



square mile

A O K I

EXCLUSIVE
TWO DAYS IN
LONDON WITH
THE BIGGEST
DJ ON THE
PLANET

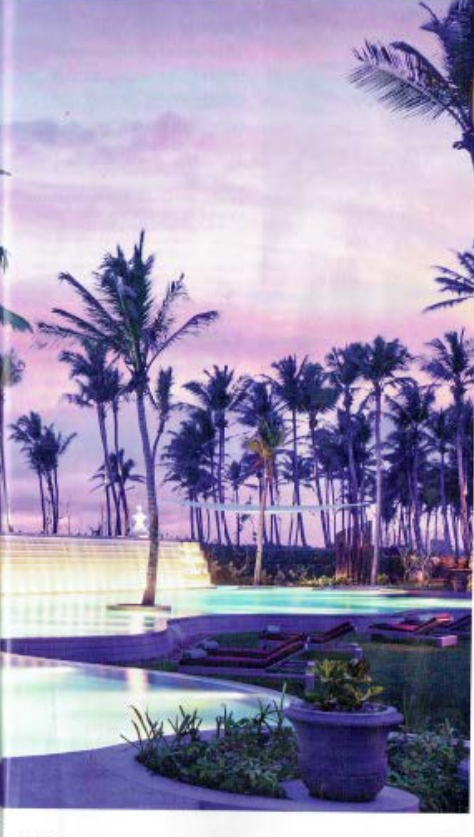
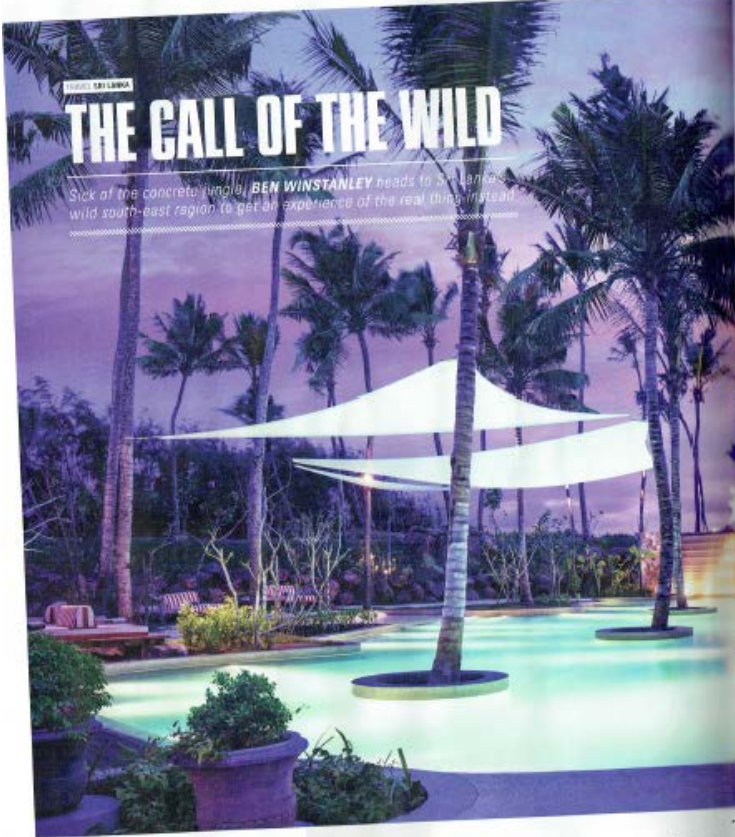


MARK WEBER
ON LEWIS HAMILTON
// AVI7 SEASON
WHY STAN ARDENKI
WILL DESTROY ARSENAL
// STEFANO BICCI
// LONDON'S MOST
STYLISH INFLUENCERS

TRAVEL SRI LANKA

THE CALL OF THE WILD

Sick of the concrete jungle, **BEN WINSTANLEY** heads to Sri Lanka's wild south-east region to get an experience of the real thing instead.



SRI LANKA, 9PM: we're walking through a stormy scrub forest in the pitch black. The beam of my torchlight flicks through the darkness, while shadows dance along rustling branches above—grey langur monkeys en route to bed. Out here in the wilderness, the soundtrack comes courtesy of waves crashing against the beach a few hundred metres away as cawing tropical birds and chirping insects join the chorus. All around is nature in total isolation from the human world. It's too easy to get lost in the beauty of it all.

The pathway swings round to the left and we stop dead in our tracks: there's something pushing through the trees up ahead. "Shit," I mouth of my startled girlfriend, but she's already turned on her heels and is off in the other direction at pace. Good effort, mate. People react differently to coming face-to-face with a five-tonne Sri Lankan elephant. I guess you just don't know until you're ten feet away from you. For my part, I was determined to get by David Attenborough on tip-toeing like *Wilde* I Coyote. I advanced three steps forward, made direct eye contact with the hump-backed beast, yanked... and quickly followed my partner down the path. Sod this. I want to go home—there's none of this shit at Longleaf. Keep your nature, I guess, I'll stick with humanity.

I'm visiting the lesser-known south-east region of Sri Lanka, home to Yala National Park, numerous herds of Asia's largest elephant, low-tech back-to-basics hotels and two of the finest new hotels in south Asia. As transport links from the capital Colombo improve, my money is on this part of the country becoming a hotbed for post-pandemic tourism. You'll also find the best of Sri Lanka's often temperamental weather here, a plethora of natural scenes teeming with all kinds of flora and fauna, and gorgeous wild beaches that are begging for your favourite Instagram filter. For those seeking a balance of bliss and adventure, it's a traveller's paradise—and you can bet that many of those people will be making use of Sri Lanka's latest and largest resort, the Shangri-La Amburussa Golf Resort and Spa.

