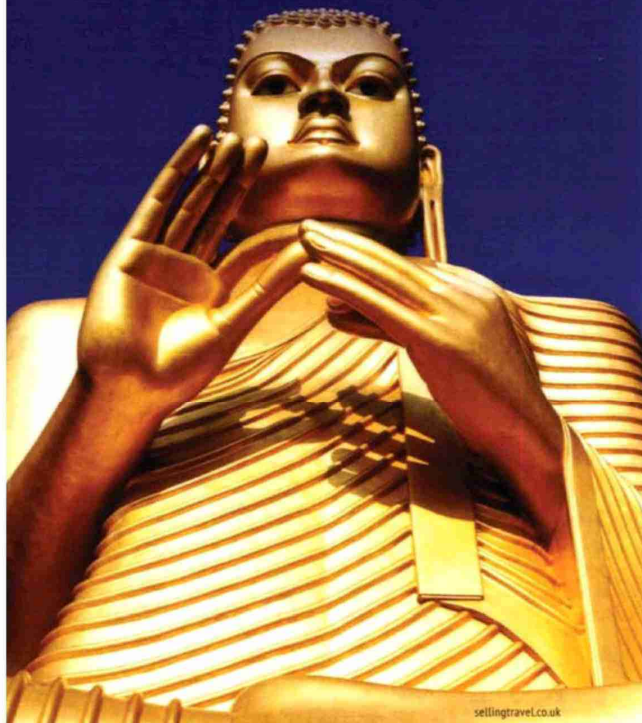


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Making tracks

From wildlife experiences to ancient cities and tea tasting to new developments in the country's north and east, Sri Lanka offers plenty from top to bottom, says Karl Cushing



As I criss-cross Yala National Park on a jeep safari with one of the eagle-eyed naturalists from Chena Huts, it seems the local leopards are toying with us, leaving a teasing trail of tell-tale tracks yet steadfastly eluding our gaze.

Even with the park's spotted star prize proving AWOL, however, it is still a wonderful experience, yielding all manner of other sightings framed against stunning backdrops.

Having opened in December 2015 the excellent Chena Huts by UGA Escapes, a property featured by operators such as Audley Travel and Premier Holidays, is one of a growing number of lodge or tented camp outfits which cling to Yala's wild beachfront, offering exclusively secluded coastal stays backed by scenic wildlife safaris and excellent food and beverages.

Resplendent Ceylon will open its own opulent version, Wild Coast Tented Lodge, in October, featuring 28 domed, tented suites. More affordable options include Cinnamon Wild Yala and Jetwing's recently-opened Tented Villas Yala.

Hot spot

Thanks to the recent spike in high-end tourism development, backed by the reintroduction of domestic flights, sales have really taken off and Sri Lanka features prominently on many operators' 2017 travel hotlists.

Year-on-year Southall Travel and Premier Holidays report that bookings for this January were up 32% and 43% respectively, while Gold Medal saw a 22% boost in room nights.

"The majority of these nights are to the coastal hotels, however we are seeing more and more customers looking at our private car and driver itineraries too, mixing touring with a relaxing beach stay," says Tricia Birmingham, Senior Product Manager, Indian Ocean, for Gold Medal.

Sri Lanka has always been a touring country. Previously though the scope was largely limited to first-timer favourite the 'Cultural Triangle', linking the ancient cities of Kandy, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and taking in sites such as Sigiriya Rock. However, the end of hostilities in 2009 slowly opened up the north, including Jaffna and the region's star attraction, Trincomalee.

On the northeastern coast, Trinco and its marine park boasts some of Sri Lanka's best beaches and snorkelling and, along with southerly Mirissa, has excellent whale watching. Another rising star of the east is former laidback surfer and backpacker centre Arugam Bay.

Resort development was previously focused on centres such as Bentota on the south western strip stretching down from Colombo to Galle, with its fort and lively Unawatuna beach nearby. It now continues to spread along the south coast through places such as Tangalle to Hambantota.

Even the oft-bypassed capital, Colombo is getting a makeover. Dining developments such as



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the Old Dutch Hospital and swanky rooftop bars at hotels such as the OZO and Kingsbury have transformed the social scene while the massive, ongoing Chinese-backed waterfront transformation will add a Hyatt and Shangri-La.

