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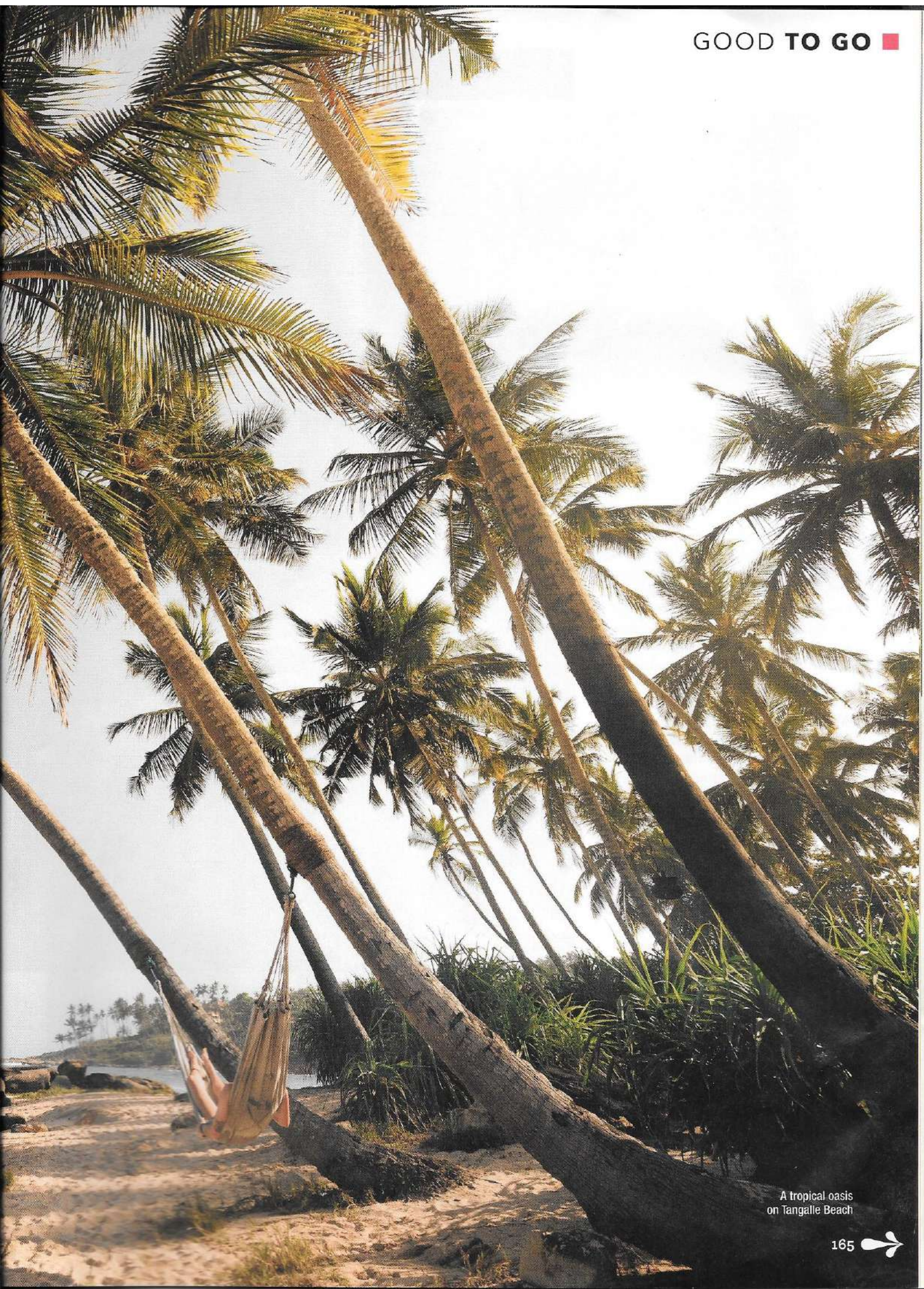


*Terms & conditions apply, see inside



Paradise FOUND

Sri Lanka offers an incredible blend of experiences – ancient temples, palm-fringed beaches... and some 20 million people all with an amazing capacity to smile. Travel editor David Wickers takes a tour of the tropical island at the toe of India



