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GREAT IDEAS FOR A GET-AHEAD CHRISTMAS

# magazine

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the chore  
wars

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CHICKEN PIE**  
Spoil yourselves  
this weekend!

Beef curry,  
pork goulash  
and other  
meaty marvels

### ATISHOO!

20 ways to stay  
sneeze-free  
this winter

It's a cup-cake!  
Pear and forest  
fruit crumble  
page 64

## Bridezilla cake

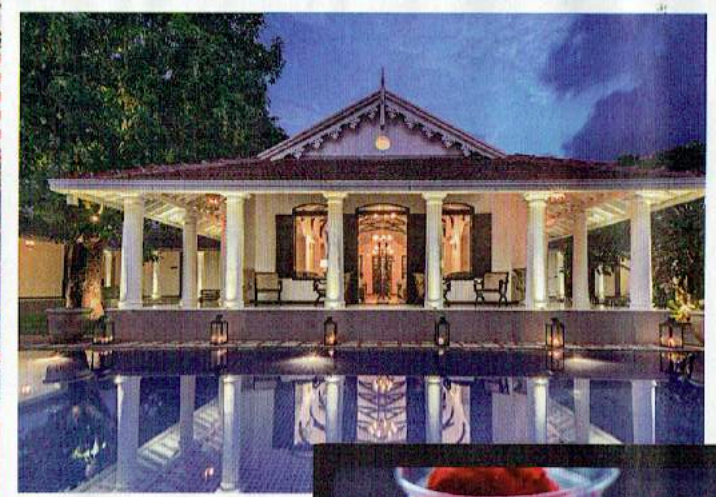
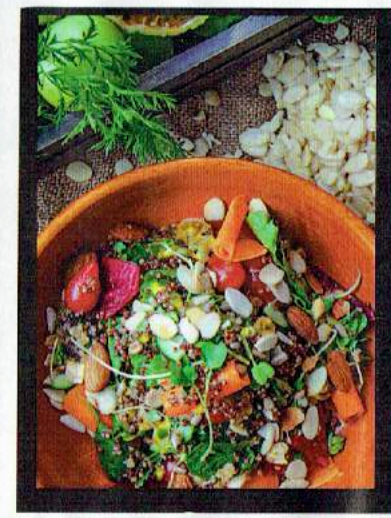
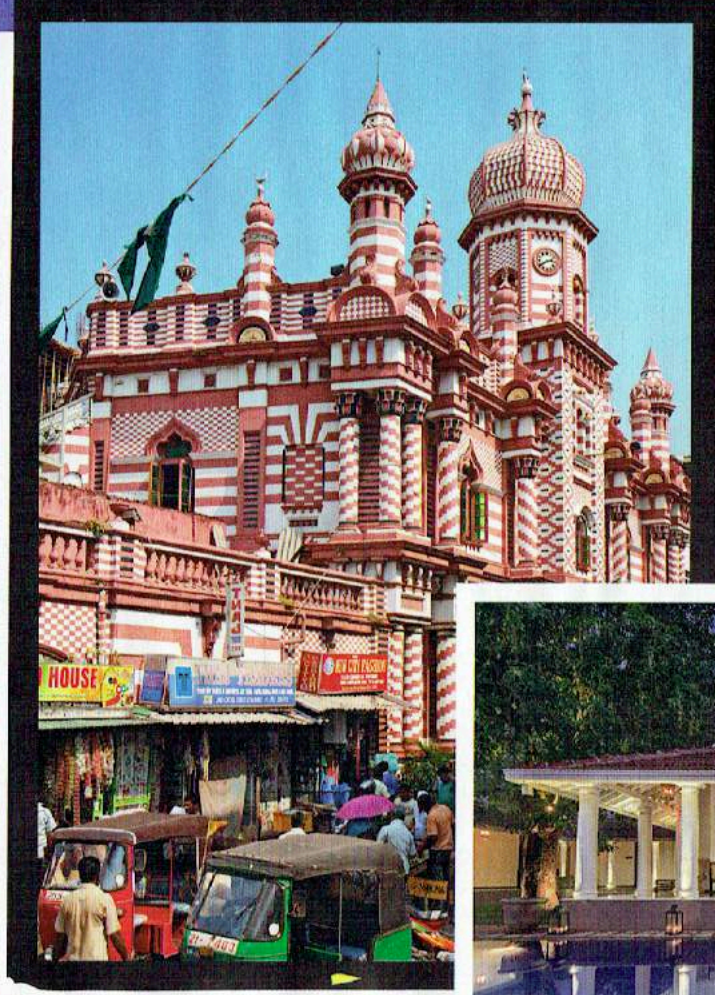
Halloween chic  
from *Bake Off*  
winner John Whaite



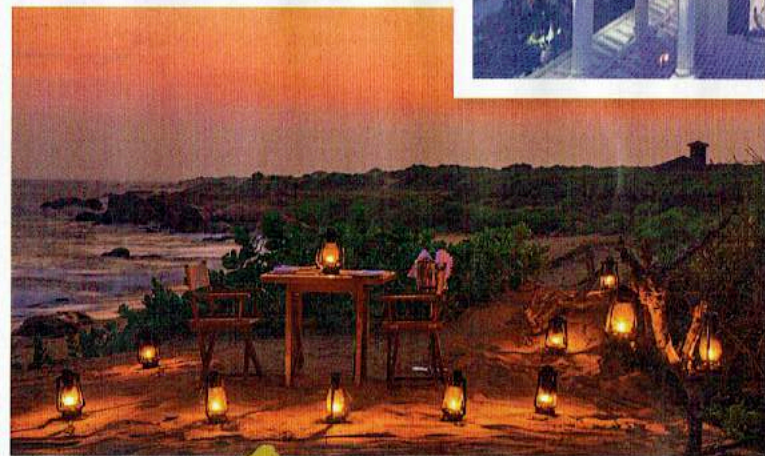


# The many flavours of SRI LANKA

Escaping to a luxurious beachside game reserve after the hustle and bustle of Colombo, Rachel McCormack discovers this Asian island is a beautiful mix of colours and cultures



Clockwise from left: Jami Ul-Alfar mosque in Colombo; red quinoa salad at Residence; an elephant in the street; luxury accommodation at Residence in Colombo; passion fruit and chilli ice cream at Rare; the Gangaramaya Buddhist Temple; tuk-tuk; 'beware the elephants'; sea views at Chena Huts



The main swimming pool at 'luxurious' Chena Huts



There are more than 400,000 tuk-tuks in Colombo, and every single one of them seems to have a horn. The one I'm travelling in is pristine white, and my driver Sean is taking me on a morning tour of the city.

Until recently, most visitors just flew in and out of Colombo to avoid getting caught in the city's notorious traffic jams, and besides, there was nowhere decent to stay. Now, with the 25-year civil war behind them, a network of slick new roads and a handful of great hotels to choose from, tourists are waking

up to the fact that Colombo is a vibrant, cosmopolitan Asian city with a laid-back island atmosphere that's well worth spending some time in.

My base is Residence by Uga Escapes, a 200-year-old grand colonial townhouse-turned-luxurious boutique hotel, with a very good gourmet restaurant and bar. With just 11 bedrooms (each with

**'Colombo is a vibrant city with a laid-back atmosphere'**

its own enclosed terrace), the place feels intimate and residential. There's also a lovely central swimming pool, leafy gardens and a communal

courtyard – the ideal spot for a late-night Martini – making it an oasis of calm in the centre of town. Hidden behind leafy Park Street, just beside the Gangaramaya Buddhist shrine, it is also one of the few places in Colombo where it is impossible to hear a tuk-tuk horn!

From the moment Sean picks me up for my tour, we're in the thick of chaotic, fast-moving traffic yet, miraculously, it never feels scary. Sean is incredulous that tuk-tuks haven't taken off in the UK, and I have to explain that it's too cold for them. But here, where anything more than a five-minute walk would probably lead to collapse from heat exhaustion, they are the way to travel. ▶



Our first stop is St Anthony's shrine in Kochchikade. It's a Tuesday, which is St Anthony's Day, so the church and the shrine are full of worshippers lighting candles and asking the saint for help. So many candles are lit that someone from the church is there to extinguish and remove them as soon as the supplicant has gone. On the annual St Anthony's Feast Day, the whole of Kochchikade joins the procession and celebrations, whatever their religion. After bumping into one of Sean's neighbours, who has come to pray at the shrine, he tells me that the man has his own shrine to Lord Buddha in his home, and is probably hedging his bets.

Back at the hotel, I get chatting to German executive chef Holger Joost, who tells me this is one of the reasons he loves Sri Lanka so much. 'Everyone here is very religious but also very tolerant of other religions. There is a multicultural mix of people, from descendants of European settlers and Indians to people who have always been here. The war ended in 2009, and the people just want to get on and take the country forward.'

## Local producers

The hotel's gastronomic restaurant, Rare, serves modern international food with Sri Lankan spices and is a favourite with the Colombo cool crowd. Almost all the ingredients are Sri Lankan; there are now local producers of Brie and mozzarella, and the vegetables are grown on a family farm. Joost's dishes remain faithful to the Sri Lankan style of spicing, where balance and nuance are key and every flavour can be tasted. I love my dinner of octopus with carrot purée and the country's famed black pork with a couscous-like grain from a local lotus flower root.

Aside from the mosques, giant Buddha statues and Hindu temples, where live cows jostle for space with carved lions, Colombo's various settlers have also left their mark on the city architecturally. I join a group of British and Malaysians on a tour around the city's old colonial centre, led by Marks Forbes, a man whose family has been in Sri Lanka for more than 200 years. We meet at the old Dutch hospital, now filled with interesting restaurants – try the Ministry of Crab – and shops selling Sri Lankan crafts. While we sit at Harpo's cafe watching the world go by, Mark tells us the story of the 1996

central bank bombing, which killed 91 people, and left most of the buildings either destroyed or later abandoned. Since 2009, the Sri Lankan Government has made it the duty of the armed forces to restore the area, which is being slowly, painstakingly done. Mark explains that when he first started doing these tours, no-one could understand why any foreigners would want to see this part of town, but now locals take great pride in his visits with groups.

## Game watching

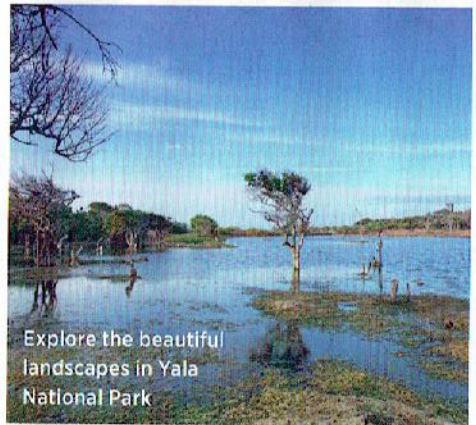
The next morning, I leave Colombo with a driver and we make the four-hour journey south to Chena Huts in the Yala National Park, the newest addition

*'As someone who knows little of nature, I'm enchanted'*

to the Uga group and one of the loveliest places to stay in the area. Big on low-impact luxury, each of its 13 gorgeous huts ▶



From left: Octopus with carrot purée; the courtyard in the old Dutch hospital



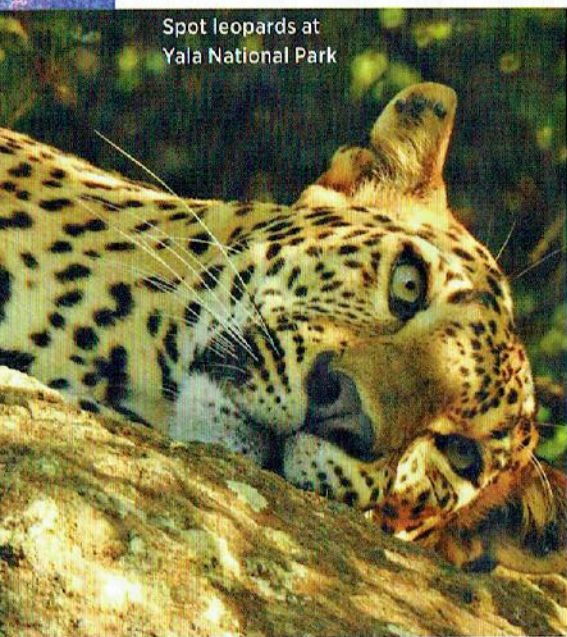
Explore the beautiful landscapes in Yala National Park

Chena Hill's boutique-like cabins even have bathrooms with a view!





Spot leopards at Yala National Park



boasts four-poster beds, free-standing tubs and private decks with plunge pools overlooking either the beach or a watering hole.

While Chena Huts may look like a luxurious Maldivian resort, you don't come here to sit on the beach – and the sea's unpredictable undercurrents mean you can't swim. It's also right on the edge of a game-filled national park, so like on an African safari, you can't wander off the property unaccompanied. But what you do come for is a sense of genuinely unspoilt wilderness that you can dip in and out of from the comfort of your rather extraordinary accommodation.

