

The Telegraph

ultratravel

YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH **AUTUMN 2018**

SILENT AUCTION
BID FOR ONE OF
27 LUXURY HOLIDAYS

MAKING WAVES THE NEW SUPER-BOATS



MODERNIST MEXICO
The hippest haunts, hotels
and tequila hangouts
52

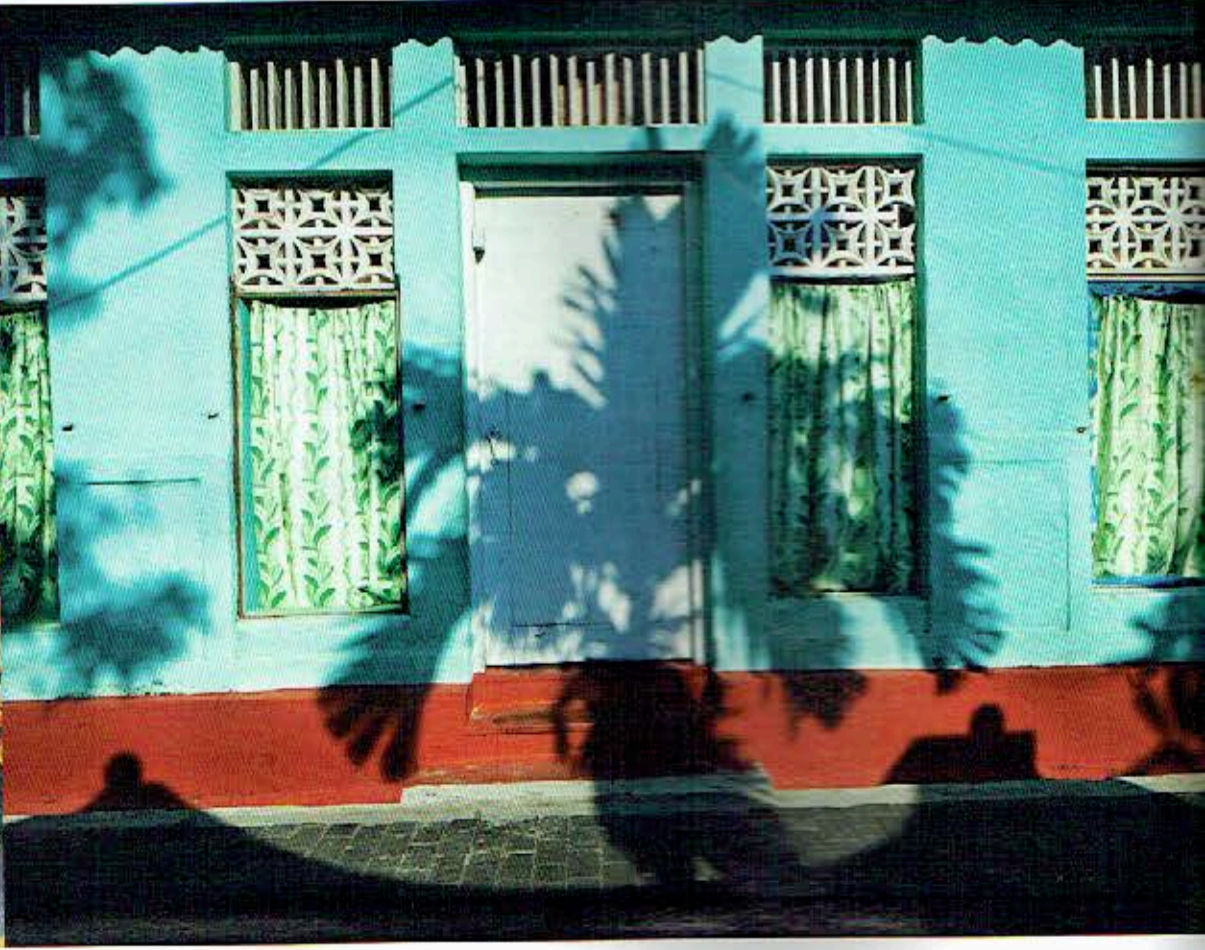
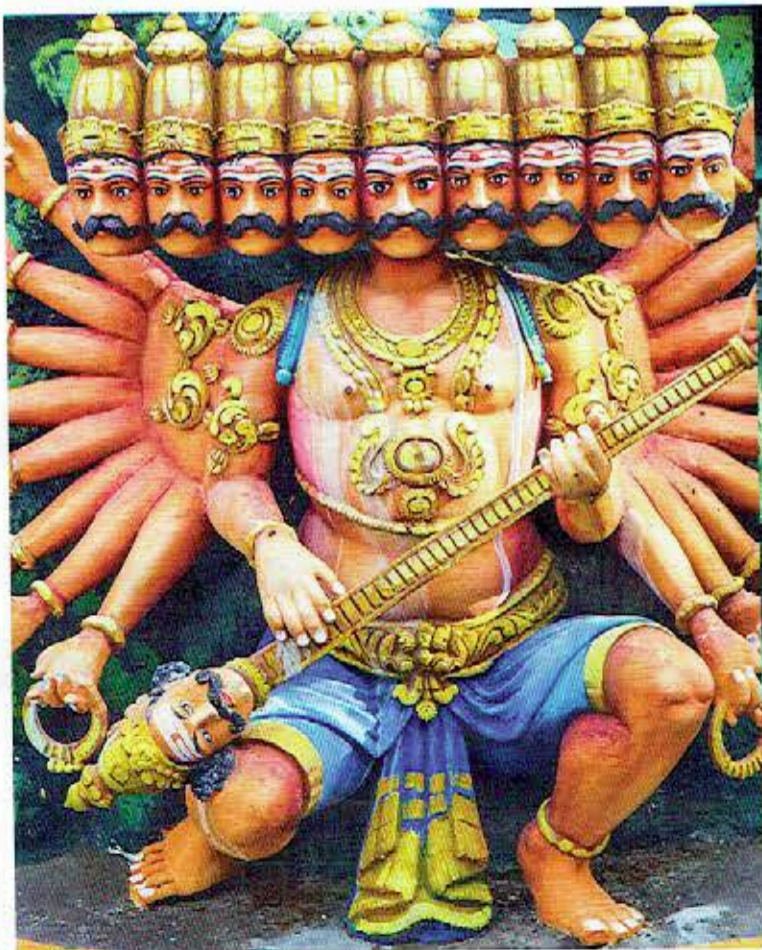
OLGA POLIZZI
On the trail of Florence's
finest master craftsmen
38

