

## Will SNP be on the right side of history?

High stakes dual strategy over Brexit risks driving the UK into a No Deal

### News // Insight

Dani Garavelli meets women discovering a career in science



### Sport // football

Edouard holds key for Celtic as Rangers bid to salvage season



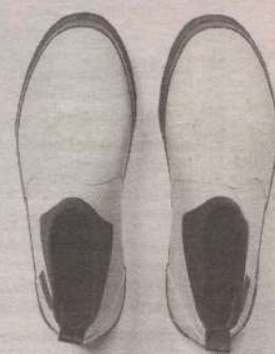
### Sport // rugby

No dream semi-final as Edinburgh and Glasgow exit Europe



### Fashion

Bòtann puts the welly boot into style with a Gaelic twist



£2.30

Subscription price £1.84

31 March, 2019

No. 1,592

£2.30 ISSN 0955-8756



9 770955 875336

13 >



# Unspoilt Sri Lanka is a real treasure island

Scott Macnab goes coast to coast to enjoy resorts, temples, jungles and beaches in a magical destination that's bound to get busier

**M**iles of near-deserted golden beaches, vast sweeps of lush green jungle and coconut trees framing vistas of smouldering horizons. Sri Lanka's northeast coast is one of the few parts of the tropics still unspoilt, with mass tourism yet to arrive in this stretch of the island. It's almost a decade since the end of the civil war which blighted much of the nation, so steeped in history and cultural diversity. Its treasures are slowly being opened up and it's easy to see why a growing global visitor market is being seduced by the place. Temples and mosques, ancient cities and heritage sites, the legacy of centuries of colonial rule, not to mention a bit of swimming with sharks, make it a destination that seems to want for nothing.

I fly into Colombo and stay at the opulent Residence operated by Sri Lankan boutique specialists Uga. It's a pocket of calm amid the chaos of the sprawling capital. Eleven luxury suites are set out in a courtyard around a swimming pool and bar area of a former townhouse which once welcomed the cream of Ceylon society in the colonial area. Located in the central Park district, it's an ideal base to explore the cosmopolitan city.

The "floating" Buddhist temple, Seema Malaka on Beira Lake, is a popular first stop with visitors. Our guided tour with local firm Pepper Life includes an illuminating breakdown of the history and religious heritage of the city which comprises Buddhists (40 per cent), Hindus (20 per cent), Muslims (20 per cent) and Christians (10 per cent).

We also take in the granite Sri Ponnambalam Vanesar Kovil Hindu temple, then cross the road to St Anthony's Shrine, the national Catholic shrine of Sri Lanka.

A real eye-opener is the Pettah neighbourhood, with its open-air markets and bazaars, as well as the towering red and white brick facade of Jami Ul-Alfar Mosque.

Travelling around wider Sri Lanka is certainly a rewarding experience but



it can take time – with no motorways yet connecting Colombo on the west coast to Batticaloa on the east coast, driving would take the best part of seven hours. However, we cover the 140 miles with a 50-minute hop on an eight-passenger "air taxi" sea plane operated by Cinnamon Air from Water's Edge lake in the centre of capital. Breathtaking bird's eye views across the island abound and it's a short drive up to the coast to Pasikudah Bay.

The Uga Bay five-star resort is nestled in the heart of this cove, with 44 classically designed studios no more than two stories in height right on the beach. The restaurant serves the freshest seafood caught that day alongside an expansive range of the best Sri Lankan, Asian and continental foods.

It would be easy to lounge around for the duration of my stay in these idyllic surroundings with an infinity pool overlooking the Indian Ocean, but I get itchy feet after a while and decide to try a spot of scuba diving.

As I'm a beginner, a couple of hours' lessons are provided in a nearby pool the night before. A 20-minute boat trip takes us out to the wreck of the British



Clockwise from top: beautiful beaches abound; a statue at Koneswaram Temple; Colombo; lush hillsides



**'It's an ideal base to explore cosmopolitan Colombo'**

Sergeant, a tanker sunk by the Japanese during the Second World War. It's only 10-15 metres down and some parts of the ship are remarkably well preserved. I'm accompanied by a professional throughout my half-hour dive – along with an array of banner, damsel, angel and long-nose butterfly fish, while corals and starfish hug the wreck.

Next stop is the jungle. It's a couple of hours' drive up the coast to Uga's Jungle Beach resort but it feels like a world away.

This is another beachfront getaway, but the 48 villas are fully equipped and fused with the natural surroundings of trees and bush. Monkeys have been

known to make an appearance in the trees overhead and some smaller crocodiles patrol the enclosed lake in front of the entrance.