Located in a former colonial estate, the property's massive 145 acres backs onto a fantastic crescent of raspberry-ripple beach.

FF We stop dead in our tracks: there's something pushing through the trees ahead

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FF This is as far removed from your usual sandy destination as you can possibly imagine

► where people-pink sand weaves through the typical golden hue. It's deserted, save for a smattering of colourful boats that local fishermen haul into the raging surf once a day, and me in my Oberbar Brown's fishing gear, darn pleased with myself. It's as far removed from your usual sandy destination as you can possibly imagine—and a welcome sight after the not-so-small matter of a four-hour journey down from Colombo.

Turning my back on the Indian Ocean, the hotel offers plenty to its inhabitants. As you might expect from a 300-room behemoth, Shangri-La Hambantota caters for everyone without oversteering itself. For starters, there's the three pools—including the infinity pool, a big skip and a running track away from the premier ocean side room—an Ayurvedic spa and even a 230-high terrace for more alcoholic guests to throw themselves into. It's symptomatic of Shangri-La's holistic approach to creating resorts: fun without sacrificing elegance.

Rooms are as bright and breezy as the climate: polished bamboo flooring and hand-woven rugs underfoot, beautiful local artwork on the walls and an ever-present bed upon which to lie in the evening. It's a safe design, hitting an international audience, but charming nonetheless—not that you'll notice when a sea-view balcony commands your attention throughout the day.

Elsewhere in the grounds, I live it up at the 18-hole championship golf course—it's Sri Lanka's first resort course, but is well-respected beyond its shores. It's no small feat to build a high-class course in a country with almost no experience in doing so but, here, Shangri-La has succeeded. Everything from the sand in the bunker's, the resident palm grove on the fairways and even the resident pro has been carefully considered and shipped from more golf-savvy countries. The result is a promising 6,310-yard track that makes up for its short putting with light, well-quoted and clever hole designs tasked with testing every aspect of a player's game. Testament to its quality, discussions have already taken place with the European Tour about hosting a tournament in the near future.

WILD THE WORLD A view from the hotel. China this is situated in the National Park and is a popular spot for the langur monkeys. The resort has a great view of the park and the sea.

and it's safe to assume the course would be an interesting addition to the circuit.

Three days of quiet luxury—of riding ocean rats given on site in memory of the property's previous owner, gazing on the South Asia's coastline prominent across all three of the hotel's restaurants, and occasionally getting taken out by the waves (the swell is as strong here, warning is a no-go)—and it's time to move on.

From Sri Lanka's largest resort to one of the smallest, we make the 40-minute journey from the harbour town of Hambantota into the jungle for our stay at Chena Hills. It's an immediate and wild departure, but one that evokes the inner-adventure in all of us.

Perched on the shore at the edge of Yala, Sri Lanka's oldest and second-largest national park, this boutique hotel is unlike anywhere else I've ever visited. Monkeys, residents long before the hotel arrived, greet your arrival with curiosity before bounding off into the trees, bink every colour of the spectrum that through the maggy air, and wooden walkways, dotted with 14 camouflage luxury beds, weave through compact thorny jungle before opening out onto a beach where sea turtles come to lay their eggs. It's another world.

Chena were originally small cottages in the jungle where locals farmed crops—their basic simple affairs in close proximity to their hungry neighbours. Other than sharing the name, Chena Hills couldn't be further removed. More elegant park than hut, these palm-fringed cabins are furnished in safari-chic style with a large bed and free-standing bath. It's a luxurious escape from the wild, aided by a terrace and a plunge pool handy for when the heat and dust gets too much.

The beauty of Chena is not just its style or site, but the daily safari excursions included in the room rate. Taking the 4x4 out for the day in search of Yala's famed leopards (the highest population density of anywhere in the world) is a joy, especially when it's on your doorstep. The hotel's rangers are also happy to take you on beach walks in search of saltwater crocodiles too. Just the leopard being spotted abjectly into the brush in search of even bigger beasts.

Anyway, back to the elephant in the room—or startlingly close to the room at least. When

we arrive at Chena, the hotel rangers are on high alert. One of the perks of the property's location is its position on an elephant crossing, and right now an adult male is believed to be circling the site. This might sound fun, but when you're dealing with something as heavy as a key and capable of travelling 27mph you've got to have your wits about you.

Unbeknownst, we accompany hotel ranger Stuart on his early morning rounds and end upon the animal's trail. "Because my interest in dung, I just like shit," he winks at us before passing a big ball of the stuff to me. "Get your nose in there. It's fresh." I can't say I've ever been excited by poo before, but it's difficult not to get a thrill when you're tracking an animal—even with a bottle of excrement. Sri Lanka's answer to Steve Irwin then picks us towards a

ripped tyre track. It's around still wet with sap. Oh boy, this is happening—we're close. Stuart's eyes dance into the undergrowth. "It's funny. For long, I hardly ever see them coming." Spoken like a man who's seen it all before. But we lose the scent and end up circling back to another hepper and curvy at the hotel's sensational restaurant—we've eaten it.

It's only that evening the elephant finally scuffles through the trees in front of us. Maybe in time I'll come up with a better ending than whimpering out, but it's safe to say Chena has over-delivered on its promise of being at one with nature, and I've more than had my fill. #Himalaya Shangri-La Hambantota Sri Lanka. 011 94 812 800000. www.shangri-lahambantota.lk. Chena Hills cost from £700 per night, including food and drink, and daily self-exclusion: www.sll.com



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