

Big Cats and Elephants: On Safari in Sri Lanka

Kirsten Raccuia

I was frozen. He didn't take his golden eyes off of me as he munched down on his lunch—a fresh antelope kill he had dragged into the shade of the trees. I sat there, holding my breath as he, a wild Sri Lankan leopard, feasted. I was transfixed, too afraid to move. In less than two seconds, I could be the second course of his lunch.

Tucked away on the southeastern coast of Sri Lanka lies Yala National Park. Such national parks are abundant on the teardrop-shaped island. Twenty-six of them, to be exact. Far more than you'd expect from a country the size of West Virginia.

Yala has nearly 130,000 hectares (321,236 acres) of protected forest, grassland, and lagoons. It was designated as a national park in 1938. Before then, ironically, it was a hunting ground for the colonial elite.

Yala has 215 different bird



From coastal estuary to high forest, Yala supports a vast range of wildlife.

species and 44 varieties of mammals, including elephants, sloth bears, and jackals. But people flock there for the leopards. It is home to one of the highest leopard densities in the world.

On my one-day safari there, I saw two leopards, water buffalos, dozens of elephants, monkeys, crocodiles, peacocks,

spotted deer, and countless tropical birds.

To get closer to an elephant, you can book a room at the plush Jetwing Yala Hotel. There, a bull male elephant named Natta Kota wanders around like he owns the place. The staff consider him the hotel's "most loyal patron" since 2013 and treat him as such.

In previous years, Natta Kota was a seasonal visitor and frequented other nearby hotels. But as his tastes became more discerning, he decided that the Jetwing was a far nicer home and decided to make his move there permanent.

The staff leave him at peace, even when he steals fruit from the kitchen. However, they do warn visitors not to leave food lying around or feed him.

And so, Natta Kota comes and goes as he pleases. He relaxes under the shade of the nearby trees and wanders the hotel footpaths with the air of a contented proprietor. ■

HOT PICKS

LOCAL SPORTS

On Your Feet, Surfing in Peru

"Surfing for all ages and abilities is within easy reach in Huan-chaco," writes Steve LePoidevin.

"Here, consistent waves roll into shore year-round. A good variety of schools offer private and group surfing lessons for very reasonable prices. Typically, an indoor formal class is followed by time in the water. Surf School Muchik is one of the oldest in town and home to a couple of surfer brothers who have several decades of experience in both teaching and competition. If you don't stand up, you don't pay!"

On the Run in Costa Rica

"While the tradition in Costa Rica is often referred to as 'bullfight,' it is actually a *corrida*, which means 'run,'" writes Kathleen Evans.

"Anyone can enter during the annual fiestas held in most towns. The objective is to outrun the angry, bewildered bull without being horned, kicked, or trampled upon. Participants (many of them drunk), run for their lives and jump over the fencing as the bull charges after them. Fortunately, there is an ambulance on standby for any unfortunate fools who sustain injuries."

Calcio in Basilicata, Italy

"If you've spent any amount of time in Italy, you have already learned that there is only one 'true' sport here—*calcio* (soccer). It's a national obsession," writes Valerie Fortney-Schneider.

"I can watch the town team play right below my balcony. But here in my mountainous region of Basilicata, there are other sports to enjoy too, and many people come from the surrounding regions to torture themselves by biking the grueling steep roads or strapping themselves into gear to scale the cliff walls."

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Hoi An, Vietnam

By Wendy Justice

Since arriving in newly reopened, virus-free Hoi An, I've concluded that this may well be the most romantic city in Vietnam.

The Ancient Town is filled with an engaging fusion of architectural styles: Historic houses and shops—some dating back to the 16th century—have butter-yellow stucco walls, Japanese support joists, red Chinese-style brick-tiled roofs, and French louvered shutters glowing bright with bougainvillea blossoms.

