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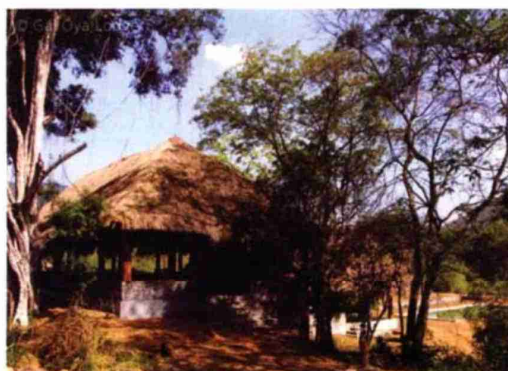
SAFARI, SRI LANKA-STYLE

The country may be known for its temples, but Sri Lanka's beautiful and diverse wildlife is an equally compelling reason to visit

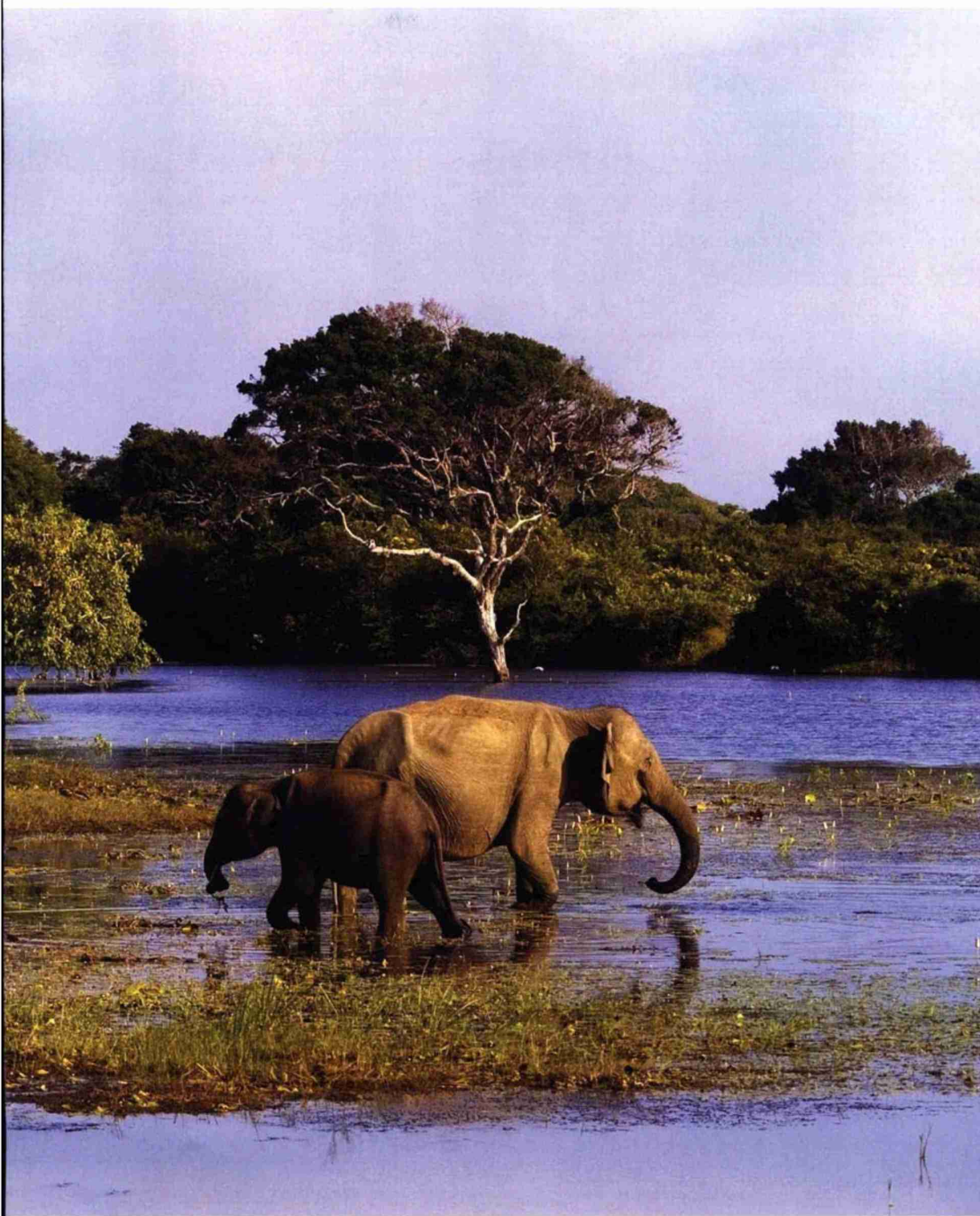
WORDS / ABIGAIL BUTCHER

My heart is in my mouth: every sense is heightened, my ears straining to pick up the merest sound in the jungle that would indicate that my longed-for sighting is about to take place.

Suddenly, I hear a twig snap, as if someone is creeping through the dry shrubs beside us. I turn swiftly to the right and am astonished to see six or so elephants running past our parked jeep – silently, elegantly and absolutely camouflaged by the shade of the trees. They cross the wide, sandy path just a few metres in front, the large female at the rear of the herd turns to face us, scrapes the ground with her front foot, flaps her ears, trumpets and sucks sand from the track, blowing it over her back in a show of dominance before turning after her herd and disappearing into the scrub, vanishing like a mouse. It's just another »



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much, much more. One particular highlight was a rare water monitor, basking in the sun while keeping watch on a bridge over a river.

