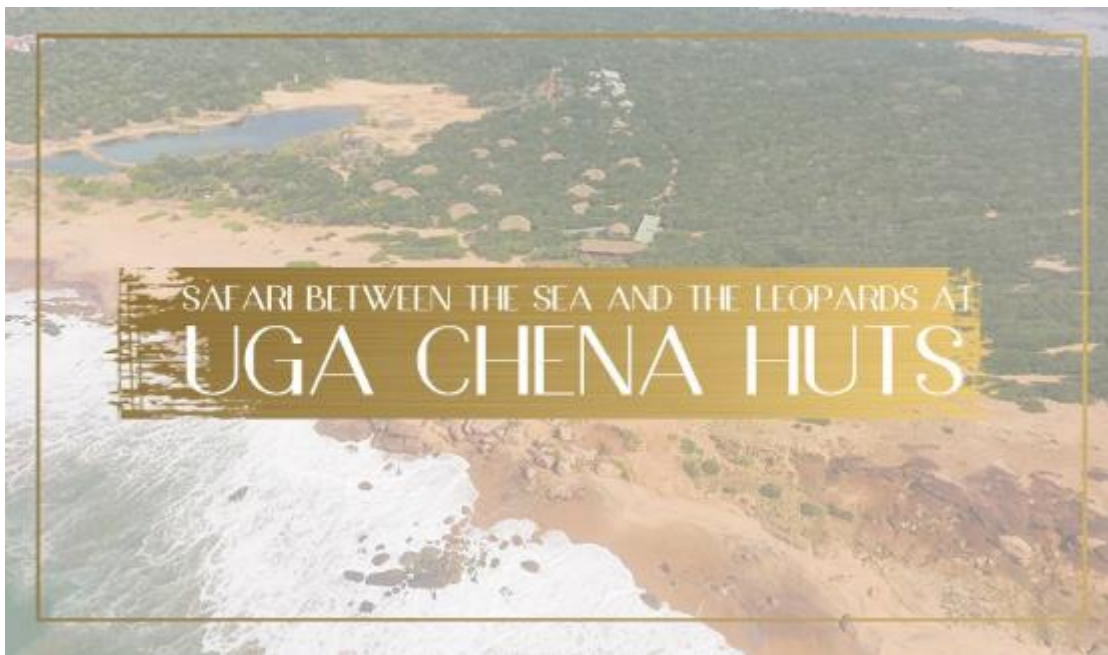




A SAFARI BETWEEN THE SEA AND THE LEOPARDS AT UGA CHENA HUTS

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The word safari, heralding from the ancient Arabian trade, trickled into Swahili, the East African lingua Franca, as a reference to a journey. To the Western world it usually evokes images of Africa, Kenya and Tanzania in particular, lions and elephants. But few associate Asia, or Sri Lanka for that matter, with safaris, jungle, predators or big cats, despite there being a few destinations where safaris in Asia are possible. The tiny but heritage rich island of Ceylon is one of them. Home of elephant herds roaming freely and leopards with no natural predators, Sri Lanka is a fantastic way to initiate oneself to the world of safaris. It is precisely in the farthest south-east tip of this tropical paradise that I traveled to in search of the only big cat that I have only ever spotted once in the wild. The voyage to Yala National Park could not have been complete without a good old fashioned, decadent and luxurious stay at an exclusive safari lodge, Uga's Chena Hutts.

Arrival and check-in at Chena Huts



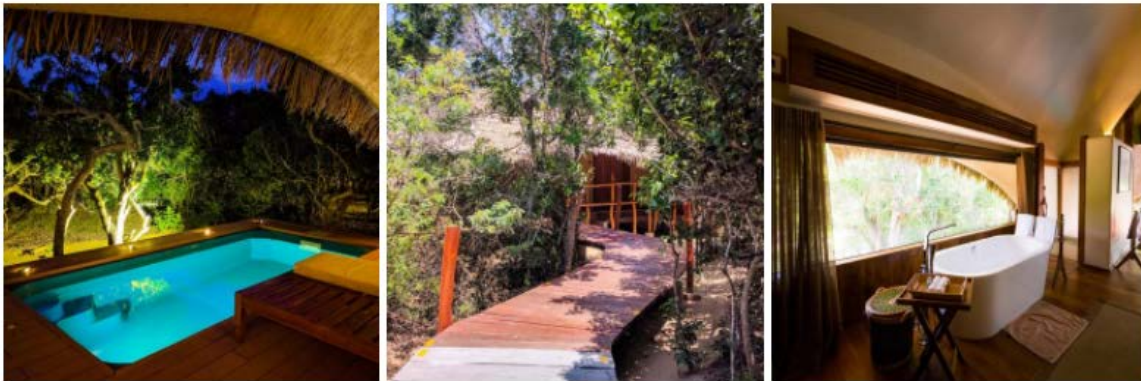
Planning a safari to Africa, especially if you want to witness nature's most amazing spectacle, The Great Migration, is not easy. It requires a lot of thinking ahead and a fair amount of travel time. Sri Lanka, if you live in Singapore, is relatively accessible and Yala, only 250km from Colombo and the airport, a straightforward journey.

