

BEACHES, BUDDHISM, WILDLIFE & WONDER: DISCOVER LUXURY SRI LANKA

Victoria Purcell on November 7, 2017 | Tagged India Travel

With beautiful beaches, game drives, fantastic cuisine, Buddhist pilgrimages and UNESCO World Heritage sites, Sri Lanka is an absolute must for adventure travellers. The Resident traverses this diverse island nation in luxury

Sri Lanka has been creeping up the destinations lists for a number of years. And now I know why. Since the Tamil Tigers' regime of terror came to an end in 2009, tourists have been flocking to discover a destination rich in history, culture and UNESCO World Heritage sites, with the added bonus of beautiful beaches, safari resorts and fantastic cuisine.

So where to start? With Uga Escapes. Uga has five properties dotted around the island. You'll be hard-pushed to visit them all, since the drives between them are four-to-five hours long (unless you have the budget for a chopper), so we settled on a whirlwind week visiting three properties: Ulagalla in the ancient capital of Anuradhapura in the north central province, Residence in the city of Colombo on the west coast, and Chena Huts on the south west coast by Yala National Park.

Together with Uga Bay on the east coast and Jungle Beach to the north east, Uga essentially provides you with a passport to explore Sri Lanka.



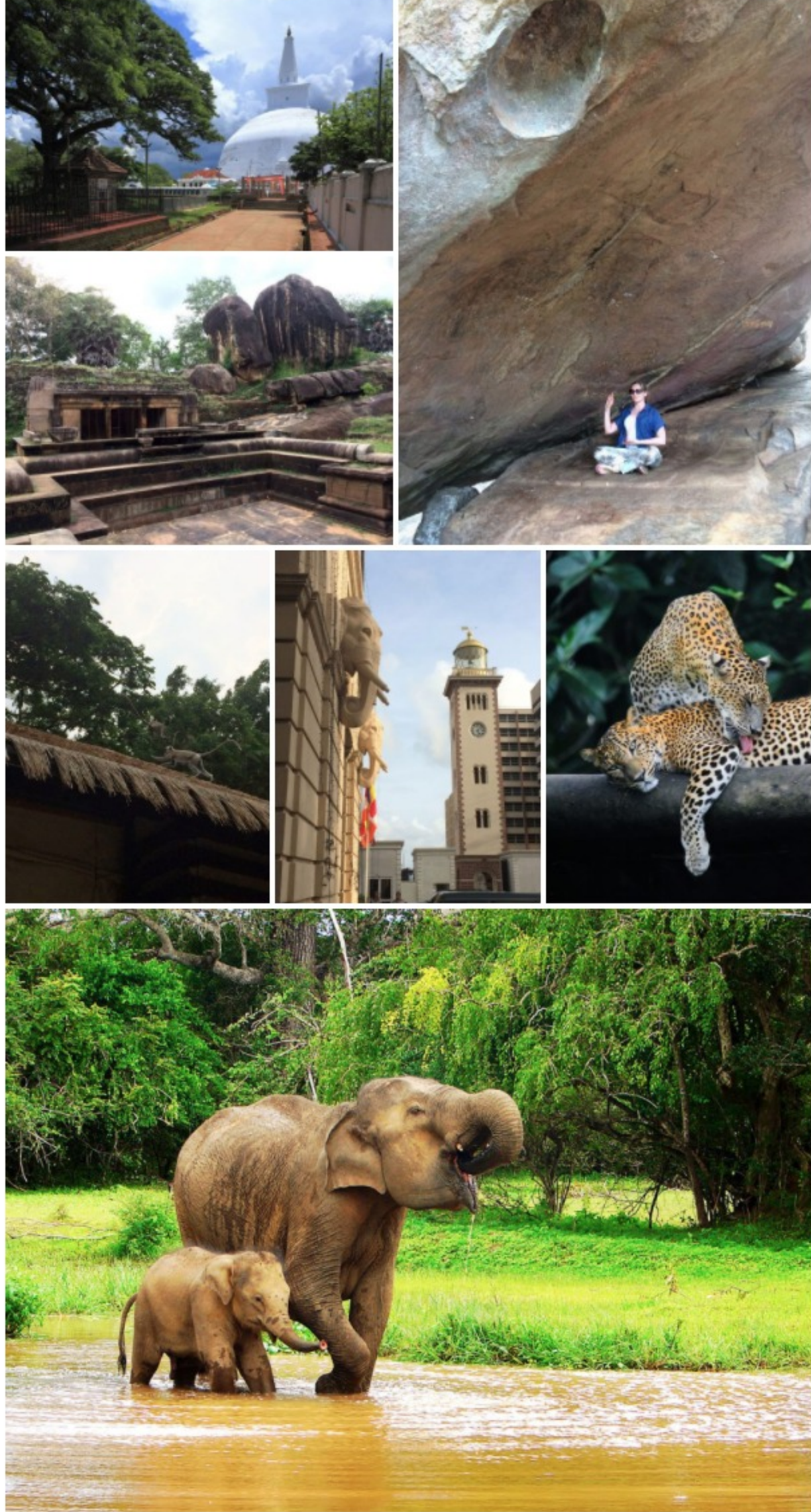
Ulagalla, which has just undergone a refurb, is a lush, sprawling resort where opulent, Colonial-style villas are disguised as jungle hideaways with a 150-year mansion, pool, restaurant and spa at its centre. It's a real nature-lover's retreat, where you can relax in your private plunge pool while watching monkeys leap from the trees onto your thatched rooftop.

