

TRAVEL

ISLAND NATION AWAKENING

SRI LANKA IS ON THE UP AND DESTINED TO BECOME A TOP HOLIDAY SPOT, DISCOVERS **DYLAN WIGGAN**

SRI Lanka's biggest exports are tea, rubber and coconuts.

This fact was something I was proudly told by a local shortly after landing at Bandaranaike International Airport.

My hosts were trying to familiarise me with the local culture, but feeling extremely tired after a long flight I merely nodded along politely behind thick sunglasses thinking of tunes from Moana (my in-flight movie of choice).

Tea, rubber, coconuts. It's one of those facts that you will either forget seconds after you hear it, or it will stay immovably lodged forever in a corner of your mind next to piles of other useless trivia.

Clearly I, despite my jet-lag fuelled malaise, was in the latter camp.

COCONUTS

Coconut trees grow plentifully in Sri Lanka. As my group drove to our first hotel of three, Uga Escapes' Ulagalla in Anuradhapura, they cut a constant figure in the sky out of our car window.

It's a long drive from the airport to Ulagalla, but when you arrive you'll see that is more than worth the time. The stunning boutique hotel is home to 20 luxurious villas spread

across 58 acres of beautiful Sri Lankan greenery. My villa was of the highest quality and came complete with my own personal plunge pool.

There is also a much larger communal pool towards the centre of the resort near an impressive 150-year-old mansion, which is home to the site's excellent restaurant Liya Wela.

Ulagalla is a tranquil locale best suited for those looking to relax or escape the rest of the world - which makes it no surprise it is a hotbed for newlyweds.

Horse riding lessons, cooking demonstrations and massages are just some of the activities available at Ulagalla. All of them are more than ably hosted by the expert staff, but ultimately I had my most memorable experiences just enjoying my exquisite villa.

The rooms are impressively kitted out - despite being in the middle of Sri Lanka's great outdoors.

Air conditioning, of course, is standard, making the constant 30-plus degrees temperature no problem when trying to sleep. The rooms have decent wi-fi, making it a cinch to update your preferred social media platform with the perfect shots to make friends at home jealous, as well as a TV and speaker sound system.

Chena Huts, another Uga Escapes site I visited, has rooms of similar

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quality to Ulagalla's - but they come beach views, rather than the much greener Ulagalla.

But either way you can't go wrong. Both have excellent restaurants that offer local flavours and something you might find at home.

There are lots to do in the surrounding areas such as the Yala National Park, right next to Chena Huts, which is home to great variety of animals such as elephants, sloth bears, leopards and water buffalo.

At Ulagalla we explored the local temples and observed local religious ceremonies during a bike tour of the area.

These more rural areas of Sri Lanka was the bulk of my trip but we also got to stay in Sri Lanka's biggest urban city, Colombo.

TEA

"We probably wouldn't have a tea industry if it wasn't for colonialism. So I guess we have you guys to thank for that," said my host in an uncomfortable exchange.

"Oh, you're welcome?" I replied. Tea is just one of the many leftovers from British rule. During my stay at the Uga Escapes

Residence hotel in Colombo, I saw many seemingly out of place sights such as classic red phone boxes and post boxes.

The Residence hotel was not as luxurious as my Ulagalla or Chena Huts, but had its own charm. A communal pool and excellent restaurant Rare, made it an excellent spot to stay while exploring the more urban areas of Sri Lanka.

Courtesy of Sri Lanka In Style we had a walking tour of the city, learning about the culture and history.

Sri Lanka's capital brought a welcome contrast to the trip compared to the more exotic experiences at the other sites, and shouldn't be missed for anyone travelling across the country.

RUBBER

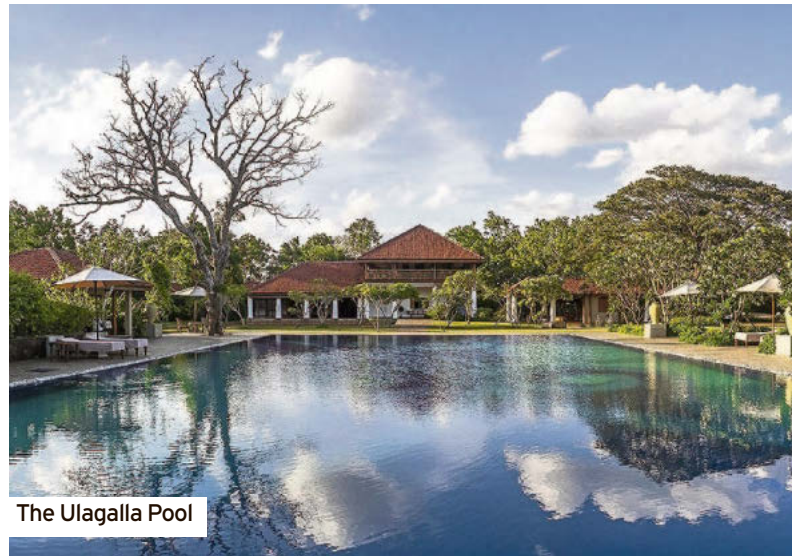
Despite being one of the country's biggest exports, outside of tut tut wheels (the local taxis), I didn't see much rubber during my stay in Sri Lanka.

What I did see, was a country that has bounced back from the brink, and is back on its feet and thriving.

It has been less than a decade since the Sri Lankan Civil War



Chena Huts basks in the sun



The Ulagalla Pool

officially ended, so it naturally may be something you worry about before booking a holiday.

