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# The ultimate holiday island: Mariella Frostrup revels in the dazzling delights of Sri Lanka, a land with breathtaking scenery - and a truly spectacular number of public holidays

- Mariella Frostrup finds Sri Lanka to be an exuberant, historically fascinating and welcoming country
- She embarked on a two-week road trip from east to south with her children, taking in Yala National Park
- They saw leopards mating, climbed an ancient volcano and hit the famous Ceylon Tea Trails

By MARIELLA FROSTRUP FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY  
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The whip cracks carry menacingly on the still night air. We sit in silent anticipation as the fearsome sound grows closer and louder, reverberating down the empty roads. A genial shop-owner has warned us that those sitting in the pavement seats are liable to be scorched by fire-eaters or sprayed with elephant dung, so we opted for ubiquitous plastic seats four storeys above street level.

On our makeshift balcony we are among thousands of spectators lining the streets. From the pavement to the rooftops, among the ramshackle shops and eateries of Kandy, there isn't a single space with a street view that isn't jam-packed.

It's almost impossible to visit Sri Lanka without experiencing a public holiday. In an admirable spirit of inclusion this island nation embraces the religious festivals of all of its Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, earning the covetable distinction of having the most public holidays on Earth.



**Magnificent: Kande Ela Reservoir in the Central Highlands. Here a collection of tea plantation owners' bungalows have been converted into individual hotels**

They have 25 days off every year, including every Full Moon, and although there are many smaller pageants, the unmissable event in this crammed celebratory calendar has to be The Festival Of The Sacred Tooth. Honouring the Buddha's molar, believed to have been extracted from his funeral pyre, the festival draws crowds from far and wide in July for ten days of magnificent nightly processions.

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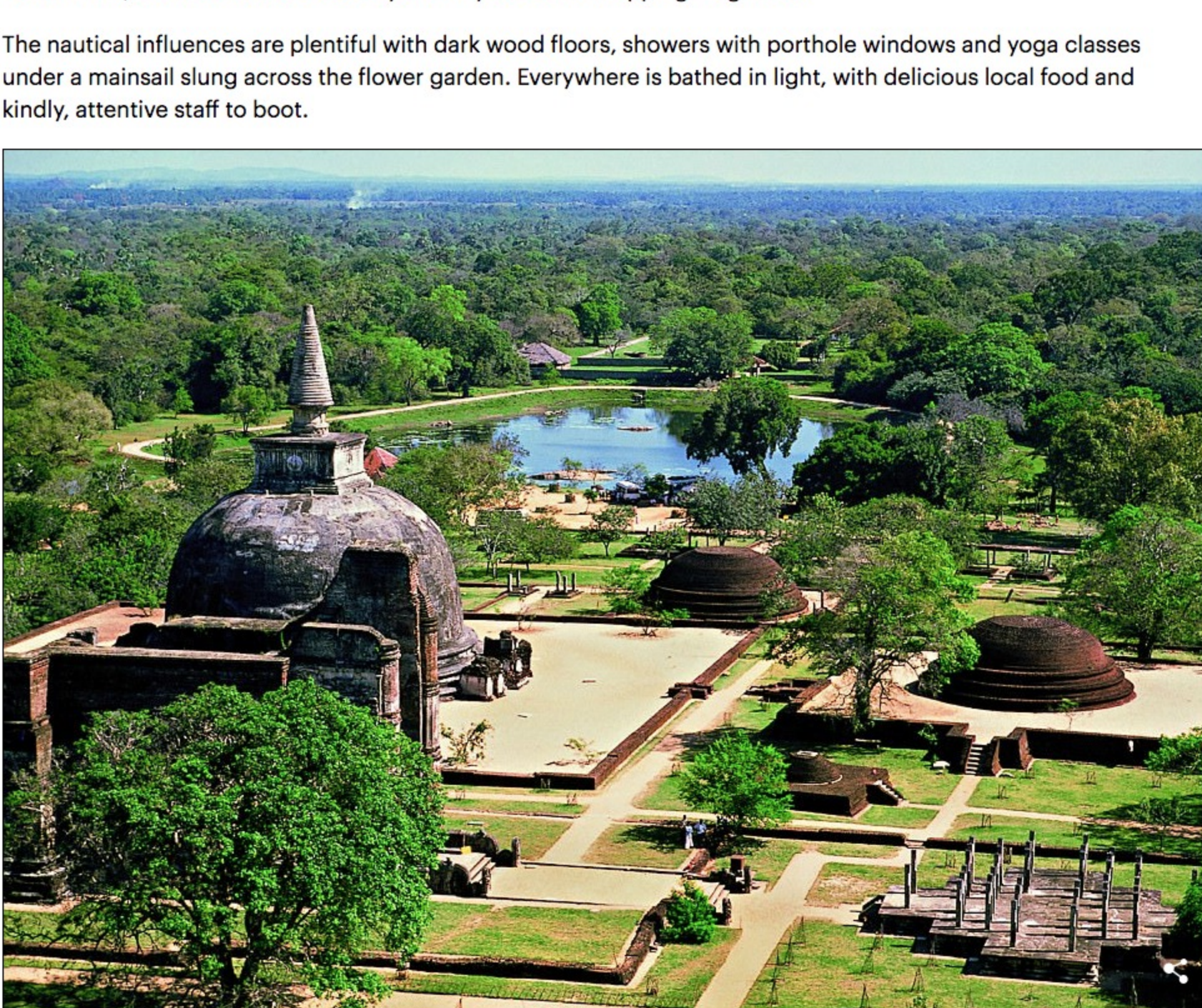
It's a family occasion and alcohol is banned, a sensible if unwelcome measure (with my husband particularly) as spectators take their seats hours beforehand to ensure their view of the extravaganza that takes a whole year to prepare.

