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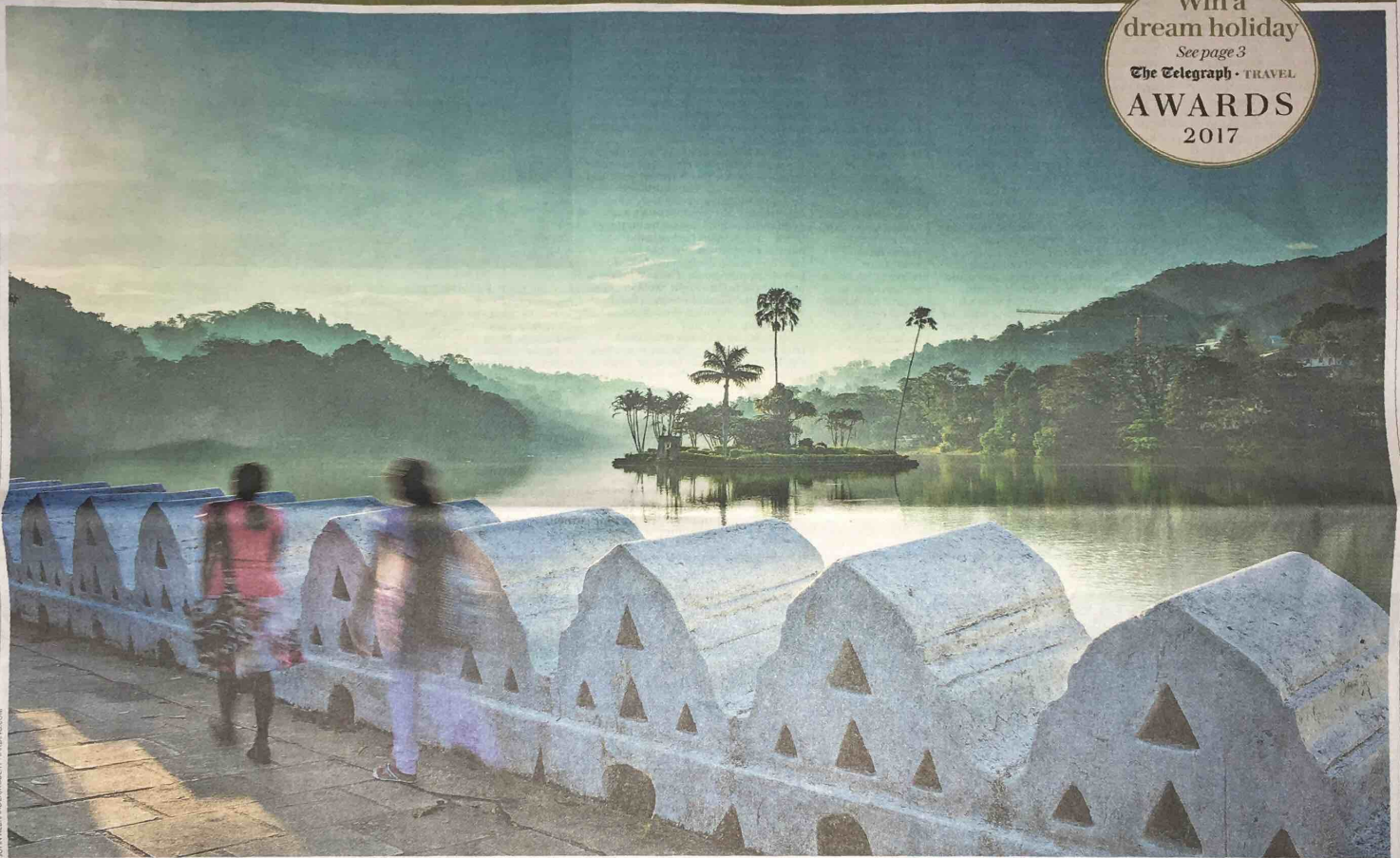
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2017



How I found peace in Sri Lanka

Michael Buerk, who reported on the country's civil war, returns as a holidaymaker to find that tourism is helping to heal old wounds

