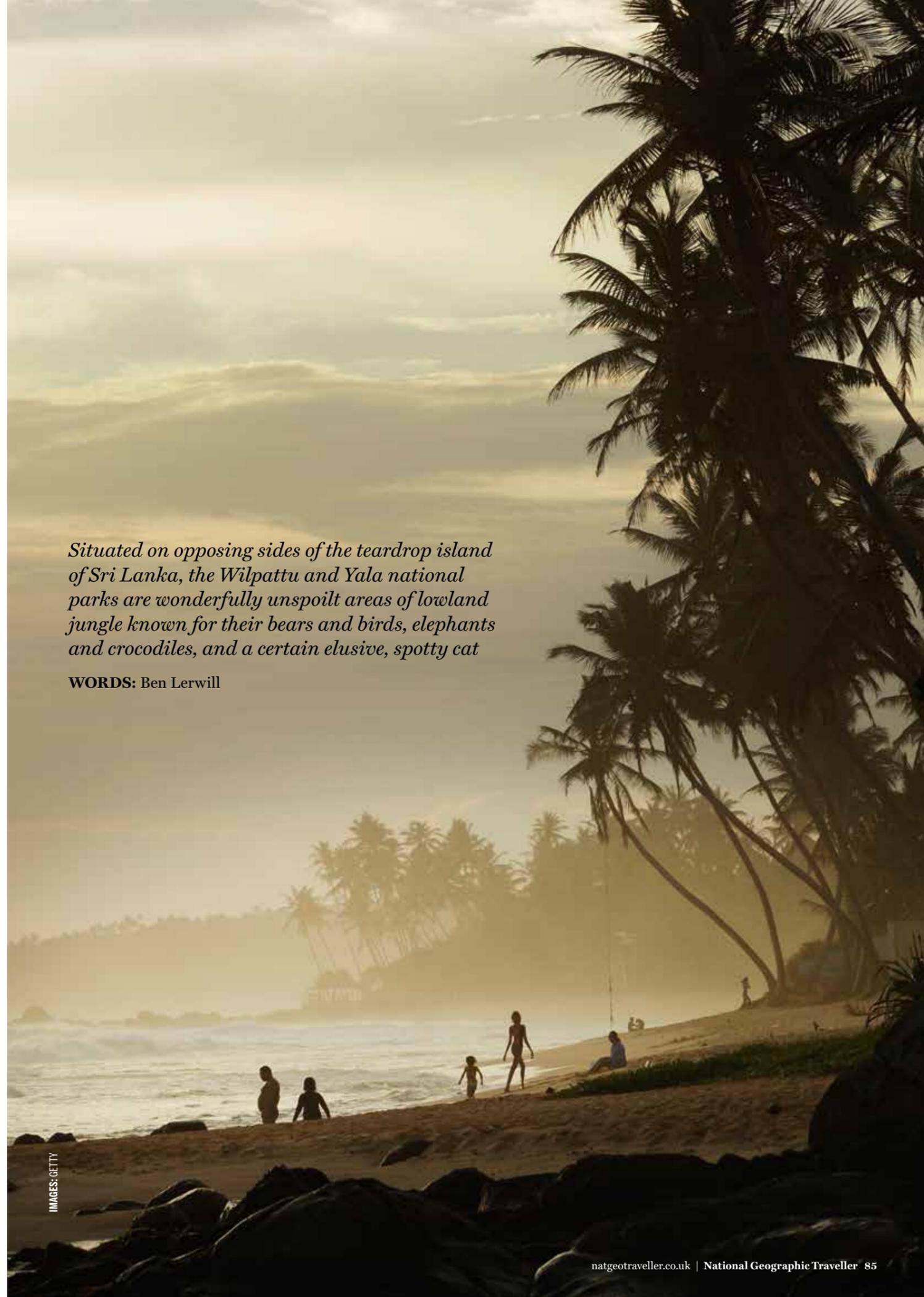


HIDE AND SEEK

Situated on opposing sides of the teardrop island of Sri Lanka, the Wilpattu and Yala national parks are wonderfully unspoilt areas of lowland jungle known for their bears and birds, elephants and crocodiles, and a certain elusive, spotty cat

WORDS: Ben Lerwill



IMAGES: GETTY



THE LEOPARD.

A majestically handsome animal fond of prowling and slinking across the grasslands of the tropics. A patterned assassin with a sleek coat and all-seeing eyes. A prince among big cats, whether slung in the bough of an acacia tree or springing savage-toothed upon its prey. And a pain in the backside if you're actually trying to see one.

