

HOPE & GLORY

Unexpected lessons in forgiveness and hope for the future helped Perdita Nouril heal old wounds on a trip to Sri Lanka

A family disagreement has consumed my life for the past seven years. Just when I think I've made peace with it all, old feelings of resentment and sadness come flooding back. While I wouldn't try to compare my situation to a 30-year conflict that has cost the lives of thousands, I empathise with the Sri Lankans I meet who are desperate to not let their country's past consume their lives. Although the civil war ended five years ago, ripples of devastation still reverberate. There are the memorial walls built to remember those killed by suicide bombers, and villages where rows of houses still bear marked tiled roofs, used as a sign to let aircraft bombers know that Tamil Tiger rebels weren't inside.

Today, Sri Lankans are rebuilding and reconciling their country. The UN has helped create schooling programmes for children to teach them how to deal with anger or resentment about the past and to hinder the chances of the next generation restarting the conflict. Communities previously cut off from one another are slowly sewing back up the seams of their torn land. The north-east, where I'm headed, has also started to open up to travellers;

army checkpoints no longer exist and railway lines closed for three decades are open, linking the Tamils in the north to the Sinhalese in the south, and representing an emblematic truce between the two sides. New domestic flight paths also provide access to previously off-limit areas, and I find myself flying with Cinnamon Air in one of its eight-seater planes to Trincomalee. Lush, emerald-green plains are below us, peppered with brightly coloured temples, mosques, Buddha statues and dense jungle intertwined with glistening turquoise lagoons. We buzz around Sigiriya Rock, marvelling at the famous 600ft-high boulder that's crowned with the ruins of a beautiful bastion once built by a fifth-century king. In the distance, I watch a herd of elephants trying to find shelter from the overwhelming heat; if only all in-flight entertainment could be this wondrous.

With my feet firmly back on the ground, I arrive at Jungle Beach, one of the first major resorts to be built on the north-east coast. The land was once ruled by the Tamil Tigers, and the owners decided to gamble with tourism in the aftermath of the war. Yet a new report by human rights organisation, the Society for Threatened >>>



>>> Peoples, found that new hotels often undermined the livelihoods of locals. Thankfully, this is not the case at Jungle Beach; the resort is owned and run by Sri Lankan company Uga Escapes, which employs the local community. Tamils and Sinhalese work across all the brand's hotels, and former Tamil rebels, who were previously living in refugee camps, now work as gardeners along with Sinhalese widows, who make up the housekeeping teams.

Unspoilt beauty

The rustic amber sand at Jungle Beach stretches as far as the eye can see, with no tacky tourist bars and just a few crabs to make up the rush hour. Villas have ornate thatched roofs, large balconies and private outside showers, allowing you to freshen up to the tranquil tune of neighbouring birds that take on the role of your personal choir. Keen to discover more of this untouched land, I take a bumpy boat trip to nearby Pigeon Island. A national park set in the Indian Ocean, it's enclosed by powdery white sands and grassy thickets mottled with shallow rock pools. The underwater coral landscape is the real gem here. One side of the island boasts crystal-clear waters that give way to a glittering coral garden, while the other is home to dozens of blacktip reef sharks and turtles, making snorkelling just as exploratory as diving.

On the road again, I'm accompanied by a new local guide, Lal, who has a kind face and storied soul. His knowledge of Sri Lanka is impressive and I listen intently as he tells poignant stories of the war, while I watch children dressed in immaculate white uniforms playing in dusty schoolyards, and tea-plantation workers outside in the blistering heat while egrets balance on grazing buffalo.

As we reach Uga Bay, Passekudah, I'm met by a magnificent, white, arched tunnel that perfectly frames an entrance looking onto a vista of lawns, a colossal infinity pool and the sea. Two-storey

villas sit facing the ocean and a glass-walled poolhouse offers unobstructed views of the bay. After a tour of a coconut cultivation farm opposite the resort, dinner is served on the beach with a table and chairs that have been magically erected in the sand. Illumination is provided by strategically placed bonfires and a dazzling blanket of stars, while we feast on the freshest ruby-red lobster and crab, accompanied by curried okra, sweet peppers and crunchy red rice.

The following day sees a three-hour drive inland towards the ancient city of Anuradhapura. I cycle around colourful

“Ancient Buddha statues and dense jungle intertwine with glistening turquoise lagoons”

food and jewellery markets, stopping to feast on 'egg hoppers', a local delicacy of crêpe bowls filled with chilli sauce. We zip round the dome-shaped Buddhist shrines, known as *stupas*, including the Jetavanaramaya, which looks like a giant red-brick bowler hat. Monks in saffron sarongs float past in a meditative trance, while young boys in Manchester United shirts and bare feet impress with their remarkable cricket skills. We stop to marvel at the ancient Bodhi 'tree of enlightenment' (dating back to the 3rd century BC) and the sandakada pahana, a moonstone with carved pictures that narrate the nirvana in Buddhism.

Home in this region is Ulagalla, sister resort to Jungle Beach and Uga Bay. By far my favourite of the three, it's nestled between two reservoirs and surrounded by 58 acres of isolated woodland, paddy fields and lily ponds. With eco policy in mind, the estate has reverse-osmosis water recycling and a solar farm, which provides over half of the energy needed to run the hotel. The 150-year-old main

house, originally owned by local nobility, is breathtakingly elegant. Ceiling fans provide a breeze that carries the fresh perfume of the surrounding frangipani trees. My open-plan villa is built on stilts, giving impressive treetop panoramic views, while a private plunge pool provides modern comfort. Grey langur monkeys bounce across my roof, and I'm lucky enough to see whole tribes of them the next day while on safari.

I arrive at Wilpattu National Park, frequented far less than the southern Yala National Park, which means you're more likely to see the animals, instead of endless lines of 4x4 vehicles. My luck is in as I spy an elephant cooling down in the lake and a leopard prowling the sun-beaten grass for prey. Back at Ulagalla, I spend the afternoon cooking with chefs. We pick local vegetables from the bountiful organic garden and fry them in cloves, turmeric and ginger.

Learning how to create new dishes wasn't the only thing Sri Lanka and its people taught me. While the so-called Teardrop Island has more reasons to shed tears than most, its new challenge is to keep peace alive – I could feel the optimism. It rekindled feelings of hope and forgiveness that I'd almost lost.

LAND OF HOPE

Kuoni offers seven nights in Sri Lanka, staying one night at the Cinnamon Lakeside, Colombo in a deluxe room, two nights at Uga Jungle Beach, Trincomalee, in a lagoon cabin, two nights at Uga Bay, Passikudah, in a beach studio and two nights at Ulagalla, Anuradhapura, in a chalet. The package includes room and breakfast, flights with Sri Lankan Airlines from London Heathrow, internal flight from Colombo to Trincomalee with Cinnamon Air and transfers in the resort. Prices start from £1,858 per person, based on two people sharing. For more information, see kuoni.co.uk.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: the private plunge pool at Ulagalla; cheetahs relax in the trees; working in one of the many tea plantations; Sigiriya Rock in Dambulla; the golden Shiva statue in the Hindu temple Koneswaram, Trincomalee, in the east of Sri Lanka

