

# A new dawn

With its ancient Buddhist temples, unspoilt beaches and abundant wildlife, **Lauren Romano** discovers why Sri Lanka should be on your travel bucket list





The sun sinks behind the trees, staining the horizon a diluted millennial pink hue. Even the blink-and-then-it's-gone sunset at Ulagalla, a former ancestral estate turned boutique hotel in Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka, is on trend.

Sri Lanka is very much the destination of the moment. Having emerged from its more than 20-year-long civil war in 2009, a slew of new boutique luxury hotels are spearheading a tourism revival the length and breadth of the island, spanning lush, vertiginous tea plantations, 2,000-year-old temples, exquisite coastlines and elephant-filled national parks.

I'm here with Uga Escapes, one of the pioneers of the country's eco-conscious tourism boom. Its five boutique hotels are dotted from Trincomalee in the north to Yala on the southern coast and offer an immersive introduction to the Sri Lankan way of life. You can organise tours between the different properties for an overview of the most remarkable regions, of which Ulagalla, in this corner of Anuradhapura is one.

If only all evenings began with sundowners (potent martinis infused with star anise) on a helipad in the middle of a lush green paddy field. Not even the persistent buzz of a scourge of mosquitos darting covertly through the air can spoil the setting.

Darkness descends quickly here and no sooner has the



PLUNGE POOL; VILLA LIVING AREA; SETTING UP FOR SIGNATURE DINING, ALL ULAGALLA

sun started to smoulder, it has dipped beyond the forest canopy in the distance, plunging us into velvety blackness.

We make our way back to the hotel's Liya Wela Restaurant by torchlight on golf buggies (these ferry guests

to and from the 150-year-old manor house at the centre of the estate). There are just 25 chalets dotted around the 58 acres of this ecologically-minded resort, where half of all energy is generated by the on-site solar farm. The breeze from the semi-open-to-the-elements first floor dining room negates the need for air conditioning. Here, I make the



fortunate mistake of ordering the straightforward enough sounding Sri Lankan curry. 'Curry' turns out to be an endless succession of little bowls filled with aubergine, potato, lentil and meaty stews that have to be set up on their own little tray as there are too many to fit on the table.

The stars are out in force when we emerge, utterly stuffed, into a darkness suffed, into a darkness soundtracked by nocturnal insects and the surprisingly loud clicking noises of the many geckos that dart about the place, a pair of which have taken up residence in my chalet.

Each of the chalets sits on stilts, with glass walls on three sides, including the bathroom for those who want to be truly at one with nature, (there are blinds for those who don't) offering uninterrupted views of your private deck, plunge pool and beyond. It's quite the view to wake up to from my four poster bed the next morning – the elevation and dark wooden touches give the space a luxe treehouse feel.

Immersion in nature is the Uga way and the rooms are equipped with wildlife literature and manuals including a field guide listing the numerous species of birds that can be spotted on its properties (the hotels collectively boast 100 resident and migratory species). On our guided sunrise nature walk we spy Ceylon jungle fowl and kingfishers among the dawn chorus, although we quickly become distracted by a family of monkeys swinging through the trees at vertigo-inducing heights and a territorial, prehistoric-looking land monitor lizard stalking the grass by the lake.

The rest of our stay at Ulagalla passes by in a haze of activity. There's a cooking demonstration at the open-air kitchen found within a large garden where we pick ingredients for a dahl curry and tempered okra with green chilli and mustard seeds. We go on a guided cycling tour of Anuradhapura – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – and visit Ruwanwelisaya stupa, where monks in bright orange habits mingle with barefooted worshippers, and a team of daredevil



We become distracted by a family of monkeys swinging through the trees



THE RESIDENCE, COLOMBO

painters attempts to scale a makeshift ladder, lashed together with old scarves, suspended from the very top of the dome. Afterwards

we take a detour to Vessagiri, the ruins of an ancient Buddhist forest monastery, to have a picnic on its giant boulders.

The following morning, it's another early morning start as we head to Wilpattu – Sri Lanka's oldest national park, where natural water basins attract exotic birds, sloth bears and leopards. We bristle with excitement after observing a herd of spotted deer grazing in the undergrowth not far from the entrance and this optimism carries us through the next few hours. It peaks when we spot some leopard footprints in the sand and follow the unsteady trail through the bush, battling overhanging branches as we go.

We're not rewarded for our efforts and return to Ulagalla momentarily deflated, although a visit to the ▶





► hotel's serene spa, accessed via stepping stones and past a waterfall helps assuage the disappointment and the aching muscles.

One of the best places to spot leopards (Sri Lanka boasts the world's largest concentration) and some of the country's 5,800 resident elephants, is Yala National Park on the south-east coast. We decide to break the journey from north to south with a pitstop at Residence, another Uga property in the capital, Colombo.

