

Leopards, elephants and sloth bears: living luxe on safari in Sri Lanka

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The lodge's pools are often visited by monkeys and, occasionally, thirsty elephants.

Photography by Elise Hassey.



Image: Open pavilions make up the dining and bar space at the Wild Coast Tented Lodge.

Tucked away like a precious secret between the dense green fringes of Yala National Park and a boulder-strewn beach overlooking the **Indian Ocean**, Wild Coast Tented Lodge in **Sri Lanka** is an extraordinary confluence of glamour and grit. Imbued with a frontier-like sense of luxury, a thrilling sense of surrender to nature hums beneath every surface. A sign reads: “Elephants, leopard, crocodiles, wild boar, sloth bears & other denizens of Yala could enter the area around the Lodge, as there is no physical impediment to stop them...” Yes, this place is *alive*. Being here feels like dancing at the very edge of the world.



Image: The poolside dining room.

This striking lodge is the newest star in a small but bright constellation of luxury hotels being nurtured into an upscale travel circuit by Malik J Fernando, managing director of Resplendent Ceylon, the hospitality offshoot of his family's Dilmah Tea business. The passionate hotelier has kept each of his Relais & Châteaux-accredited properties — Cape Weligama, Ceylon Tea Trails and a new project underway in Sigiriya — deliberately intimate. "I believe small is beautiful," says Fernando.



Image: Each Cocoon Pool Suite has a four-poster bed, bathtub and private pool.

It feels like the right approach on this teardrop of an island, which is blessed with the sort of abundant, nostalgic natural beauty that elicits whispered insider tips from the well-travelled set, but which is still finding its feet after the long and brutal civil war ended in 2009.



Image: In the bar, the bamboo shell ceiling structure is a focal point; the bamboo chandelier is inspired by stalactite formations in caves. Campaign-style furniture, including leather and mahogany chairs, sit atop a sandy quartz pebble floor.

Fernando's latest project was conjured into being by interdisciplinary company Nomadic Resorts, with interiors by Amsterdam-based Bo Reudler Studio. Twenty-eight Cocoon Suites (eight of which have 'Urchin tents' for children) are clustered around watering holes and scattered across the bush in the shape of leopards' paws. Four private-pool, beachfront suites are often visited by monkeys and, occasionally, thirsty elephants.



Image: A family of monkeys visit the private pool of a beachfront suite.

Spa treatments such as a sandalwood and turmeric-accented Island Spice Scrub await those able to tear themselves away from the central bar, dining and pool area. The dining is relaxed, with highlights including coconut-driven Sri Lankan curries, fresh local seafood and bright salads. Sundowners are seabreeze-addled, pastel-skied affairs, with the arches of the glowing pavilion creating a hypnotic sequence of vistas — salt-washed foliage, a mirror-like pool, the white-plumed exhalations of the Indian Ocean beyond.



Image: Local fishermen completed the bodice-like threading of the Cocoon Suite ceiling membranes.

Yala is known for the density of its leopard population, and safaris here can feel overwhelmed by other jeeps in search of the area's most famous resident. Besides the option of heading into quieter blocks of the park, Wild Coast plans to open a leopard conservation station for valuable research in the first half of 2019. Fernando has also gained approval for an 810-hectare conservancy with strict ecological guidelines on access and activity.



Image: The bathtub in the Cocoon Suite has been handcrafted from copper.

The creative concept for the domed buildings unfurled organically, says Louis Thompson, Nomadic's CEO, from the fantastic boulders dropped like a careless giant's marbles along the shore. Local fishermen took over construction after an overseas contractor dropped out, and worked tirelessly under the tutelage of experts in steel and bamboo construction, as well as tensile membrane tensioning.



The lodge uses solar power, recycles water for landscaping, and features local materials such as teak and mudbrick bound with elephant dung. “If you use noble materials, you don’t need to finish them that much, really,” says Thompson. A tree that had to be felled has been cast in copper and suspended in the dining pavilion like an offering to the gods. “It’s a piece of solid local poetry,” says designer Bo Reudler.



While communal spaces clad in reclaimed teak shingles look almost to have emerged from the earth, the Cocoon Suites — all stretched membrane and porthole windows — appear to have floated down from some other exotic frontier. The interiors are a romantic marriage of safari style with what Reudler calls a “steampunk touch”, featuring four-poster beds, soaking tubs and bespoke military-campaign-style furniture that “references an era in which there were still worlds left to discover”.



The humble, bodice-like beauty of the stitching joining the tents’ interior membrane pieces fittingly echoes the fishermen’s artistry in threading their lines. “It’s not perfect,” says Thompson, with quiet pride. “If you look carefully, it’s full of imperfections all over the place.” Just like nature, really.





Visit: resplendentceylon.com/wildcoastlodge-yala