an atmospheric beach BBQ accompanied by cultural dance performances around the fire.

BBQs would become a theme of the trip – with another of our stays, Uga Bay, offering a wonderful evening as we sat with toes scrunching into the sandy beach. Located in the east of Sri Lanka in Batticaloa and set on the beautiful bay of Passekudah, Uga Bay is a larger and livelier affair than Chena, with 48 rooms and a large infinity pool.

Gill O’Leary, senior travel consultant with Meon



Valley Travel and first-time visitor to Sri Lanka, says: “The drive down the coast to get there was stunning and our signature meal on the beach was brilliant, with exceptional seafood and I loved touches such as the sand raked into patterns and the simple little beach bar.”

After a lot of driving, Uga Bay provided the perfect spot for some downtime. Along the way, we stopped off at Jungle

Beach, a charming hotel that lives up to its name; it’s a sleepy 10-acre reserve where an elaborate treehouse structure acts as the reception area and leads you down to its restaurant where we ate dishes including traditional crab curry.

Its simply furnished rooms are secluded among the jungle, from which all paths lead to the three-mile beach. Close to the village of Kuchchaveli on the east coast, Jungle Beach was the first resort of its kind in the area and is also close to Trincomalee – or “Trinco”, a popular stop on Sri Lanka itineraries – while other options here could also include whale watching.

Abercrombie & Kent personal travel consultant Jonathan Dunne says: “Jungle Beach is isolated, but for those clients who want a few days away from sightseeing and just want to relax, this is the perfect place. No doubt the area will change in the next few years as more hotels open up, so for now this is a real hidden gem.”

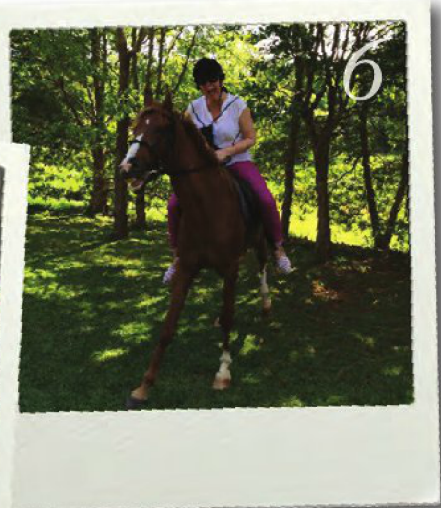
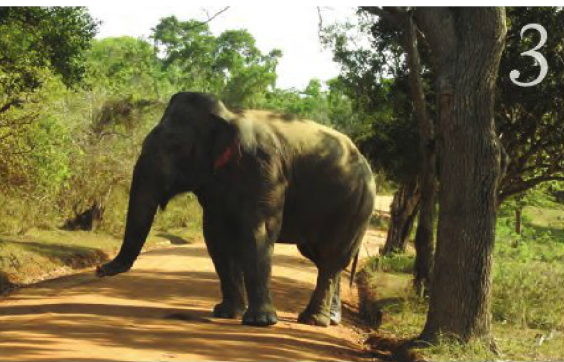
Sweet touches at Jungle Beach include how the hotel floats as many frangipani petals as there are guests in a bowl at the entrance and we start to recognise each hotel offers its own



Getting there: Oman Air

“While most of our clients do prefer a direct flight, Oman Air’s connections to Sri Lanka via Muscat are seamless and they have fantastic connections to India too. I am confident on the product and feedback has always been positive, but now having experienced both business class and economy, it’s great to know that I can sell the airline with greater confidence. As it flies twice a day from Heathrow to Muscat now, this offers greater flexibility, but be aware it currently operates from Terminals 3 and 4 – that’s especially relevant for clients parking at the airport. Business class is a great product – the seats are comfortable and for tall people like myself, plenty of space when fully reclined, while the onboard service was excellent and attentive without being impersonal. In Muscat the transit was smooth, although quite short compared with some other transit stops. Our next leg was in economy, which again was comfortable, although the leg room could be bit more generous. Returning from Colombo was quick and efficient, but getting through the airport to check-in is a bit like Fort Knox, but of course, this is the airport authorities’ procedures not the airline’s and we had allowed plenty of time.”

Jon Dunne, platinum sales consultant, Abercrombie & Kent, Harrods





1 unique welcome ritual for guests; at Chena, each guest is given a little flag to put on the wall behind reception while they are in residence.

