

Sri Lanka: Wild and wonderful

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I must confess that my assumptions of Sri Lanka were coloured by my experiences travelling through its larger neighbour to the north. I had spent a few eventful months in India with my girlfriend as a student, and, although I greatly enjoyed the trip, I was hoping for a different type of experience. I was not to be disappointed with Sri Lanka.

It's not surprising that Sri Lanka has emerged as one of the most desirable holiday locations. With a crop of new chic boutique hotels, its stunning white sandy beaches, historic sites, amazing food and reliable surf, there is much to attract the tourist. It is easy to forget that this tropical paradise has had such a fraught and turbulent recent history.

It was only in the spring of 2009, that the Sri Lankan military crushed the final remnants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) militants. The Tigers had fought for several decades to establish a homeland for ethnic Tamils, and can claim the dubious distinction of having invented the suicide vest. Eventually, they were forced to retreat to a small patch of land next to the coast in north-east Sri Lanka. More than 100,000 people are believed to have been killed in this bloody conflict.

You cannot fail to be struck by the colossal development that has occurred in the last few years when you arrive in Colombo - the capital of Sri Lanka. It is a fascinating blend of different cultural and architectural influences; Portuguese, Dutch and British. This colonial architecture lends the city a strong European feel. Sri Lanka has a Buddhist majority, but there are significant populations of Christians, Hindus and Muslims and the city is dotted with pagodas, churches, temples and mosques. Port City - a vast project largely built and financed by Chinese investment - is rapidly beginning to take shape. I first caught sight of it in the early evening on my way to the Kingsbury Hotel. The hotel is located near Colombo's Galle Face Green, and faces towards the district known as Fort. This is flanked by the granite neo-Baroque Old Parliament building on one side, and soaring modern skyscrapers on the other. It is regarded as something of an institution, and my room was tastefully furnished, light and airy with a fantastic sunflower head shower.

I was famished so I made my way to a famous seafood restaurant - the Ministry of Crab - which was only a short stroll away. The Ministry is housed in a 400-year-old former Dutch hospital. This is one of the oldest buildings of Colombo Fort, and has been sympathetically restored.

The restaurant has acquired a cult following, and pop up versions have surfaced in the London Shard and on the Left Bank in Paris. Sri Lanka's lagoon crabs are rightly prized by seafood lovers the world over. Ironically, this has meant that the very best crustaceans were exported, and came to be in short supply in their native country. That was until chef Dharshan Munidasa teamed up with two Sri Lankan cricketing legends, Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara, to open the Ministry of Crab in 2011. The restaurant prides itself on only using export quality crab in its dishes, with sizes ranging from 500g up to the mind-boggling and aptly named 'Crabzilla' which weighs more than 2kg.

The first dish I ordered was a giant freshwater prawn served with oil and chilli, and accompanied by traditional wood-fired kade bread - which proved perfect for mopping up the juices. This was followed by a breathtaking assortment of traditional Sri Lankan recipes. These arrived in clay pots, and included curry crab, garlic crab, chilli crab and - my favourite - black pepper crab. As the lid of each pot was lifted, the intoxicating aromas were about as close as any shellfish lover can get to nirvana.

The monsoon was in full swing during my visit to Sri Lanka, and I just made it back to the hotel's rooftop bar before the heavens opened. I was able to watch a spectacular thunder and lightning storm, as I unwound from the pressures of the day with a few cocktails. They were made with local coconut arrack, which I can recommend as a potent but delicious Sri Lankan substitute for whiskey.

The cultural and geographical centre of Sri Lanka is Kandy. The city sits on a plateau surrounded by densely forested hills and idyllic tea plantations. It contains some of the most noteworthy historic sites in the country. Approaching the Royal Palace compound feels timeless and surreal. On the way, you pass scores of British colonial bungalows and old shops, some of which retain the names of long-defunct English companies. The humiliating treaty known as the Kandyan Convention between the British and the local aristocrats, was signed in the Royal Audience Hall on March 2, 1815. This Treaty claimed Ceylon as a British protectorate. The last King, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, and his family were taken as prisoners to southern India, never to return. It seems entirely fitting that, when Ceylon finally gained independence from the British in 1948, its declaration was signed in the same building.

The compound is a warren of imposing former palaces, museums and neo-classical colonial administrative quarters. However, its most significant building is undoubtedly the golden-roofed Temple of the Sacred Tooth. This houses Sri Lanka's most-important Buddhist relic, a tooth of the Buddha. It is because of this that the Temple was attacked on two occasions by the Tamil Tigers: first in 1998 and again in 2002 as the final round of peace talks ground to a halt. Thankfully the contents of the library weren't damaged and buildings have been meticulously restored, although there are some paintings which are now only preserved in fragments.

The two-storey shrine is lavishly decorated with carvings, tusks and colourful paintings. Each day during puja (offerings or prayers), the heavily guarded room housing the tooth is open to devotees and tourists. You don't actually see the tooth: it is kept in a gold casket which is rather like a Russian Mariska doll and contains a series of six other caskets of diminishing size.

