

#JOM! Go: Sri Lanka Beckons

By [Angela Goh](#) - October 3, 2019 @ 11:38am

From leopards and artisanal teas to forts and fiery cuisine, Sri Lanka is also witnessing a nascent cool and trendy scene. Angela Goh swings through the island before the crowds return

SINCE the Easter Sunday attacks in April, Sri Lanka's tourism tide has receded, leaving behind desolate shores. Hotels are running at very low occupancy while most tourist spots are deserted, traffic at the jeep congested Yala National Park has dwindled to a trickle. At some places, I am the only guest or visitor.

But amid tightened security (I feel safer here than elsewhere), lower room rates and airfares, now is an excellent time to visit the Pearl of the Indian Ocean that hasn't lost its lustre. It's Lonely Planet guide's top travel destination for 2019 for a reason.

"From endless beaches to diverse wildlife, cultural sites and mouthwatering food, including authentic Sri Lankan hospitality, sets it apart from the rest of the world," says Russell Cool, area general manager of Onyx Hospitality Group, which operates Amari and Ozo brands countrywide.



Reflecting the people's resilience, a concerted effort by tourism stakeholders has resulted in the Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance to spur the industry's recovery.

LEOPARD SAFARI

Outside of Africa, nowhere else can beat Sri Lanka's Big Four (leopards, sloth bears, whales and elephants), accompanied by legions of deer, birds and peacocks. It also offers an affordable foray into a wildlife holiday.

Although Yala National Park claims the world's densest leopard population, these elusive creatures remain a challenge to spot. Compounded by a veil of thickets and woodland, including park regulations forbidding off-road driving, chances of sightings are slim but not impossible. I am lucky that a mother and her cub decide to stroll across the road.



And while observing an elephant snack on tree leaves, a sloth bear ambles out of the woods just a metre away from my vehicle. Go without expectations and you may be surprised.

Leopards are active at dawn and dusk, so an early morning and/or late afternoon game drive are best, avoiding a tiring full-day safari. An acclaimed operator is Noel Rodrigo's Leopard Safaris, which imbues the romanticism of the African safari alongside having trained guides certified in South Africa.

TEAS AND TREKS

Many extol the scenic journey by train or road through the hill country of beguiling mist cloaked tea fields.

Exceptional teas are found at Amba Estate, cradled by the highlands near Ella. Led by a multinational team of socially-conscious entrepreneurs and run by the fourth generation of the original owner's family, Amba produces organic, artisanal teas through traditional hand-rolled method. Reviving a rare traditional blend of the storied Vangedi Pekoe, Amba is the only estate in the country that produces this blend commercially.

Better known as thieves' tea during the colonial days when workers snuck home some pickings and processed them with pestle and mortar (vangedi). My judgement doesn't count as much as a discerning local tea-drinker declared it as "superb".

Amba also offers spectacular trails to a stream with gentle falls or with views of Ella Rock and Lipton's Seat lookout.

A good second choice is Handunugoda Estate, located between Yala and Galle. It's renowned for Virgin White Tea harvested following ancient Chinese tradition using scissors and a bowl to prevent contamination by human skin.

CITIES

1) Galle

This charming coastal citadel — its fort and quaint old quarters — is a must on any itinerary. To explore beyond Galle, a tour by the three-wheeler tuk-tuk is fun and experiential.

I zip to the outskirts in the spruced up tuk-tuk captained by a uniformed guide, bolstered with cold beer, coconut and local pop hits blaring away. In a village, I learn how ropes are made from coconut husks and how coconut fronds can be fashioned into walls. A boat cruise on Koggala Lake heads to an island where cinnamon is produced. As for stilt fishing, the excitement is sitting above the crashing waves and hoping not to fall. This cool tour culminates with a home-cooked meal.

For a lower pace, I meander the bucolic countryside on a bicycle, getting an invigorating cardio workout amid great views.



Tired muscles are treated to a top-to-toe spa journey at Amari Galle's Breeze Spa.

Then chill down at the resort's sprawling beach club with are freshing king coconut — the indigenous vivid orange variety set against the stunning beachscape — marvelling at how wonderful it is to combine heritage and hip in Galle.

2) Kandy

If tame and sedate is your calling, head for the ancient capital of Kandy. This quiet town, which shuts down by 8pm, is famed for the Dalada Maligawa, better known as the Temple of the Tooth (believed to be Buddha's tooth, the country's most important Buddhist relic).