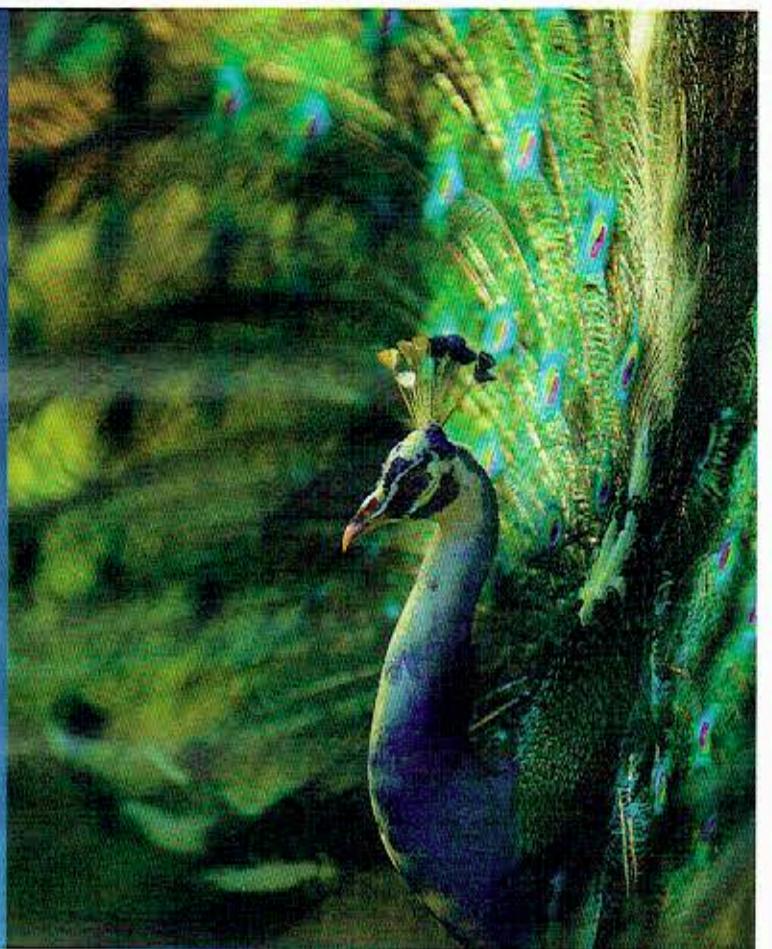
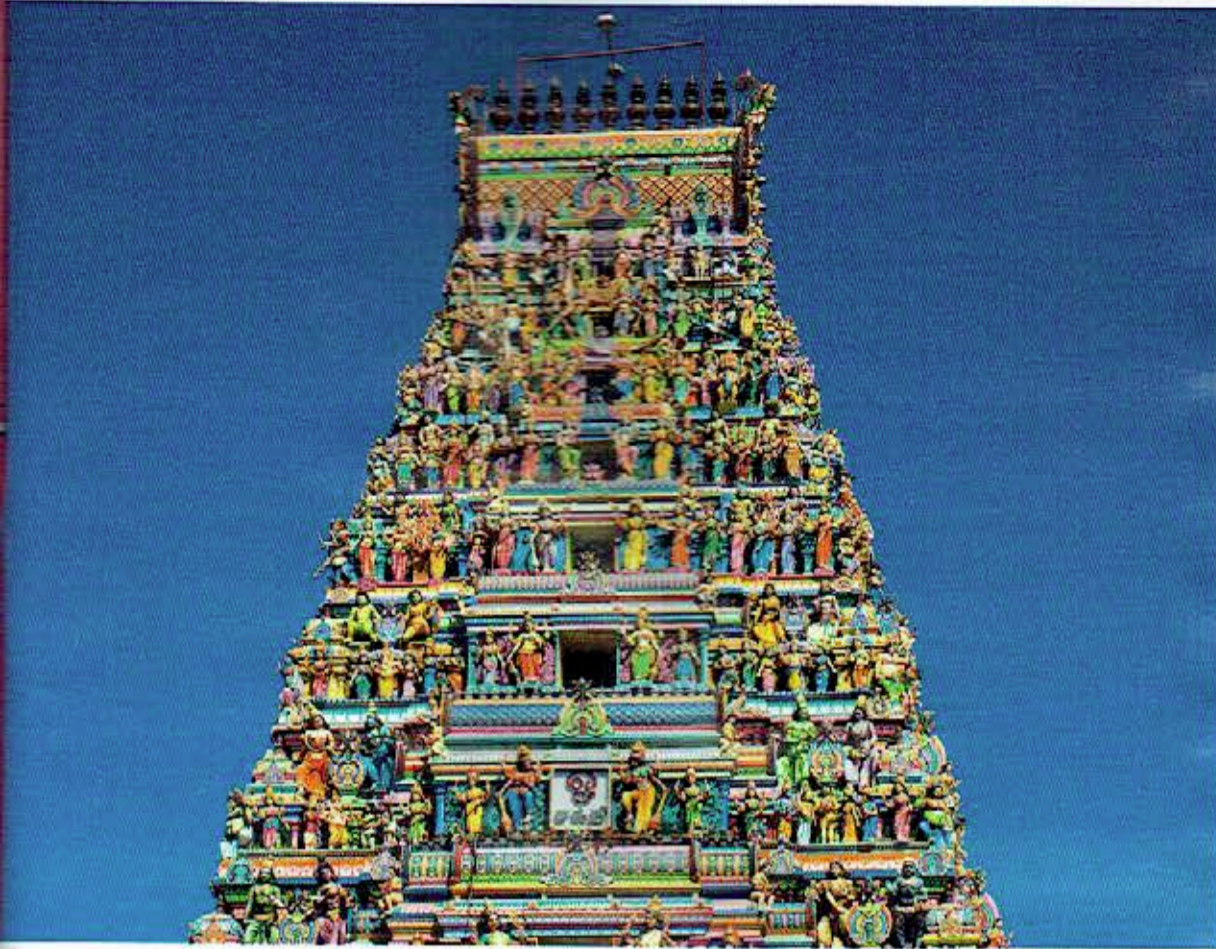
RETURN TO SPLENDOUR
Martin Fletcher celebrates
Sri Lanka's renaissance
32