Chena Huts is about 15 min from the park's entrance and can be reached via a well maintained highway and a series of local roads from Colombo on a 6h drive. The drive is scenic but we landed right before sunset so we did not get to see anything until our return. However, we were picked up by a very efficient and friendly driver who also took us back to Colombo after our stay. He was a good safe driver and also a great chaperon, taking us for my craving of egg hoppers as soon as we stopped at a service station for dinner. The van that Chena Huts organised for us was not cheap, for Sri Lankan standard, and I know because last time I visited I hired a driver and a car for 4 days for less, but it provided all the comforts that we needed for the long drive including reclining comfortable leather seats that were the perfect cocoon to sleep on on our way to the lodge.

The trip went by pretty fast and as we approached the lodge we had to wait by the wired fence of the park for the Front Office Manager to come open it for us. On the last kilometers to the lodge's entrance, he spotted a leopard, but we did not see it despite having our eyes glued to the dusty path in hopes of catching a glimpse of this elusive creature. It takes a trained eye to see the camouflaged kings of the Sri Lankan jungle.

Upon arrival, almost at midnight, we were greeted and escorted straight to our bush and sea villa where the procedures were kept to a minimum and reserved for the next day. We were offered food which we originally declined but then I insisted in accepting when I saw Nir swallowing the cookies from the cookie jar in one bite. The chicken sandwich came swiftly accompanied with crunchy fries and we went to bed with a content stomach.

The villas at Chena Huts



The lodge has 13 identical villas with private plunge pools and safari style domed roofs. Some of them are located near the lagoon, as was ours, while two of them have direct beach access although the sea is hidden behind the vegetation, but the waves and the strength of the sea at this point of the Sri Lankan coast could be heard even from the restaurant.

Each villa has its raised bed on a wooden platform, a large egg shaped sofa, satellite TV (although I wonder who chooses it over the sounds of the bush) and a large free-standing bathtub where two can comfortably fit. The decor is wood and earthy with green undertones and pictures of the country's favorite predator. The space is very large with plenty of room for dancing around, or for inflating a massive golden dragon if you are in the mood. As the resort is eco-friendly, the villas have been placed among the bushes and trees with minimal damage. Thus, some of the outdoor decks are pieced by growing trees that were there before Chena Huts set shop.

The verdant surroundings help ease the dusty feeling one has during a safari and provide respite from the abating sun. Inside the huts the light is tamed and the ambience subdued and heavily ACed if you so wish, practically a requirement given how hot the area can get. Outside the lodge is one with nature and practically blends into the color of the sand and the muted vegetation. Luxury and comfort are clear everywhere. There are cute tea pots with some of the local famous export, an espresso machine, electricity sockets galore by the desk and the bathroom sinks, convenient master light switches by the bed, practical bags to use in the resort and thoughtful if not very fashionable, flip flops that were my saving grace when I wanted to walk to the beach without scalding my feet at 8am on the boiling sand.

The lodge has gone to great lengths to provide everything one would need. The plunge pools and the common pool are salinated not chlorinated, so your eyes don't sting and the environment is not damaged. The villas are connected by raised decked pathways so that wildlife can roam around under you, instead of in front of you, although expect the friendly monitor lizards to cross your path at least once. The natural vegetation and the layout of the villas ensures almost perfect privacy and you could sunbathe naked without being seen. At night, the sun loungers on your deck are the perfect place to watch the starry spectacle of clear skies unfold.

The food at Chena Huts



When I travel, food is as much a part of the journey as the destination, so I favor local foods over international dishes. In Sri Lanka this is particularly true because I love their hoppers, the coconut curries and pretty much anything they eat. I was so excited to go back to the country for a third time that I could not wait to arrive at the lodge and asked the driver to stop for egg hoppers on the way, which were delicious. But I recognise that not everyone is like me and that the spiciness and richness of Sri Lankan food may not be for everyone. I was happy to see that the Chena Huts menu always had one local option consisting of rustic farmer's chicken or fish curry which we enjoyed at every meal, lunch and dinner. I would have liked to see more local recipes and less international options, but quickly realised we were the only ones ordering the local dishes while everyone else was going for the international palate pleasers which the hotel delivered beautifully.