Some would say fate is not being kind. I've come to Sri Lanka to visit its two biggest national parks — Wilpattu in the northwest and Yala in the southeast — both of which are chiefly renowned for their leopards. Together the parks cover more than 880 square miles of wilderness. That's a lot of space for spotted predators to hide in, and sure enough they're doing a scrupulous job of evading this particular traveller. Seven days in, and I've not even glimpsed the flick of a tail. Woe is me.

What an ordeal, I think each night, as I tuck into homemade curries under the stars. Poor me, I mutter, as I watch baby elephants tottering through the bush just feet away from my jeep. My luck is appalling, I curse, as I lie back in my comfortable safari tent listening to otters splashing outside. Again.

Leopards can wait. It would take a fool to feel short-changed in Sri Lanka. Within hours of heading north from the airport I've been drawn in by the country's heady centrifugal force, a colour-drenched whirl of frangipani trees, giant

Buddhas and politely chaotic drivers. My jetlag is tossed aside with a smile and a freshly hacked-open coconut. Kingfishers are flashing through the leaves, roadside stalls are dishing out bags of sweet lychees and the coastal sunshine is pounding down on temples, mosques and churches.

I'm here for the animals. Sri Lanka may not be a big island — it's a shade smaller than Ireland — but it positively pulsates with fauna. When the road signs warn of elephants crossing, you know you're somewhere that sets the wildlife bar high. The birdlife alone is world-class, and the country's spread of lowland jungle plays home to a massed assembly of swinging, slithering and scampering inhabitants.

"Open-billed stork. Cattle egret. Sri Lanka hill myna," catalogues Yatawara, my permanently cheery driver, identifying birds as we steer past cashew plantations and sparkling wetlands. He's a long-term member of the Ceylon Bird Club and takes obvious relish in keeping one eye on the road and the other on the verges. I recline my ►

IMAGE: GETTY

Previous spread, from left: Stalking leopard; Unawatuna beach in Galle, southern province.
Opposite: Three-wheeled ice-cream van, Galle



Sloth bear, Wilpattu National Park

IMAGE: LEOPARD SAFARIS

seat and try to take it all in. If there's one thing I'll come to learn on this trip, it's that there's always plenty to see. Just don't put too much emphasis on the L word.

Of bears & butterflies

We're heading first to Wilpattu, the biggest of Sri Lanka's national parks by size, though often excluded from the usual traveller circuit. This is partly because international visitors tend to gravitate to the island's surf-friendly south, and in part as the park has suffered severe tribulations in the past. Its location on the borderland between Sinhalese and Tamil parts of the country rendered it hazardous during the decades of inter-island conflict.

There was a time — a long time — when any Sri Lankan travel feature would have been obliged to mention the civil war in its introduction. Thankfully, the country has moved on. So too has Wilpattu, which has had plenty to overcome. Once the most visited park on the island, it was forced to close in 1988 after a shocking attack in which its Sinhalese wildlife rangers were lined up and killed en masse. It reopened from 2003 to 2007, before further landmine and shooting incidents saw it shut its gates again until 2010. The animal population, decimated by wartime poaching, is still recovering. Happily, with some success.

"A bear, right there," whispers my safari guide Praneeth, cutting the engine on the jeep. I look over the side of the vehicle and see a black shape less than 10 metres away, shifting through the bush. The shape turns to reveal a pale face and long muzzle, its dark nose twitching tentatively towards us. "Its eyesight and hearing are poor," murmurs Praneeth. "It's checking us out by smell."

After half a minute, the bear seemingly satisfies itself that we present no threat and continues its snuffling undergrowth investigations, ambling slowly on thick-furred legs. The sloth bear is one of Sri Lanka's rarest animals.

Our jeep is entirely alone on a tree-cramped track through one of Wilpattu's forests, so we're getting a private show. The bear pauses at a foot-high termite mound. Despite its name, the creature is no relation to the sloth and can become a blur of claws and speed if provoked. Now it gives a sudden show of its strength, forcing a hole in the termite mound with its front paws. There follows a loud tearing noise as the bear rips out a web of plant roots, then an almost comical shoop-shoop as it sticks its lips into the hole and hoovers out the unfortunate insects.

Wilpattu feels genuinely special, in part due to the fact that it's little-visited. I'm staying at a tented riverside camp run by Noel Rodrigo's Leopard Safaris (I know, I know), situated in the buffer zone on the park outskirts. The setting makes it a wild, immersive place to stay, with paradise fly-catchers skimming above the water during the day and the churr of frogs and nightjars providing an evening soundtrack. It's a fine place to stargaze too and these ➤

Locals say that in the coastal national park at Yala, the animals sensed the 2004 tsunami before it arrived and headed to safety

indulgences make the 4.45am wake-up calls for game drives more than worthwhile.