You can also explore the resort and the surrounding nature trails on foot, by bike or on horse back, drink in the sunsets from strategic alfresco dining spots, eat traditional Sri Lankan hoppers for breakfast, take a curry cookery class in the wonderful kitchen garden or check into the serene jungle spa, where luscious greenery and flowing water will help you drift off into full-body-massage bliss.

Anuradhapura, famed for its sprawling collection of ruins, was once the centre of Theravada Buddhism and is home to enormous white dome-shaped Buddhist temples

But do tear yourself away from all the relaxation for a day trip to Anuradhapura city, famed for its sprawling collection of ruins. The UNESCO World Heritage Site was once the centre of Theravada Buddhism and is home to enormous white dome-shaped Buddhist temples (stupas), crumbling palaces and sacred rocks.

We hired a local guide to help us navigate the intricacies of the temples and monasteries, still the destination of Buddhist pilgrimages. You can also head out on safari to Wilpattu National Park, Sri Lanka's oldest and largest national park, known for its lakes and leopard population.



For a change of pace, head back to the city. Residence in Colombo is an opulent, 11-suite boutique hotel built in the 19th century by a wealthy barrister. Its great halls and central courtyard, designed to entertain British governors, Indian maharajas and the cream of colonial Ceylon society, provide a peaceful respite from the city.