A tropical oasis
on Tangalle Beach



Wallawwa's stylish lobby

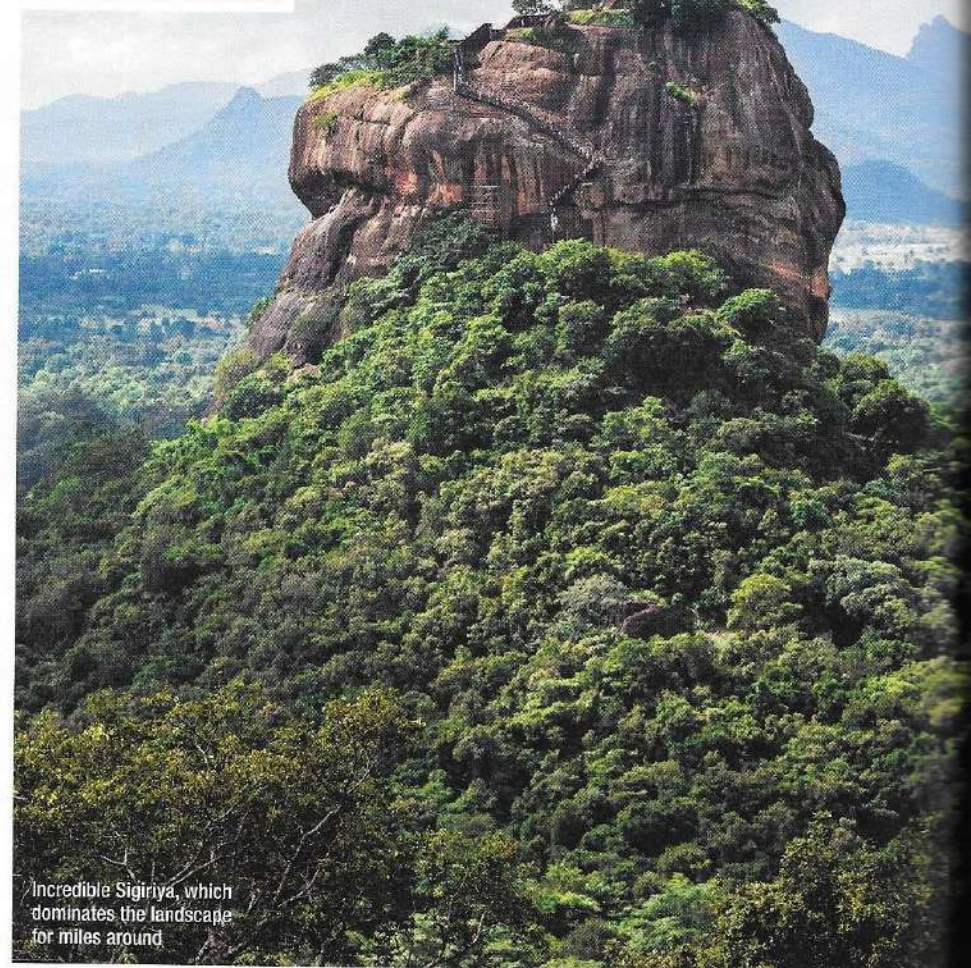
We flew non-stop to Colombo, turned our backs on the city and spent the first night in Wallawwa, an 18-room colonial-style country house in Negombo, just 20 minutes from the airport.

Wallawwa would be the perfect first stop after a long flight to any destination in the world. Lucky Sri Lanka! And lucky us, taking a restorative dip in the pool encased in eight acres of lush garden bursting with birdsong, followed by a massage before enjoying our first delicious (and not too hot) curry on a terrace cooled by paddle fans. Heaven.

We then took a five-hour but fascinating drive north into the 'cultural triangle'. We visited Anuradhapura, the island's holiest city, a place of pilgrimage with white tureen-like temples (or stupas). It's home to a 2,000-year-old bo tree, which is said to have begun as a sapling from the tree under which Buddha gained enlightenment, its arthritic boughs supported by crutches.

On to Sigiriya, a rock fortress that rises from the scrubland like the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb. It's the Uluru of the northern hemisphere. The vertiginous stairway to the summit passes a number of dusky, bare-breasted and bejewelled maidens, frescoes painted 15 centuries ago, the colours as intense as if they were fresh yesterday. On the flat summit is an even bigger surprise: what some believe is Asia's oldest surviving garden. The third point in the triangle, Polonnaruwa, is home to the bones of a once-sprawling medieval capital featuring a reclining Buddha, longer than a bus, carved from a single slab of granite.

Hotel Ulagalla, with its authentic colonial looks, gigantic pool and just 20 chalets spread over 58 acres amid the song of exotic birds, is the place to stay in this



Incredible Sigiriya, which dominates the landscape for miles around

cultural triangle. We enjoyed a cookery lesson in a field kitchen modelled on a traditional rural home, the ingredients freshly picked from the organic garden.

