

NATURAL HIGH

Surrender yourself to the serenity of Sri Lanka's idyllic boutique nature resorts.

Text Emma Boyle

PHOTOS DOMINIC SANSONI/THREEBLINDMEN PHOTOGRAPHY





Vil Uyana

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The beauty of Vil Uyana is its flourishing wetland ecosystem, carefully carved out of reclaimed agricultural lands a decade ago. Vil Uyana's 25 luxuriously appointed dwellings – some with private pools – sit on stilts over three distinct habitats (water, marsh and forest) with a handful perched above working paddy fields. The creation of this private 10-hectare nature reserve has boosted biodiversity and up to 80 bird species and 17 mammal species now call Vil Uyana home. Scan for wildlife as you stroll to the restaurant, work out in the glass-fronted gym, dine in the idyllic treehouse or select books from the serene over-water library. Highlights include the 5km Sigiriya Bird Trail, a pathway to the foot of the historic fifth-century Sigiriya rock fortress, and Minneriya National Park, renowned for 'The Gathering' when elephants congregate in large numbers between Aug-Oct around the receding waters of the Minneriya Tank.

The Mudhouse

There are few retreats as blissfully tranquil as The Mudhouse. Set deeply within over 20 hectares of jungle, organic farmland and lotus-laced lakes, this eco-venture offers an authentic immersion into Sri Lanka's ancient north-western heartlands. Four forest-fringed clusters of rustic mud-moulded cajan-thatched huts blend traditional building techniques with a creative interior design. Showers gush from trees, hammocks dangle all over the place and a serene yoga pavilion looks out over the resort's swimming pool, a private lake. Delicious Sri Lankan food is a highlight, and a proportion of produce is sourced from the resort's organic garden. Well over 100 species of Dry Zone birds are spotted here along with a host of mammals such as the elusive slender loris and tiny-footed mouse deer. Wake up to free crack-of-dawn bird-watching and make for Anawilundawa's wetlands or Wilpattu National Park.

Leopard Safaris

For the ultimate wildlife adventure, stay in one of Leopard Safari's luxury tented fully mobile camps at



An outdoor cajan-thatched resting hut at The Mudhouse



The Mudhouse

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The Mudhouse

Pahaladuwelweva,
Anamaduwa
Tel +94 77 301 6191
www.themudhouse.lk

2

Leopard Safaris

Yala, Wilpattu and
Uda Walawe
Tel +94 71 331 4004
www.leopardsafaris.com

3

The Rainforest Ecolodge

Enselwate Tea
Estate, Deniyaya
Tel +94 41 340 5666
www.rainforest-ecolodge.org

Yala, Uda Walawe or Wilpattu national parks. Camps are erected close to swim-worthy waterholes on the buffer zone of these nature-stuffed reserves; wildlife to scour for include Sri Lanka's Big Three: Elusive leopards, majestic Asian elephants and scrubby-furred sloth bears. Birdlife is abundant in the parks as well and ranges from tiny green bee-eaters to the rare black-necked stork. Camping with Leopard Safaris is no ordinary experience – spacious South African tents boast proper beds, furnished lounge porches and 'ensuite' alfresco jungle bathrooms with hot showers. Service is highly personalised and rates include everything you can eat and drink (including alcohol), plus two safaris a day with informed local guides in customised jeeps.

The Rainforest Ecolodge

Set within a 200-hectare division of the Enselwate Tea Estate near Deniyaya, The Rainforest Ecolodge sits on the border of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve, Sri Lanka's only natural UNESCO World Heritage Site. In tribute to this two million-year-old virgin rainforest, the resort's design conforms to eco-tourism principles, which earned them a prestigious LEEDS Platinum award for sustainability. Crafted out of two-and-a-half recycled shipping containers apiece, each of the resort's 16 foliage-tufted chalets is raised high on stilts above lush tea bushes, a mere two metres from the reserve. Floor-to-ceiling windows allow you to gaze unobstructed over the mist-cloaked forest that surrounds you, and all treks into the reserve are guided by naturalists and included in the rate. Sinharaja is incredibly bio-diverse: Eight of the island's 12 endemic mammal species are found here along with almost all of Sri Lanka's 26 endemic species of birds.

