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scenic



sri lanka

Rich in natural beauty and cultural splendours, Sri Lanka is certainly in the spotlight as a dream destination for avid travellers.

Scott Armstrong explores one of the most beautiful islands of the world.

All I am saying is give peace a chance," John Lennon famously sang. A visit to Sri Lanka will prove the wisdom of his words.

A country once bitterly divided by a civil war between the North and South, stability finally came four years ago when the Tamil Tigers finally gave up violence for diplomacy.

Since that time this country defined by its raw natural beauty has gradually healed year on year, helped by an increasing number of tourists drawn to its beaches, landscapes and wildlife.

The nation of the Lion and the Sword, the country's crest, is finally beginning to enjoy the spoils of peace not war.

It took another step forward recently as its flag carrier airline Sri Lankan Airlines entered the OneWorld Alliance, connecting the country to one of the biggest global aviation networks.

To the western traveller this may seem a small and mundane matter, an added convenience to be sure, but to Sri Lanka it is symbolic of its march into a brighter future. Global acceptance, on any level, is always welcome especially in a country that has gone from cash handouts from the world community to financial independence.

Sri Lanka, like its 22-fleet airline, is thriving and deservedly so. Travellers to this land now greeted by the infectious smiles and open hearts will find it difficult to comprehend how this was a land once scarred by war.

But the reminders are there, in any street you will see survivors of the turbulent times with missing limbs doing what Sri Lanka is doing everywhere, just getting on with life.

It's perhaps this that makes a visit to Sri Lanka all the more inspiring.



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Jetwing Beach Hotel - Negombo



Flying into the capital city's airport Colombo, the beach town, which feels more like a village, of Negombo is less than a 30 minute taxi drive away.

Negombo, in the South of Sri Lanka, is a schizophrenic place with two faces, one which looks out to the sea, and one which looks at the bustling streets on which the locals go about their daily life.

The face that looks to the sea is populated with hotels, such as the Jetwings Beach hotel, one of Sri Lanka's best-known high quality chains which oozes rustic luxury.

This is a pure beach resort, palm trees, pool bar, buffet restaurant, rooms featuring lots of local, dark wood. But on reflection it is more than that, it is perhaps one of the most striking beach resorts you might visit. It is stripped down five-star perhaps, but it is certainly five-star.

Any traveller from Oman will be well used to beautiful beaches, however don't be complacent. Negombo offers a different perspective on the much-prized view.

This small resort is the best place to watch a fleet of traditional single-sailed 'Paruvas' catamarans gliding across the horizon. The colours used to paint this portrait include golden for the sand, bright green for the vegetation that carpets parts of the beach, then that blue sea, conveniently framed by palm trees.

Local women sit patiently on the sands waiting to show you their wares, mostly sarongs with elaborate patterns. They are persistent but their warm smiles are likely to coax a few dollars from your wallet.

In all it is the picture postcard scene many aspire to visit.

Negombo which faces inland is a much different story, bustling in only the way South Asia can be, but not intimidating to the novice. Outside the strip of hotels, and nearby late night bars, the road is lined with Tuk Tuk drivers eager to show you their home, for a negotiable price of course. In some ways this really is the only way to see Negombo, but be prepared for an adrenalin-fuelled ride as these fearless drivers in their flimsy three-wheels hare breakneck through the streets.

Negombo has the faded look of driftwood, as do many of its Catholic churches housed in Little Rome, or its brightly painted Buddhist shrines, but that adds perhaps to the charm.

The high street in Negombo is also home to market stalls and shops, the best buys being gemstones, silver jewellery, leather goods and carved masks.

Tempting as it is to lie on those beaches, Sri Lanka has much more to offer, especially those in search of wildlife and photo safaris.

A 40-minute flight from the capital's airport to Hambantota International Airport, Sri Lanka's second and newest airport, puts you just an hour's drive from the Yala National Park.

Here the landscape changes from tropical to almost African with a savanna like appearance. Mudholes, mountains and lagoons interrupt vast scrubland from which a huge variety of wildlife can appear.

Tourism is really beginning to grow, evidence of that is Jetwings' newest hotel, the stunning Jetwing Yala. Equipped with sea views, luxury trappings, four-poster beds, a huge pool, this hotel shines for two reasons, firstly its food; which offers the best in Sri Lankan cuisine, secondly; as a staging post into the national park.