The Tigers' lair was deep in the jungle. It was difficult to find and tough to get to; two hours jolting, semi-prone, in a trailer dragged by a tractor, watching for mines. This was a war zone for decades. The paddy fields were abandoned long ago to the peacocks and their perpetual courtship, dozens of them every where, each male made fabulous by desire. The man-made lake that once fed the fields was covered in lotus flowers. A crocodile basked on a rock in the shallows, jaws gaping as if in wonder at the lonely



beauty of it all. Well into the thicker brush, down a maze of paths and tunnels through the thorn trees, we came first to what was left of the Tigers' guard post. Just rubble now where 50 fighters held part of the perimeter of what was, in effect, a separate state. Their latrine, the only recognisable structure left, was now home to a loft Indian rock python. The main camp was much further into the jungle, blasted to near oblivion, like the movement itself. It had been the

permanent base for 1,000 fighters, three times that many when recruits in this eastern Tamil heartland were transiting to the battlefields of the north. It had been a small town of concrete, breeze blocks and underground bunkers. Maybe the place was levelled by the Tigers themselves, when the war ended in a bloody Götterdämmerung, 100 miles to the north. But the remains of their distinctive uniforms, the emptied ammunition boxes, and – more chilling – the human bones that were lying about spoke of collapse, and flight, and worse. Our guides couldn't, or wouldn't, tell us. We didn't inquire if they had

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Cover story



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were fighters themselves. Eight years after the war ended, it is still not a question that can be asked.

We had set off, shortly after dawn, from one of the most interesting hotels I have ever stayed in. Jungle Beach is a collection of 48 "cabins" clustered in tropical seclusion between the jungle and the sea. It's not just the luxury of the chalets, with their air-conditioning, their terraces and decks, king-size beds and state-of-the-art bathrooms and lighting systems. It's not the beach, though that's three miles long and the hotel has it all to itself. It's not the food, exotically sourced and fastidiously prepared though it is (and the barbecued Sri Lankan lobster and jumbo prawns beside the surf under a dark velvet sky is my most memorable night of the year so far). It's not the endlessly obliging service from so many friendly and courteous people that set it apart.

It is the way it is helping to heal the gaping wounds of war. War is all most people here knew. It went on for nearly 30 years, the longest civil war in Asian history, and for much of that time the east was Tiger territory, a state with its own borders, courts, even traffic police equipped with radar guns. Much of the time, the army was banged up in the old British naval base at Trincomalee, 20 miles to the south, and only ventured out along the

main roads, in daylight. For many round here there was no work, no school, for two generations. Parents wouldn't let their children out for fear of murder at the bloodied hands of both sides, or abduction - the Tigers were always short of manpower and made killers of thousands of women and boys.

Jungle Beach is a first promise of change, bringing high-end tourists to this corner of a tortured paradise. Almost half the staff have been recruited locally. For all I knew, the waiter who brought us our eggs Benedict at breakfast was once internationally defined as a terrorist with the Tigers' trademark cyanide capsule necklace and striped camos, as expert with a T-56 assault rifle and a bayonet as he is now with more domestic cutlery.

The war widows work mainly in the laundry and the kitchen. Shanthi Kumari, 34, was left half-starving with her two daughters when her husband disappeared like so many others. Now she's a kitchen steward with a salary sufficient to build a house with a TV, a fridge and a goldfish tank. The war wrecked her life, she says. The hotel put it back together again and means a future for her two girls, aged 15 and 10. She says the hotel manager, an inspirational figure and a Tamil himself, "is a god to me". There are so many others, she says, who would give anything for a similar chance.

The guests need know nothing of the war. This is an exclusive retreat,

Essentials

Michael Buerk travelled as a guest of Uga Escapes, Red Savannah and Qatar Airways (qatarairways.com), which flies daily from London Heathrow to Colombo, via Doha, with economy fares from £794. Book through Uga Escapes (ugasescapes.com) or Red Savannah (01242 787800; redsavannah.com), which offers 10 nights in Sri Lanka from £3,295 per person based on two people sharing, including international economy flights, transfers, the services of an English-speaking chauffeur/guide and B&B accommodation at Jungle Beach, Uga Bay, Ulagalla, Chena Huts and the Residence in Colombo.



only five years old but already well-sprinkled with awards. There's the jungle on the doorstep, the beach stretches forever and, just offshore, is one of the world's great whale-watching sites. We spent a morning following dozens of pilot whales as they gorged on the krill that funnels up where the seabed suddenly drops two and a half miles to the deep ocean floor.

Soon, perhaps, the war might be just another attraction. "Dark tourism" is a growing trend and the Tigers' lairs may soon take their place alongside the Khmer Rouge killing fields, the Viet Cong's tunnels and Mandela's Robben Island on the worldwide cruelty trail.