Perfect five

- 1 **Spot the leopard:** See leopards in Yala after an indulgent night spent in a luxury beachside tented camp or lodge.
- 2 **Be rail adventurous:** Goggle at the stunning scenery as you ride into hill country from Kandy to Ella, a great base for activities like rafting, hiking and biking.
- 3 **Get some air:** See iconic Cultural Triangle sites such as Sigiriya Rock from the air on a sunrise balloon flight or helicopter tour.
- 4 **Make a trunk call:** Each summer Minneriya National Park plays host to a unique gathering of around 300 Asian elephants
- 5 **Twin to win:** Sri Lanka's close proximity to the Maldives has long made it a hit with twin-centring couples and honeymooners. December saw SriLankan Airlines (srilankan.com/en_uk) add a service from Colombo to Gan Island.

What's new

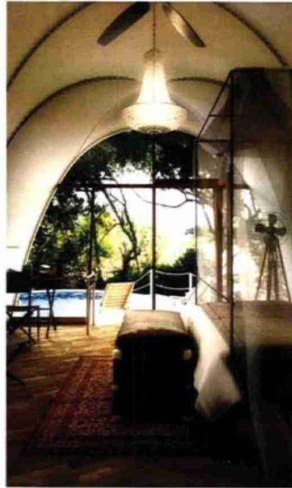
Tour Operators: Operators driving the move to more 'experiential' and interesting excursions include the fast-growing DMC Red Dot Tours (reddotours.com) and Khiri Travel (khiri.com) whose latest additions include Cricket and Highballs, a fun afternoon playing six-a-side cricket at Galle Fort while drinking gin and tonics, and a northern train journey on the *Queen of Jaffna* from Anuradhapura.

Another interesting rail option is Great Rail Journeys' (greatrail.com) 15-day Sri Lanka, Temples and Tea tour.

New bolt-ons worth a look include Premier Holidays' three-night privately escorted tour of Gal Oya National Park and Travel 2's four-day Highlights of Sri Lanka (from £315pp) and six-day



Previous page: Golden Temple in Dambulla. This page, clockwise from top left: Wild Coast Tented Lodge by Yala Hotels; yoga at Tri Sri Lanka; climbing Monkey mountain in Gal Oya; Cape Weligama resort



Scenic and Wildlife Tour (from £495pp). Like Gold Medal, Travel 2 also offers the option of a private car and driver.

Tours taking in the country's national parks – from biodiverse Sinharaja Forest to elephant-rich Udawalawe and Minneriya – include TransIndus' (transindus.co.uk) 12-day Wildlife of Sri Lanka.

The excellent year-round diving, meanwhile, can be explored through Dive Worldwide (diveworldwide.com) which has added 10-day tours on the island's first proper liveaboard, *Sri Lanka Aggressor*, backed by a four-day safari extension option.

Hotels: Having recently opened OZO hotels in Kandy and Colombo Onyx Hospitality (amari.com) will open its 172-room Amari Galle in March

Kahanda Kanda (kahandakanda.com) has opened both KK by George in Galle and a new beachfront boutique property, KK Beach, in Habaraduwa.

Jetwing's (jetwinghotels.com) latest offering is Sunrise by Jetwing in Passikudah, a coastal resort 20 miles north of Batticaloa

Resplendent Ceylon (resplendentceylon.com) has announced plans to open two more properties, including one near Sigiriya, and introduced a whale-watching experience aboard its new catamaran at its Cape Weligama hotel near Galle.

Available for private hire is the 15-room Ani Villas (anivillas.com) on the south-central coast.

'Tourism talk



"The UK remains the third largest market for Sri Lanka, with 188,000 arrivals in 2016, a growth of 16% year on year.

"Our tourism offering is based upon authenticity, uniqueness and diversity and we cascade the country's offerings along the eight themes of Pristine, Bliss, Thrills, Wildlife, Heritage, Essence, Scenic and Festivals – promising eight wonderful experiences in eight wonderful days.

"Looking ahead we will focus on our wildlife and the east coast, including the surfers' paradise of Arugam Bay.

"Visitors enjoy a very high encounter rate of both elephant and whale. The island is also home to 92 species of indigenous mammals, along with 10% per cent of the entire Asian

elephant population and the highest density of leopard in the world.

Nalin Perera, Sri Lanka Tourism UK

"Agents should think about the distances for getting from one place to another. When visiting the cultural area and tea plantations, journey times between locations can take several hours"

NIKKI HAIN, SRI LANKA PRODUCT MANAGER
 PREMIER HOLIDAYS

Where to book it

WENDY WU – 0800 902 0888

The 15-day Spirit of Sri Lanka guided tour, departing October 12 or 23, 2017, includes leopard spotting in Wilpattu, paddling the Mahaweli River and exploring Colombo in a World War Two jeep. It is priced from £3,190pp including flights, accommodation and most meals.

wendywtours.co.uk