



SRI LANKA

“HIDDEN AWAY IN DENSE JUNGLE FOR MANY YEARS, ITS PALACES ARE ACCESSIBLE ONCE AGAIN”



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CULTURAL TRIANGLE

BOTH SUSIE AND ALY INDIVIDUALLY VISITED THIS ENCHANTING ISLAND

Susie: The holy Temple of the Tooth is an ideal location to appreciate the culture of the city of Kandy, set on a plateau surrounded by mountains. The large, fascinating complex houses sacred relics and is on the banks of a beautiful lake; it is best experienced during one of the daily ceremonies, when crowds of worshippers make offerings to the sound of drums and conches blowing. Its grand, annual Esala Perahera procession also includes decorated elephants parading through the streets.

A retreat from the busy throng of Kandy, Kandy House hotel has a country house feel, with beautiful gardens and a large pool. The Ultra rooms have lounges and access to private verandahs; mine also boasted its own stone Jacuzzi in the middle of the room. Dining on the terrace here is excellent. The hotel also arranged a full performance of the traditional, acrobatic Kandyan dance, with fire-eating and drums beating.

The ruins of nearby Anuradhapura are one of the most evocative sights in Asia. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site (one of 8 in Sri Lanka), the former political/religious capital city thrived for 1,300 years before being abandoned in 993AD. Hidden away in dense jungle for many years, its palaces, monasteries and monuments are now accessible once again. I stayed at Ulagalla Resort, where I loved the villas; there are 20 with pools to choose from,

located in its 58 acres. The villas have glass walls and are very large; there is also one 2-bedroomed villa. The main entrance of the hotel is in the old mansion, looking out over a large swimming pool. A great base for 3/4 nights to explore the surrounding area and nearby places to visit. While I was there, the hotel organised a Puja ritual blessing with a Buddhist monk. We all dressed in white and walked to a quiet area; memorably, Mother Nature put on a fantastic thunder and lightning show to accompany the ceremony.

Aly: The garden city of Polonnaruwa was built in the 11th and 12th centuries and replaced Anuradhapura as the capital; it is now another fascinating World Heritage Site. Here you can see the ruins of the royal palace, the Gal Viharaya (3 enormous and very splendid statues of the Buddha in different positions), the lotus bath and the audience hall – all of which are now populated by ubiquitous macaques monkeys.

My hotel for 3 nights was the stunning Water Garden: only a year-old, it has been designed to replicate the beautiful water gardens of the famous Sigiriya rock - just 6km away and in full view from all parts of the hotel. Our two-bedroom Duplex Villa was very spacious, had its own plunge pool and living area and was close to the spa, restaurant, bar and large hotel pool. A climb up the imposing, 200m high Sigiriya outcrop is a must, but do make the trip at 7am (when it opens) as the 1,200 steps up the vertical rock face are in the shade; it's not for the faint-hearted or unfit, but the 360-degree views and the ruined city at the top are well worth the effort.

A short drive from Sigiriya are the five, beautifully painted cave temples at the market town of Dambulla, dating back to the 1st century BC.

Susie: The fortress city of Galle on the south coast is testimony to various invasions over the centuries; its 16th century fortifications and ramparts envelope Dutch colonial buildings, ancient mosques, grand churches, museums, shops and restaurants. It's a delight to explore on foot. I visited Fort Bazaar, a chic 18-bedroom hotel, recently opened within the Fort walls. Rooms are based around a courtyard; the décor is calm and cooling, with four-poster beds and rooms for families. The pool, cinema and spa were being built when I was there. The Church Street restaurant and bar are already very popular and it is in a great location to walk out into Galle.

“A CLIMB UP SIGIRIYA IS A MUST, BUT DO MAKE THE ASCENT EARLY MORNING”



WILDLIFE OPTIONS

Aly: For a sense of adventure and to truly immerse ourselves in the wild in the most eco way possible, we headed for Neil Rodrigo's Leopard Safaris, based in Yala National Park near Kataragama (famous for its temples). Our ranger was welcoming and extremely knowledgeable and on the first game drive, our sighting of a female leopard marking her territory and serenely strolling at sunset was truly awe-inspiring. We also saw a rare King's Mongoose; lizards; an enormous python swollen by its latest meal (a deer); sunbathing crocodiles; many wild elephants with their young; water buffalo and a multitude of birdlife, including various eagles, hornbills and storks. A good camera is an absolute must for any safari here.