Ladies wearing traditional *ao dai* tunics and slacks glide grace-

fully on bicycles down cobblestone roads. On this full moon evening, tiny candle-lit paper lanterns float down the Thu Bon River carrying prayers and lucky wishes.

All fresco restaurants overlook the river, offering spectacular views. Not three miles away, the wide, sandy An Bang Beach offers a postcard-perfect scene, the Cham Islands shimmering offshore.

I'll be exploring the city of Da Nang and the mountain retreat of Da Lat soon, and will be sharing these gems with you as well.



Lush and temperate, Panama is just one of the places Sherry and David spend their time.

Seeing It All and Living Free With a Roving Retirement

Kirsten Raccuia

David Lee, 56, and his wife Sherry, 55, started their roving retirement in 2018. But theirs isn't the usual roving retirement story. They work four months to fund eight months of travel and adventure. "Every year in August, we get to 'retire' again and go live our dreams for eight months," says David.

They used to live in Alaska, which is where they return every year for the summer. Sherry is a nurse who gets stationed in different towns, and David finds work wherever they are or on a salmon boat.

They make family a priority after their Alaska stint is over. A portion of the roving eight months is spent in the lower 48. They have two kids and three grandsons living in Washington. In addition, their parents are in California and Nevada, so Christmas is always in the U.S. with family. "We felt a lot of support from family to go and live our dream," says Sherry. "Our co-workers called us crazy, but that was more out of envy. Not many people actually follow their dreams."

David and Sherry's youngest daughter

lives in France, which means Sherry gets her fill of Europe while visiting her. But since Europe is more expensive, they try to limit their extra time there and balance it out with longer stays in more affordable regions.

"My career in the airline industry allowed us to travel abroad extensively, and it's something we really love doing together. We'd often wish we could stay on our vacations for an extended time, and so we began to formulate a way actually to do it. We are too young to take Social Security, but we really wanted a life of adventure and not to just work until we die," says David.

A few years before David retired from his airline career, he and Sherry took a hard look at their finances, their future, and their dreams.

With their roving retirement in mind, they devised an exit strategy and stuck to it. They started to simplify their lives, became more minimalistic, and worked on getting debt-free. Sherry began to sell their things. "She financed three great vacations to faraway places, just by selling down the

"We wanted a life of adventure, not just work."

household items we no longer needed. It's easier to do without than you might think," says David. "We would rather have an experience than a thing we have to take care of."

The couple sold their house in exchange for a small rental. By living smaller and selling more of their belongings, they reduced their expenses and started saving more money.

"We now have very few belongings—just a small storage room and a few boxes at our daughter's. We go through them as we move from work to play or vice versa (and change climates). But honestly, we have very little to worry about in a material sense, and it's very freeing," says Sherry. "We found a balance that works for us, and it let us taste our dream. That motivates us to keep looking for a way to make it happen."

How They Travel

One of the benefits of David's career, even after retirement, is access to flights at a discount and on a standby basis. Flying standby is not always the easiest method. You can't actually book a seat ahead of time, which can make traveling a little more stressful. "We've used that benefit within the U.S., and for a trip to Panama as well. However, we rarely travel internationally on standby now; it's too much drama. And intra-Asia and intra-Europe airfares are actually too cheap to even bother," states David.

Visas and Planning

"The best part of our lifestyle is that we can go where we want to go when we want to go," says Sherry.

However, visas play a significant role in their planning. The duration of each visa determines if and when they go to a country. "We don't make border runs to stay legal. We respect the intent of a country's visa requirements," says Sherry. But other than that, "We are not too scientific in our selection process. If the location is interesting, fits into our schedule, and we can avoid peak travel times if possible, we'll go," adds David. "It also needs to be done at a reasonable cost—budget is a factor when you work for four months and take eight off, right?"

Budget

David and Sherry have discovered that it is absolutely cheaper to live abroad than to live a regular lifestyle in Alaska. How-

ever, it all depends on your lifestyle. Since one of their daughters lives in France, they spend time there every year. Sherry loves Europe, but staying there comes with a cost. They keep that in mind when planning. “The last visit I found a 10-day cruise around the Mediterranean that was cheaper than a hotel, food, and rental car, so we took advantage,” says David.