A CHANGE OF PACE

Heading south, passing through hilly and hard-wooded scenery, we arrived in Kandy, welcomed by an armageddon of a storm, the roads like rivers, the river like a feisty stream of melted chocolate. The traffic, infested with tuk-tuks scurrying around

like a plague of beetles, was horrendous and rather detracted from the charm of Kandy's lake and the spirituality of the Temple of the Tooth, another sacred site housing the relic of one of Buddha's teeth inside a nest of gold caskets.

We stayed at Elephant Stables, intimate and perfectly located on a broad shelf of a garden overlooking the town, with a small pool. In addition to the seven rooms is the Luxury Royal Tented Suite, like a super sumptuous yurt where we were billeted.



Take in spectacular scenes on the journey to Nuwara Eliya

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

From Kandy we took the train to Nuwara Eliya, climbing more than 3,500ft to orange pekoe (a type of tea) country, where acres of tea bushes smother the hillsides. We splashed out on first-class tickets at a fiver each for the four-hour ride.

The exotic blooms of the tropical lowlands give way to gladioli, sweet pea and lupin, while leeks, carrots and potatoes nudge aside papaya and pineapples. The town, a colonial hill station, is known as Little England on account of its frequent drizzle, mock Tudor buildings and the Hill Club whose walls carry heads of beasts, a python skin, a pen

and ink of snow and sheep on the Lakeland fells and photos of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh's 1954 visit to Sri Lanka. It's as though the past 50 years never happened.

We stayed in Stafford Bungalow, an original tea planter's house with four guest rooms, a garden with a tennis court, faded photos of 'Ceylon' and charming staff. Breakfast was served on the lawn, with marmalade, Marmite and porridge flavoured with whisky, overlooking the estate's tea crops.

From a drive through the spectacular scenery around Ella we descended south



Elephants roam free in Yala National Park



Wallawwa's pool is surrounded by eight acres of gardens

The park is home to the world's highest density of leopards



to the coastal plains and to Yala, one of Sri Lanka's oldest and largest national parks, where leopards stalk and elephants roam. It's home to the world's highest density of leopards. We saw one, sprawled over the branch of a tree, plus buffalo, a mongoose, land monitors, crocodiles, bears, boar, several elephants and birds like kingfishers, bee eaters, painted storks (so called because of the bright pink colour on their tail feathers) – on just two game drives.

Although Yala isn't in quite the same league as Africa's game parks, Chena Huts would rank among the very finest lodges.

We carried on west along the coast and

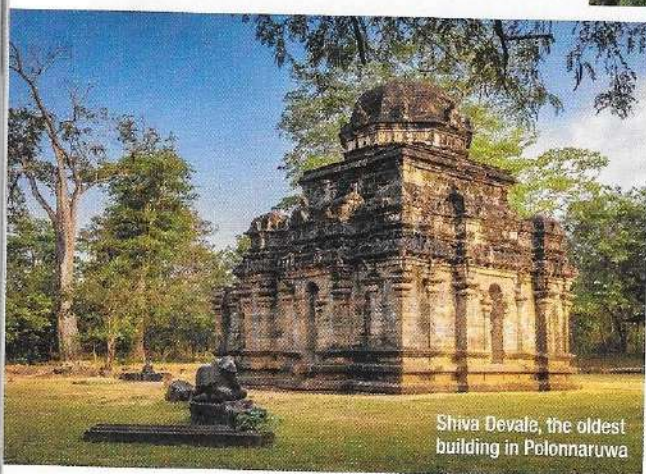
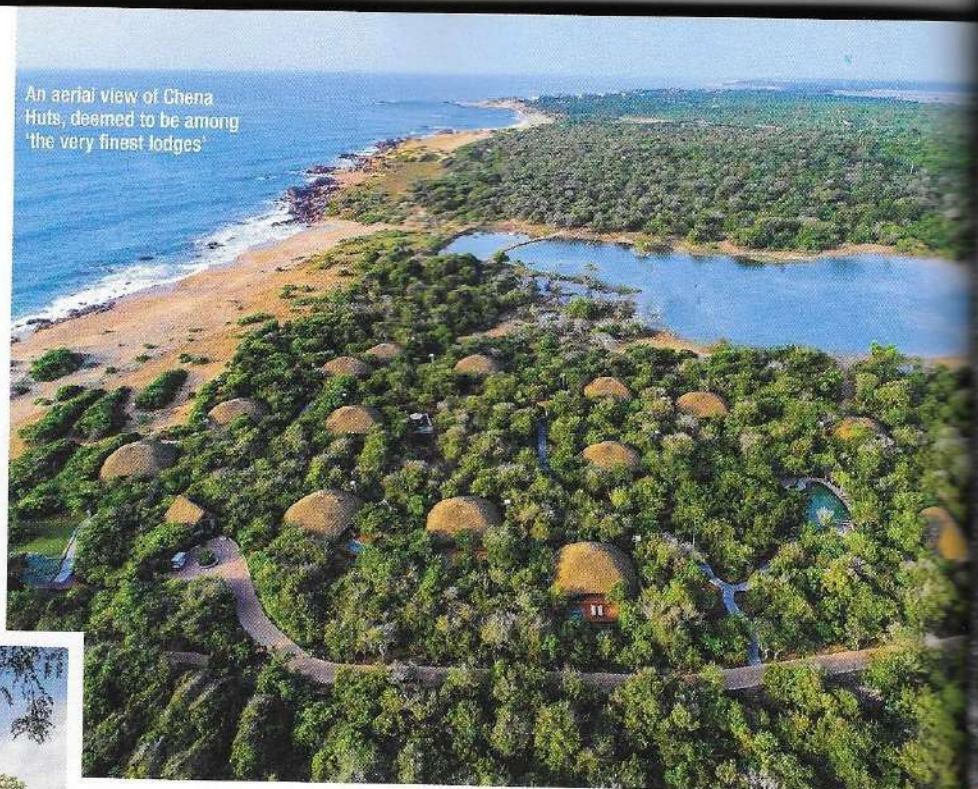