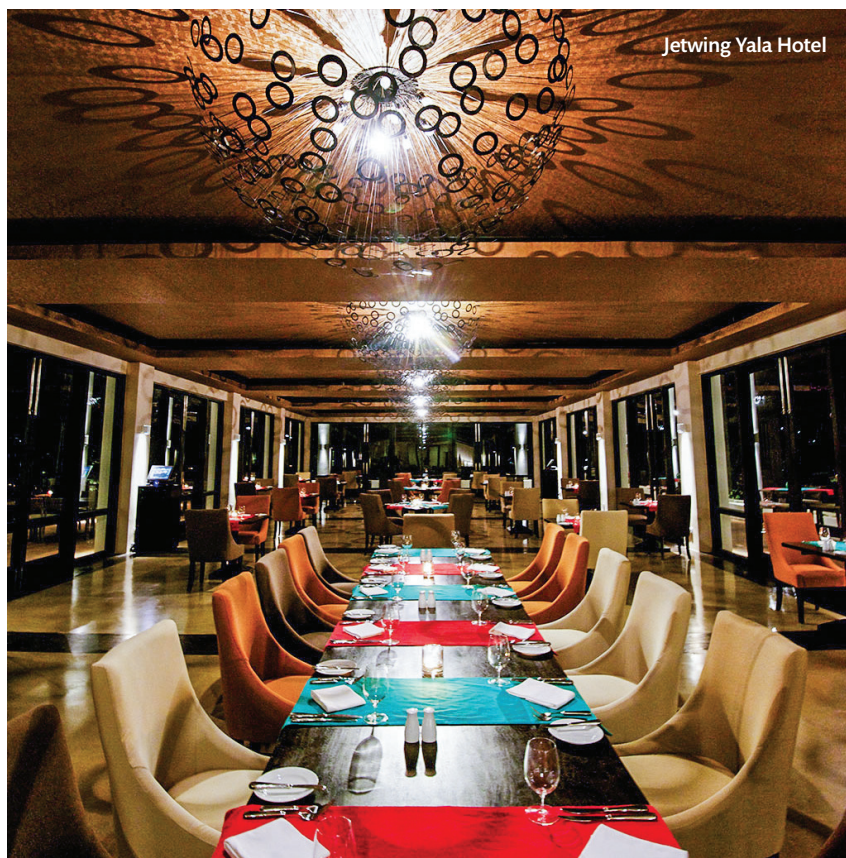
A total change of pace from Negombo's beaches, this gives you the chance to connect with the Allan Quatermain in you (minus elephant gun of course) and go on adventure.

Crocodiles, elephants, buffalo, leopards, boars, pelicans, this list of wildlife that call this massive reserve home goes on and on. Luckily most are not too camera shy either, with the photographer only really challenged to capture images of the Sri Lankan leopard.

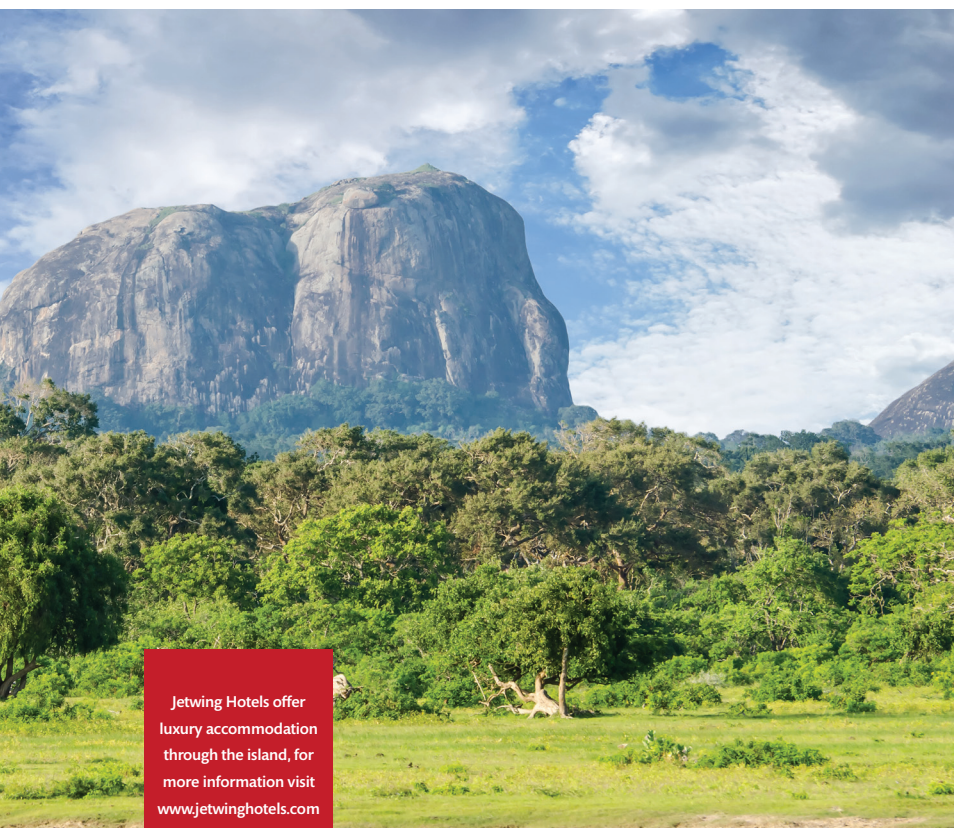
While there are photo moments everywhere it really is worth putting the lens down for some time and just capturing the scene with your eyes and searing the sites into your memory (latest research shows we retain less of events viewed through a smartphone camera).



Yala National Park



Jetwing Yala Hotel



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Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic - Kandy

This is a vast wilderness that needs to be breathed in, soaked up and experienced properly, enjoy every bump of the jeep, sink your feet into the unspoiled beach and don't forget to gasp, and even cynics will, at the site of your first elephant close up and in its natural habitat.

You and group will return to your hotel hours later, dusty yes, thirsty perhaps, but talking endlessly and enthusiastically of the things you saw in your day, re-

peating them in an almost shamanic way to preserve the memory.

There are of course other sites in Sri Lanka, Kandy Elephant Orphanage (plus the Temple of the Tooth Relic) being among the most famous, but one trip to this surprising, humble, smiling nation is not enough. You'll yearn to return to explore more sites such as the rolling tea plantations, the tea being another of Sri Lanka's prized exports. Plus the now

peaceful North holds the promise of developing tourist attractions, such as Wilpattu National Park or the dolphins of Kalpitiya, but those are for another trip.

That all said, with our televisions full of strife and conflict in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe, perhaps Sri Lanka's biggest draw is the sense of hope a traveller can draw from what it has built, and how fast scars have healed, in just a few years. ☺