All meals were served at the Basses restaurant which takes the name from the two famous lighthouses located 12km from the coast in front of the hotel. The outer reefs and the strong currents and wild waves of the ocean along this coast is such that two lighthouses were placed to guide the ships and avoid the massacre of shipwrecks the British was seeing at this particular crossing. The restaurant has both an outdoor raised deck above the beach as well as an indoor section which is necessary at lunch times.

The breakfast menu consists of a series of options all freshly prepared from eggs any way with a long list of side options like homemade gravlax or bacon, to French toast, pancakes or waffles. There was also Bircher Muesli, egg white omelet and the Yala special breakfast set which comes with curry and the Sri Lankan version of a pancake, something which I very much enjoyed.

Lunch and dinner was served with a starter, a soup and a choice of a main among four alternatives which usually included the local curry, a Chinese inspired option and two international/Italian variants such as burgers or calamari. There were always fish and meat alternatives and a vegetarian option. The food was beautifully presented and colourful and local ingredients and produce bought twice weekly by the chef from the market were used. Seafood and fish were particularly fresh and delicious being caught off the coast. The curries were yum, freshly prepared and tasty, just how I liked them, and the level of spiciness was bearable for the inexperienced like me. The F&B Manager came to greet us and get out feedback at almost every meal and when we requested hoppers for breakfast he dutifully provided the next morning, just for us.

The lodge can organise romantic dinner settings under the stars in a private spot on the beach where, if you are lucky, elephants may wander around as they are often seen close to the beach. Even if they don't, the blanket of stars overhead will be an exciting enough backdrop.

The facilities and activities at Chena Huts



One comes to Yala for the sole purpose of spotting leopards. Having the largest concentration of leopards in the world, the park boasts the privilege of daily morning and evening game drives in search of this elegant creature. A [typical day on safari](#) here is no different from that in Africa. Cars depart the lodge either at 5am or around 3pm for a 2-3h game drive and you basically sit in an open jeep watching the world go by.

Besides this noble pursuit, there is not much else to do at the lodge or the surroundings. Most of the day, from breakfast to afternoon tea time, are spent lazing by the plunge pool or the common jungle pool area, enjoying the freshly prepared meals or a refreshing King Coconut. The beach is nearby, only a few steps away, but the sea current and the waves are so incredibly powerful that you would not venture beyond the dry shore. Even the tail end of the waves that wash on shore is strong enough to suck you into the ocean. By 8am the sand was so hot that wearing flip flops was not enough. If you can bear the heat, the rangers are on hand for walking exploration of the surroundings on foot and you can learn about endemic vegetation and wildlife of which there is plenty. Yala has more than 200 bird species and several mammals including the friendly and innocent looking monkeys that parade themselves around the restaurant, or the lizards and monitor lizards that walk the paths.

There is a spa on premises to get pampered, something which your skin may cry for after the hours on an open jeep driving at high speeds through insect clouds or simply navigating the often crowded Block 1 path that can sometimes be packed with over 500 vehicles at a time, all of which will rush to exit the park by 6pm when its doors close, overtaking and bringing clouds of dust up.

The service at Chena Huts



Sri Lankans are incredibly friendly and proud of their country. For a place that endured decades of civil war and tension, its people are remarkably peaceful and kind. This translates into great service no matter where you go. As this was already my third trip to the country, after a lovely stay at [Amangalla](#) in Galle, Tangalle, [Madulkelle](#) Eco Lodge in the tea plantations and the cultural Triangle of [Sigiriya](#), [Polonnaruwa](#), [Anuradhapura](#), Kandy and [Dambulla](#) caves, I knew that I could expect great hospitality and friendly service.

At Chena Huts, everyone had a smile on their faces and was willing and happy to oblige to any of our requests. We paraded with our massive golden dragon, jumped into the pool to record slow mo videos and requested the use of a different villa to fly the drone and nothing could be easier. The F&B Manager came to check on the food and made us hoppers the next day, the General Manager talked about the well being of wildlife and the growing concern over the sustainability of the visitors figures and the entire team made us feel at home, as if we were visiting friends. It was hard to find any fault to their service standards.

Uga Chena Huts review – The verdict



If Yala is where you are keen to visit, [Chena Huts](#) should be your treat. The lodge is lovely, private, exclusive and beautiful and provides a great base from where to explore the area and where to retire to after a long dusty day chasing cats. Everything was perfect. But I knew what to expect from the country and from Uga Escapes, the locally grown chain of boutique hotels that I already fell in love with when I visited the [Cultural Triangle](#) and stayed at [Ulagalla](#). Chena Huts, their latest addition and one of the [best new hotels of 2016](#) according to Conde Nast, was no exception and has risen the bar for their next opening in Tea Country.