Cultural connection

Meanwhile at Ulagalla, the original of the Uga Escapes portfolio and our first stop on this trip, we had arrived in the dark feeling slightly disorientated after our flight from London, but soon felt revived as we stood around an ancient wooden wall lined with bells for our welcome ritual. As the bells were rang, we each lit a candle to announce the beginning of our two-night stay. Upon seeing the resort in the daylight, we soon decided that two nights was never going to be enough – a message Uga Escapes is keen to push about its hotel and rich cultural surroundings.

Ulagalla sits in 58 acres of natural woodland, of which guests are free to roam, be it on bike, on foot, or even horseback, as a few of us tried. Once the ancestral estate of local nobility, the hotel features a 150-year-old mansion at its centre, home to reception and the restaurant, while a pool sparkles invitingly and 20 ecologically-built private villas are dotted among the grounds, which even contain a solar farm that fulfills half of the resort's energy requirements.

Ulagalla sits in Sri Lanka's "cultural triangle", which includes Anuradhapura, a former political and religious capital of the country that flourished for 1,300 years, but was abandoned after an invasion in 993. Over the years, the abandoned city fell to ruins and became enveloped in dense jungle but today, this Unesco site can be explored by modern-day Sri Lankans and visitors – including our group who explored it on a cycle tour, pedaling past old bathing pools, temples and remnants of other structures, as well as fully-intact "stupas" – domed buildings that enshrine relics of Buddha.

The Ulagalla stay also included a tour of the chef's garden, where we learned the dedicated team had started the garden again virtually from



scratch recently, following a trampling visit from a hungry elephant. It was once again stocked full of herbs, salads and vegetables which were used for a cooking lesson in a fancy garden "shack" as the team prepared curries, roti and hoppers, a Sri Lankan dish enjoying popularity here in the UK too.

One of the other highlights at Ulagalla was the dinner under the stars out in a paddy field; led there by candlelit pathways, it made for a memorable setting, enhanced by yet more delicious food. We virtually had to be rolled back to our rooms; luckily fleets of golf buggies are always on hand to drive guests back to villas, each of which has as many glass walls as possible to allow the highest appreciation of surrounding nature.

Marcelline Paul, Uga Escapes' general manager, sales and marketing, says: "We are thrilled we got to show such a wonderful group of travel professionals what Sri Lanka has to offer and to do so by hosting them at our five hotels. This kind of personal experience is so crucial in helping those selling our hotels understand each of their unique qualities and I hope the group will now be our ambassadors in the UK – and of course, return again one day."

Step back in time

The final stop on the trip was Colombo, which thanks to a new expressway is doable in around five hours from Yala. In the capital, Uga has transformed a 150-year-old mansion into an 11-suite boutique hotel, The Residence, which provides a leafy oasis of colonial-style calm in this otherwise bustling city, close to Park Street Mews with its cute cafes and shops and the lakeside temple of Gangarama, one of Colombo's principal Buddhist shrines.

In the capital, we enjoyed an entertaining and educational walking tour with Mark Forbes, a photographer who now wants to show people his passion for the city via tours. He shows us the Old Colombo Dutch Hospital, a heritage building

that has been transformed into a cool shopping and dining precinct. Forbes also shows us the district of the city filled with official buildings that was effectively closed down during the civil war – which ended in 2009 – and for years afterwards, but is now slowly creeping back to life since becoming accessible to the public again a year-and-a-half ago and full of incredible old, but run-down buildings.

As Bridget Hussey, a consultant with Carrick Travel, says: "I would definitely recommend Mark's tour – I really enjoyed it because he really interacted with us all, got us interested in the history and because of his interest in photography, he not only shows you how places are now, but compares them to a bank of images on his iPad so you can see what they looked like many years before."

There's no denying distances are great in Sri Lanka between key highlights, but roads are improving and ever more expressways are planned. The country is not without its woes; civil war is still fresh in some minds, and the impact of the tsunami will never be forgotten – and of course it's recently been hit by flooding and landslides. But its resilient people and inner spirit will no doubt ensure there will always be a welcome for any visitor who wants to explore this fascinating and beautiful country.

As Gill O'Leary sums up: "The people are the friendliest I have met and cannot do enough for you. The country is so lush, which I wasn't expecting, and there are so many different parts to Sri Lanka; it's like having many different holidays all in one place." ■

Pictured

1. Chena Huts at Yala national park
2. The group prepares for a cycling tour
3. Expect wildlife at every turn
4. Beach Villa at Uga Bay, Passekudah
5. Karen Williams, Rowena Butterworth and Gill O'Leary
6. ttgluxury editor April Hutchinson
7. Jungle Beach, Kuchchaveli
8. The Residence, Colombo