

# Exploring Sri Lanka

with Jessica Stockmann, Contributing Travel Editor.



**W**henever I hear the word safari, I immediately think of Africa, but little did I know that Sri Lanka also has some of the very best safari lodges. When I think of rainforest, I think of South America, but there is hardly a country like Sri Lanka that offers such a diverse landscape, from rainforest to highlands.

When I think of rice fields, I think of Vietnam, but Sri Lanka has so many rice fields that it can feed itself without having to import. Only when I think of tea does Sri Lanka immediately come to mind, although to be honest I think of Ceylon, which belonged to England for almost 150 years from 1802 to 1948. Ceylon gained independence in 1948 but it wasn't until 1972 that Ceylon became an independent republic within the Commonwealth and changed its name to Sri Lanka.

From a tourists perspective, I think Sri Lanka is like a rough diamond, but it is also rightly called the pearl of the Indian Ocean. I have never experienced such a diverse country where the term hospitality is given a completely new meaning.

We had a hand-picked trip put together by the London-based travel agency bespoke, which enabled us to experience the diversity of this pearl of the Orient in a very short time. We stayed in the mountains of the tea plantations in the Owners Villa, colonial in style but designed with an amazing attention to detail and timeless elegance - like something straight out of a movie. Sri Lanka is smart and preserved the old colonial villas and converted them into exclusive boutique hotels.



This country attaches great importance to cleanliness and sustainability. There is no garbage on the streets and there are separate waste garbage cans everywhere. In all the hotels we stayed in, nothing was made of plastic. From the straws to the toothbrushes, everything was sustainable. The bed sheets can be washed every day but it is up to the guest to decide whether this is really necessary. The nature and environment is so clean and green and incredibly beautiful and present - as a guest in their country you are educated to behave in an eco-friendly way, promoting the preservation of their county.

Because of its diverse nature, everything grows in Sri Lanka and hardly anything is imported. Rarely have I eaten such delicious fruit that was still hanging on the tree only 5 seconds prior. If you want to take an exclusive, elegant journey into the past and through nature and wildlife, I can only recommend Sri Lanka. This country offers elegant luxury in the midst of breathtaking nature, which is so diverse that you will never get bored.

What is particularly nice is that the locals are so incredibly friendly. Everyone smiles, and yet they don't turn anything on you. Tourists are still seen as a blessing here. They are proud of their country and are happy that we are interested in their land, but they don't ram their land. It should remain a protected natural environment and not a stronghold for backpackers.

We were very lucky to have chosen Bespoke to organize our trip through Sri Lanka. Bespoke is a London-based travel company that organizes trips exclusively for Sri Lanka. However, it is so lovingly put together that you immediately notice that the owner is from Sri Lanka and she will do everything to make her guests fall in love with her country. She certainly succeeded with us.