“We have a rough budget that covers eight months of not working. Part of that time is spent in expensive places trying to spoil kids or grandkids. Those months cost more than sitting by the pool in Malaysia and having a wonderful meal for \$12 (for both of us!). The lifestyle and budget you can have in Southeast Asia is unattainable in Europe.”

David and Sherry thought that by roving the world for eight months a year, they would have plenty of time to figure out where and if they might settle one day. They just didn’t think it would happen so soon in their journey. They fell in love with Penang in Malaysia and its community the first year they started their roving retirement.

It was easy for them to make contacts. “You make friends by being friendly,” says Sherry. “We made friends with neighbors and by talking to people at the market, at church, and from seeing the same folks as you begin your routine in a new place. People make the place special. When you leave, it’s the people you miss as much as

your favorite restaurant or sun spot near the pool,” says David.

Now they spend a few months each year in Penang. So far, they’ve been able to rent different condos within the same building. It is always a three-bedroom, two-bathroom, furnished unit with a sea view. The building has an incredible pool and a gym, and they spend between \$450 and \$600 a month, depending on the duration of their stay.

David and Sherry’s total budget is \$1,500 a month, but they often spend less. “It’s hard to spend \$1,500, truthfully, but Sherry tries,” David laughs. “We enjoy the benefit of a normal schedule, a routine with social events, and a comfort level to relax in the familiar.”

They use Penang as a base to travel throughout Southeast Asia. “It’s like taking a vacation from our more settled, stable Penang life,” says Sherry. Their monthly trips add to the budget, but Southeast Asian travel is so affordable it doesn’t put them too much over. Since they started staying in Penang for a few months a year, they’ve traveled to Indonesia, Singapore, Borneo, and Thailand. This year, they’re looking forward to visiting Bali.

Accommodation

Once they’ve decided on a location and know their visa limits, they work out what to do for accommodation. Each area

offers its own set of challenges. If they are moving around a bit, they’ll look for affordable hotels. But if they plan to stay for a more extended period, they’ll book something for a few nights to get a feel for the area and try to uncover longer-term furnished housing.

“It’s not always easy to find. Most locations are set up for quick short-term tourists or longer-term (six to 12 months) accommodation, but not much in between. There is no substitute for finding local people to help you,” says David. So, they ask around and get the word out early in their search.

Healthcare

Since Sherry and David spend a lot of time in Southeast Asia, where high quality medical care is affordable, they don’t have travel insurance. “We purchase an annual U.S. expat policy with a fairly high deductible that requires us to be outside the U.S. half the year. We really view it as a catastrophe policy,” says David.

They schedule any dental or medical check-ups that are needed in Penang. Any medical expenses they have abroad are minimal enough to pay out of pocket.

Future Plans

At the moment, they plan to continue their roving retirement for the next five to six years. But anything is possible. That is part of the beauty of their plan; it is open to tweaking as they see fit. “I think only family or ill health would force us back to the U.S. full-time in the foreseeable future,” says David. “And because we will still plan to rove for the next five or six years, we have not initiated any longer-term visa processes. We will have that discussion and make that decision in 2025.”

This lifestyle isn’t for everyone, and it won’t happen by accident. It takes some planning, sacrifice, and intentional steps to change your lifestyle. “But it is attainable. It’s not something that has to happen only after you have enough money. Will you ever? We don’t,” says David.

But their dreams far outweighed the sacrifices they had to make. “Yes, life includes budget elements, but we are not worried about material items, nor about paying costs associated with trying to have it all. We are pretty much free,” says Sherry. “It’s a big world out there, and I want to see it all!” ■

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David and Sherry aren’t putting down roots, but right now, Penang, Malaysia is their home.

