

A walk on the wild side

NATURE Sri Lanka offers 12 wildlife-rich national parks, and close encounters with its own 'big five'. **By Debbie Ward**

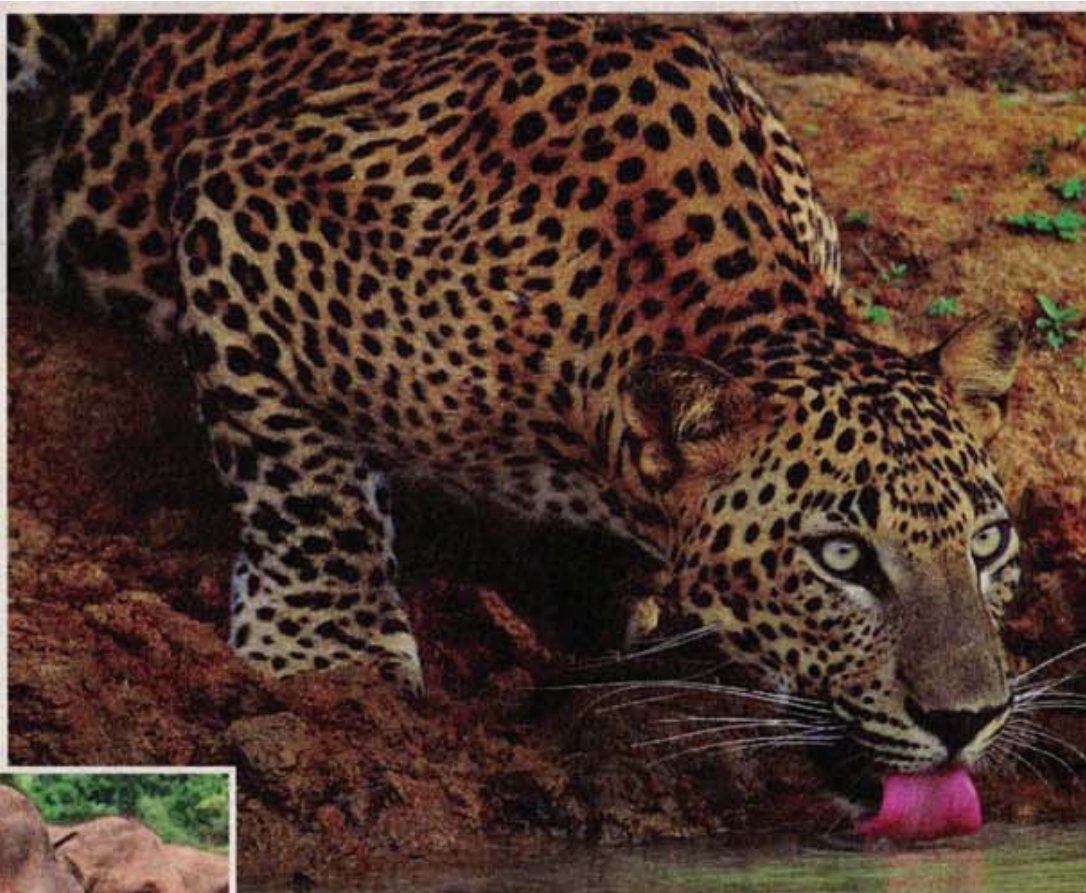
BACKLIT BY DAWN, A PACK OF JACKALS rises from the dusty ground. The animals yawn and arch their backs to stretch out their limbs. Behind them an elephant flings its trunk upwards and pulls its mouth wide open. They troop groggily past my jeep, heading to resume their roles on the great wildlife set that is Yala National Park. It's a first-class animal encounter and I haven't even entered the gate yet.

Yala, in Sri Lanka's southeast corner, is a jewel among the country's myriad animal attractions. During the latter years of the civil war, a Foreign Office advisory effectively closed the park to British tourists while others were shut by the Sri Lankan government. All the country's reserves have now reopened and tourists are in for a treat.

For those who think of safari in terms of browns and khakis, Sri Lanka's version can be a little startling. Peacocks decorate the treetops, their tails trailing like Christmas tinsel, or flick open their fans on dusty tracks. There are flitting green bee-eaters and scenic waterholes where crocodiles bask beside pink lilies. You may even, as I did, spot day-tripping Buddhist monks, their saffron robes fluttering through the bars of an open-backed bus.

Sri Lanka claims to be the easiest and most rewarding safari destination outside Africa and it's not hard to see why. There are 12 wildlife-rich national parks and 52 sanctuaries on a land mass the size of Ireland.

The top draw is leopards and Yala boasts among the highest densities of the big cat in the world. On my own day in the park I'm not disappointed. We've been scanning the rocky outcrops



The opportunity to see leopards and elephants is boosting the island's appeal.



the predators favour but the feeling I'm being watched causes me to turn. A couple of metres away, on open grass, a young leopard is keeping pace with our jeep. I tap my driver and he hits the brakes, the leopard hits the deck and for long minutes we all watch each other. "Take a photo," my driver implores but my arms have turned to jelly. I feel like a sparrow being sized up by a housecat.

Leopards join elephants, sloth bears, blue whales and sperm whales in what Sri Lanka is calling its own 'Big Five'. The two aquatic stars in the line-up were only recently found to migrate past the coast and, handily for tourists, the best place to see them is not far from the Unesco-listed historic city of Galle. Whale-watching tours run out of Mirissa and the best sightings require an early start, arriving at the port as local fishermen are leaving, balancing fresh tuna on their bicycles.

It's 13 miles out to the deep, whale-friendly stretch of water which sits between two shipping lanes and between December and March sightings

are reliable. On the boat I join from Mirissa Watersports, the captain, almost childlike in his own excitement, briefs a few passengers at a time, spreading maps and pictures and ignoring his mobile as it bursts into whale song in his pocket.

Flying fish buzz across the water then a huge back breaks the surface, appearing like an island on which we might land. The blue whale sighs out a jet of water and we 'ooh' and 'ahh' like we're at a fireworks display as it upends and nips its huge fluke. This time I get my photo.

Sri Lanka's big five

LEOPARD Yala boasts among the highest densities in the world. Another good bet is Wilpattu on the Northwest coast, relatively close to the popular beach resort of Negombo and Colombo's international airport. May is the top spotting time.

SLOTH BEAR The most elusive of Sri Lanka's big five. Again, Yala and Wilpattu are the top spots. June and July are the best times.

ELEPHANT Many parks have elephants but they are best viewed in southerly Uda Walawe. Minneriya, on the cultural touring route between Sigiriya

Deacnes, lush tropical forests, waterfalls, and mist-swathed mountains.

"It's an incredible experience," says Manoj Gunawardena, CEO of Sri Lankan Airlines, "coming through plantations and landing in Nuwara Eliya or on the Castlereagh Reservoir."

Daily scheduled flights to Bentota and Koggala will provide convenient transfers to popular locations and resorts in the south and charter flights will be available to Negombo, Bentota, Koggala, Dikwella, Tissamaharama, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Dambulla and Ampara.

The national carrier operates a direct service from the UK to Colombo 9 times a week, and four via Male in the Maldives. Flights depart from London Heathrow, Terminal 4.

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