The warning whips are followed by elephants in gem-encrusted coats, then dancers in crimson and orange. In a dazzling four-hour display, hundreds of performers, fire-eaters, children in gaudy costumes, monks, disciples, and musicians stream past to a cacophony of chanting and singing, beating drums and high-pitched flutes.

The thrills of the night were capped for our children when, on the drive to our hotel, we narrowly avoided colliding with a giant python crossing the road. Dan at 11, who'd originally threatened not to come to Sri Lanka because of the preponderance of snakes, transformed into a mini Attenborough, eager to leap out and inspect the night slitherer.

Luckily, both passengers and python escaped the encounter unharmed and our attention was diverted to our destination. Bougainvillea Retreat, 40 minutes outside Kandy, is an oasis of style and calm, housed in a faux Tuscan villa, owned and decorated by a family of Danish shipping magnates.

The nautical influences are plentiful with dark wood floors, showers with porthole windows and yoga classes under a mainsail slung across the flower garden. Everywhere is bathed in light, with delicious local food and kindly, attentive staff to boot.



**Regal: The 11th Century city of Polonnaruwa, former home of the kings of Sri Lanka**

Until ten years ago, Sri Lanka was a feature of news headlines rather than holiday brochures thanks to a 20-year civil war. Now the country is fast reasserting itself on the tourist map and so abundant are its attributes that it's hard to know where to begin.

Our summer adventure started a week earlier with three days of sun and sea at Uga Bay, in Pasikuda in the heart of the predominately Tamil north east. It's one of a cluster of new hotels that have sprung up along this expansive crescent bay that, until 2006, was a no-go area dotted with checkpoints.

Nowadays peace reigns; small breakers roll to the shore, fishermen cluster around their brightly painted boats mending their nets, and, when the blessed breeze picks up in the afternoon, baby pink clouds streak across the sky.

It's a scene so tranquil it's hard to imagine that less than a decade ago these local boys and girls, now employed in service industries, would have been trapped on one side or other of the bitter battle.

