



POLONNARUWA – CULTURAL TRIANGLE

Not Just Cricket

Charlie Read, one of Audley's Sri Lanka specialists, has an infectious enthusiasm for this island nation.

When I first visited Sri Lanka in 2001, what struck me was how overwhelmingly friendly the people were. Coming from London, and then knowing little of eastern cultures, I found it all too much to understand – random acts of generosity, friendly and honest conversation amongst strangers, an overall sense of goodwill and all before I had left the airport! These three things seemed to sum up my first stay in Sri Lanka, that and a healthy dose of international cricket.

On returning from my travels 18 months later I vowed that Sri Lanka would be the country I would most like to revisit. So when I started at Audley in January of this year, within two weeks I was on a plane back there to discover what other hidden treasures the island has to offer – I was in for a real treat. On arrival I was met by my chauffeur guide Priyalal, who I was to discover, was not only a chauffeur guide but an eminent ornithologist, cricket lover, teller of jokes, and by the time I left – a good friend. Chauffeur guides really do add huge value to your trip,

their local knowledge and enthusiasm is addictive and you learn so much more about the people and the country than you can ever read in a guide book.

An outdoor restaurant at the foot of a vast overhanging boulder

One of Sri Lanka's real gems, I was to discover, is the abundance of wildlife on the island. With seven national parks, five nature reserves, two bird sanctuaries and a primeval rainforest, it is almost impossible to see all of these sites in a two week stay! Sinharaja Biosphere reserve is a World Heritage site and is home to 95% of endemic birds in Sri Lanka. The rainforest is totally uninhabited and unspoilt. I spent a day trekking here and it was breathtaking – made even more special by my stay at The Boulder Garden, a new boutique hotel only 15 minutes away from the reserve entrance and a totally unique concept to Sri Lanka. The hotel has been built around a number of enormous boulders that are clustered

at the fringe of the rainforest. Boasting its own freshwater swimming pool, 10 individually designed rooms all incorporating the natural rock formation into their layout, and an outdoor restaurant at the foot of a vast overhanging boulder (that you can't help but feel will drop on to your head at any time – but I have been assured won't) serving some of the best food in Sri Lanka. The Boulder Garden is a unique experience and one which is not worth missing out on.

Equally exciting is the Elephant Corridor in Dambulla, another new hotel and one with aspirations of being the island's first six star hotel. Set on a lake and alongside the route taken by the wild herds of elephants to the lake to drink and bathe, I was really impressed with this establishment – its tranquillity and setting are unrivalled, and each of the 24 suites are furnished and finished to the highest standard with antique four poster beds. Every suite has its own plunge pool (either inside or out), a private garden where all meals may be taken if desired, and stunning views of the lake which offers

clients unparalleled access to the wild elephants playing, bathing and washing. Its location means you are also perfectly placed for the next two or three days to explore the wonders of the Cultural Triangle but that, and the fabulous mountains, are for a future Audley Traveller article.

Perhaps the best place to see the most diverse array of flora and fauna is Yala National Park on the south east coast. Sri Lanka has one of the highest density populations of leopard in South Asia with over 500 accounted for. With 30 of them resident in Yala, you have every chance of seeing one, as I did. Having arrived in Yala later than expected, I jumped into the back of one of the park jeeps with Priyalal and a park guide and we had a little over 2 hours before nightfall to try and find a leopard. I had soon given up all hope, but no sooner had I packed my camera away than we were staring at a three year old male leopard lying on his back on the side of the road playing in the early evening sun! We stayed with him for over 15 minutes before he slipped

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back into the bush, and left our party utterly speechless. Having consequently spoken to people who have been back to Africa five times to try and spot a leopard, I felt very privileged, very privileged indeed. The guides and jeeps at Yala are excellent. If you have Priyalal with you, no doubt he will teach you the Latin, Sinhalese and English names of every living thing in Yala (as he did with me) and you can't help but be affected by this man's enthusiasm and knowledge – its astounding.

What also makes Sri Lanka, in my opinion, the best island destination in the world are its beaches which are plentiful and beautiful – that much I learnt in 2001. Personally, I found Taru Villas in Bentota to be the perfect haven to unwind. Owned by Taru, Sri Lanka's leading fashion designer, this nine bedroom villa has become an instant 'hit' with our clients. The rooms have been elegantly designed incorporating Sinhalese and European antique furniture, with a twist of the contemporary,



THE BOULDER GARDEN

but each room maintaining its own individual identity. With beautifully landscaped gardens leading down to the beach, a good sized pool, and a menu boasting 'fusion cuisine', in a short space of time this villa has become a raging success, not least because of the endeavours of Dorothy, the Sri



PRIYALAL AND CHARLIE



BEE-EATER

Lankan born and English educated manager of the property. Her effervescent and chatty character is a real delight to be around and she will look after you like you were her own family.

Probably the best stretch of beach in Sri Lanka is at Trincomalee, or 'Trinco' as it's affectionately known to the locals. A former navel port used by the British during the Second World War as their headquarters for South East Asia operations, and by the Americans during the Vietnam War, more recently this town was off limits because of the conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese government.

However, due to the ceasefire between the two warring factions in February 2002, it has, for the first time in over 20 years opened to locals and tourists alike. With a fragile infrastructure and limited accommodation choices I found the Nilaweli Beach Resort to be the best accommodation option. Fantastically positioned right in the middle of this vast stretch of sand, some 16kms from Trinco, the hotel offers excellent scuba diving and snorkelling, in a relaxed and informal environment. Whilst not quite up to the same standards as many of the West coast beach hotels, The Nilaweli Beach Resort does allow you to explore a part of the country which has been totally inaccessible for the last 22 years, its well worth a visit and the beach is absolutely beautiful.

As I sat on the plane reflecting on my time in Sri Lanka, both this time and in 2001, my conclusions were that with its rich array of history and culture, a small smattering of the colonial past, its significant historical and religious sites, an embarrassment of wildlife, some of the best beaches in Asia and, above all, an overwhelming sense of goodwill – until anyone can prove to me otherwise – Sri Lanka is the best island destination in the world.

Travel File

Sri Lanka remains one of the best value destinations in Asia. A 14-night tailor-made itinerary with chauffeur guide costs from £1,295 per person. A tour using the hotels that Charlie mentions in his article would cost from £1,795 per person. For further details please call Charlie or Renira on 01869 276 218.