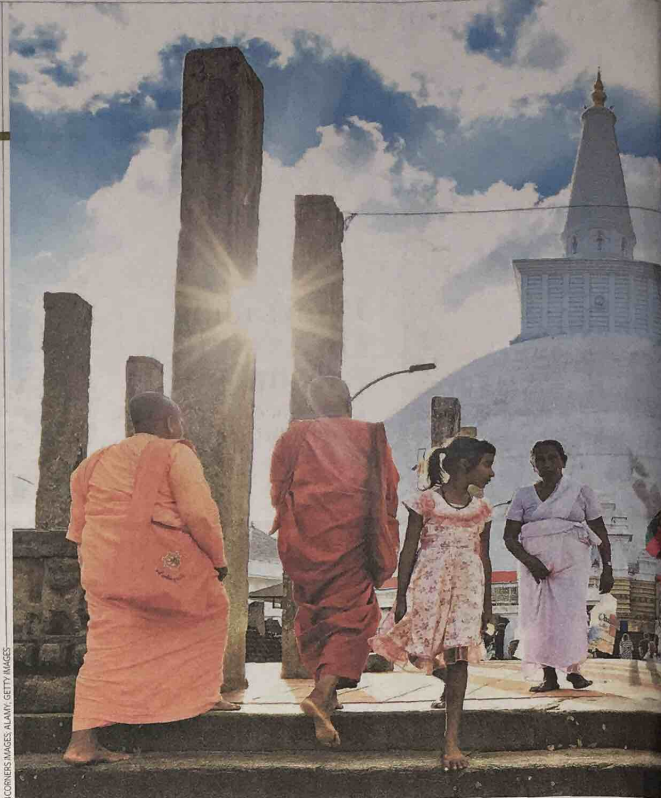
At its peak, the LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) controlled a third of a country the size of Ireland. All of that, and more, was off limits for visitors and missed out on the global tourist boom that in Sri Lanka was funnelled into the south-western beaches and the tea plantation hill country around Kandy. Now, in some places aching slowly, in others at a rush, hotels are springing up in places where the humans may be scarred but the landscape is pristine.

Chena Huts is a new safari lodge in the deep south, in a strip of protected jungle between Yala National Park and the Indian Ocean. The "huts" are arguably bigger, and certainly more expensively fitted out, than a lot of even rich people's houses, with their living rooms, giant bedrooms, bathrooms with fashionable free-standing baths, decks outside and private plunge pools. The restaurant is on the beach. One night, we had to put the lobster on hold because a "tusker" was ambling through the lodges on his way to play in the surf.

Yala, Sri Lanka's oldest national park, was closed during the war when the Tigers used it as a hideout. Until then it was leopards that ruled the roost. They had no predators until the guerrillas came and are bigger here than elsewhere, with a denser population. In all my years in Africa I only saw a leopard twice. I saw two on the first morning in Yala.

Sri Lanka's parks don't have the scale, or quite as much big beast sex-and-violence appeal as Africa's best reserves. But the long war shielded them from mass tourism.

The cuddly looking but vicious sloth bears are unique, there are elephants everywhere and, if it is danger you're



looking for, the wild buffalo are famously poker-faced and potentially lethal. Besides, the smaller stuff is more interesting than bone-idle big mammals. Birds, particularly.

In the Wilpattu National Park, we watched two tiny dusky blue flycatchers attacking a huge serpent eagle that had perched too close to their nest. Time after time, they flew straight into him, like kamikazes. He was rocked by each tiny, but furious, impact, yet for 10 minutes or so affected not to notice, sitting there stiff with contempt, until he finally flapped off into the trees.

Wilpattu was part of a swathe of central and north Sri Lanka that has many of the island's most important cultural attractions. We stayed at one of the island's finest new boutique hotels, the Ulagalla, which has been

Revitalised Batticaloa, above left; the Golden Sand Stupa in Anuradhapura, above. Previous page: Kandy Lake

We had to put the lobster on hold as a "tusker" ambled by

created out of a local nobleman's Dutch colonial-style house and estate. It had been commandeered by the army as a place to treat their wounded. Now you stay in one of 20 traditional-looking - but, again, very hi-tech - villas on stilts dotted among 60 acres of paddy fields and half-tamed jungle. The 150-year-old *walawura* (mansion) is where you eat (very well; Sri Lankan curries, with their characteristic use of coconut in all its forms, must be the best in the world). The service levels are extraordinary. They'll create "private dining experiences" almost anywhere on the estate with your own chef and waiters in a bower at the end of a path of flares. At a price, of course.

