

Discover Sri Lanka: Safari, Surf, and Sacred Caves

By Kirsten Raccuia

My husband Mark and I are sitting in a jeep surrounded by tall grass, watching a leopard tuck into a fresh kill just 30 feet away. He doesn't take his topaz eyes off me while he eats. Our trusty driver, Nuwan, tells us, "Don't worry. He can't be bothered to move if we don't give him a reason to."

We are not in Africa. We're in Yala National Park in Sri Lanka, that large, teardrop-shaped island nation at the base of India.

On our drive through the park, we hit a roadblock: a large bull elephant standing in the road with no intention of going anywhere. We had to take the long road to the nearby river. En route, we spotted more elephants, water buffalo, and wild boar. This could have been anywhere in Africa, and it would have cost hundreds of dollars more. But in Yala, we paid pennies on the dollar.

Affordable is a perfect word to describe Sri Lanka right now. This island nation is still emerging from the shadow of a 25-year civil war, which ended in 2009. Tourism is only now taking off, so you can still enjoy Sri Lanka while prices are low. Try a traditional breakfast of *pol rotti*, a homemade flatbread made of wheat and coconut with curry sauce, for \$2.30, or a hotel stay for only \$24. This country has plenty to enjoy, from parks teeming with exotic wildlife to stunning beaches facing the Indian Ocean...and a rich history dating back thousands of years.

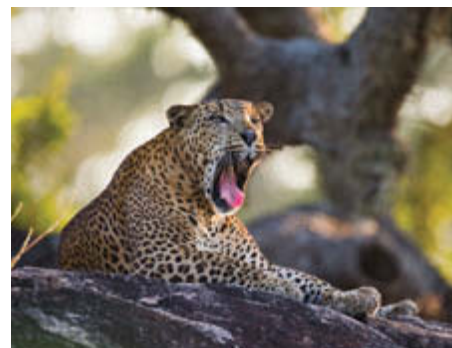
If you're thinking of checking out Yala National Park, the best time to visit is June to September, during the dry season, when the animals are more visible at the watering holes. Bungalows in the park start at \$53 a night, if you want to stay over. For a truly exotic experience, the nearby Kumbuk River Ec lodge has an ultra-modern, two-story, stilted treehouse to stay in. The air-conditioned bedroom has floor-to-ceiling glass walls so you can watch all the wildlife along the rushing river below. The room goes for \$180 a night, which includes food and all activities (except for the safari). See: Kumbukriver.com.

Entry to the park is \$24.25 per person. You can hire a jeep and guide for up to six people for \$40 for a half-day tour and \$70 for a full day—ridiculously affordable. And the wildlife compares to that of Africa. See: Yalasrilanka.lk.

With over 1,000 miles of tropical coastline, Sri Lanka is a paradise for surfers; the best spot is Arugam Bay. Abay, as the locals call it, lies on the country's southeast coast. From April to October, the surf is at its best, and surfers from around the world congregate there. It's the perfect place for beginners as well as pros, with alcoves protecting the newbies from the thrashing waves. The uncrowded beaches have golden sand and clear, shallow waters easy to lounge in.

Abay is a charming little surf community that still has a local feel; don't be surprised to see female goatherds in purple traditional garb guiding their bleating charges along the beach.

We walked around town and found No Worries Surf Shop (you can find it on Facebook). For \$17, we each had our own instructor, and after a short drive to the beginners' beach, we were ready to get started. The instructors were patient, and spoke perfect English. (Sri Lanka, as a former British colony, has plenty of English speakers.) The best place to stay



At Yala National Park, you can see spectacular wildlife for as little as \$40.

in Arugam Bay is the Hideaway Resort; it has great food, a relaxed ambience, and fantastic service. It's well worth the \$110 for a room with air conditioning in high season (\$70 without air conditioning). See: Hideawayarugambay.com.

If you'd rather delve into Sri Lanka's rich history and culture, make a beeline for the center of the island. Here you'll find Dambulla, known for the Golden Temple of Dambulla. It is the largest and best-preserved cave temple complex in Sri Lanka, dating from the first century B.C. Later kings added to it over the years, and by the 11th century it became the magnificent site it is today.

The series of five caves is built directly into the base of the 492-foot-high Dambulla rock. Entering from the street, you'll be struck by the painfully shiny and enormous golden Buddha statue. Continuing up, you'll be escorted by mischievous monkeys ready to take away anything not tied down, so beware. After a slow 15-minute walk to the top, you're rewarded by panoramas of another Sigiriya,

an ancient palace complex built atop a 656-foot-tall rock.

The first cave you enter is small and tight—a 49-foot reclining Buddha carved directly into the rock takes up most of the space. Every space in the cave is covered with murals: black, red, gold, and white triangles and flowers.

The next cave, the Temple of the Great Kings, or Maharaja Viharaya, is the most magnificent, with more than 50 exquisitely preserved statues. The central Buddha was once covered in gold leaf; enough remains to make it glow in the dark cave. The walls and ceiling are entirely covered in frescoes, with such rich detail it's hard to believe they weren't painted yesterday.

The caves only take an hour to walk through on your own or a bit longer with a guide. You can find one through your hotel, any tour company, or at the entrance. I would make a day of it, start early, and climb Sigiriya Rock before driving the 30 minutes to Dambulla. If you use a guide, he can take you to both places. Withlocals.com is a great place to find local tour guides throughout the island. A tour of both sites starts at \$45. ■

This island nation is still emerging.