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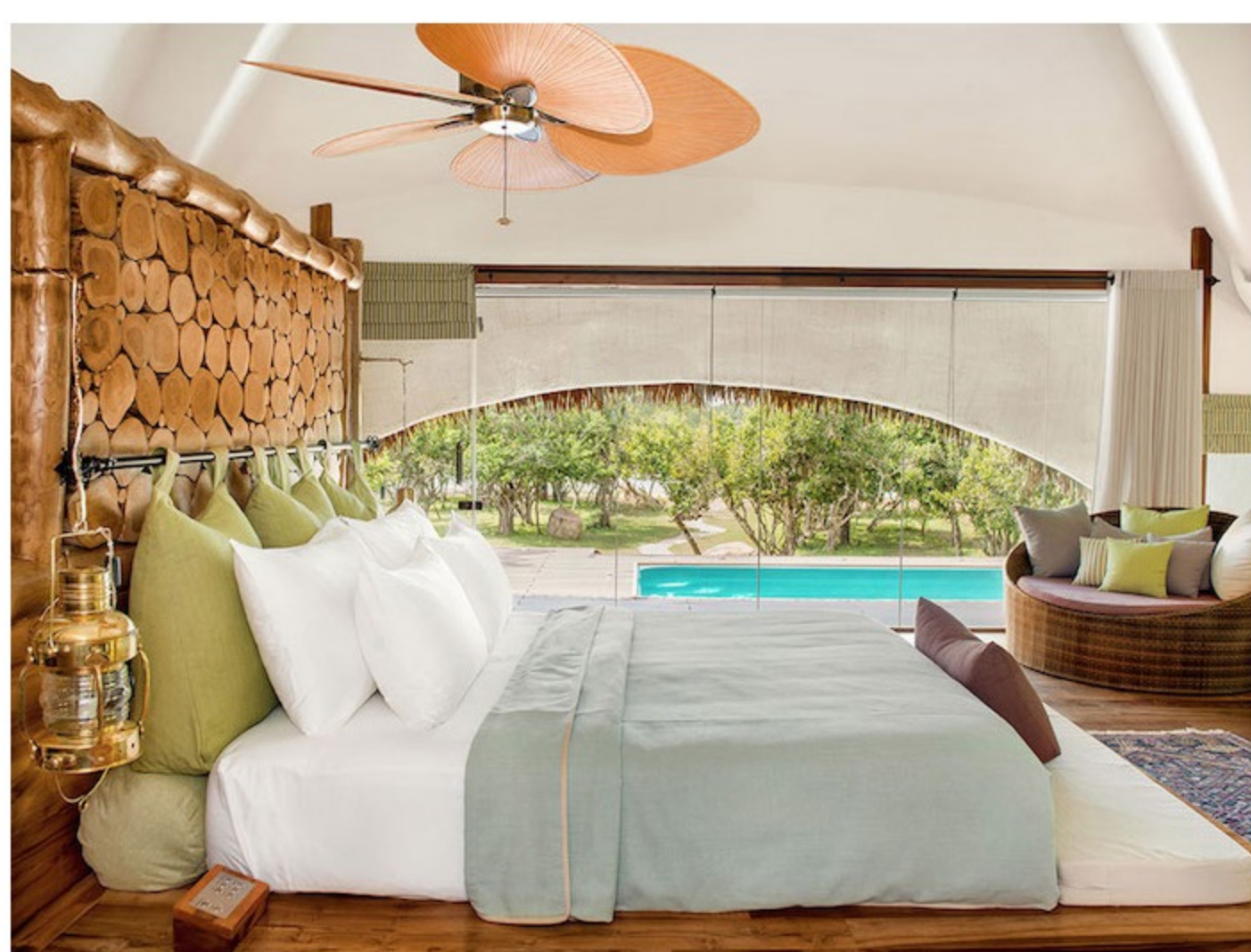
Sri Lanka in Style, Part II: Chena Huts

BY TOM BANGAY ON JANUARY 13, 2018

TRAVEL

Tom Bangay's Sri Lankan escape continues as he departs tea country, avoiding the hair-raising hours-long drive south to the elephant enclave of Yala National Park...

