

THE AUSTRALIAN

Sri Lanka hits the safari spot for leopards, elephants, sloth



The domed thatched roof of the accommodation at Chena Huts, Sri Lanka.

KENDALL HILL THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 18, 2017

Leopards can be found anywhere, according to our guide Hari. On the ground. Sprawled on giant granite boulders. Lounging in trees. Even basking on the beach, sometimes. But on a morning safari into Yala National Park, the 100,000ha wildlife sanctuary beside the Indian Ocean in Sri Lanka's southeast, leopards are nowhere to be seen.

The only spotted creatures in sight are deer. There are posing peacocks, a still-life sambar with magnificent antlers, crocodiles, buffalo and serpent eagles, a lone elephant and, just as we're about to head back, a sloth bear. The most remarkable thing about our bear sighting is that we are all alone on the Yala plains when it happens. This is Sri Lanka's most visited national park; in peak season there can be 500-600 safari vehicles waiting impatiently at dawn for the gates to open. Today there are maybe 200 and not one disturbs our magical bear moment.



Yala National Park has the highest density of any leopard species on Earth.

Sloth bears are sweet-looking creatures with pale snouts and white ruffs on black fur coats. Ours is cuter than most because he has a limp, a legacy of that time a few years back when he got so drunk on fermented rosewood berries he fell out of a tree and broke his leg. The sight of a wonky sloth bear cheers me so much I forget all about leopards. Senior ranger Haritha Pilapitiya seems pleased with the sighting too, and he's in this park every day. I ask him what's the most incredible thing he's ever seen at Yala. "An eight-foot crocodile being eaten by a python," he says, putting our quaint little bear into startling context.



A room with private plunge pool at Chena Huts, Sri Lanka.

Hari and I and a Sydney couple are game-drive buddies at Chena Huts, an exclusive 28-guest property that is both safari camp and beachfront lodge. Chena opened a year ago on several hectares tucked between the Indian Ocean and Yala. If guests are lucky they may see, from the stilted deck of the lodge restaurant, an elephant lumbering down

the beach or sea turtles laying their eggs by moonlight. If unlucky, they might encounter a cobra. That's Sri Lanka's great outdoors for you — wildly unpredictable.

The resort takes its design cues from nature and its low thatched roofs, teak boardwalks and fences of cinnamon twigs merge into the bushland. Lavish sheets of glass in huts and communal spaces showcase ocean and waterhole views. “Huts” is a misnomer because Chena's 14 jungle suites sprawl across 105sq m each, including a pool deck, and are hermetically sealed against bugs and beasts.



An aerial view of Chena Huts, an exclusive 28-guest property.

Coolly chic interiors feature vast sleeping platforms with ornamental woodpile bedheads, rich-grained teak floors and a vaulted dome frame that lends a faint ecclesiastic air. With complimentary minibars, every bathroom amenity imaginable, flat-screen TVs and Bluetooth speakers, these are among the best-equipped and best-looking safari lodges imaginable.

The remainder of the resort comprises a two-room spa, communal pool and the Basses Restaurant on the shore. The restaurant is named after two lighthouses off this shipwreck coast; one of which, Great Basses Reef, is visible from the dining room and terrace. (There's a permanent blue whale population that lives in a channel beside the reef. Boat charter operators promise guests a 95 per cent chance of spotting the world's largest animal.)

All meals are taken in the restaurant. Room service is banned to avoid wild animals — especially wily langurs that lurk in surrounding trees — associating the accommodation with food. Restaurant meals are three-course affairs of

western, Sri Lankan and international dishes and are well-presented and adequate, and the seafood is fished straight from the ocean out front.



Elephants are one of the many animals that can be spotted on safari at Yala.

The only downside to being this close to a pristine beach is that guests are not allowed to walk on it unless accompanied by a ranger, for those reasons stated above (see: elephant, cobra). So there are no morning runs or moonlit strolls to be had, and the sea is too dangerous for swimming. But Hari leads a pleasant sunrise nature walk along the coastline into the national park, though visitors should not expect to meet any animals. In-room compendiums specifically advise, “The aim of the walk is not to get close to animals.” Hari carries pepper spray in his utility belt just in case a drunken bear picks a fight.

Chena’s proximity to Yala is a gift to guests. It’s the closest lodge to Gate I, which offers some of the park’s best wildlife sightings and the largest leopard population. Resort drivers depart very early each morning to secure pole position at the gate. We leave camp at a more leisurely 5.15am and drive straight to the front of the pack, presumably to the envy of the many dozens of open-sided jeeps queued outside.

“It’s really nice being the first person in the park because you get to see a lot more,” Hari says. But we are first for only a fleeting second. When gates open at 6am, all hell breaks loose. Daredevil jeeps fly past like a South Asian leg of the Dakar Rally. We motor along calmly as the scrum roars ahead down the red dirt track. “We try to take the Chena standard into the park,” Hari explains as I stare slack-jawed after the pack. Afternoon game drives are far less feral because visitors can come and go as they please.

The landscapes inside Yala, a former Raj-era hunting ground, are surprisingly diverse. There are plains carpeted green after recent rains, and metamorphic boulders strewn about like the ruins of some ancient civilisation but not to be confused with the actual ancient ruins of Buddhist monasteries still found in the sanctuary. There are wet forests, dry forests, thorn forests, marshes and empty stretches of golden shoreline. The air echoes with the screams of peacocks and the weary sighs of water buffalo as we motor past Lake Vilapala and come to a screeching halt. Leopard! In the bush, just there, to my right, maybe 8m away.

Unfortunately we are not alone for this sighting and the euphoria of spotting a big cat is marred by the hysteria of 10 jeeps revving and reversing to fit, Tetris-like, into the tightest possible space so everyone gets an eyeful of *Panthera pardus kotiya*, Sri Lanka's endemic leopard. Yala has the highest density of any leopard species on Earth.

The considerate female waits until our jeeps are locked in and cameras poised before crossing the track, tail twitching like a vane in the wind, to conceal herself in lakeside scrub and, with luck, catch a nice spotted deer for tea.

Snap, snap, press, whirr, record. Everyone is madly clicking, zooming and filming, witnessing this wonder through their viewfinders. This is that delirious moment where holiday dreams and reality meet and, given the leopard lingers in plain sight for more than five minutes, it exceeds all expectations. This is what we travelled across the world to see. The bear was a bonus.

Kendall Hill was a guest of India Unbound.

CHECKLIST

Yala National Park is open year-round except for six weeks from September to mid-October when it closes for maintenance and the leopard breeding season. More: yalasilanka.lk. Rates at Chena Huts average \$850 a night and include all meals, most beverages, twice-daily game drives, park fees, laundry and minibar. More:

ugaescapes.com.

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