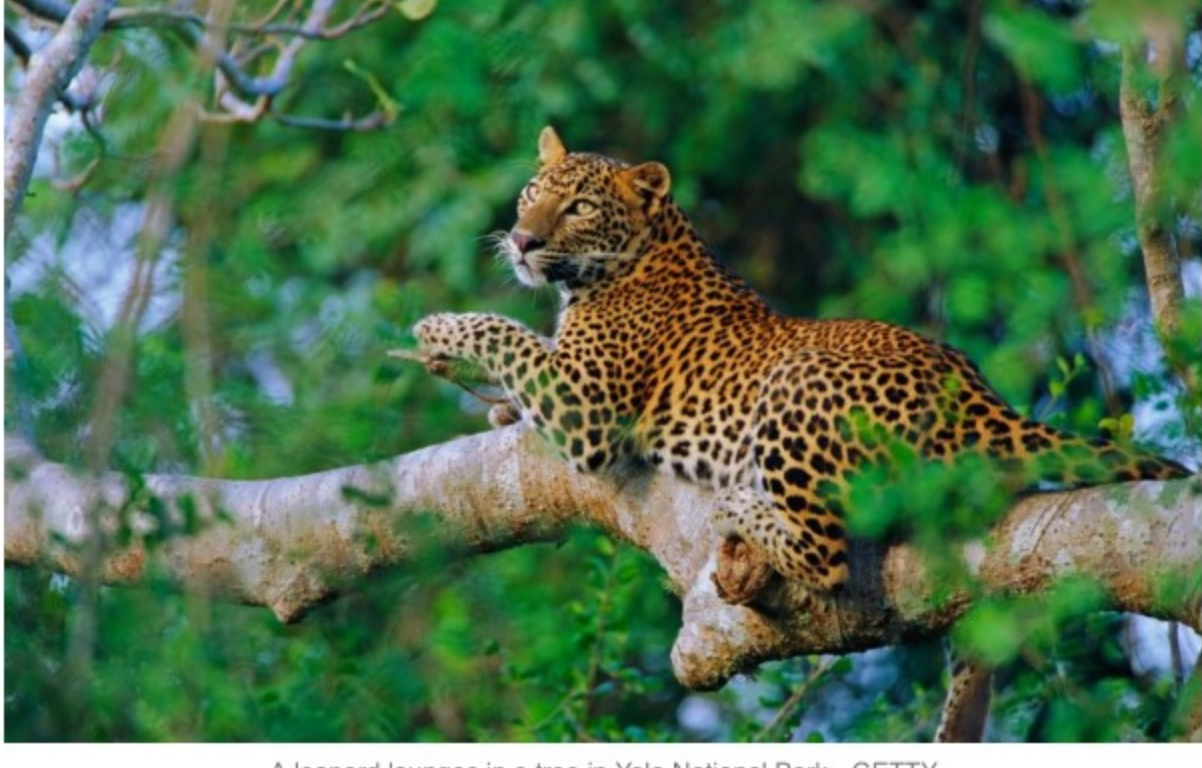


# Scourge or saviour? How tourism is impacting Sri Lanka's abundant wildlife

Abigail Butcher  
The Telegraph 13 July 2017



A leopard lounges in a tree in Yala National Park - GETTY

I'm padding through the jungle, big vines tumbling from branches overhead and leaves creating a soft path beneath my bare feet. I shouldn't really be walking without shoes; it breaks every rule in the health and safety book, but it feels natural and earthy.

The undulating path we are following dives abruptly between two towering grey boulders upon which a leopard was recently sighted. Sadly, he's not there today and we creep through, emerging from the dim light onto the soft sand bed of the Gal Oya river in eastern Sri Lanka, reduced to a relative trickle during the current dry season.

"Come – over here," says Damien, my guide, in a loud whisper as we scramble up another huge boulder. Gal Oya means "rocky river" and it's like Jurassic Park; I feel so small and insignificant. Damien hands me a pair of binoculars and gestures to look over the grassy bank in front on to the shores of the vast Gal Oya Lake – the largest in the country – stretching endlessly in front of us.



An elephant looks across a lake in Gal Oya National Park Credit: GETTY

"What do you see?" he asks softly, eyes twinkling. I see elephants and count three or four, assuming they are the young males we have seen over the past few days, ostracised from the main herd during their teenage years.

"Look again," Damien urges, his grin widening with delight at what he has found for me – a herd of 30, perhaps 40 elephants and calves of various sizes ambling along, carelessly and gloriously wild.

This is what I have come to see and my heart beats hard in my chest as I watch them meandering on the shore, spraying themselves with water and snatching tufts of grasses with delightfully inquisitive trunks. I watch for what seems like hours until a quick glance at the time shows that, at 4.30pm, it is not long until dark. Night falls rapidly here in the tropics and we must be out of Gal Oya National Park by 6pm.