THE FUTURE'S

Tourism has flourished in Sri Lanka after the civil war that blighted this island nation. *Martin Fletcher* travels from north to south after a





BRIGHT

34-year hiatus to find a country that's returned to splendour

FRESH NEW START

Clockwise, from far left, top: a view of Tri hotel, near Galle; a fisherman at Galle Fort; the temple of Naga Pooshani Ambal Kovil Gopuram in Nainativu; India Blue Pied peacock; sushi, as served at Tri; a woman plucks tea in the hill country; shadow play in Galle; statue of a Hindu guardian spirit



I celebrated Easter morning with my wife this year on an island of sun-warmed rock in a huge lake fringed by forests and mountains in eastern Sri Lanka's remote, little-known Gal Oya National Park. We were alone except for our guide and a few faraway fishermen in dugouts with makeshift sails. We bathed in the clear, warm water. We ate a breakfast of fresh fruits, curd and honey laid out on rush mats sprinkled with flowers. A white-bellied sea eagle circled in the cloudless sky. Lizards scurried away. From neighbouring islands came the cries of peacocks. This was the same serene, sublime Sri Lanka that Katy and I remembered from our honeymoon in 1982.

Back then we had meandered along deserted roads on a motorbike, narrowly escaping disaster when a chicken flew into my arms. We stayed in beach huts in somnolent fishing villages. We lived in the sun and it seemed like paradise, especially during the English winter from which we had escaped. But 1982 was the year before more than a quarter of a century of civil war erupted between Tamil separatists and the government, leaving an estimated 100,000 Sri Lankans dead. It was before the tsunami that killed at least another 30,000 in 2004, and before the advent of the distinctly mixed blessing that is mass tourism.

We had been apprehensive about returning. We doubted whether the Sri Lanka that so enchanted us 34 years ago still existed, but we were wrong. It emphatically does. Moreover, the war zones of the north and east, including Gal Oya, are no longer off limits, and a string of stunning boutique hotels have recently opened in choice locations, with gastronomy to match. No more cheap dives for us. We're too old.

The north, erstwhile stronghold of the Tamil Tigers who pioneered suicide bombs, carried out political assassinations and terrorised even their own people, was new territory for us. We went by train from Colombo to Jaffna on a line that reopened only in 2014, past shattered homes and a water tower toppled by the Tigers and left as a monument to the "futility of terror". At Elephant Pass, gateway to the Jaffna peninsula, a huge memorial celebrates the government's "steadfast political leadership, unshaken as a mountain, which brought to an end the era of terror" - but fails to mention its massacre of innocent Tamil civilians. Nearby stands a bizarre armour-plated bulldozer which the Tigers filled with explosives and directed towards a military base until a heroic young soldier blew it - and himself - up with grenades. In Jaffna itself, behind a billboard proclaiming "Say No to Destruction. Never Again", stand the ruins of a library that housed a priceless collection of Tamil literature until it was torched by a Sinhalese mob.

Happily, the colonial heart and fine Hindu temples of Sri Lanka's most Indian city survived largely unscathed. Jaffna is rebuilding and determined to move on. It has much to offer, not least the string of remote, palm-fringed islands that form the fractured tail of the upended comma that is Sri Lanka. A series of low bridges and a rickety old ferry took us to one of the most distant, Nainativu, site of a well-known Hindu temple where newborns are brought for blessings, but what bewitched us was the scenery - the almost imperceptible merging of shallow lagoons and pancake-flat land beneath a vast blue sky.

Elsewhere, the Sri Lanka of our honeymoon not only survives but thrives. It remains a singularly beautiful land of lush jungle and paddy fields, of misty hill country carpeted with the vivid green baize of manicured tea gardens, of white beaches and impossibly blue sea. It



FRESH FRONTIERS

Tri offers sustainable luxury in modern guest villas (above); glamping at the Madulkelle Tea & Eco Lodge near Kandy (below); a game drive in the national park, from Gal Oya Lodge (below right)

still blazes with jacaranda, frangipani and bougainvillea. Its trees are heavy with mangos, papayas, avocados, jackfruit, coconuts and bananas. A walking stick planted in its fecund earth would sprout.

The bird-life is astonishing - hornbills, painted partridges, crested serpent eagles, racket-tailed drongos, kingfishers, bee-eaters and brahminy kites, to name a few. So are the animals - crocodiles, leopards, wild boar, monkeys, mongooses, snakes and elephants. Because the British shot almost all Sri Lanka's tusked elephants, the descendants of those that survived are mostly tusk-less, so immune from poachers.