But if you want to go really wild, travel north to Gal Oya National Park, 250 sq km of secluded wildlife paradise in southeastern Sri Lanka. Comprising lake and forest, Gal Oya remains virtually untouched, thanks to its remote location and every minute of the seven-hour drive from Colombo is worth it.

I'm in Sri Lanka with Tears for Tigers Travel, a British company that focuses on environmentally responsible tourism and organises safari

experiences that offer more than a simple 'holiday'. One of their mainstays here is Gal

» day here in Sri Lanka, a country so rich in flora and fauna that visitors are flocking to its many national parks in ever increasing numbers. Sri Lanka has one of the highest proportions of endemic species in the world, with large numbers of birds, reptiles and insects, but its rich natural treasure is under growing threat – that of human intervention and tourism.

My long-awaited elephant sighting takes place in Yala, the closest park to Colombo, which boasts the highest concentration of leopards per square mile in the world and is the most visited in Sri Lanka. Income generated from local and foreign tourism here has increased exponentially since the end of the civil war (from 50,000RS,

approximately £252 in 2009 to 419,311RS, approximately £2,109 in 2015) and it is suffering as a result. The 100,000 sq km park is split into five 'blocks' – with the most popular, Block One, overrun with jeeps and tourists, to the point that visiting is disappointingly akin to a grotesque trip round a British safari park.

Venture off the beaten path, though, and you'll strike gold. While I still didn't manage to spy the infamous Sri Lankan leopard in person, I did see the territorial scratches of one on a tree trunk, spied buffalos wallowing in shallow pools, endless spotted deer darting around the scrub, a multitude of eagles and



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Oya Lodge, which exists to give back as much to the local environment and community as it might be seen to take.

Owners Tim Edwards and Sanjay Choegal grew up at Tiger Tops in Nepal, and opened the now nine-bungalow Gal Oya Lodge in August 2014. It's simple but luxurious, with each of the lodges (comprising bedroom, living area and outdoor bathroom) made from locally sourced, natural materials, often incorporating trees within the structure to minimise impact on the environment. There's no air conditioning and water is heated with solar power. Safaris are on foot, by boat and jeep, and one of the experiences available is a bush walk with the village chief of the local Vedda people.

Tim Edwards explains his company's ethos. "We grew up being wildlife and conservation enthusiasts, so when we decided to move to Sri Lanka we knew we wanted to create something different, a lodge that focused on unique guest experiences that were conservation-oriented.

"We try to achieve this by having a good team of naturalists who not only try to spot animals but explain the flora and fauna of the surrounding jungle, as well as the indigenous tribes, so that the guests really engage and learn while out on safari. We are also aware of our responsibility to the local community, and make a lot of effort in engaging with them and trying to teach them the importance of conservation."

I spend three days with Gal Oya Lodge's head naturalist Damien (who softly pads around in bare feet), exploring the 20 acres of private forest that surround the lodge on foot. Safari, for the uninitiated, is best done at dawn, so one morning just after sunrise we take a quiet, slow walk past local farms, watching little bush quails and barred button quails scurry around beneath hedgerows, vast pumpkin fields scattered with the peacocks

COMPRISING LAKE AND
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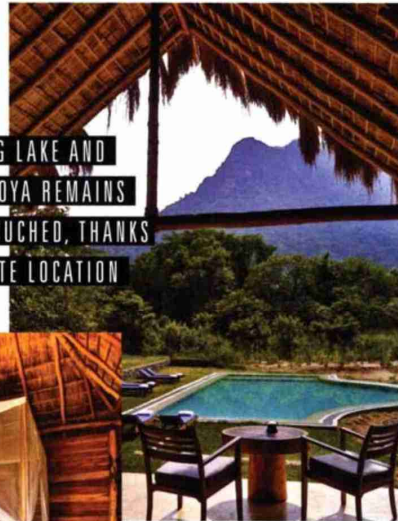


that are as common in Sri Lanka as pigeons in the UK. We reach a lake used for fishing by villagers that's teeming with storks, eagles and egrets, edged by trees decorated with little baya weaverbird nests and all the while crushing wild mint underfoot - which Damien explains is used by locals as a natural mosquito repellent.

We return home after this and every safari experience to a delicious, local meal served in the open-air main lodge surrounded by jungle and cooled by fans. Travelling alone, I spend mealtimes poring over the many reference books on Sri Lanka's flora and fauna laid on the hand-carved wooden tables for visitors' use.

I wished I could stay forever, but hope one day to be back - Gal Oya Lodge is timeless, and one place that I know may not be changing too quickly. Sadly, the same is not the case in the far south. ©

This page /
© Gal Oya
Lodge



HOW TO SEE THE WILDLIFE OF SRI LANKA

Tears for Tigers Travel offers a ten-day trip to Sri Lanka, including two nights at Uga Residence in Colombo, three nights at Gal Oya Lodge, two nights in Uda Uwalawe with Elevation, and two nights at Kulu Safaris in Wilpattu, from £2,014 per person. Includes transfers, guiding and some meals.
experience-wildlife.com

Combine wildlife with Sri Lanka's cultural sights: [Red Savannah](http://RedSavannah.com) offers ten nights in Sri Lanka from £4,195 per person. Includes one night in Galle at Fort Bazaar, three nights at Chena Huts in a chalet, three nights at Gal Oya Lodge in a bungalow on half board, and three nights at Leopard Trails in a classic tent on an all-inclusive basis, return flights with Sri Lankan Airlines from Heathrow to Colombo and private transfers throughout.
redsavannah.com