Preserved by its isolation during the years of strife, the bounty of the east coast lies ready to be discovered and the beach at Pasikuda has to be one of the best in the world.

We could have lingered but our itinerary was packed so, deserting the sunloungers, we headed to the Cultural Triangle, where much of Sri Lanka's rich heritage is to be uncovered.

As any parent knows, 6.30am can be an endurance test with a grumpy teenager in tow but, after ascending the hundreds of stone steps carved into Sigiriya Rock, even 13-year-old Molly grudgingly admitted it was worth the effort.

The core of an ancient volcano and fabled fortress palace of a 5th Century prince who committed patricide, Sigiriya is a national monument. Halfway through our climb we reached an overhang complete with rock paintings, vividly coloured and of an erotic bent - among them images of languid-eyed maidens with minuscule waists and enormous spherical breasts gazing seductively at their admirers.

At the summit, red-faced and breathless, we enjoyed the breeze as we admired the crumbling remains of a monastery abandoned before Columbus discovered America.

The next day we were off again, this time to visit the country's second ancient city, Polonnaruwa, where we cycled around the 11th Century home of the kings of Sri Lanka with wild monkeys scattering in our wake.

This cluster of palaces, one of which in its glory days was seven storeys high, had us pondering how such ancient feats of human engineering - from the pyramids to Angkor Wat - were completed by human hand alone.

The family favourite was a vast beehive-shaped structure, topped by its requisite stupa, intimidating and awe-inspiring in equal measure. Equally striking was the evidence of religious inclusivity with Hindus and Buddhists worshipping cheek by jowl as though such tolerance were part of the natural order of things.

No sooner had we abandoned our bicycles than we were paddling downstream on a white-water rafting expedition, ecstatic kids begging for more, as our two guides steer us back up against the rapids for an extra dousing.

The Kelani River tumbles down from Adam's Peak, Sri Lanka's highest point, and where the river passes through the small town of Kitulgala the conditions were perfect for an introduction to the sport.

On both sides, the tangled, verdant, tropical jungle enclosing us looked like a set from a Vietnam War movie. We glided past a strangely familiar spot and discover it served as a location for the famous bridge-blowing scene in *The Bridge On The River Kwai*.

The same size as Ireland but with more than four times the population, the diversity of experiences and variety of climate zones in Sri Lanka is extraordinary.

During our two-week road trip from east to south, we toured Yala National Park and saw leopards mating, popped into Minneriya to catch the annual elephant gathering, took in Kandy's aforementioned festival and visited the sanctuary created at Jetwing Vil Uyana, where we enjoyed a night safari on jungle trails, spotting endangered grey lorises - an unforgettable thrill.

At the fabulous Ceylon Tea Trails in Nuwara Eliya in the Central Highlands, a collection of plantation owners' bungalows have been converted into individual hotels dotted around the epic Kande Ela Reservoir.

Here it feels as if our half-day car journey has taken us all the way back home. I gaze out from the writing desk in my elegant bedchamber at the misty, moody, Scot's pine-scattered terraces, curved like contour lines around the hillsides, and imagine myself a Victorian lady, penning letters to friends while escaping the heat of the plains. Our grand finale was a visit to the wind-swept, sea-battered and atmospheric fortress town of Galle, built by the Dutch in 1663. Here we revel in Amangalla, for 140 years known as the New Oriental Hotel and still a perfect snapshot of lustrous colonial splendour.

The gleaming candelabras reflect our faces in the flickering light and the polished floor of the long, sweeping veranda that serves as bar, restaurant and promenade looks good enough to lick.

We wander along the ramparts of the old port, where abandoned cannons and palm trees bent by the South Sea winds are silhouetted against the bruised sky.

We've crammed in so much and yet here, in our last port of call, we feel we've barely scratched the surface of this exuberant, historically fascinating and welcoming country. It may be commonplace to say you'll return, but with a remaining to-do list as long as ours, it's a certainty.



**Taking it all in: Mariella admires the view from the ruins at Polonnaruwa**

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