Journeys remain visual feasts - whitewashed Buddhist stupas and ornate Hindu temples, exotic fish and fruit markets, women doing their washing in lakes or streams, gaggles of tiny schoolchildren in white uniforms, impromptu cricket games on strips of dust, buffalo with tick-seeking egrets balanced on their backs. Sri Lanka has largely escaped Western homogenisation, so far. Squalid, Indian-style poverty is rare. The people are so welcoming that our driver insisted on addressing me - rather disconcertingly - as "my darling boss".

For older British visitors, at least, there is still the poignant appeal of our fading colonial legacy: stone churches with crumbling gravestones, tea gardens named Henfold or Glenmore, red George V-era pillar boxes, Morris Minors and those ultimate symbols of British punctiliousness - the clock towers in the centre of most big towns.

One consequence of the war's end is an explosion in the number of tourists - from 400,000 in 1982 to more than 1.5 million last year - and some unfortunate coastal developments. But it is not hard to avoid the scrum. Coachloads visit the ancient city of Anuradhapura, but steer clear of the main sites and you can wander alone among ruins of 2,000-year-old monasteries and temples shaded by venerable banyan trees.

In Yala, the country's most popular national park, a guide spotted a leopard sleeping on a rock and several dozen Jeeps swiftly converged





SRI LANKA REMAINS A BEAUTIFUL LAND OF JUNGLE AND HILLS CARPETED WITH TEA GARDENS. A WALKING STICK PLANTED IN ITS FECUND EARTH WOULD SPROUT



on the spot, creating a noisy, exhaust-belching traffic jam worthy of London. But an hour earlier we had watched, alone and in awe, as six elephants, including a baby, emerged from thick bush right behind us.

In the old hill capital of Kandy we found long queues outside the famous Temple of the Tooth, alleged repository of one of Buddha's teeth. But right by it we discovered an unexpected gem – the Garrison Cemetery, an acre of shaded tranquillity founded by the British in 1822. The elderly, barefoot caretaker, Charles Carmichael, a Sri Lankan with a Scottish ancestor, proudly showed us the graves of the last Briton killed by a wild elephant; of William Mackwood, impaled on a stake while alighting from his horse; of Captain James MacGlashan who survived Waterloo but not a malarial mosquito; and of numerous victims of cholera, dysentery or jungle fever, including five boys from one family and three sisters, the oldest 19 months, from another. Ships that had delivered tea and coffee to Britain brought the gravestones back, Carmichael told us. Thousands visit the temple each day, barely half a dozen this bitter-sweet monument to British colonialism.

Galle Fort, on the south coast, is enclosed by 17th-century Dutch ramparts, which saved it from the tsunami in 2004, and it has become a tourist mecca. But amid the proliferating gift and gem shops stands a musty English lending library, unchanged in a hundred years, where old men go to read the newspapers. Nearby, hidden behind a police compound, we found the "Black Fort" – an abandoned prison from the 1700s replete with mouldering cells and rusting iron gates.

One gorgeous morning in 1982 Katy and I hiked alone across Horton Plains, a Scottish-style moorland high in the hill country full of trout streams, gorse and rhododendrons, to a terrifying sheer drop of 2,800ft called World's End. We longed to return, but found Horton Plains is now a national park with an exorbitant entry fee and a car park jammed with coaches. At World's End Chinese tourists took selfies while teetering on the edge. It still provided a magical moment, however: within minutes of our arrival the banks of dense white mist that were obliterating the view miraculously lifted to reveal a panorama of miniature forests and tea gardens far below.

The exclusive new hotels – the sort our youthful selves could never have dreamed of or afforded – also provided moments to cherish. From Gal Oya Lodge, after our Easter-morning breakfast, we drove deep into a jungle once infested by Tamil Tigers, swung on vines as thick as forearms, and swam in pools beneath some rushing waterfalls on which few foreigners would ever have set eyes.

At the Madulkelle Tea & Eco Lodge near Kandy we "glamped" in a luxurious tent looking across the plunging Hulu Ganga valley to the five bumps of the Knuckles mountains, and woke as the sun rose over that mighty range in an orange blaze that illuminated our tent like a headlight. One magical evening at **Ulagalla Resort** near Anuradhapura we enjoyed a private barbecue of fresh tuna, king prawns and squid beside a lily pond full of croaking frogs as a full moon rose. Another balmy night at **Chena Huts** near Yala we fine-dined on a terrace looking across sand dunes and the Indian Ocean to two distant lighthouses rhythmically flashing in the darkness. At Thotalagala, in the hill country, we enjoyed a champagne breakfast on a lawn with a spectacular 50-mile view over receding foothills to the plains beyond.