Villa Talangama

This idyllic three-bedroom villa is only a half hour's drive from Colombo, but its position on the edge of the Talangama Wetlands makes it a great escape from the hustle and bustle of the capital. Distinctively styled to 'look out' over the serene lotus-topped waterways, the vertically-open spaces, breezy verandas and lush garden of this secreted suburban villa allow you to seek out wildlife effortlessly. The wetlands harbour 46 species of birds such as kingfishers, herons, bitterns, cormorants and waterhens, as well as reptiles and mammals including endemic purple-faced leaf monkeys, water monitors and mongooses. The villa is rented on an exclusive basis, sleeps up to 11 and comes with a full complement of staff.

98 Acres

Nestled within a 40-hectare (98-acre) tea estate on the outskirts of the south-eastern hill country hamlet of Ella, this eco resort boasts spectacular views across a deeply creviced valley descending into the island's southern plains. The 12 rooms are located within pretty illuk-thatched chalets perched in amongst lush tea bushes overlooking Little Adam's Peak and Ella Rock. Celebrated Sri Lankan ornithologist >>

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Vil Uyana

Sigiriya
Tel +94 66 492 3585-6
www.jetwinghotels.com

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Jungle Beach

Kuchchaveli, Trincomalee
Tel +94 26 567 1000
www.junglebeach.lk

6

Villa Talangama

Hokandara, Colombo
Tel +94 11 238 1201
<http://www.jetwingeco.com/content/villa-talangama-colombo>

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Sloth bear sightings increase in May as these elusive creatures boldly emerge to feast on the ripening yellow berries of the dry zone Palu (ironwood) tree.

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Alankuda

Alankuda Beach,
Kalpitiya
Tel +94 77 735 2200
www.alankuda.com

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98 Acres

Greenland Estate,
Namunukula Road, Ella
Tel +94 57 205 0050
www.resort98acres.com

9

Madukelle Tea & Eco Lodge

Madukelle, Kandy
Tel +94 71 777 7750
www.madukelle.com



Malaysia Airlines flies direct from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Colombo (CMB)

RK Widanagamage spent three months researching birdlife here and discovered 63 species, including six endemics. Bird walks are conducted at dawn and dusk, you can go trekking or cycling, visit the estate's tea factory or take a day trip to Horton Plains National Park.

Alankuda

The fingernail-shaped windswept peninsular of Kalpitiya makes an idyllic natural setting for a resort, and Alankuda's four clusters of independently-managed properties idolise this spectacular coastal locale. Accommodation consists of charming private villas and palm-thatched chalets decked out with natural ornaments and idyllic alfresco showers, and facilities include common restaurants and swimming pools. Numerous bird species – particularly raptors – are drawn to the arid, salt-speckled landscape of the peninsular and blue whales, sperm whales and dolphins can all be spied out at sea. Bar Reef, a beautiful coral garden a short boat ride offshore, is accessible for snorkelling or, if pre-arranged, diving for certified divers. In the nearby Puttalam Lagoon, pink dolphins and elusive dugongs (sea cows) are sometimes spotted, and Wilpattu National Park – home to leopards, elephants and sloth bears – is an hour's drive away.

Jungle Beach

As its name suggests, this isolated retreat is absorbed within four hectares of scrub jungle bordering the deserted sands of Kuchchaveli, 12km north of Trincomalee on Sri Lanka's burgeoning northeast coast. The lush coastal scrub jungle, tropical mangroves and idyllic lagoon are animated by birds, reptiles and mammals which are easy to view from the lounging decks of the resort's 48 contemporary-styled jungle-, lagoon- or beach-view cabins. Facilities include a gym and excellent Balinese spa, and signature private dining is a feature of the resort. You can swim in the bay beyond Kuchchaveli's near-deserted white sandy beach or make for Nilaveli, 6km to the south, to snorkel around Pigeon Island, scuba dive or embark on trips to see blue whales, sperm whales and dolphins out at sea.

Madukelle Tea and Eco Lodge

Nature lovers will adore this tea-flanked eco lodge 30km from Kandy due to its jaw-dropping panoramas and accessibility to the Knuckles Mountain Range. Lodges sheathed in South African tents perch vertiginously over the tea bush-carpeted hillside and feature safari-style bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms and private balconies with jaw-dropping mist-cloaked mountain views. The nostalgia of Ceylon's colonial days is evoked in the estate house, which features a library, English-style bar and dining room with crackling hearth, and there's also an infinity pool. Standing at an elevation of well over 1,000m, the Knuckles is home to huge numbers of endemic flora and fauna. Discover the reserve by trekking to waterfalls and viewpoints, visiting centuries-old villages and being guided through its incredible eco-systems where birds, reptiles and mammals thrive. ■



Alankuda



Jungle Beach Resort



Madukelle Tea and Eco Lodge