[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] spent two nights at the Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort, a large five-star property by the sea at Tangalle. Despite its size, the Anantara was tranquil and a perfect place to chill after touring.

The surf, thumping feistily on the shore, ruled out even a paddle, but the pool was calm and there were plenty of distractions: twice-daily yoga, three restaurants, whale-watching excursions, a spa, and even a rice paddy and an ayurvedic doctor.

Everyone loved Galle, our last stop. A grid of narrow streets, girdled by massive

An aerial view of Chena Huts, deemed to be among 'the very finest lodges'



Shiva Devala, the oldest building in Polonnaruwa

ramparts, contains hundreds of historic buildings, a legacy of earlier Portuguese, British and mostly Dutch masters, many now shops and restaurants. Our last refuge was part of Galle's historic fabric. Fort Bazaar, with its paddle fans and louvred windows, is a townhouse-turned-boutique hotel. It doesn't have a pool but

guests have splash rights at the Lighthouse Hotel, a 10-minute jaunt by tuk-tuk.

WHEN TO GO: Autumn to spring. Cox & Kings (coxandkings.co.uk) has a similar 14-day/12-night private tour from £4,075pp including flights, transfers, a driver and car throughout, train from Kandy to hill country and B&B (half board at Stafford Bungalow and all-inclusive at Chena Huts) with game drives, valid from 1 October to 14 December.

The other islands of the Indian Ocean – pick yours

THE MALDIVES

A flotilla of a country with over 1,000 islands. All are fringed by white sand beaches and an azure lagoon where the diving and snorkelling are second to none. There are around 100, mostly five-star, resorts, each with an island to itself. Don't bother with more than one island; hopping isn't easy. Choose carefully, take lots to read and listen to, then stay put.

WHEN TO GO: November to May.

GO WITH: Kuoni (kuoni.co.uk)



THE SEYCHELLES

This group of islands, 1,000 miles from anywhere, is renowned for its worlds of natural beauty and incredible wildlife. The best way to enjoy the Seychelles is to island-hop, by boat, seaplane or helicopter, taking in the diversity of this picture-perfect archipelago. Choosing just one island to visit is like picking one chocolate from a box of multi-centres.

WHEN TO GO: In our summer months.

GO WITH: Inspiring Travel Company (inspiringtravelcompany.co.uk)

MAURITIUS

Described as a land of 'rainbows, waterfalls and shooting stars', Mauritius has miles of beaches, hotels with stars as abundant as the Milky Way and an interior clothed in sugar cane. Visit the highlands and valleys in the south-west corner, beautifully scarred by the Black River Gorge.

WHEN TO GO: May to November, the rest of the year being warmer but wetter.

GO WITH: Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) □



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY