

# Eight days was not enough to see all Sri Lanka's delights

BY STUART FORSTER

**S**RI Lanka's cultural heritage, wildlife and cuisine are factors drawing a growing number of visitors to the tropical island that lies across the Palk Strait, south-east of India.

To maximise what I could see and experience during an eight-day tour of Sri Lanka, I had at my disposal the services of a chauffeur-guide.

Luxman greeted me with a handshake at Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport and showed me to the air-conditioned vehicle that we'd be touring in over the coming days.

I'm a big fan of road trips and enjoy the experience of driving abroad. However, renting a car

## Public displays of affection frowned upon

and self-driving is the exception rather than the rule in Sri Lanka, where hiring a car with a driver is the norm.

Indian Odyssey, the tour operator that arranged my tailor-made itinerary, suggested that a chauffeur-guide would be a means of maximising insights into the island's heritage while travelling.

But what would happen if I didn't get on with the driver? What if I wasn't impressed by either his driving or guiding skills? Those concerns crossed my mind before setting off to Sri Lanka.

I was provided with telephone numbers to call in case the driver did not meet my expectations. Ultimately, I need not have worried, Luxman made a positive



ELEPHANTS in Udawalawe

impression from start to finish.

As we headed into the heart of Colombo, I soon saw why it's best to have a driver in Sri Lanka.

Heavy rush hour traffic, characterised by lane-hopping and the frequent use of horns, made it tricky for a newbie, such as myself, to read the flow of the road.

I was glad to be in the passenger seat, leaving the driving to Luxman, who explained he'd been a professional driver and guide for more than 20 years.

He dropped me at the Cinnamon Grand Colombo hotel and we agreed to meet in the lobby the next morning.

The reason? I'd booked a walking tour of the city with a local guide, to gain an insider's perspective of the nation's capital, whose historic Fort District has

evolved into the country's financial and business hub.

The Portuguese, Dutch and British have all left their marks on Sri Lanka.

One notable colonial era legacy that typifies recent efforts to beautify the city while is Colombo's Dutch Hospital. The late-17th century building has been preserved through conversion into a shopping precinct with chic, upscale stores and restaurants.

Luxman explained that many tourists head straight to Sri Lanka's beach resorts, without

## Tourists can view feeding sessions

spending time in Colombo. The surfing, particularly on the island's south coast, is rated among the best in the world.

Negombo, an hour's drive north of the capital, is a coastal resort that is conveniently close to the island's principle airport.

We paused at Negombo's fish market on the way to Wilpattu National Park, the largest in Sri Lanka.

Leopards, sloth bears and an array of birdlife draw wildlife lovers to the national park, whose name is derived from the local name for the lakes that speckle Wilpattu's sandy terrain.

My accommodation was one of the air-conditioned tents operated by Leopard Trails. It was glamping rather than camping, with multi-course meals and drinks served in separate open-sided tents.

At Anuradhapura, Luxman explained the historical context of the rock carvings at the ancient Isurumuniya Temple and joined me for a stroll through the

royal gardens, through which water flowed in its heyday.

He also climbed the narrow staircase that leads to the top of Sigiriya, a fortress perched on top of a rock that provides an outstanding vantage point over the surrounding landscape.

The fifth-century fortification is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Colourful frescos of women are displayed in a gallery improbably high on the rockface.

Having a chauffeur-guide proved handy as Luxman chatted candidly about a range of issues, including the political situation in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war in 2009.

Those conversations provided insights that helped me better understand the land in which I was travelling.

I gained cross-cultural insights too. Luxman reminded me that Sri Lankans expect travellers to dress modestly when anywhere but the beach.

Entering a temple dressed in shorts and without covering the shoulders is frowned upon, as are public displays of affection by couples.

The value of having a chauffeur-guide with local contacts came into its own as we neared Minneriya National Park.

Aware of my keen interest in wildlife and desire to photograph Asian elephants, Luxman arranged for an off-road vehicle to pick us up for a two-hour game drive, that also brought opportunities to photograph a jackal and herd of water buffalo.

He also asked if I'd be interested in a pause at the Elephant Transit Home in Udawalawe National Park.

Every three hours orphan elephants are fed as part of a programme aimed at getting the pachyderms ready for release back into the wild.

Tourists are welcomed into the camp to view the feeding sessions.

One of the highlights of visiting Sri Lanka was, undoubtedly, tasting the traditional cuisine.

Generous use is made of the island's spices, as Sunanda Kumar, the executive chef of the Cinnamon Lodge Habarana explained during a cooking demonstration in his kitchen.

His creations were flavoursome and markedly less hot than some of the chilli-laced dishes I've tasted in India.

Having just eight days to explore Sri Lanka meant having to forgo a visit to Polonnaruwa, the former capital and UNESCO World Site, that counts among the attractions of Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle.

We passed through another of those, Dambulla, whose cave temple hold sculptures of Buddha and Hindu deities, en route to Kandy.

Luxman explained that the Kandy Esala Perehera, a festival featuring caparisoned elephants, proves the busiest time of year in the city.

In 2018, the festival coincided with the second-half of July. Its

focal point is the Temple of the Tooth, which is reputed to hold a tooth from Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.

Prior to departing the city, I meandered through Kandy's neatly-tended Royal Botanical Gardens, whose trees provided habitat to bonnet macaques and flying foxes.

My final night in Sri Lanka was spent amid a tea estate at the plush Kahanda Kanda resort, near Galle.

The cricket stadium outside the walled city will play host to a Test match between Sri Lanka and England in November.

As we stood on the fortified

## Many tourists head straight to the beaches

gateway overlooking the ground, Luxman described the severe damage wrought by the Boxing Day tsunami on Galle in 2004.

Eight days is by no means long enough to see all Sri Lanka's attractions: I'd recommend spending at least a fortnight on the island.

Would I consider engaging the services of a chauffeur-guide if I was to return? Definitely.

■ Stuart travelled with Indian Odyssey, a UK-based tour operator specialising in bespoke holidays to Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and the Maldives.

■ Prices start at £1,895 per person for a seven-night trip to Sri Lanka, including return flights from the UK, accommodation in boutique hotels, a personal driver and a tailored itinerary for each guest.

■ Visit [www.indianodyssey.co.uk](http://www.indianodyssey.co.uk), call 01224 313984 or email [info@indianodyssey.co.uk](mailto:info@indianodyssey.co.uk).

■ [www.srilanka.travel](http://www.srilanka.travel)



A CRESTED serpent eagle in Wilpattu



COOKING lesson with chef Sunanda Kumar at the Cinnamon Lodge Habarana