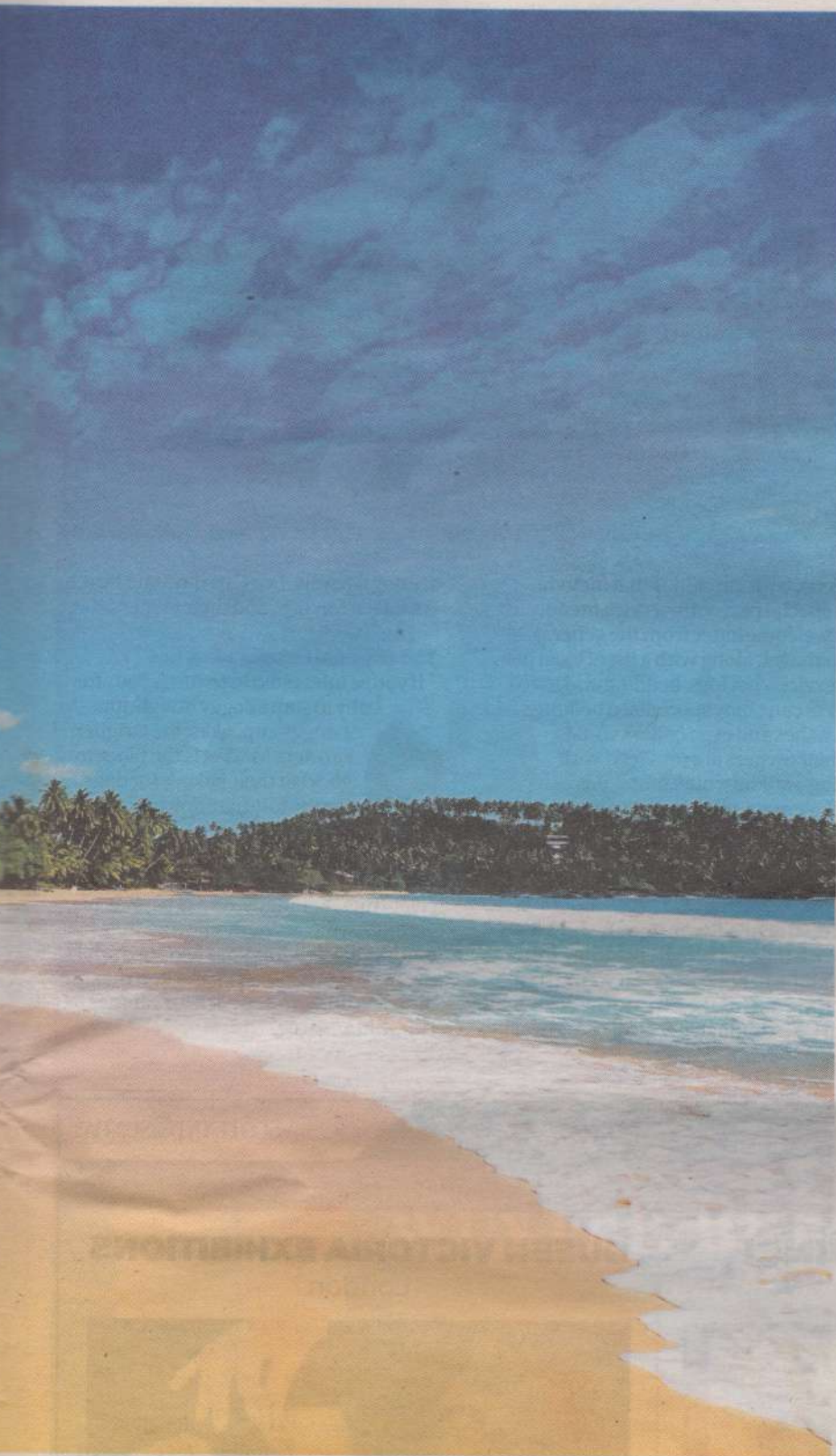
It's a short stroll from my villa down to the Kuchchaveli beach and I enjoy a pre-breakfast dip in the near-deserted sea each morning. The restaurant and lounge areas are also enclosed in the jungle backdrop which makes eating here a real experience.

Like Pasikudah, this region was ravaged by civil war and Uga, as a Sri Lankan firm, makes it a duty to employ many of those affected by the conflict, on both sides, and so help regenerate the local community.

Next we head to the nearby town of Trincomalee and venture up to the cliff-top Koneswaram Temple. The classical-medieval Hindu temple has a host of statues which were rediscovered after being hidden by monks when the Portuguese embarked on a spree of destruction during their reign. It also affords great ocean views.

If you find yourself struggling with any ailments or health niggles, the Kanniya Hot Wells are the place to go. The seven hot springs, arranged in square bathing wells, attract hordes of locals for their





healing properties. Doing it properly means having your head doused in the waters from each of the springs, so prepare to get wet. At least buckets are provided – and I did feel a bit perkier afterwards.