With limited time in Sri Lanka, an internal flight seemed wise to get from Kandy to Yala national park without spending seven hours in a van. We pull up to the Polgolla Aerodrome only a few minutes before our plane is due to take off, only to realise it's not so much an aerodrome as a jetty on the Mahaweli river. With perfect cinematic timing, a shiny white sea plane swoops in from the south east and lands on the water, spinning a quick u-turn before pulling up at the jetty for us to hop on. A few minutes later we're back in the sky, skimming Sri Lanka's highest peak, Pidurutalagala, on our left, and Horton Plains national park below us. After a glorious half hour of unbeatable views, we splash down in a lake near Tangalle to drop two people off, before whipping back up and over to Wirawila air force base. We park our ride and head for Chena Huts, Uga Escapes' nature-focused resort in Sri Lanka's deep south.



Chena Huts sits at the edge of Yala national park, on the windswept south coast. It's a bumpy ride off the main road, towards the sea, before Chena's swooping thatched roofs emerge from the bush and welcome you in with a cold towel and a drink. Chena are small clearings where farmers sleep in rudimentary constructions, so they can chase hungry elephants off their crops in the night. Our huts are some way from rudimentary, but they maintain a look that blends right into the bush and leaves the jungle looking unspoiled. It's this commitment to nature that means animals are comfortable passing through the resort, and lizards, monkeys, elephants, warthogs and even the extremely occasional leopard have been spotted on the walkways.

Inside the huts it's a different story. The AC is powerful and immediate (as is the Wi Fi). Under the domed roof, the gargantuan white bed sits on a plinth in the middle of the room, fringed by rugs on the polished wooden floor. Huge TV, minibar, bath, wet room, all present and correct, and out of the back door is our own private pool, frothing away on its Jacuzzi setting. You can get some serious relaxation done in here, and when you're ready to wander back for dinner, you can ring a bell to summon an escort – just in case any of the resort's visiting fauna are in your way.



Game drives to explore the national park are a key feature of Chena Huts. Block 1 of Yala National Park is one of the best places in the world to see leopards, and thankfully Chena has not skimped on this part of the experience. The resort maintains a squad of highly trained rangers who deliver a thoughtful and educational experience that's a million miles away from some of the get-in-a-jeep-and-crowd-the-elephants deals further north. We head into block 4 – unfortunately block 1 is closed at this time of year – and immediately see the difference. Our ranger stops the jeep with a silent gesture to the driver; we look at each other, confused; he explains there are elephants in the trees ahead, and if we pause here they can't smell us. Sure enough, after half a minute a family of elephants lumber out ahead of us and start throwing dirt around in the evening sun.

Monkeys occasionally swing by overhead as we cruise by the lake; the Weheragala Dam that adorns Sri Lanka's 5,000 rupee note is in Yala, and it flooded a plain to create a beautifully still lake filled with dead trees as far as the eye can see. Crocodiles lurk between the branches, waiting for a yellow-eared bulbul to relax a little too much. We don't manage to see a leopard – they are fantastically good at hiding – but baby deer make an appearance on our way out of the park, before we head back to Chena Huts in the darkness.



Food is a full-board affair – it's not like you pop out for food with leopard tracks within a few minutes of the hotel. Meals and drinks are taken in the restaurant facing the beach, inside or outside, depending on your preference (and the wind). The cocktail game is strong, with a good number of punchy efforts drawing on the fresh fruit to be obtained in the surrounding forests.

Curries are more than decent and breakfast is particularly generous – a necessity for those long mornings in a jeep, waiting for stealthy big cats to appear. It's also worth mentioning the well-equipped spa, and the picturesque pool next to it, fringed by palm trees to offer shade while you relax with a drink from the swim-up bar. Chena Huts is a place to see nature, but that doesn't mean you have to leave the most luxurious of creature comforts behind.

Chena Huts from Uga Escapes. For more information, including details of special offers, visit www.ugaescapes.com.



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