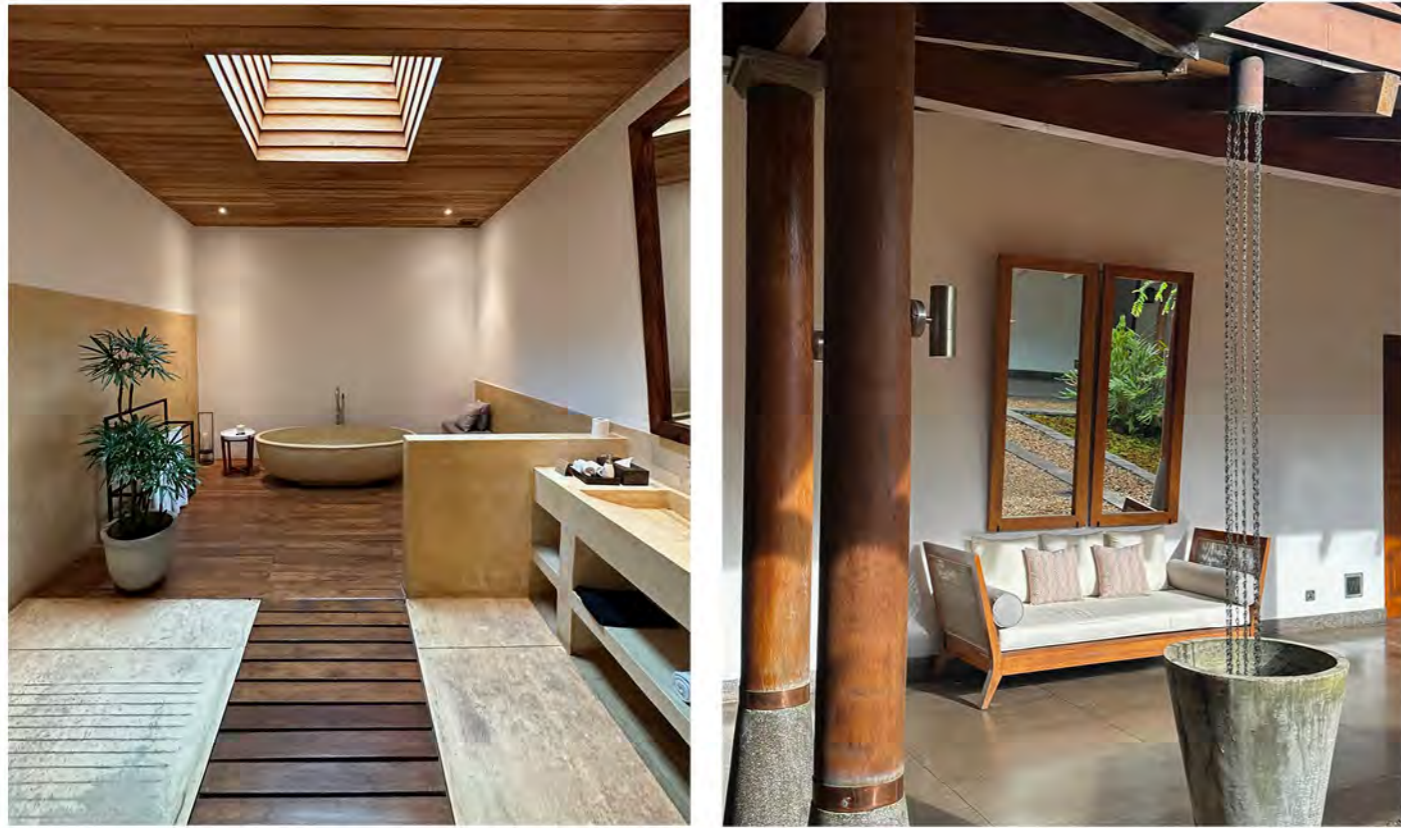
We had 10 days and opted for the southern part of the island. There were three of us, my two grown-up daughters and myself. I wanted to show them a part of the world that they hadn't seen before and that hadn't been shown so often on social media that you get the feeling you don't even need to go there anymore. We were definitely very excited and had no idea what to expect. This was to be a trip where we didn't get "advice; from tiktok and tripadvisor beforehand, but a trip that was 110% organized and accompanied by bespoke. We as a family didn't have to do any preliminary research, we just got on the plane and put ourselves in the hands of our guide when we arrived at Colombo airport. Doesn't that sound like an old school trip? Yes, a little bit, but it was wonderful because it was the only way we really got to know Sri Lanka. I didn't know that you could still experience such unexpected trips in the age of the internet. We were picked up at the airport by our bespoke guide and he accompanied us for 10 days, showing us the pearl of the Orient.

Our stops were in five different hotels and I have to say one was more beautiful than the other.



1. Kotugoda: The Wallawwa
2. Pussellawa: Lavender House
3. Ella: Nine Skies
4. Yala: Chena Huts
5. Kegalle: The Grand Walawwa