Next morning we enjoy dolphin-watching at the foot of Trincomalee cliffs, as a number of pods of spinners come out to put on a show. Then it's over to Pigeon Island, a few miles back up the coast and a designated natural park, for a spot of snorkelling. It's spectacular stuff, as four-foot-long black tipped reef sharks (they look bigger to me) stalk the sea bed below us, while a raft of sea life, including the colourful but temperamental Titan trigger fish (they've been known to bite divers), Moorish idols and trumpet fish accompany us. We also dodge a number of Lion's mane jellyfish which are truly startling creatures and carry a mean sting.

It can't be long until this magical place is opened up to a wider visitor surge. But as our boat meanders back to Kuchchaveli, with the Indian Ocean on one side and mangrove-backed sands on the other, part of me yearns for it to stay this way forever.

#### FACTFILE

Book an East Coast tour of Sri Lanka with Uga Escapes ([ugaescapes.com](http://ugaescapes.com) / +94 11 2331 322), staying at Uga Bay from £202 (B&B), Jungle Beach from £224 (B&B) and Residence from £201 (B&B). Return flights from Edinburgh to Colombo, with Qatar, start from £714. A range of authentic Sri Lankan experiences, such as Colombo's Culture and Kattankudy City Walk, can be booked through Pepper Life ([experiences@pepper.life](mailto:experiences@pepper.life) / +94 77 008 8877).



## Do Not Disturb

Grootbos Private Nature Reserve, South Africa

## Luxurious lodges

@LISAYOUNGPHOTO

**A**mong a maze of winding nature trails, Grootbos Private Game Reserve can be found perched on a wooded, coastal hillside overlooking Walker Bay. It is a breath of fresh air between Cape Town and the start of South Africa's Garden Route. The place is alive with birdcalls, exotic insects and elusive animals. It's a great place to learn about the world's diverse floral kingdom too, filled with colourful wild flowers.

Secluded Grootbos is a 2,500-hectare property located 145km from Cape Town (a two-hour drive heading east via Hermanus). It blends so well with its surroundings of pristine shrubland and milkwood forests that you can't see it until you arrive.

Translated from Afrikaans, Grootbos derived its name from their rare and protected milkwood forest, "Groot bos", which means big thicket. The low forest canopy of twisted trunks is one of only ten in the world.

One of the attractions here is whale watching and June to December are prime months, when whales come early in the season to mate and later in the year to give birth. Visitors can watch from the shore or take a cruise along the coast, getting close up, and also visit the small islands nearby that are home to thousands of seals. When planning a visit, time it according to what you want to see. August to November is best for the beautiful wild spring flowers at Grootbos; December to March is summer, and although the days can be very hot and sunny, the sea is still cold; while autumn, in April and June is a good time for spotting animals and birds.

#### Budget or boutique?

Grootbos is not cheap, but the price includes all meals, as well as all land-based activities including horse riding, mountain biking, guided walks and hikes, marine, coastal and nature drives and transfers to activities, so it's still good value.



#### Room service

Grootbos is two lodges in one; each has its own decorative style, as well as its own restaurant and pool area.

The child-friendly Garden Lodge has spacious luxury suites decorated in natural hues and calming colours, each with a fireplace, huge beds and a rain shower. There's a pool, restaurants, and great views on to Walker Bay. There are 16 stylish suites at Forest Lodge, hidden discreetly among the foliage and connected by paths and tunnels. The "rock star style" private villa is another option, but it is big.

#### Wining and dining

Meals at Grootbos are a fine dining experience, even if you are in a remote setting. The same menu is served in both restaurants; guests just need to decide where they'd like to eat. Cheerful and polite waiters buzz about the thatched restaurant and bar with its circular dining room, serving delicious local wines from an extensive list and exotic cocktails. There's a rich buffet-style breakfast, with a hot, off-menu option. Lunch consists of a three-course meal or a salad and sandwich option.

A weather dependent, six-course dinner menu is served in a fairy tale forest setting, where guests dine among low trees decorated with lights.

#### Worth getting out of bed for

Activities include walks along endless sandy beaches; 4x4 jeep excursions exploring the hills with expert guides and a team of conservationists; horse riding with instructors along the beach or hillside landscape; bird watching from your terrace; driving to Klipgat Cave on the coast to explore Stone Age artefacts; boat trips to Dyer Island to see penguin and seal colonies; and cage-diving among great white sharks.

#### Little extras

All rooms have a terrace, TV, wifi, air-conditioning, mini-bar and hairdryer.

#### Guestbook comments

Private, peaceful and luxurious, the suites are ideal for soaking up silence or connecting with nature.

Lisa Young

**For suites in the Garden and Forest lodges for two adults per night in low season (1 May to 15 July) prices start from Rand 11,480 (£610), and up to R17,800 (£950) in peak season (16 December to 10 January). A family suite (two adults and three children sharing) in the child friendly Garden Lodge starts from R17,220 (£920 approx) per night in low season. Prices vary for the private villas depending on numbers of guests and Grootbos can provide rates via email. [www.grootbos.com](http://www.grootbos.com)**