The hotel runs small-group excursions to the National Park in sturdy 4x4s twice daily, and it is well worth going to both. As someone who knows little about nature, I'm completely enchanted. Our knowledgeable guides show us how to look for tracks, spot leopards (I'm thrilled

**'A guest came back to find her pool full of monkeys'**

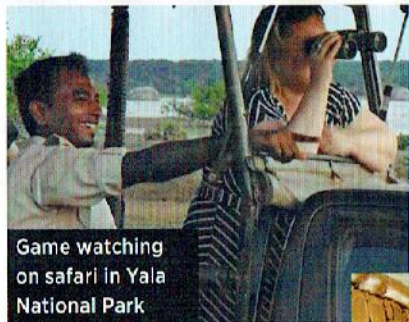
to see two walking away from us and one lying in the early morning sun in the distance), how to tell the difference between wild and domestic

buffalo, and the names of the myriad different kinds of birds. The lovely, accommodating staff are also happy to take you on individual walks and excursions outside the scheduled times. I'm particularly thrilled by a bushwalk to a watering hole where I see a crocodile from a distance. I also get to visit a local fishing village. Just 10 minutes from Chena Huts, it feels shockingly primitive in contrast, but I'm given a warm welcome and get an insight into the nomadic existence of the fishing communities.

### Gourmet dining

Food here is every bit as good as in Colombo, and the menu offers Asian-fusion food mixed with international favourites and made with the best Sri Lankan ingredients. There's even a wood-fired pizza oven. I love a cold gazpacho-style soup and have never enjoyed pizza so much as I do from the terrace of the restaurant, watching a family of wild boar thunder past on the beach. Room service is forbidden, as the smell of food might attract wild boar, the occasional inquisitive elephant or monkeys – a guest once came back from a safari to find her plunge pool full of them! The kitchen is virtually hermetically sealed and encased in steel to ensure that no smells get out, and no animals get in.

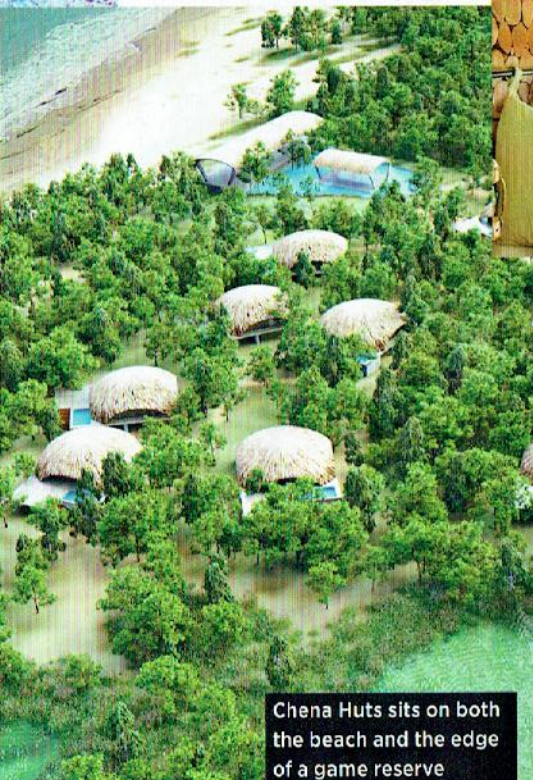
Chatting to other guests, who have also come to Sri Lanka for the first time, we all agree on how extraordinary the contrasts in landscape are within such short distances, how safe we have felt exploring it, and how much we have enjoyed the food. I would go back tomorrow for another tuk-tuk tour of Colombo and a Sri Lankan Margarita, enjoyed beachside. ♦



Game watching on safari in Yala National Park

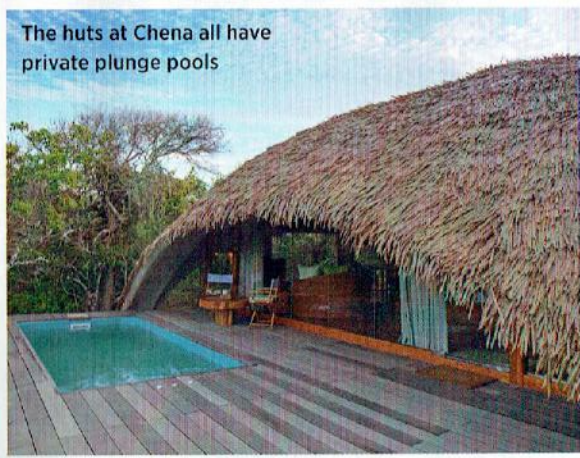


A master bedroom overlooking the pool in Chena Huts



Chena Huts sits on both the beach and the edge of a game reserve

The huts at Chena all have private plunge pools



### HOW TO GET THERE

Bespoke travel experts Experience Travel Group ([experiencetravelgroup.com](http://experiencetravelgroup.com)) can tailor-make a five-night holiday to Sri Lanka from £3,090, including two nights at the Uga Residence in Colombo; three nights on an all-inclusive basis at Chena Huts, plus international flights, guided transfers and exclusive Experience Travel Group signature tours throughout.