Our final day, we cycled down to the coast from Tri, a new hotel south of Galle and a few miles inland, through the sort of timeless bucolic scenes we remembered so well. We followed paths across marshes and rivers, past men harvesting rice in paddy fields, through tiny villages where everyone greeted us. We stopped to inspect pepper vines, cinnamon trees and exotic cannibal flowers. We stumbled on two huge water monitors – prehistoric-looking lizards each four foot long – basking in the sunshine. We watched a peacock deploying its magnificent fan to court a peahen. We exulted in a sudden torrential downpour that cooled us down and produced a rainbow as colourful as the peacock's tail. At the beach, we plunged into the never-changing, ever-lovely Indian Ocean.

1982? 2016? Apart from our ages, there was really little difference.

*Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) offers bespoke tours to Sri Lanka. A 12-night luxury tour, including five-star accommodation at Galle Face Hotel, Colombo; Jetwing, Jaffna; **Ulagalla**, Anuradhapura; Madulkelle Tea & Eco Lodge, Madulkelle; Gal Oya Lodge, Gal Oya; Thotalagala, Haputale; **Chena Huts**, Yala National Park and Tri Lanka, Galle, costs from £4,500 per person (based on two sharing), including return flights from the UK, privately guided sightseeing and chauffeur-driven cars throughout.*



THE ULTRA GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S HOTTEST HOTELS

TRI

Forty minutes south of Galle, and inland from the overdeveloped coast, Tri is the inspired creation of British expat Rob Drummond. Opened last December, it offers eight ultra-modern villas, each a cube of light and space, arranged over six acres of hilly promontory overlooking Sri Lanka's largest natural lake, Koggala. Three more rooms occupy a futuristic water tower on a hilltop with an ancient banyan tree. Sustainability and personal wellbeing are Tri's watchwords, there's a spectacular infinity pool, a glass-walled yoga centre and a spa. Dinners are gastronomic adventures – from fragrant lentil lemongrass vadai and jackfruit nut curry to king coconut jelly – although the garage-like dining doesn't do it justice. There is also boating, kayaking and bike rides.

*From £206 double, half-board; 00 94 777 708 177; trilanka.com
Full review telegraph.co.uk/tt-trilanka*

GAL OYA LODGE

Opened in 2014, this hidden delight occupies 20 acres of wilderness in eastern Sri Lanka, flanked by a forest reserve and the little-known Gal Oya National Park which was closed by the war until 2008. It is practically the only starting point for land and water safaris in the park. We saw some wonderful wildlife thanks to our excellent guide, Damien Pillai, but really lucky visitors may see elephants swimming between the lake's many islands as they follow their old migration routes. The lodge consists of an airy, open-sided main building where we dined off fresh local fish cooked in banana leaves, and

eight simple but stylish private chalets built of local stone, wood and thatch with open-air bathrooms. It is ecologically impeccable: power is solar-generated, all water comes from a borehole, and basins are made from old brass rice-cleaning bowls and taps from bamboo. It has a friendly staff and lovely pool, ceiling fans instead of air conditioning and – refreshingly – no internet, mobile signal or TV. *Doubles from £119, water safaris cost £115 for up to four people and land safaris £42; 00 94 768 424 612; galoyalodge.com*

ULAGALLA RESORT

A Sri Lankan nobleman once owned this 58-acre estate and 150-year-old mansion in lush countryside 40 minutes from Anuradhapura. Since 2010 it has been one of five Uga Escapes hotels with a strong ecological bent. The paddy fields remain, but around their perimeter 20

glass-walled villas are concealed in the trees, each with plunge pool, sun deck and terrific dawn chorus. You get around on bikes or in golf carts – cars are banned. Fine meals are served wherever guests choose, using produce from the organic garden. We enjoyed a private, torch-lit barbecue by a lily pond, with pumpkin soup, seafood platter, and chocolate lava pudding. There is an enormous pool, a spa, gym and helipad, and activities from kayaking to cookery lessons. *From £288, b&b; 00 94 252 050 280; ugaescapes.com
Full review telegraph.co.uk/tt-ulagalla*