“Crocodiles can’t break wind,” volunteers Praneeth matter-of-factly, early the next morning. We’re watching three open-jawed mugger crocodiles basking in the dawn sun on the edge of a *willu*, one of the large water-filled natural

depressions from which Wilpattu takes its name. “Their mouths are gaping like that to regulate their body temperature,” he continues.

It makes the crocs look like they’re smiling, as well they might — the banks of the *willu* are coursing with wildlife. Spotted deer are grazing in flocks, wild boar are nosing through shrubs, grey langur monkeys are swinging rowdily in trees and mongooses are skittering busily out of the shade. In the air, meanwhile, white-bellied sea eagles ride the high currents while small, flamboyantly hued orioles and bee-eaters zip from branch to

branch. Praneeth opens a box and produces coffee, papaya juice and filled roti flatbreads. It’s some breakfast spot.

I spend three days at Wilpattu, which is perhaps the minimum it warrants. Many of its roads are badly rutted, making it slow going at times, but the low number of other jeeps gives it the feel of an exclusive reserve. On my final game drive, we come upon a 100-strong cloud of lemon emigrant butterflies, and they puff around us like yellow confetti. Praneeth — just a tad gratingly, if I’m frank — points out a clearing where he recently saw a leopard and her cubs. It’s nearly three decades since Wilpattu had to first close its gates, and the park’s fauna has been wholly reliant on nature’s gift of self-restoration. Its future deserves to be a rosy one.

The road to Galle

Dangling from Yatawara’s rear view mirror is a lotus leaf covered with delicately inked spiritual mantras. During the drive back down south, he reels off the three main tenets of Theravada Buddhism, the religion that still dominates the country. “Refrain from all evil, cultivate the good and purify the mind,” he says, counting them off with thick fingers above his steering wheel.

He might have added a fourth, which seems to encompass all the Sri Lankan faiths: play cricket. The sport is everywhere. Batsmen wallop balls around palm-fringed playing fields in each town we pass. Ex-pros smile off from billboard adverts for noodles and cologne. Schoolkids set up makeshift wickets bang in the

middle of rural roads. And when we reach Galle in the warmth of late evening, spread in front of us is the ground often referred to as one of the most beautiful Test match venues in the world.

The stadium owes its reputation for good looks to its backdrop, made up of the spangled blue of the Indian Ocean and the elephant-grey bulk of Galle Fort. Built by the Portuguese, expanded by the Dutch then ceded to the British, the vast battlement-enclosed fort is Sri Lanka’s best preserved remnant of its colonial past. Today, more than 65 years after the country regained its independence, the lanes, shophouses and ramparts within its thick walls still thrum with life.

I’m here in Galle for two days because it’s a convenient midway point between the two national parks I’m visiting. It would be easy to linger for longer. In the fort, Sri Lanka’s various cultures jostle along together to fascinating effect. Rooftop restaurants serve up table-filling spreads of curry, rice and mango lassi against a panorama of magnolia trees and minarets, and at sunset the long ramparts become crowded with strolling residents and tourists. Snake-charmers tout for spare rupees, but to little avail — in Galle at dusk, with sarongs aglow and the sun bleeding orange into the sea, there are far too many other things for people to point their cameras at.

One afternoon I wander the fort’s earliest buildings and, next to a Dutch Reformed Church from the 1750s, come across a small but wonderfully preserved public library. Its shelves are stacked with a mixture of old English and Sinhalese titles, and cane reading chairs are arranged on a stone floor. The elderly librarian licks her fingers and proudly shows me an original history folio from 1803, then opens a book of black-and-white photos from Galle’s past. “The fort still looks the same,” she says, smiling. “The only change is that the rickshaws have become tuk-tuks.”

Animal instincts

The coastal road from Galle to Yala showcases Sri Lanka at its most backpacker-friendly. Pizza shacks, surf lodges and numberless beaches line the way, and three-wheelers selling fresh bread tootle along in the heat. Incongruously, it was also this area of the country that was one of the worst hit by the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004. Other than heartrending stories of tragedy, survival and government corruption, there’s mercifully little to suggest to outside eyes that the disaster ever took place.

Locals say that in the coastal national park at Yala, the animals sensed the tsunami coming before it arrived. When the waters receded, having flooded inland for more than a kilometre, there was barely a carcass to be found. The overwhelming majority of the park’s resident animal population — elephants, leopards and water-buffalos among them — had seemingly headed to safety before calamity struck.

“The animals are very alert, always very alert. They have to be,” says Sarath, my Yala wildlife ➤



IMAGES: SUPERSTOCK; ALAMY; CHENA HUTS

Clockwise from top left: Antiques store with Galle Lighthouse in the distance; library on Church Street, Galle; master bedroom at Chena Huts



guide, as our jeep bumps along the path on my first morning in the park. “Predators are everywhere.”

