

ESCAPE TO SRI LANKA

Craig Burkinshaw, Managing Director, shares with us the highlights of his recent trip to Sri Lanka...



The South Coast near Mirissa

When I flew to Sri Lanka with my fiancée, Joanne, I was expecting a mild version of India. Although our programme manager, Nick Coates, had enthused to me about its hill country and cultural heartland, I still only knew Sri Lanka as a beach destination. I was to be more than a little surprised by its diversity.

We started off at a pretty eco-resort near Waikkal. Close to the airport, but quiet, it was a great place to relax after our flights. From here we were driven into the cultural triangle to explore the ancient cities of the Sinhalese kingdom. I took Jo to see the remains of the Sigiriya fortress, which rests at the summit of a huge rock. The views were superb although Jo, who is scared of heights, wasn't too happy with the steep climb back down from the top! Similar to Angkor Wat in Cambodia, getting up is rarely a problem; it is the descent that can be a little unnerving. To make it up to her we also visited Habarana Village, where we rode elephants through swampland and saw more of the country's wildlife. Heading south, our highlight of the trip was Sri Lanka's hill country, where the lush tea plantations clung to the mountainsides and



stretched away from us into the distance. The fields and forests of Horton Plains made a beautiful place for a morning walk, and the echoes of British colonialism added to the romantic atmosphere. Nuwara Eliya with its country houses, brick post office and Hill Club is set amongst some particularly beautiful countryside. We even enjoyed a round on the golf course, although my game still needs a little practise.

We decided to spend our final days on the beach. Having taken Nick's advice that the beaches get better the further south you go, we divided our time between Unawatuna and Mirissa. It was interesting to see the stilt fishermen at work, and the beaches were, as promised, perfect. Despite golden sands and gorgeous clear waters, I was bewildered as to why no other tour operators seem to use Mirissa. With such seclusion we felt no need to explore further north.

Leaving the island, it certainly hadn't been what I had imagined. Yes, the beaches were wonderful, but the crumbling ruins in the north were striking and the superb hill country unforgettable.



Stone House Lodge, Kandy

This was one of our favourite hotels during our time in Sri Lanka. It has a great setting, with well-kept gardens, shaded courtyards and ponds, and sweeping views of the area. The house resembles an old British plantation bungalow, with three comfortable and well-appointed suites. The home-made food was delicious and the whole place has a lovely local feel to it.



Elephants near Habarana Village