But from my time there it was clear Sri Lanka is driving forward and not looking back. During our tour in Colombo our guide showed us images of the places we stood in just a few years before. The transformation from warzone to thriving city was incredible.

With new hotels and businesses popping up all the time it is clear Sri Lanka is on the up and will become one of the top holiday destinations in a few years - and from my experience it is very much deserved.

HOW TO BOOK

DYLAN Wiggan stayed at Ulagalla, Chena Huts and Residence courtesy of Uga Escapes. Go to www.ugaescapes.com for more information.

Emirates offer regular flights from Manchester to Sri Lanka with a connection in Dubai - prices are around £500.

Late deals / Overseas

■ Teletext Holidays (teletextholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights in Tenerife from £502 per person based on two adults sharing. Staying at the four-star Be Live Playa La Arena on an all-inclusive basis, flying from Manchester on March 20.

■ Teletext Holidays offers seven nights in Fuerteventura from £406 per person based on two adults sharing. Staying at the four-star Geranios Suites And Spa on a half-board basis, flying from Manchester on March 19.

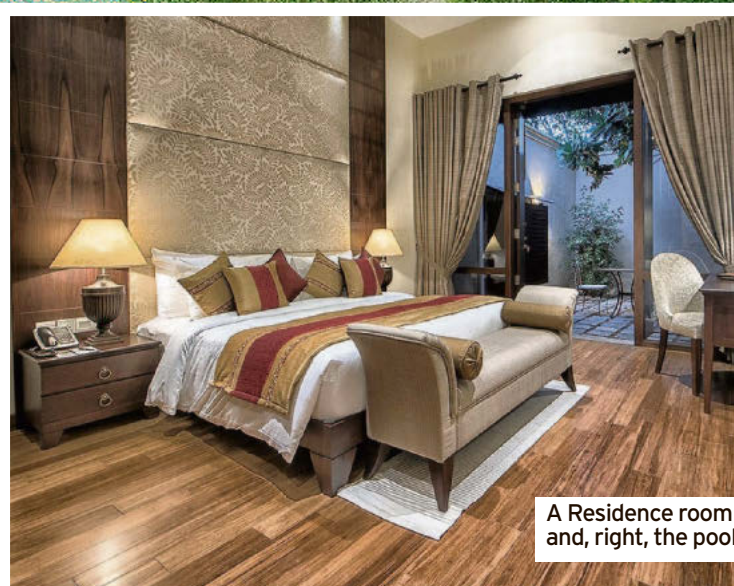
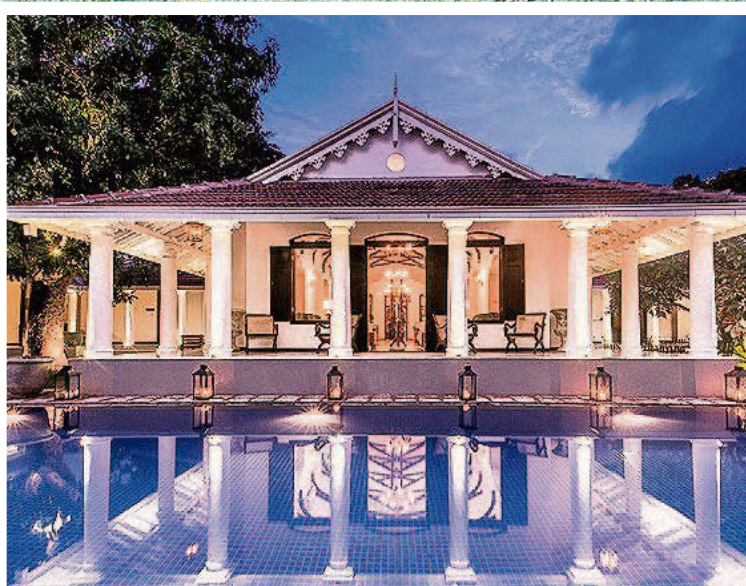
■ Jet2holidays - Algarve, Vilamoura, three-star Parque Mourabel Oasis Village, seven nights self-catering departing from Manchester on April 13. Price: £229 per person based on two sharing, includes a 22kg baggage allowance and return transfers. To book your trip, or to find out further information, visit www.jet2holidays.com, freephone 0800 408 5594, or visit your travel agent.

■ Thomas Cook offers seven nights in Larnaca, Cyprus from £1,555 per family, based on two adults, one child sharing. Staying at the four-star Sunwing Sandy Bay on a self-catering basis, flying from Manchester on April 8. To book, visit www.thomascook.com, call 0844 412 5970, or visit your nearest Thomas Cook store.

■ Jet2CityBreaks - Rome City, four-star Black Hotel, three nights bed and breakfast departing from Manchester on April 13. Price: £299 per person based on two sharing, includes a 22kg baggage allowance. To book your trip, or to find out further information, visit www.jet2holidays.com, freephone 0800 408 5594, or visit your travel agent.

■ Teletext Holidays offers seven nights in Lanzarote from £444 per person based on two adults sharing. Staying at the four-star The Mirador Papagayo on a half-board basis, flying from Manchester on March 19.

■ Teletext Holidays offers seven nights in Gran Canaria from £513 per person based on two adults sharing. Staying at the four-star Caserio Hotel on a half-board basis, flying from Manchester on March 22.



A Residence room and, right, the pool