Sarath, too, is more alert than most. Seconds later he points into the branches of an overhanging tree to reveal a crested hawk-eagle tearing out the innards of a monitor lizard. Minutes after that he spies a baby crocodile, a dark green slip of a thing, wallowing in a muddy pool.

Yala covers an area of some 585 square miles. Its pale, sun-bleached landscape alternates between open spreads of riverine grassland and dense patches of coastal forest. It’s the most visited national park in Sri Lanka, and often feels like it. On occasion, word gets radioed around the multitude of drivers that a particularly interesting animal has been seen — one of those spotted big cats whose name escapes me, for example — and queues of jeeps start forming on narrow dirt roads.

After we have a couple of experiences like this, without seeing the creatures in question, Sarath wisely decides that it’s best to ignore the radio, head to a quieter part of the park and see what we come across. A lot, as it happens. A pair of jackals skulking out of the bush. A family of elephants gorging noisily on foliage. And suddenly our own lagoon, where everything comes alive: peacocks fussing around with tail-feathers on display, two Malabar pied hornbills flying overhead, storks high-stepping through the croc-roamed shallows. In Yala, few

things feel as good as taking in the wildlife when there are no other jeeps around.

At Chena Huts, the spectacularly swish new retreat where I’m staying, the staff pose me the same two questions after each game drive: “I hope you enjoyed it?” and “Did you see any leopards?” For three days I reply “yes” to the first query and “no” to the second. At the end of the final game drive, I’ll admit there may have even been a twinge of dejection in the responses.

There’s more wildlife to come, however. The retreat is based in its own beach wilderness just outside the official park boundary, and sightings of elephants and buffalo are common. After dinner on my last evening I join Harita, one of Chena Huts’ guides, on a night-time bushwalk. The experience quickly turns into a heart-racing one — our torches pick out bizarre-looking spiders and centipedes, and the flash of reptilian eyes by waterholes. The darkness is edgy. Harita spots a snake whipping through the sand and within seconds has it in his hands, identifying it as a knotted krait. “Not poisonous,” he says cheerily.

We turn to go back, and as Harita’s torch falls back onto the ground he stops dead. “Look, pug-marks,” he says calmly. “Leopards’ pug-marks. Four rounded toes, asymmetric heel pad.” Fear swamps me. A leopard? Here? Now? “No, maybe two hours ago,” he answers. I stare down at the prints and feel my pulse pounding. I’m still jumpy when we arrive back. A trip to Sri Lanka is no guarantee of seeing the country’s famous leopards — but they’re out there. ►

Above: Yala National Park

ESSENTIALS

Sri Lanka

GETTING THERE

SriLankan Airlines flies between Heathrow and Colombo daily. There are one-stop services available with airlines including Emirates, Etihad and British Airways. srilankan.com emirates.com etihad.com ba.com
Average flight time: 10h 30m.

GETTING AROUND

Getting from A to B can be time-consuming. There are two expressways out of Colombo (serving the airport and Galle), but otherwise, the roads are narrow. Buses and private vehicles provide long-distance transport. The rail network has improved recently and stretches to the far north. For short journeys, tuk-tuks are ubiquitous.

WHEN TO GO

Temperatures are fairly constant, averaging 26-30C around the coast and 18-22C in the hilly central areas. There are two monsoons: the southwest monsoon affects the west coast and inland areas and is at its rainiest between April and June, while the northeast monsoon hits the east coast and is at its rainiest throughout November and December.

NEED TO KNOW

Visas: UK visitors need to purchase a 30-day electronic tourist visa before arrival. The cost is around £20.
Currency: Sri Lanka Rupee (LKR)
 £1 = LKR208
Health: Avoid tap water and use adequate sun protection. Dengue fever affects some areas.
International dial code: 00 94.
Time: GMT +5.5.

PLACES MENTIONED

Noel Rodrigo's Leopard Safaris. leopardsafaris.com
 Chena Huts. ugaescapes.com

FURTHER READING:

The Rough Guide to Sri Lanka. RRP: £14.99.

HOW TO DO IT:

Western & Oriental offers an eight-night, tailor-made tour from £1,589 per person for two adults. It includes SriLankan Airlines return flights from Heathrow, transportation and driver-guide throughout and excursions including jeep safaris in Wilpattu and Yala, a city tour of Galle, whale-watching and a trip to the Elephant Transit Home. Accommodation is on a minimum B&B basis, with four nights all-inclusive. westernoriental.com □



ILLUSTRATION: NIK NEVES