

Yearning for Yala

Searching for leopards and
nibbling wild sage in Sri Lanka's
Yala National Park

FROM LEFT:
Elephants roam the
Yala National Park.
Sajith Withanage,
Hilton Yala Resort's
head ranger



WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

Walking in single file, voices low, we follow Sajith's lead and clamber through the grasslands, taking care not to become tangled in the twigs underfoot. Our ranger has an Indiana Jones-like persona and, armed with a trusty wooden cane and heightened senses, plots our route through the Yala bush.

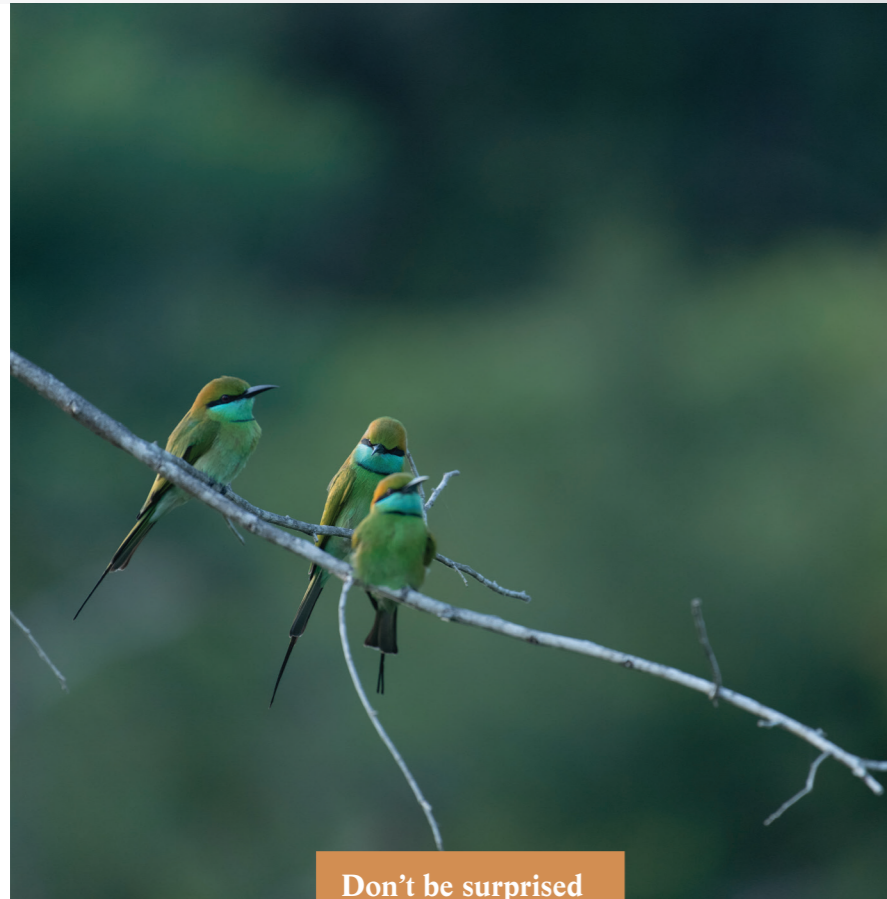
A deer's distress cry cuts through the air – echoed by a troop of monkeys sounding the alarm. Sajith follows the noise and later detects the scent of a fresh carcass in our midst.

It's the calling card of the jungle's most elusive resident and the top of Sri Lanka's food chain. Yala has one of the highest leopard densities in the world, largely owing to the lack of other predators (there aren't any lions or tigers) and copious amounts of prey. On this occasion, we had missed the spotted creature by just a few minutes.

Readers might be more familiar with safari destinations on the African continent, but Sri Lanka's south-eastern destination of Yala is a worthy alternative. Bounded by a choppy coastal stretch of the Indian Ocean, Yala is home to 130,000 hectares of national park land, where you can find more than 44 varieties of mammal and 215 bird species.

Expect monkeys playing on branches, water buffaloes mingling in waterholes, and flamingos parading their graceful postures. We spied elephants grazing on vegetation with their large, wrinkled trunks and spotted deer prancing through marshes, while the murky swamps concealed crocodiles.

Yala is the most visited national park in the country, and busiest during the dry season from February to July. The park is divided into five blocks, three of which are open to the public. Avoid congested Block 1 (more homo sapiens than wildlife to spot) and head to the smaller 6,656-hectare Block 5, which is also blessed with breathtaking scenery of →



Don't be surprised to find a monkey eyeing up your swimsuit if you leave it out to dry

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Yala has around 215 bird species; spacious and safari-inspired rooms at Hilton Yala; the resort is built into the natural surrounds; trees within Yala National Park

lush forestry, contorted trees sprouting from the Weheragala Reservoir and ancient ruins.

GATEWAY TO THE PARK

Hilton Yala Resort lies within the buffer zone of Yala National Park, its sleek stone structures boasting floor-to-ceiling windows built into the natural environment. It's a long 300km/five-hour journey from Colombo, but a scenic one – with the last hour in game drive territory.

Peacocks balance on telephone lines overhead as our jeep's resilience gets put to the test on the rollercoaster of a driveway, otherwise tread by leopards and elephants.

There are no borders, with animals free to meander through the reddish-brown soil paths – as is their right. For this reason, guests are advised to stay on the beaten track, with wooden walkways and bridges weaving through the jungle-like surrounds, and to request a buggy when night falls.