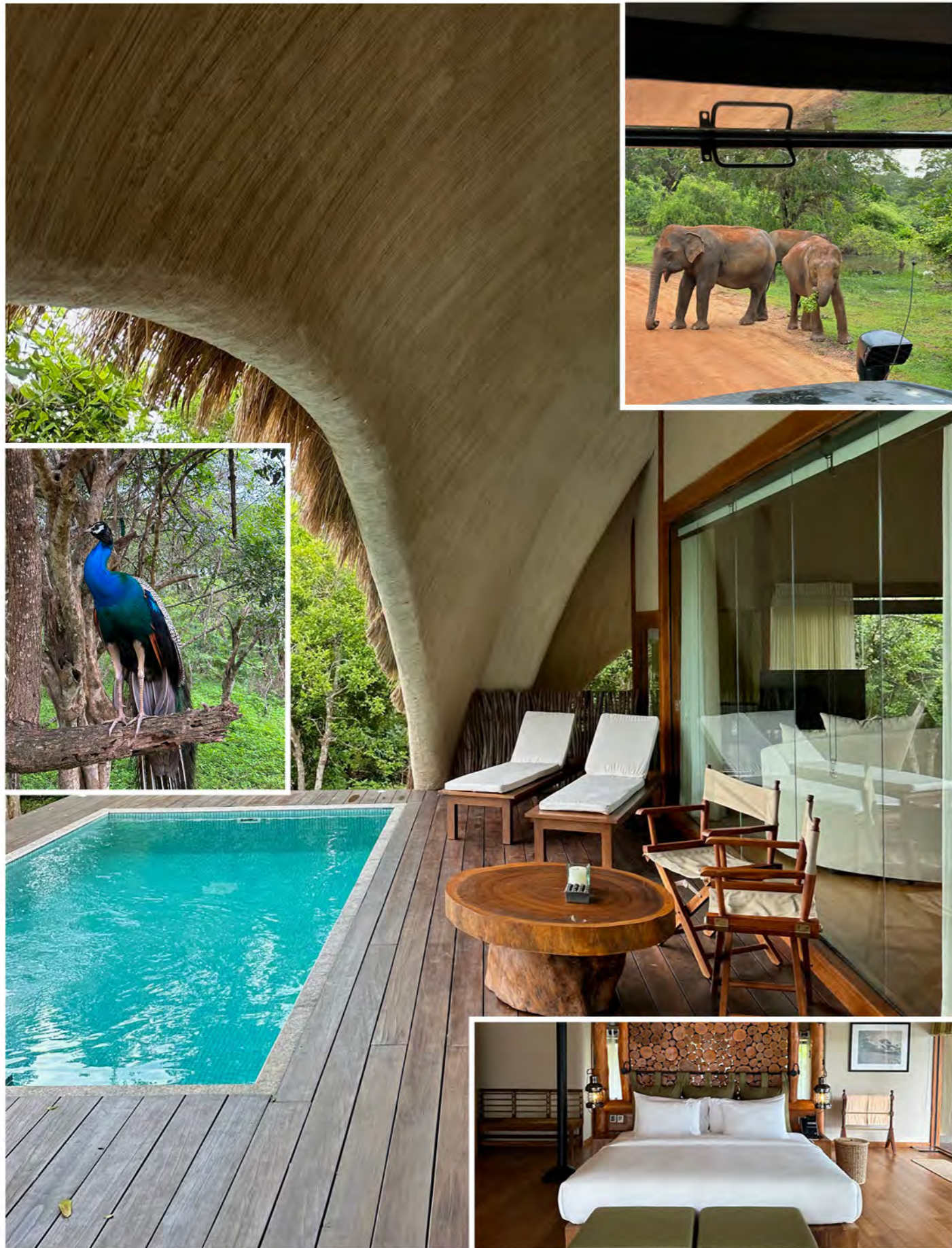
1 The Wallawwa, listed by Condé Nast as one of the top 100 hotels of the world and only 25 minutes from the Airport is the perfect place after a long flight to enjoy the Spa Treatments and get rid of the jetlag before starting to explore Sri Lanka. The 18 bedroom beautifully renovated colonial country house hotel is set amongst tropical gardens and has its own vegetable and spice garden. Everything the chef needs to spoil their guests for dinner or lunch is grown right here. Directly upon arrival I decided to head towards the beautiful spa, and spoil myself with a relaxing massage. Surrounded by nature, covered in the most prestigious essential oils and traditional balinese massage techniques, was the most at peace I have felt in a long time.



2 Lavender House: timeless elegance meets modern luxury with meticulously designed rooms, while captivating the history and culture of this colonial retreat. Amidst a beautiful tea plantation with incredible views across the verdant hills. With only five suites this hill country luxury Lavender House is an exceptional hideaway. Although quite isolated, there is no need to fear boredom. Experience the Sri Lankan tradition of "high tea" served with the fresh tea and most delicious cakes, followed by a trip to the tea factory located close by to learn all about the fascinating history and production of tea.



3 Nine Skies: the former home of the manager of Findlay tea estate. In this 4 bedroom home you can book also only one bedroom but of course it's perfectly designed for a family or group who needs 4 bedrooms. The friendly staff will make your stay extremely pleasant. What was particularly fascinating about our stay here was our train ride in Ella to see the Nine Arch Bridge. The mountain village revered for its waterfalls and far-reaching views was nothing short of extraordinary. The train with open windows allowed for a panorama view of this spectacle, and is an image that has truly been engraved in our memory.



4 Chena Huts: super luxe safari residences in their round huts overlooking the beach. Each of the 18 spacious huts has their own pool. Their design is detailed and you can feel the love that the interior designer has put into it. The staff and Rangers are so incredibly friendly and welcoming. Don't be surprised to wake up to an elephant splashing or have sea turtles laying eggs by moonlight. The cuisine is delicious and the selection of wines and champagnes are great too. Your private Ranger will take you at 6 am for a 4 hour morning Safari and at 3 pm for a 4 hour afternoon/sunset safari. If you decide to spend a day at the resort, the Spa and the beach are just wonderful and sipping a cup of tea while on your private veranda overlooking the jungle and the sea is just breathtaking.

5 The Grand Walawwa: timeless elegance meets luxury here at this colonial home which opened its doors just recently in 2023. All rooms are restored with the love for details and at the same time have the modern comfort of true luxury. There is a reason why couples decide to pick this romantic spot for their wedding parties.

Visit Sri Lanka Bespoke for further information: <https://srilanka-bespoke.com>

