

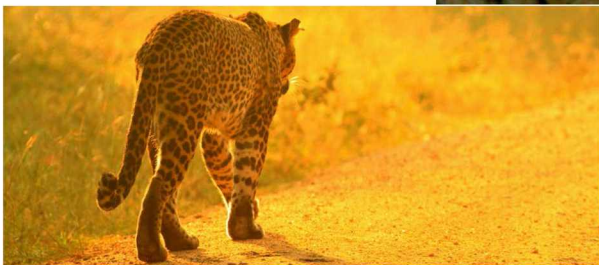
SRI LANKA

GHOSTS IN THE JUNGLE: LEOPARD SAFARI

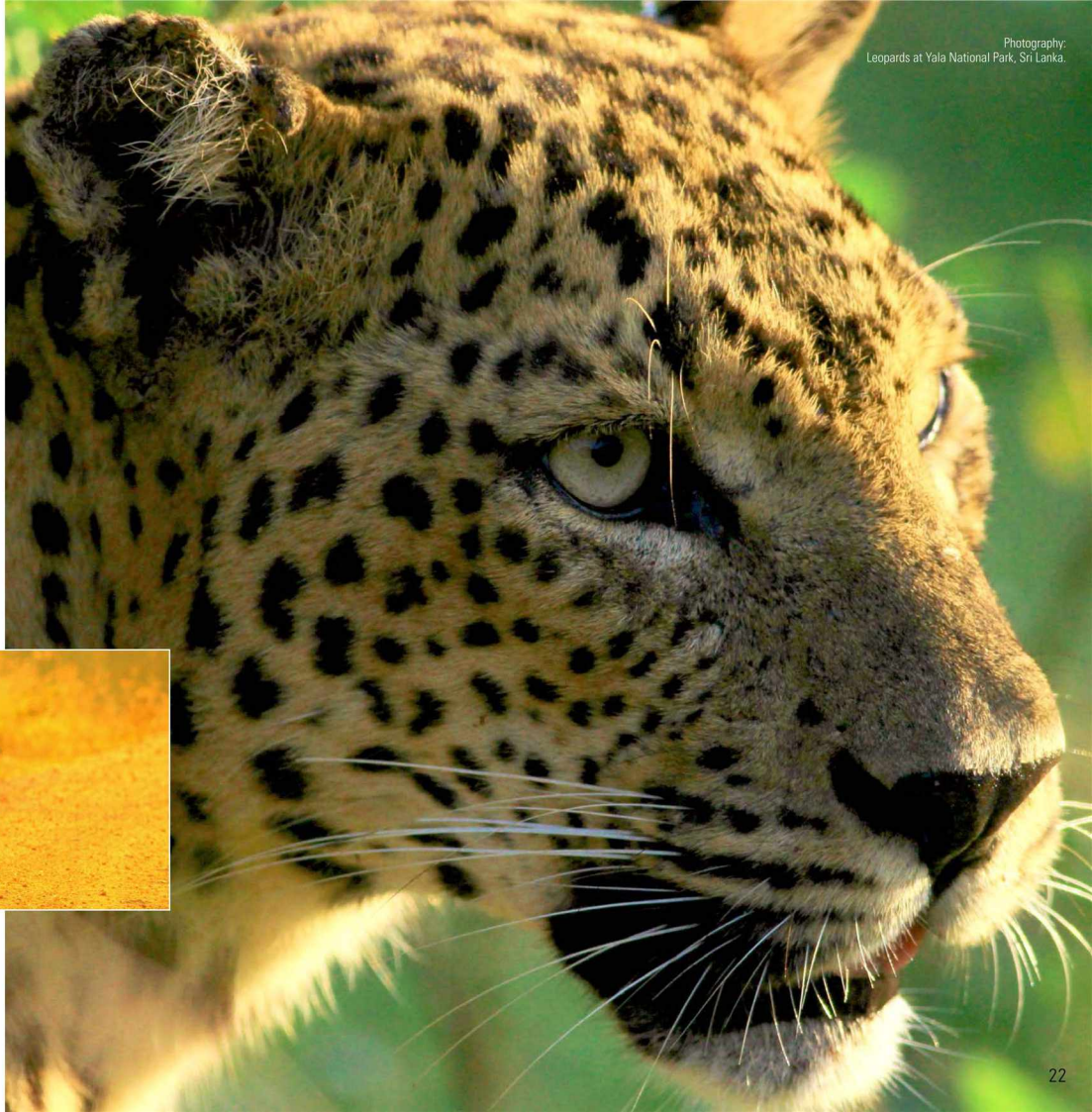
BY BELINDA JACKSON

They're supposed to be shy, elusive and rarely seen, but two days in the wild, and we find a jungle thick with spotted predators. There's one slung around a tree like a carelessly tied scarf, a cub feeding from its mother before gamboling prettily and a third simply ambling down a dusty road in the golden morning light.

Thanks to its compact size, Sri Lanka's Yala National Park is possibly the world's top leopard spotting location, yet back in Colombo, we listen to other travellers and even locals who confess they've never caught a whiff of a leopard.



Travelling with Sri Lanka's bona-fide leopard whisperer, Noel Rodrigo, doesn't hurt, either. Noel has been tracking leopard 'pug' marks for 15 years, including those of One-Eye, Bati (the tiny one), Harmu (the governor) and Scarface. Broken tails, scars and torn ears, he knows them all.





His small, five-star, low-impact camp site sits lightly on the earth while still generously laying on the wine, hot showers and soft beds beneath canvas. He also has a team of expert guides—all keen photographers—and well-equipped jeeps with battery charging-points and camera rests. The camp kitchens serve up some of the best local cuisine we encounter in the country.

When not spotting leopards, we dodge elephants on the move, rouse sleepy buffalos and admire child-like grey langur monkeys, eyes always open for sloth bears, the Scarlet Pimpernels of the Sri Lankan jungle. Twitchers note: we also snap Sri Lanka's national bird, the colourful Ceylon jungle-fowl and watch crested hawk eagles kill while painted storks fish for their supper. The average stay is two nights, and while it's far from the cheapest option, it's an ethically-and sustainably-run operation worth every cent.



➤ ADDRESS BOOK

Barefoot, 706 Galle Rd, Colombo 3 (flagship), also, Galle Fort and Dutch Hospital, barefootceylon.com. Colombo City Walks, colombocitywalks.blogspot.com. Leopard Safaris, from US\$400 a night, all-inclusive (LEOPARDSAFARIS.COM).

Belinda Jackson was a guest of Banyan Tours Lanka (banyanlanka.com) and Mr & Mrs Smith hotels (WWW.MRANDMRSSMITH.COM).