Although small - roughly the same size as Ireland - Sri Lanka is astonishingly diverse in biological features. It boasts huge swathes of primary tropical rain-forest, palm-fringed beaches, arid bush, breath-taking hill country and an abundance of wildlife. There are estimated to be more than 5,000 wild elephants wandering around the island.

Since there are no pesky tigers to compete with them - they were hunted to extinction by the British - Sri Lanka holds the biggest concentration of leopards in the world. Yala National Park is a pristine 130,000-hectare wilderness on the south-eastern tip of Sri Lanka. Rather than spending hours driving in the heat, I decided to travel there by more unconventional means.

I boarded a seaplane at a nearby reservoir. It cost a little more than the price of a flight to London, and is worth the price. With its sleek lines and propeller, the plane seemed to evoke another age. The flight was as thrilling as I had

hoped. We landed on a military airstrip that was only a short journey to the park.

With its bleached-white trees, hunched rock formations, rising cliffs and arid bush, the landscape of Yala evokes images of a prehistoric time. Chena Huts is less than a 10-minute drive away. To be honest, huts seem a rather modest moniker for these elegant climate-controlled residences - each of which has its own private plunge pool. They nestle into the coastal jungle that borders the park, and are ideal for creature-comfort loving wildlife fans. Each hut comes with comfy platform beds and an open-style bathroom with free-standing tub - as well as all the other mod cons you could imagine. They are elevated above ground and linked by boardwalks so that nature can move around them. There are some potential downsides, however, the local wildlife, including wild boar, buffalo and the occasional elephant and even leopard, don't respect boundaries and are regular visitors to the resort. As a result you can't wander to the beach unaccompanied or swim in the sea as it is not only tempestuous but there is an abundance of terrifying salt-water crocodiles.

Included in your stay is the opportunity to go on two private jeep safaris a day. The guides have been trained in South Africa and are adept at spotting the local wildlife. Under their guidance even someone as short-sighted as me managed to see an elephant, plenty of peacocks and their less glamorous peahens, monkeys, two kinds of crocodile and a glimpse of the elusive Sri Lankan leopard - albeit just its tail.

Galle was a stronghold for the Portuguese and then the Dutch in the 17th Century, and it has retained much of their architectural influences. Because of its strategic significance, the city was extensively fortified. The Galle fort is a world heritage site and is the largest remaining fortress in Asia built by European occupiers.

The Fortress Resort & Spa is located in a much smaller but beautifully restored Dutch Fort. With its cobblestoned pathways, majestic entrance doors, hardwood floors, tiled roofs and tall whitewashed circular pillars, this resort seems to combine its colonial ancestry with contemporary and chic embellishments. My room was airy and cool: the perfect tonic after a day of travel.

The balcony offered panoramic views of the Indian Ocean, and I could not resist going for a swim. The seas in this part of the island can often be rough, and the impressive waves attract large numbers of surfers. The hotel also has a pool, as well as access to a secluded beach which is sheltered from the worst of weather by a coral reef. The setting sun-framed the silhouettes of local fishermen perched at the top of huge poles, and it all seemed impossibly picturesque.

As you drive through the country you notice scores of memorials, both public and private, to those who died in the conflict. You get the sense that this remarkably beautiful and culturally rich country is finally beginning to awaken from its nightmare.

GETTING THERE

Sri Lanka Tourism Promotions Bureau

srilanka.travel

Flights

Cinnamon Air cinnamonair.com

Hotels

Mahaweli Reach Hotel - mahaweli.com

Vivanta by Taj, Bentota - vivanta.tajhotels.com/en-in/bentota-sri-lanka

OZO Colombo, Colombo - ozohotels.com/colombo-srilanka

Shangri La

shangri-la.com/hambantota/shangrila

The Fortress Resort and Spa

thefortress.lk

The Kingsbury thekingsburyhotel.com

Eating

Ministry of Crab ministryofcrab.com

Whale and dolphin watching

Sail Lanka Charter sail-lanka-charter

Tours

Red Dot tours reddottours.com

Take three: top attractions

Curry lessons

Village Riders offers traditional cooking classes with a difference. I was collected just outside Galle by a red tuk-tuk which whisked me along narrow roads through picturesque villages surrounded by paddy fields until I arrived at a small farm. There I watched in awe as a chef skilfully prepared an amazing variety of incredible curries using local produce from scratch.

Whale watching

Set up after the tsunami of 2004 which devastated much of the local coastline Sail Lanka Charter was established to promote sailing as a viable eco-friendly resource for the local community. The seas around Sri Lanka are exceptionally rich with marine life. Aside from sea turtles, dolphins and sharks it is also one of the best places in the world to observe majestic Blue Whales.

Lunuganga

The country house of Sri Lanka's most celebrated architect Geoffrey Bawa until his death in 2003. Bawa was instrumental in developing "tropical modernism": a style based on Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic traditions as well as its colonial influences. Bawa's buildings were the result of meticulous planning, he even had a hill reduced so he could enjoy unobstructed views of the nearby river.

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