But for the quirky and whimsical, visit Helga's Folly hotel. A personification of flamboyant socialite Helga Blow's art therapy (from a difficult divorce), the outlandish hotel screams of Salvadore Dali like surrealism against gaudy furnishings, artefacts and Helga's wall-to-ceiling paintings. It is worth to check it out, though such personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sir Laurence Olivier and Gregory Peck, have checked in.

Unlike them, my taste finds comfort in contemporary hotel Ozo Kandy which over looks Kandy Lake.

3) Colombo and beyond

Compact Colombo is morphing into a capital of cool with a burgeoning chic dining scene. Park Street Mews, Dutch Hospital (where the Ministry of Crab resides) and the stylishly colourful T-Lounge shows what can result when tea is blended with modern sophistication. The Prince of Kandy Lemonade Tea (of high-grown variety, no less) is as good as it sounds.

Ozo Colombo hotel offers one of the most scenic stays. An urban hotel with a resort feel, it commands an unfettered view of the ocean along Marine Drive, with a railway track skirting the shoreline. From its rooftop bar, I watch birds swoop and sweep on air thermals and train carriages overflowing with commuters during rush hour while I sip on imaginative iced teas. The ravishingly refreshing Melon Tea is very addictive. You should go easy on the gin-laced High Tea.

In architecture, Sri Lanka has long been a trendsetter. Legendary architect Geoffrey Bawa's style from the 1960s, blending traditional sensibilities and modern minimalism, continues to be a model for resort design here and throughout Southeast Asia. This year also marks Bawa's centenary.

Tour his former home, Number 11, or stay at one of many Bawa-inspired resorts around the island. Among the misboutique resort, The Villas, at Wadduwa, a 45-minute drive from Colombo. It encapsulates Bawa's understated design suffused with natural light, water features and overhanging roofs.

Another highlight is toddy (palm wine) harvesting from the resort's coconut trees.

Every morning, a tapper extracts and collects the sap, walking nimbly from tree to tree connected by rope bridges.

NEW AGE FOOD

Abundant seafood, spices and a multicultural heritage are reflected in an intense and complex cuisine. Prawn vadai, crab curry and sour fish curry (ambul thiyal) are notable favourites on my culinary journey.

For a simple fare of the quintessential hopper (or appam) and string hoppers, seek out Hela Bojun Hala, a foodcourt where local women cook from open kitchens.

This government initiative — to promote local produce and women entrepreneurship — is in several locations including Kandy and Nuwara Eliya.



A slew of young entrepreneurs is transforming local fast food to hygienically-prepared slow food. Kottulabs is a game-changer for the nation's favourite dish, the greasy but heavenly kottu (godamba roti, resembling roti canai, chopped and stir fried with ingredients of choice).

This Colombo-based outfit, started over a year ago by innovative 30-somethings, has reinterpreted kottu from grubby to gourmet (picture a modern, spotless kitchen), eschewing dine in for deliveries and takeaways. The steady stream of Uber riders arriving to pick up orders proves its popularity.

In Galle, Hoppa restaurant serves the hopper in myriad new ways. My curry-leaf infused hopper is delicately crispy and the prawn curry, absolutely sensational. Like Kottulabs, Hoppa prides itself by making everything from scratch using quality ingredients.

Sri Lanka is moving into the sunshine after the storm and when the crowds return they will be enchanted and entertained, just as I have been, by the wild, quirky and new.

TRAVEL FILE

WHERE TO STAY

Ozo Colombo (www.ozohotels.com) has an oceanfront location.

Ozo Kandy (www.ozohotels.com) is a three-hour drive to the hill country.

Amari Galle (www.amari.com) is a three-hour drive to Yala National Park.

The Villas, Wadduwa (www.thevillaswadduwa.com) is a 45-minute drive from Colombo.

WHAT TO DO

Aitken Spence (www.aitkenspencetravels.com), the country's largest travel provider, can personalise tours of impeccable quality.

Amba Estate (ambaestate.com) is a niche plantation of organic teas.

Noel Rodrigo Leopard Safaris (www.leopardsafaris.com) has the best trained guides.

UPDATES

Lovesrilanka.org disseminates the latest travel news on Sri Lanka.

75 reads