As we make our way back along the path and Damien stops to point out a green forest lizard, a flame-backed woodpecker and yet more grey langur monkeys swinging excitedly overhead. He smiles when I mistake a group of stout and spiky cycads for pineapples, patiently explaining that they are, in fact, living fossils that grow less than an inch per year.



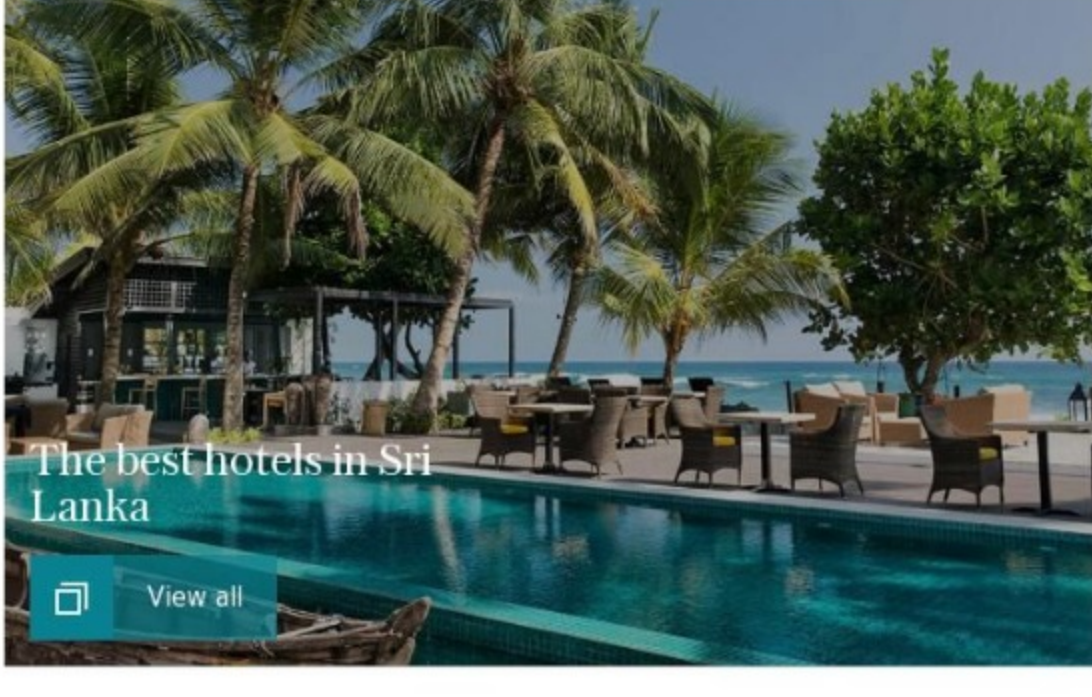
Tourists enjoy a safari in Yala National Park Credit: GETTY

The Gal Oya park comprises 100 sq miles (259 sq km) of lake and forest in the east of Sri Lanka – a peaceful, secluded wildlife paradise that remains almost entirely untouched thanks to its remote location. It took seven hours to drive here from Colombo but the journey was worth it. Gal Oya Lodge, where I am staying and where Damien is head naturalist, specialises in environmentally responsible tourism.

It works closely with Tears for Tigers Travel, a British company that provides safari experiences in partnership with conservation groups which educate clients on the threats to local wildlife and ways of preserving their natural habitat.

For the past three days I've been learning just that: exploring the local area and 20 acres of private forest that surround the lodge. One morning we head out just after sunrise, watching tiny bush quails and barred button quails go about their business, walking past pumpkin fields scattered with peacocks, trees decorated with baya weaver bird nests.

One afternoon we join a boat safari across Gal Oya Lake, sipping cardamom-infused masala chai and eating home-made shortbread packed by the lodge's wonderful chefs while driving slowly through the park as Damien explains the bird and mammal life in intricate detail.



The best hotels in Sri Lanka

Damien cares passionately about his surroundings, studying dragon flies and running a snake awareness programme in an attempt to halt the unnecessary killing of harmless serpents by villagers – conservation work encouraged by his employers, Tim Edwards and Sangjay Choegyal.

Tim and Sangjay grew up in Nepal and opened the now nine-room Gal Oya Lodge in August 2014, constructing each of the rooms from locally sourced, natural materials and often incorporating trees into the open-air living areas to minimise impact on the environment. There is no air conditioning and water is heated with solar power. "We're aware of our responsibility," says Tim, "and we make a lot of effort in engaging with the local community and teaching them the importance of conservation. One of the first things we did was hire local poachers, not only to give them an alternative income but also to make a direct impact on that section of the community. They have unparalleled knowledge of the surrounding jungles and have been an invaluable source of expertise."