You Can Tell a Lot by How a Country Reacts to a Crisis

Kirsten Raccuia

Almost seven years ago, I left the United States. I didn't move to Malaysia because I wanted to escape America. I relocated because I wanted to live a life full of adventure and travel the world.

Despite what some people think, I'm a proud American and always will be. However, today, I am also really proud of Malaysia. I haven't always been able to brag about my adopted home country. Most people remember it for losing an airplane or the 1MDB corruption scandal when billions of dollars' worth of aid mysteriously went missing.

But I genuinely think that is all about to change. Malaysia has done a stellar job handling the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the defining characteristics of this country is its diversity. There are three significant ethnicities that fall under the Malaysian umbrella: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Each has its own distinct culture, religion, and traditions. That crazy cocktail is what makes Malaysia so remarkable. It's one of the things that my husband, Mark, and I fell in love with here, and it was a contributing factor in our decision to make Malaysia our new home.

As you can probably imagine, that same crazy cocktail also causes some challenges. Sometimes there is a struggle between these fundamentally divergent cultures, and occasionally there is a racial divide.

Nevertheless, when COVID-19 reared its ugly head in Malaysia, the people of this country became one. All of a sudden, which deity you worshipped lost its importance. It became a country united.

It wasn't immediate. The first few days were a little iffy.

Like in most countries, the government

put a lockdown in place. Some Malaysians were slow to accept the new rules. A lot of people didn't take it seriously, and there was some confusion as to what was actually allowed, what was advised against, and what was prohibited. (That seems to have been almost universal worldwide.)

After the first few days of ignoring the movement control order, the new prime minister went on record and told people to stop being selfish. He brought in the military as a show of force. Not to threaten the people but to keep order. And that they did.

The government set up roadblocks. They broadcasted the locations in the news, so they didn't come as a surprise. They wanted to prevent people from going out, not to arrest them for bad behavior—

although they did so when necessary.

Within a few days, Malaysia was locked down...in harmony.

Despite all the inherent diversity, Malaysians put aside their discord and stayed home. They put the country's need for flattening the curve ahead of themselves individually. It was not a case of the people versus the government. It became a war: people versus COVID-19. It was about the health of *all* Malaysians, not just some and not just individuals.

In a country of 31 million, just a little bigger than the state of Texas, we had 115 deaths. I recognize that it is 115 too many. Still, without the government's fast action and the willingness of the people to cooperate for the greater good, well, we know what happens.

Despite being physically apart during lockdown, compassion brought the people of Malaysia together. I dare say that this pandemic has even brought out the best in people. Some have risen above and

gone beyond themselves to join forces and help others. People have been making DIY masks and shields for the frontline workers. Restaurants are providing free freshly cooked meals for them, too.

People have been grocery shopping for the elderly, delivering food supplies to those unable to leave their homes, and paying grocery tabs for those in need. We paid our cleaning lady even though she wasn't allowed to work, and we weren't alone in that sort of behavior. Many condo owners cooked for their security guards and bought extras for the food delivery guys.

The government put a price cap on masks so the stores and scammers couldn't jack up prices. They delivered free masks to a lot of homes in Penang. The whole concept of paying it forward was revived, and communities who once may have been on opposing sides of the fence banded together to make a real difference.

When I see all the protests around the U.S., I can't help but wish they knew how well Malaysians handled the pandemic.

The U.S. is the land of the free, and I love that about it, but that freedom can also make it divisive. I'm not promoting less freedom, I'm promoting cohesion, and it feels like that may be something the U.S. lacks right now.

These are unprecedented times, and no one knows how to make things *normal* again. I think the people here have bonded over this devastating pandemic and have come out stronger because of it.

Malaysians chose community instead of themselves. Everyone was on the same side as opposed to letting their differences speak louder than their similarities.

The Malaysian people came out swinging and took COVID-19 by the reins, and I couldn't be more proud to call myself a *Malaysian...an American-Malaysian*. ■

"I'm a proud American and always will be."



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