From there, you can explore Anuradhapura, one of the wonders of the ancient world. For nearly 2,000 years it was the Sinhalese capital, a



Sri Lanka's civil war

Almost 75 per cent of the population are Buddhist Sinhalese; 15 per cent are Tamil, most of them Hindu. Tamils prospered under the British. They formed two thirds of the colonial civil service.

After independence, Sinhalese nationalist leaders sought to promote their own community at the expense of the Tamils, making Sinhala the only official language, and giving Buddhism special status. Tensions turned into riots, atrocities and eventually war after the LTTE (Tamil Tigers)

ambushed and murdered an army patrol in 1983 and Sinhalese mobs butchered Tamils in Colombo in reprisal.

Sri Lanka became the most militarised nation in south Asia. Its army grew to 30 times its original size. There were cessfires and attempts at mediation but it ended in death and defeat for the Tigers in 2009, along with large numbers of civilians.

Estimates vary but it's thought 100,000 people died over the next 26 years, and up to a million were displaced.

Colombo's bus station had been bombed to smithereens with horrendous loss of life. The Tigers had just stopped a busload of monks and slaughtered them like sheep. The army was responding with torture and massacres of their own.

My son, Roland, was the resident BBC correspondent there as it came to an end, when the Tigers, and thousands of civilians, were pushed into a last square mile, back to the Nandimalai lagoon, and blown to bits. Both of us saw Sri Lanka as a flawed paradise. It's even shaped like a teardrop, beautiful, deadly and sad. Not for the first time, it occurred to me how terrible things happen in the most beautiful places, to the nicest people.

Now, you can go to places like the city of Batticaloa, a hotspot in the war but one of the most attractive parts of the island. If you do, I recommend staying at the Uga Bay hotel, the best of those now lining probably Sri Lanka's finest beach at Passaicudah, north of the town itself.

The war spent decades training a community there that was then demolished in seconds when the 2004 tsunami sent a 40ft wall of water miles inland, killing 500 in this tiny district alone. The fishing proas are back on the beach now, and the tourists are starting to return.

You can go now to the forbidden places in the capital, Colombo, which the Tigers once attacked a dozen times in a single day, and where anti-aircraft guns were set up around Galle Face Green to counter the Tigers' home-made air force.

Stay somewhere like the Residence, an 11-suite luxury hotel right in the centre, created out of a Victorian town house and stables. Go on one of Mark Forbes's famous walking tours through the Fort, the old colonial outpost that became Sri Lanka's government and financial centre. It was probably the most guarded city district in the world, especially after a suicide bomber managed to blow up the central bank in 1996, destroying 12 buildings, killing 91 people, injuring 1,400 and painting himself into the pavement in the process. Now it is open. The old colonial buildings are being restored, and the army barracks is a chichi collection of restaurants.

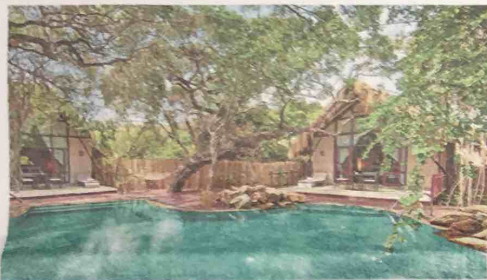
Thailand gets 15 times as many tourists as Sri Lanka with, arguably, far less to offer. The international hotel chains are said to be queuing to open up in Colombo to cater for a new wave of tourists, where imperial servants once took tiffin in their togas.

Be optimistic. It could be Paradise Regained, after all. As Bishop Heber's famous hymn about the place says: "every prospect pleases" and, now the war is history, you can see it all for yourself.

civilisation built around the huge man-made irrigation reservoirs they call "tanks". It spreads over 16 square miles, surrounded by monastery dagobas and, at its heart, the oldest recorded vegetable in the world - a Bodhi Tree, that's said to have been grown from a cutting from the fig tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, which has apparently been tended since 245BC.

This was, until recently, the army's major staging post for the war, which for a time turned the new town near the site into one of largest brothels in south Asia. Now there's a new future, based on old grandeur.

Sri Lanka's war was a family affair, for them and for me. I was there for the BBC at the beginning, in the Eighties, as a cycle of violence and reprisal reached an early peak.



The luxurious Jungle Beach hotel, above: wartime propaganda in Colombo, above right

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