The bustling street scenes from our chauffeur-driven van provide excellent in-transit entertainment: mango sellers barter from carts propped up at the side of the road; mountains of bananas sit by the kerb; tuk-tuks veer along the congested streets, somehow without colliding.

We shut the door on the rigmarole of traffic and general chaos at Residence. Behind its imposing gates sits an 11-suite boutique hotel with an internal courtyard and pool. The former home of an influential barrister, the 19th century townhouse was once frequented by British governors and India maharajas, and the cosmopolitan glamour remains with grandly proportioned rooms decked out in dark teak and magnolia and jewel-toned accents.

It's the perfect base for exploring the up-and-coming city. Evidence of the capital's former glory days can be unearthed at almost every corner, if you know where to look. We go on a walking tour led by the brilliant and informative Mark Forbes, who produces an iPad loaded with black and white photographs dating back to when



## Sri Lanka boasts the world's largest concentration of leopards, and Yala National Park is the best place to spot them

Colombo was a thriving port so we can compare then and now. As we wander along the streets, it's good to see that a wave of luxury hotels is injecting life back into the city and resurrecting some of its most magnificent (but crumbling) buildings.

We start off at the Dutch Hospital, the oldest building in the fort area to survive the Civil War – which is now home to several independent shops and the must-try restaurant Ministry of Crab – and end at the Grand Oriental Hotel for a gin and tonic overlooking the port, which was once where those who wanted to see and be seen hung out.

Today the city's cosmopolitan crowd head to the Residence Bar, which is pleasantly bustling mid-week, with live musicians serenading guests with renditions of Western hits. Follow this with a visit to Rare restaurant next door where

traditional Sri Lankan ingredients are given a modern twist. Here, highlights include crab cakes with pungent tomato chutney and lime aioli; Asian sea bass with a roasted almond crust; and homemade passion fruit and chilli ice cream – there's a fishy seeni sambol and sprats soft scoop for those with more adventurous palates. The band is striking up a soulful version of Ed Sheeran's *Shape of You* when I return to my room. It's an unlikely serenade, but I fall into a deep sleep the moment my head touches the pillow.

Another day, another destination: this time Chena Huts in Yala National Park. The long drive skirts the choppy coastline where waves spit and fizz violently, as well as numerous little villages amid the coconut groves. Four hours later we arrive in paradise.

Chena Huts sits in an enviable position, with jungle on one side and a rolling sandy beach on the other. You can't get much closer to nature than this: Chena is separated from Sri Lanka's second largest nature reserve by a ring of bushes. Sea turtles have been known to lay their eggs on the beach here by moonlight and there's even an errant, mischievous elephant who makes the pond his watering hole from time to time, trampling everything in his path and leaving incriminating footprints in his wake.

Fourteen domed cabins are set over seven acres, with rustic design features, including an impressive log headboard that separates the generously proportioned platform bed from the bathroom. The set-up resembles a safari camp, if those ordinarily came with a freestanding bath and a private patio with a five-metre plunge pool. At night guests are advised to padlock themselves into their rooms, such is the density of the wildlife here. No sooner have I returned from a barbecue dinner of seafood kebabs on the beach, and bolted the door, I hear loud stomping noises just outside. Could it be the elusive elephant?

If it's close encounters you're after, chances are you'll find them at Yala National Park. We're quietly optimistic as we set out with a Chena Huts ranger for a late afternoon game drive. And sure enough, it's not long before a hubbub of excitement, and a traffic jam, starts to form. Just above our heads in



THE BEACH AND GUEST CABINS AT CHENA HUTS

the canopy of some overhanging trees is a lounging leopard, fast asleep. He's extremely well camouflaged but we spot him with the help of binoculars, evidently unperturbed by the excitement his presence has provoked.

But somehow it doesn't seem that special sharing the moment with seven other truckloads of people, all waving their cameras about. It's only later when we're

trundling down a deserted path, the entourage nowhere to be seen, that our driver stops the engine and points in the direction of some rustling bushes. Up ahead a mother elephant is followed by her calf, stripping the branches for shoots. Then, as we turn to the right, an entire elephant family, with three babies weaving around their mothers' feet, strides across the open plain. It's a heart-warming sight and one that we get to enjoy all by ourselves, as the sun fades into another spectacular sunset. ■

### NEED TO KNOW

SriLankaInStyle (enquiries@srilankainstyle.com / srilankainstyle.com / +94 11 239 6666) offers this seven-night Uga Escapes itinerary from £3,800 based on two people sharing. This includes a private air-conditioned car or van with an English speaking chauffeur guide; accommodation at Ulagalla (B&B three nights), Uga Residence (B&B two nights) and Chena Huts (all-inclusive two nights); the Hidden History City Walking Tour in Colombo and two return flights from London to Colombo. Terms and conditions apply and pricing is subject to change and availability.