

Back to the wild

With the FCDO's travel restrictions lifted and a new tourism campaign called 'Save the Sri Lankan Smile', now is the time to sell this wildlife-rich Indian Ocean destination, says **Yolanda Zappaterra**

It's like that scene in *Jurassic Park*, when the kids first see the dinosaurs," murmurs my partner, "only with elephants". He's not wrong. Mere feet away from our motionless Jeep is the magical sight of said majestic beasts in Udawalawe National Park. The park is one of 12 across Sri Lanka, with leopards, crocodiles and hundreds of bird species to be found in them.

Wildlife is just one draw for visitors to this gorgeous island nation: there are also verdant tea plantations in Nuwara Eliya; hiking trails on the central Horton Plains; train journeys across Instagram-favourites such as Ella's Nine Arch Bridge; the spectacular east and south coast beaches; marine life surrounding the entire island; and ancient cultural sites to rival many others in Asia.

Before 2018, millions of tourists had discovered this perfect winter holiday destination, with Indians, Russians, Ukrainians and Brits top of the leaderboard. But then came a spate of tragic events – a terrorist attack, global pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – that all took their toll. Catastrophic

mismanagement of a fragile economy made things worse, and this spring, what had been fast-recovering post-pandemic tourist figures took a nosedive in the face of severe fuel and food shortages, power cuts, protests and curfews across the country.

An essential-travel-only FCDO advisory scared many potential British visitors off, but now that these restrictions have been lifted, and with the launch of a committee established to reassure the world that the country has enough fuel, food and medicines to take care of tourists and locals – the country is hoping for a strong recovery.

"The committee, made up of members of Thasl (The Hotels Association of Sri Lanka) and Slaito (Sri Lanka Association of Inbound Tour Operators), will do its best to remind the world that the country has many authentic experiences, be it in wellness, nature, wildlife or hiking, and of course the beaches are just as inviting as they've always been," says Shiromal Cooray, managing director of Jetwing Travels. A social media campaign, 'Save the Sri Lankan Smile' with the ➤



DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | SRI LANKA

ASK THE expert



"Now that the FCDO advisory has been lifted, agents will

find Sri Lanka an easier sell than a lot of long-haul winter destinations, many of which have high prices and low availability. Compared with other 'winter' destinations, Sri Lanka is excellent value – especially for boutique hotel luxury. The famously warm welcome will be more effusive than ever, and your clients' visits will directly contribute to the economic recovery."

Sam Clark, director,
Experience Travel Group



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Benota Beach; the ancient structure of Polonnaruwa Vatadage; traditional Sri Lankan dishes; tea plantation at Nuwara Eliya

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PLACES TO STAY

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Luxury rural retreat. From £70. jetwinghotels.com

All prices per room, per night.

tagline 'Please come on board, to support an Island of Hospitality' has been launched, too.

Sri Lanka's reputation for hospitality is well deserved, and for a country that desperately needs tourists, now is arguably the perfect time to sell this multi-layered Indian Ocean destination. Ordinarily teeming Unesco World Heritage Sites such as Sigiriya, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are ethereally empty, and at sacred spaces like Dambulla Cave Temple and Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy, queues are non-existent. Gorgeous south coast beaches like Unawatuna, Mirissa and Jungle Beach are virtually deserted, as are the national parks of Yala, Minneriya and Bundala, and the popular hiking routes of Adam's Peak, Ella Rock and Horton Plains.

As a first-time visitor to Sri Lanka, I was keen to explore both the highlights and quieter sites, and found the mix everywhere.

In between underrated capital Colombo and the walled city of Galle, I stopped at Brief Garden, the estate that belonged to the brother of one of Sri Lanka's most famous architects, Geoffrey Bawa, and shared the beautifully landscaped gardens with just a handful of visitors. On a sunrise birdwatching safari to Bundala I heard birdsong from some of the 452 resident species, but that evening, on a bike ride in the paradise-like Tangalle, I saw and heard the same birds settle down for the night at a local pond.

Between Tangalle and Udawalawe, the rock-carved temple site of Buduruwagala was a revelation to my chauffeur and guide Sanjaya, who had never been there either. And just on the

outskirts of unmissable Kandy, the sheer scale, colours and scents of more than 4,000 plant species in Peradeniya Botanical Gardens left me open-mouthed in wonder.

Ending my trip at the Suriya resort in Negombo, I thought of the things I hadn't seen and done: eastern beaches such as Trincomalee and Arugam Bay; whale and dolphin watching on northwest Sri Lanka's Kalpitiya Peninsula; scuba and wreck diving along pretty much all of the coastline; exploring the northernmost city of Jaffna and amazing beaches such as Casuarina; not to mention trekking in the Unesco Sinharaja Forest Reserve.

However, Sri Lanka will endure, and tourists will return to discover these fabulous places... as will I. **TW**

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