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Teaching the community about the importance of conservation is vital if Sri Lanka's rich and diverse flora and fauna is to remain intact. The country has one of the highest proportions of endemic species in the world, but urbanisation, tourism and human intervention by farming are taking their toll.

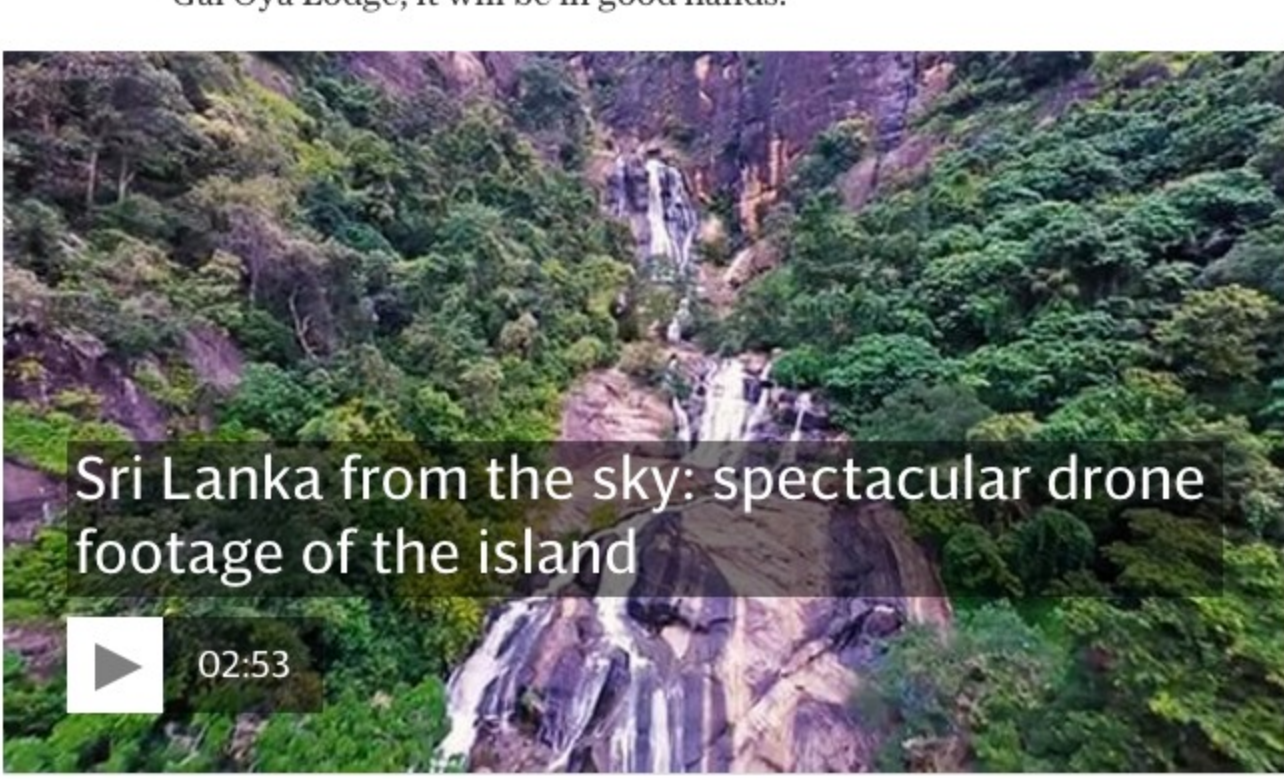
The influx of tourists that began in 2009 after the civil war ended surged to a new high in 2016 – reaching more than two million. Many are flocking to national parks to see Sri Lanka's wildlife, and Yala National Park – the closest park to Colombo, with the highest concentration of leopards per square mile in the world – has seen a similar surge in visitor numbers.



"The situation can best be described as chaos" Credit: GETTY

This popularity has come at a price. Talk to the more sympathetic operators in the 378 sq and offers a quieter experience than Yala.

In contrast, Gal Oya remains unexplored with very few safari operators. Those that do take tourists into the park continue to put the wildlife's welfare first – and as long as Damien remains in place at the Gal Oya Lodge, it will be in good hands.



## Essentials

Tears for Tigers Travel (01825 713636; [experience-wildlife.com](#)) is offering a 10-day trip to Sri Lanka from £2,014 per person. Includes two nights at Uga Residence in Colombo, three nights at Gal Oya Lodge, two nights in Udauwalawe, two nights at Kulu Safaris, Wilpattu, plus transfers, guiding and some meals, but not international air travel.

Sri Lankan Airlines ([srilankan.com](#)) flies from London Heathrow to Colombo with fares from £484.

Red Savannah (01242 787800; [redsavannah.com](#)) has 10 nights in Sri

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