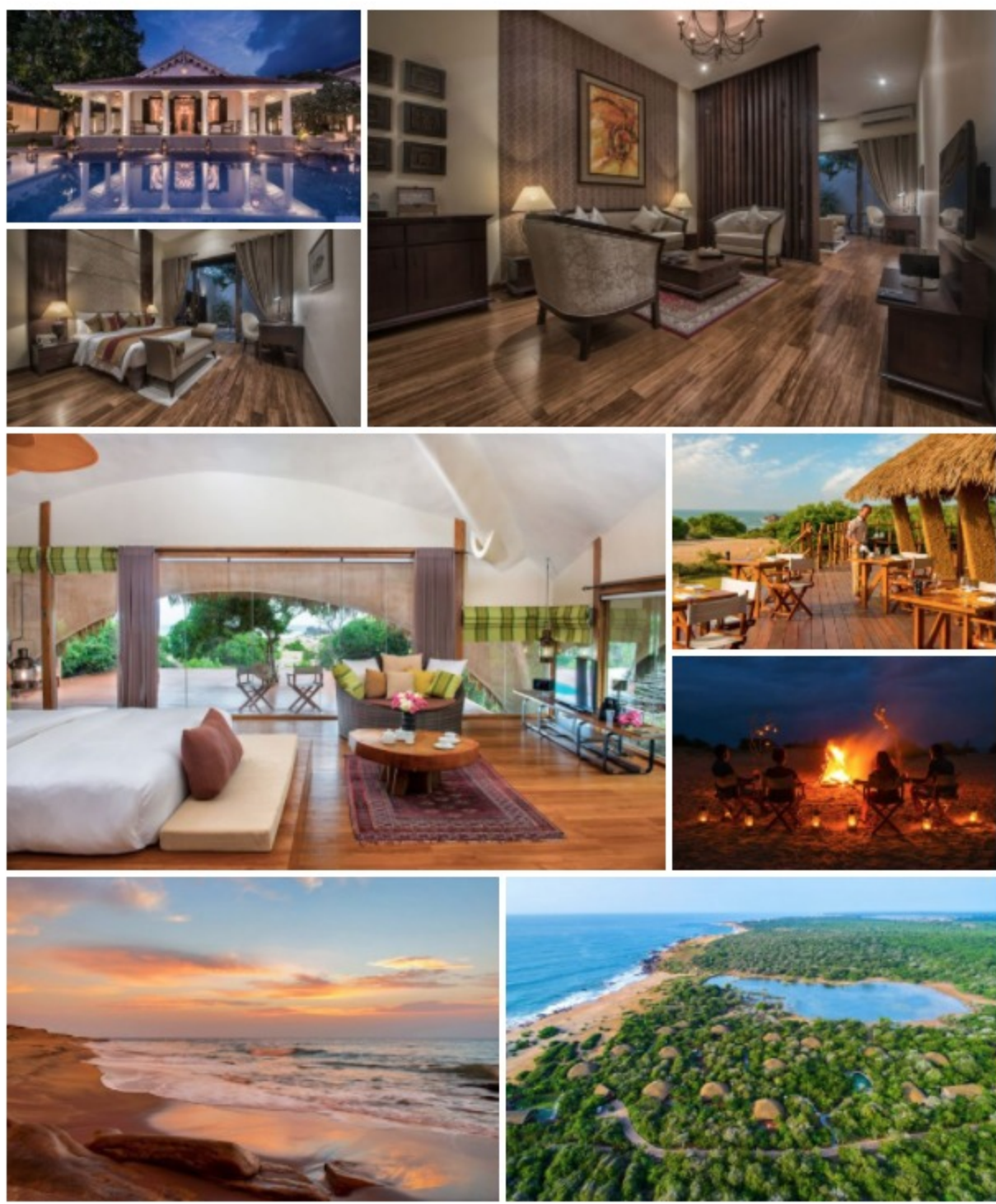
The huge suites are luxuriously appointed, and the restaurant, Rare, serves up top-notch international cuisine like octopus with avocado and spicy carrot purée, as well as fiery Sri Lankan dishes like Kalu Pol (rock lobster with roast paan and coconut sambol).

Enjoy a G&T at the harbourside Grand Oriental Hotel, once the playground of wealthy colonials. Its splendour has faded, but the walls ache with tales of revelry and royal visits

From Residence we headed to the Old Dutch Hospital, now a tourist hotspot, for a walking tour of the city with the brilliant Mark Forbes (organised via SriLankaInStyle), who guided us through the city's buildings of note, many still decorated with lanterns following Vesak, the Buddhist festival of enlightenment.

We ended with a G&T at the harbourside Grand Oriental Hotel, once the playground of wealthy colonials. Its splendour has faded, but the walls ache with tales of revelry and royal visits.

And then, for me, the pièce de résistance; Chena Huts by Yala National Park, one of Sri Lanka's first and finest boutique safari lodges. Elephants regularly visit the beach here to frolic in the surf, and the night before our arrival a particularly cheeky specimen had stomped through the property, trashing the pretty lily pond.



Invigorated by our proximity to these magnificent beasts, we headed out on a game drive, where we marvelled at elephant herds, land monitors, warthogs, jackals, peacocks in tree tops and the briefest glimpse of a leopard.

We were due to head out on another drive at 5.30am the next day, but the lure of a morning at leisure in our beautiful eco-huts – inspired by the thatched huts farmers built to watch over their crops, but with luxury furnishings, plunge pool and a sound system that makes Lana Del Rey sound more deliciously familiar than ever – was irresistible.

Of course, when we bumped into our guide while enjoying a beachside brunch, he informed us that we'd missed out on a glorious sighting of lounging leopards. You know what they say about the early bird...

TRIP NOTES

Destinology offers a 7-night Uga Escapes itinerary from £2,049pp based on 2 sharing with 3 nights B&B at Ulagalla, 2 nights B&B at Residence and 2 nights all inclusive at Chena Huts, plus return Emirates flights from London and all transfers. See destinology.co.uk or call 01204 824 619. For walking tours of Colombo, see srilankainstyle.com

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