MADULKELLE ECO LODGE

A good hour from Kandy, this four-year-old colonial-style lodge stands in its own small garden 3,000ft above sea level, from which there are expansive views. The main building, which resembles a tea manager's

bungalow, and the 19 luxurious safari-style tents look across the deep Hulu Ganga valley, from which the sounds of village and temple life drift up, to the five domed peaks of the Knuckles mountains beyond. So do the croquet lawn, infinity pool and spa. The lodge, owned by three Frenchmen and a Sri Lankan, is a popular destination, but the night that we spent there the service was a little haphazard and the set menu somewhat uninspiring. The access road is barely passable in an ordinary car, so we took a tuk-tuk down the hill next morning. *Prices from about £150 a night; hiking, bird-watching and tea-factory visits extra; 00 94 813 801 052; madulkelle.com*

GALLE FACE HOTEL

Built in 1864 but newly restored and reopened last October, this grand colonial edifice stands next to the sea, overlooking Galle Face

Green. Family-owned for generations, it claims to be one of the oldest hotels east of Suez, and received the first Pimm's exported from Britain. Past guests include Mahatma Gandhi, Richard Nixon, Pope John Paul II, Che Guevara and Clement Attlee, and its museum houses the 1935 Standard Nine that was the Duke of Edinburgh's first car. It has an outdoor pool, spa, croquet lawn, a fine à la carte restaurant called the 1864, a new seafood one called Sea Spray, plus the open-air Verandah for magnificent teas – scones and clotted cream, cakes, cucumber sandwiches, tarts, savouries and more for 1,864 rupees (about £21). Linger long enough and you can watch a bagpiper play as the Sri Lankan flag is lowered at sunset. 'It's just a lovely old lady,' Antony Paton, the British manager, says of his property. *From £130 double; 00 94 112 541 010; gallefacehotel.com*



JETWING JAFFNA

This brand-new seven-storey hotel stands in the heart of Jaffna and is presently the city's tallest building. It has 55 bright, stylish, contemporary rooms and a rooftop terrace with panoramic views of the city and the lagoon beyond. It has no pool, gym or garden, but it does have what are surely the friendliest staff and the finest restaurant in the city. The Sri Lankan dinner here is recommended: a modestly priced Jaffna chicken curry with spicy rice, potatoes, dhal, beans and okra.

From £125 double; 00 94 212 215 57; jetwinghotels.com

THOTALAGALA

This is a beautifully restored and extended tea manager's bungalow dating from 1870, about 4,700ft up in the hills near Haputale and ringed by an English-style garden with spectacular views southwards

across tea gardens to the plains. It opened last December and has seven luxury suites. A few teething problems – fluctuating electricity, intermittent hot

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Setting up an alfresco dinner at Ulagalla (above); a bird's-eye view of Chena Huts, near Yala National Park (below)

water – are offset by a truly delightful staff and top-class Sri Lankan and Western cuisine courtesy of chef Ferdinand Paul. We dined off dishes from

smoked pork on pineapple, ginger and pumpkin soup and tea-infused chicken on chickpea mash to an afternoon tea of scones, cream and cucumber sandwiches served on antique Royal Stafford china. Mary Anne Elgar, the manager, or her team will happily take you to Horton Plains, an hour away, or to the nearby tea factory, favourite viewpoint and Victorian bungalow with beautiful gardens of Sir Thomas Lipton, the 19th-century Scot who revolutionised the production and marketing of Ceylon tea. *Suites from £577 per night, including all food and alcohol, but there is no spa, gym or pool; 00 94 772 040 981; thotalagala.com*

CHENA HUTS

Opened last December and owned, like Ulagalla, by Uga Escapes, this is the closest hotel to the extremely popular Yala National Park, less than a mile

away on Sri Lanka's southern coast. Chena's 14 beautifully furnished thatched "huts", each with private sun deck and plunge pool, are scattered across seven acres of woodland behind the beach and connected by raised boardwalks. Swimming in the sea is not allowed, but there is a large pool, a spa and an attractive open-air bar and dining area with a lovely view across the sand dunes to the distant Basses lighthouse. The service is friendly, if sometimes erratic. Morning and evening safaris are led by ranger Steuart Roelofs and his excellent team. You will certainly see elephants, crocodiles and wild boar and, if you're lucky, a leopard. For a taste of unspoilt Sri Lanka, ask to visit the nearby fishing village of Aamaduwwa.

Doubles from £255 including all food and alcohol, plus twice-daily safaris; 00 94 472 267 103; ugaescapes.com

