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A resort that's wild at hut

HOTEL REVIEW

CHENA HUTS

Yala, Sri Lanka

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Bouncing along the dusty tracks of Sri Lanka's Yala National Park in an off-road vehicle, you're never quite sure what you'll encounter around the next bend. Most visitors are hoping it will be one of the park's more elusive residents, the Sri Lankan leopard. Home to one of the largest concentrations on Earth of these big cats, Sri Lanka's second largest park (after Wilpattu in the north) offers pretty good chances of seeing one in its natural habitat.

Until recently, the choice of places to check in for a night or two in the wilderness had been limited to a couple of chain hotels. Opened this year, Chena Huts has pioneered a more luxurious approach and was the first of a clutch of new openings in the island's south-eastern corner. It's owned by the home-grown Sri Lankan boutique chain, *Uga Escapes*, which has four other properties dotted around the island.

Guests bid their driver farewell at the small car park and are taken via golf cart to the open-air, thatched reception area edged by a lotus pond complete with croaking frogs. It's like an African safari camp, but with a Sri Lankan feel – the name comes from the slash-and-burn method used locally to clear the jungle for crops.

Each of the 14 semi-circular huts is reached by a series of raised walkways. Thatched palm-leaf roofs slope two-thirds of the way to the ground and views from the windows are limited to the surrounding vegetation. Calling them huts is doing them a bit of a disservice – though they are rustic on the outside, there is nothing rudimentary about the interior.

There are huge platform beds with headboards fashioned from logs, ship's

lanterns-cum-bedside lights, wooden floors and lots of space. The bathroom has a shower, large freestanding bath and double sinks. The owners made their fortune in construction and it shows – the plumbing would put many less remote hotels to shame. Each hut also has its own plunge pool.

You can make out Great Basses Reef Lighthouse on the horizon from your table at the hotel's Basses Restaurant, where all meals are served. Twelve kilometres off the Sri Lankan coast, the lighthouse is one of two constructed in the 1870s from Scottish granite that are testament to the prowess of lighthouse-building British brothers Sir James Nicholas Douglass and William Douglass.

The restaurant has glass walls so you won't miss out on the views if you opt for the chilly embrace of the air conditioning, or there is al fresco dining on the terrace. The menu is extensive, but for my tastes it leaned a little too much towards the international rather than the local. There's an open-air sunken bar area where guests and guides congregate for sundowners and to exchange tales of the bush. The barman mixes a mean mojito.

With its green tiles and freeform shape, the shady swimming pool is suggestive of an inviting watering hole – something you'll be grateful for in between hot game drives. It was a bit of a shame that the absence of cushions

on any of the sun loungers made it feel like a bit of an afterthought. There's also a small spa hut by the pool for treatments like massages and facials.

The area

Chena Huts sits just beyond the park's boundary; to one side is the park and to the other, a tranquil saline lake and the beach – so close you can hear the crash of the Indian Ocean waves. Animals often wander around the property – during my stay the beach was off limits without a ranger as there had

been some crocodile sightings.

There are guided game drives into the park early in the morning and in late afternoon that are individual or shared, depending on the number of guests staying. Our guide, Stuart, had an infectious love of Sri Lanka's flora and fauna. Yala's birdlife is prolific with over 250 endemic and migratory species; Stuart pointed out iridescent blue-tailed bee-eaters, Malabar pied hornbills, flamingoes, pelicans and lots of wild peacocks shaking their tail feathers.

Seeing a leopard might be the ultimate prize, but the park has over 40 other types of mammal, so there is always something to see. Herds of elephants can be seen bathing in the watering holes, there are water buffaloes, crocodiles, grey langur and macaque monkeys, monitor lizards and mongooses – you might even get lucky and see a sloth bear.

■ *Chena Huts, Palatupana, Yala, Sri Lanka (00 94 47 226 7100; ugaescapes.com/chenhuts). Doubles from £680 per night full board, including game drives and some drinks. Audley Travel (01993 838 300; audleytravel.com) offers a 15-day Sri Lanka itinerary from £3,050pp with accommodation, including three nights' all-inclusive at Chena Huts, flights and internal transport.*

Rooms: ★★★★★

Value: ★★★★★

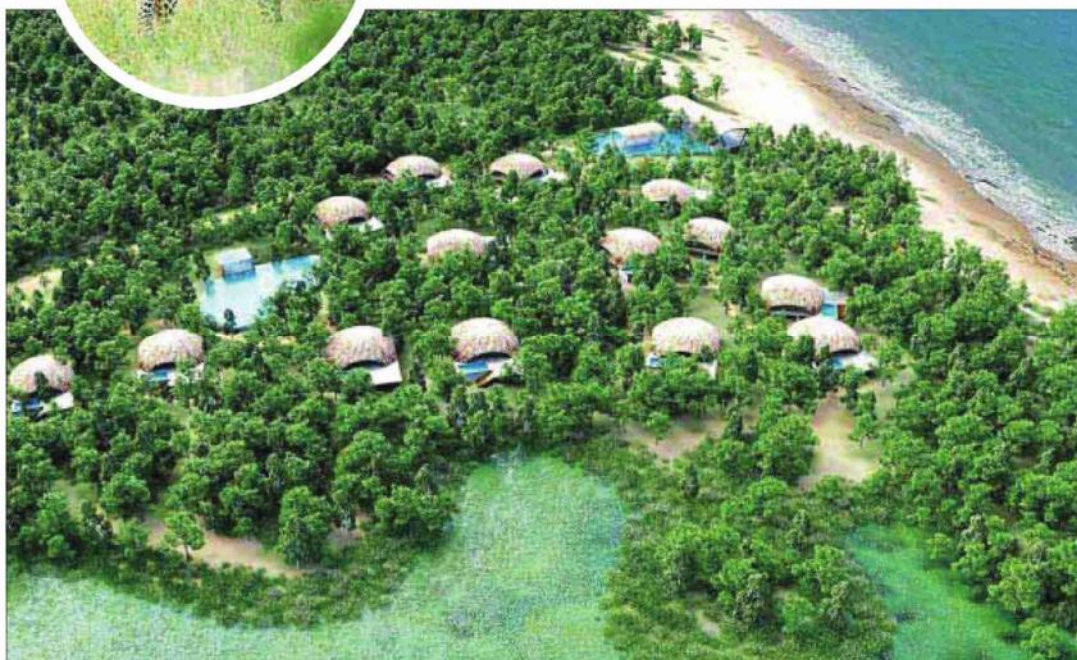
Service: ★★★★★

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Dine out: the restaurant terrace

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Green screen: the 14 luxurious huts sit among the trees, between the beach and Yala National Park. Inset top, a leopard