Dotted across the grounds are 42 rooms, suites and villas, outfitted in neutral tones, with wood panelling, luxe bathrooms and local artworks including a wire elephant on the headboard. Ground-floor rooms feature tranquil private pools, while those on the level above include hot tubs – don't be surprised to find a monkey eyeing up your swimsuit if you leave it out to dry. The lush grounds also house a serene

spa, with pillars inspired by ancient temples and a large pool built around trees and rocks, a fitness centre for wild workouts, and Sanskrit-named restaurants – the all-day Dhira and grill Sandali (pictured right).

SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR

Hilton Yala opened in August 2023 and represents the first international resort chain in the locality, but with this comes pressure and questions about ethical tourism in the area.

Thankfully, many of those working for the resort are determined conservationists, notably head ranger and the hotel's ESG champion Sajith Withanage. "The day I put on this badge and uniform, it became my responsibility to make sure you treat the park with respect. The people working here are working for the environment," he says.

Guests must follow certain rules. Importantly, they must not feed the wildlife – not only does this disrupt their behaviour and habits, but the animals could potentially catch human-borne diseases.

There's also no room service to avoid food being left unattended, which might draw animals to your door. (During our visit, the door to the housekeeping pantry was wrecked by an elephant in pursuit of a bag of sugar accidentally left open...) "The animals are the owners, and we are



APPETITE FOR SPICE

Speak to anyone who has visited Sri Lanka and they will begin to salivate while reminiscing about the cuisine. Hilton Yala's restaurants offer various Asian specialties, with dishes ranging from a labour-intensive Jaffna crab curry with coconut sambol to sea bass marinated in oil for 48 hours and vegetarian curries soaked up by soft roti. Pair your food with wittily named Crouching Leopard and Bush Moonlight cocktails (or Sajith's inventive rum cocktail infused with mango chutney), and dine alfresco on the terrace illuminated by starlight. The restaurant highlights local produce, too, with the bright yellow ranawara flower grown onsite and used to create a herbal tea. The head chef also hosts interactive cooking classes, during which guests learn about the Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay and Burgher influences on Sri Lankan cuisine and later dig into a sharing-style feast.

the visitors here," explains Withanage. "If you're going to run the hotel, this is the way to do so."

To further educate guests about the environment, the hotel operates bush walks. Unlike game drives, these are all about the intricacies of the national park – identifying animal tracks and discovering the local flora and fauna.

"It's about the small 500, not the big five. It's about seeing how the whole ecosystem works," says Sajith, as we head out, on foot, into the bush beside the hotel. As we walk, he points out the pale-billed

flowerpeckers (the smallest bird in Sri Lanka) and dainty crimson rose butterflies. We stop at the "bush supermarket" to nibble on wild sage and collect elephant ear plants (colocasia) to deep-fry into 'jungle Pringles' later. At one point, we're all inhaling fumes from burnt elephant dung – supposedly it's a cure for headaches.

It was here that we missed the leopard by mere minutes, but spontaneity is both the blessing and curse of such excursions. Game drives are also on the menu at this resort, and the next day we head out to Block 5 – grateful for our decision as we pass by a stream of vehicles heading in the opposite direction to Block 1.

Barely a kilometre through the gate, Sajith catches a glimpse of the big cat – and fellow jeeps comically follow our ranger's track in pursuit of the leopard hiding in plain sight. Excitedly, we peer into the jungle where he points, but the experience is like 'Where's Wally?', with the subject wearing spots rather than stripes. Despite glasses, binoculars and a high-grade camera in green camo casing, I fail to distinguish between the predator and a tree stump.

"The landscape is imprinted in our brains, so we notice leopards much quicker," Sajith reassures me. My eyes finally adjust, but I only manage to clock the leopard's slinky tail just before it vanishes behind a tree.

Thankfully, I'm gifted one more chance. There's another leopard surveying us across the road – this time, its golden fleece distinguishable as it skulks through the bright green grasslands. "This is the →





ENVIRONMENT WATCH

Hilton has set up an on-site animal research programme, funded by the Hilton Global Foundation, which equips rangers with the latest wildlife information technology and tools, such as solar-powered weather sensors and night-vision binoculars – used to monitor wildlife, helping to further protect indigenous species. This research is carried out in collaboration with the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS) Small Cat Advisory, Leopard Diary and the Wilderness and Wildlife Conservation Trust (WWCT).



You should never compromise wildlife ethics to entertain your guests

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP:
The moment we spotted a leopard in Block 5; sunset on the Indian Ocean

when passing cars throw food from the windows and the calf downs a bunch of bananas in one.

While disheartening, thankfully there are people like Sajith who recognise the ongoing ethical issues and call them out. “You should never compromise wildlife ethics to entertain your guests,” he stresses.

Having spent plenty of time in the bush, we trade wildlife sightings for sand dunes on our last evening in Yala, watching the sun set in hues of amber and crimson to the soothing tune of the Indian Ocean’s lapping waves. “This is the best office you can get,” Sajith beams. I can’t argue with that. ⁸¹

reason we’ve given up our corporate jobs,” Sajith remarks as we bask in the scenery.

His story is an inspiration for those yearning to change their path and follow their dreams. Sajith formerly worked in fashion design, but traded leopard print for the real deal over 11 years ago, gaining his qualifications in South Africa and

working in various parks before returning to his Sri Lankan roots.

We leave the park at sundown, back wheeling on normal roads, and come across a trio of elephants, including a beautiful baby whose curious trunk weaves into our open-air jeep. It’s a magical moment, but one that is unfortunately cut short



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