Home for three nights was a large, fully customised South African safari tent, which contained a bed with a comfortable mattress, zip-up wardrobe and adjoining separate, flushable toilet and hot water shower cubicle for starlit bathing. My teenage daughter was in seventh heaven – washing in terracotta bowls and lying in bed listening to the

jungle calls was her idea of bliss. Honeymooners (or those who seek every creature comfort) would love the luxury lodge tent option; a sizeable, canvas room furnished with a romantic four-poster, king-sized bed, stylish recycled furniture and even energy-saving air conditioning. The en-suite bathroom with twin washbasins and large hot water rain shower rivals any top hotel.

The big attraction of the camp for all of us – alongside its proximity to the less busy game drives and stunning wildlife – was its eco policies. Focussed on sustainability, it is firmly committed to reducing its carbon footprint and a deep respect for its surroundings – no trees were felled to build the camp, solar panels are used and a dual battery system operates on the jeeps. A highlight of our stay was when my daughter was asked to plant a young tree near to the dining tent, as part of its reforestation project, giving us an extra reason to go back one day, hopefully. Dining was al fresco, with pre dinner drinks and delicious canapés served in the jungle “bar” with hammocks, bean bags and

easy chairs. The menu is authentic, freshly prepared Sri Lankan food, using locally grown fruits and vegetables, some of which are grown in the camp's own garden. Dining under a ceiling of sparkling stars, with a glass of good red wine in hand and a background of jungle noises was an experience I shall never forget.

Susie: Set in 7 acres of Yala National Park in the SE of the island, Chena Huts is an amazing lodge of 14 huts and all rooms and public areas are in keeping with the park. Each luxurious, rounded hut is 1130sq ft with every mod con required and has decking with a plunge pool to relax in between game drives. Rangers here are good at spotting wildlife and very conscious that other vehicles do not crowd the animals. Chena Huts also overlooks the beach, where you may see turtles or elephants wandering down to the waters' edge. There is a central swimming pool and both the bar and restaurant are the hub of the evenings. A fire was lit on the beach and we had a lovely dinner by candlelight. I definitely want to go back!

SCENIC STOPS

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Susie: Perched on a hillside at more than 1,000 ft, the Tea Suite at the Rosyth Estate, Kegalle has amazing sunrise views from its balcony. With an excellent spa and yoga sessions, this hotel is a good base for a few days away from everything, with a good selection of rooms to accommodate couples and families. It boasts a relaxed, homely atmosphere, with friendly staff.

It also has a small pool and cooking classes can be arranged; all guests are asked for their chilli rating before arriving, so the chef does not overpower the curries. As a working, 62-acre tea and rubber plantation, you are welcome to see how tea is produced in the traditional ways. Three hours from Colombo, it is a good option for a base to visit the Cultural Triangle.

For beach lovers, Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort hides away on a rocky outcrop along a secluded stretch of Sri Lanka's southernmost coastline. The 152 rooms and villas with pools are an excellent size. I was in a deluxe ocean-facing room on the 3rd floor; I loved having tea from my own teapot in the room on my balcony in the morning. There is a good stretch of beach, with gardens leading down, as well as a large spa area and kids' club, many areas to sit in and a choice of restaurants. Situated on the beach close to Mirissa (where blue whale watching is possible in season) and Galle, the 6-bedroom Last House, Tangalle was famous Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa's final design and would be perfect for a family or group of 14 friends to book as a whole.

Aly: A scenic, slow train ride to Ella through elevated, verdant tea plantations was a highlight of my trip. A popular trekking destination, more adventurous travellers can climb Ella Rock, visit Ravana Falls or just enjoy the cooler climate and spectacular views.

Set amid the high mountain landscape, our home for two nights was a suite at a tea planter's historic bungalow, Secret Ella, an enchanting 10-acre estate with a small pool and views of the photogenic Nine Arches Bridge. The perfect escape above the clouds.

