

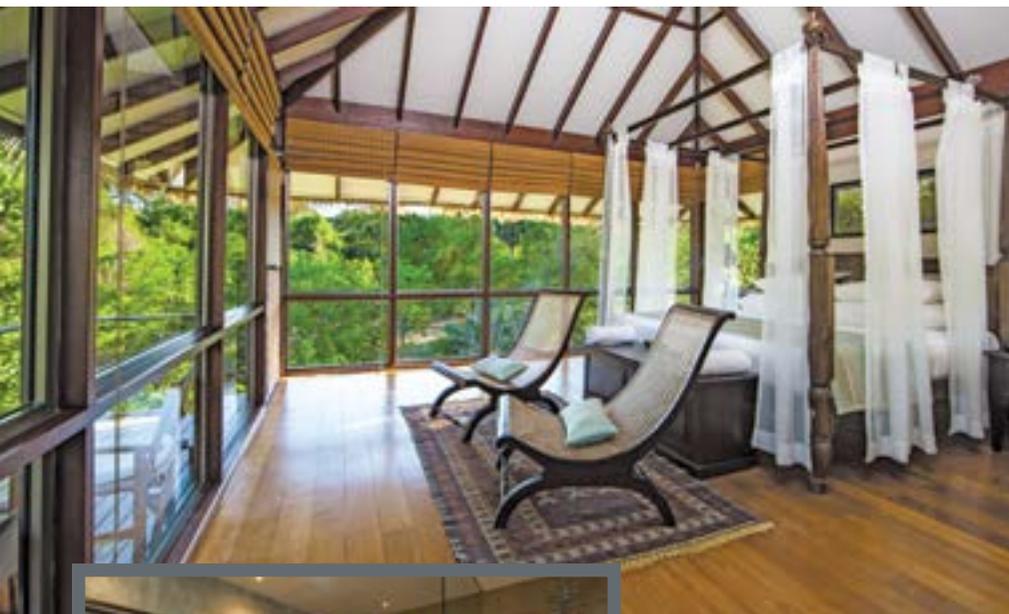
High Time for Sri Lanka

WITH A DEVASTATING TSUNAMI AND A DECADES-LONG CIVIL WAR BEHIND IT, THE ISLAND NATION IS TAKING FLIGHT AS A DISTINCT LUXURY DESTINATION. **BY CYNTHIA ROSENFELD**

|||||
 Miguel Cunat discovered the site for the Ceylon Tea Trails resort (above) while exploring the Bogawantalawa Valley by motorcycle.
 |||||

THE GIPPSAERO GA8 AIRVAN floats nimbly through the clouds, sweeping over the paddies and craggy mountains of the Sri Lankan countryside. Traveling north from the island nation's seaside metropolis of Colombo to its famed Cultural Triangle, the aircraft soars past Adam's Peak—a jagged, cone-shaped mountain whose footprint-like indentations have for centuries prompted holy pilgrimages—then veers toward the tangled green hills of the northern steppes.

Suren Mirchandani, the founder of the Sri Lankan private-aviation company Simplify, has taken me 20,000 feet above the ground to prove a point. “Seven years ago, I realized tourism’s potential here was in the air,” he says as the changing scenery slips past us in a few heartbeats. Having visited Sri Lanka in the past, I know that this idyllic landscape often unfolds slowly and uncomfortably on the ground, a travel experience marred by



|||||
**The 20-villa
 Ulagalla resort sits
 in a 58-acre nature
 preserve near
 Wilpattu National
 Park, home to a
 large population of
 leopards.**
 |||||

variable roads and other remnants of the country's checkered past.

My previous visits to the island—one in 2005, a few months after a devastating tsunami ravaged the country, and a second in 2008, during a flare-up of domestic violence—had been disappointing, to say the least. On the occasion of the latter, my Cathay Pacific flight arrived at Bandaranaike International Airport just as an attack by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hit nearby Colombo. At the time, the country was less than a year away from ending its 26-year civil war between the LTTE and the ruling Sinhalese. But on this trip, gunfire on the only road into the city left me stranded and fearful. Canceling my stay, I bribed a machine-gun-toting soldier to help me buy the next plane ticket out of town, and then spent

the next 12 hours eating stale cookies and attempting to wiggle into a sleeping position on an airport windowsill.

The Sinhalese government defeated the LTTE in 2009, and, as I am quickly learning, much has changed for tourists in the subsequent years. Many of these changes, however, started taking shape much earlier, thanks to visionaries like Mirchandani. “Exceptional hotels opened even during the worst years of the war,” he explains as we fly over Heritance Kandalama, an eco-resort opened in 1994 that is built into the side of a rocky cliff. “But long drives kept people away at least as much as the fighting.”

Miguel Cunat, a cofounder and the CEO of the travel agency Sri Lanka in Style, is another of the island's tourism pioneers. After visiting Sri Lanka in 2002 for his honeymoon, the Spanish entrepreneur “fell in love with the country, too.” Realizing Sri Lanka held tourism potential for more than just intrepid backpackers and Buddhist pilgrims, Cunat launched his agency in 2005, amid the country's long-standing unrest.

“Back then we felt certain the war would continue for a very long time,” says Cunat, who is escorting me on

my trip north. “I became skilled at answering the question, ‘Is it safe?’ To show Sri Lanka at its best, we first needed to get people off the ground.”

Moments later, we touch down on a former military airfield. (“The war that impeded our operations now facilitates it,” Mirchandani says.) Stepping off the aircraft onto the flat, emerald plain, I am not sure which takes my breath away more: the 5th-century rock-fortress capital of Sigiriya, protruding from the horizon like a thumb, or the speed at which we have arrived—less than an hour after takeoff, or about one-fifth the time it would take on the bumpy roads.

Cunat and I continue 45 minutes by road to Ulagalla, a 20-villa resort spread across a 58-acre nature preserve near Wilpattu National Park. Home to leopards and sloth bears, the park reopened in 2004 after nearly 16 years of closures caused by safety concerns. Before Ulagalla, which debuted in 2010, the region lacked anything in the way of luxury accommodations, forcing Cunat's clients to rush from site to site on day trips. But today, as a buggy driver escorts me to my villa, the mood is unhurried, with stops along the way to observe three monkeys swinging in the trees overhead and a delightfully prehistoric monitor lizard crossing our path. The jungle surroundings are on display through floor-to-ceiling windows in my villa, which is outfitted with colonial furnishings and a four-poster bed.