

Sunny days in Sri Lanka

Kate Farr spent a laid back family holiday on the Indian subcontinent



Sri Lanka has grown enormously in popularity over the last few years. With oodles of culture, wildlife and sunshine, it's a great getaway for families and its location makes it a credible five-hour, mid-haul alternative to Bali or Thailand - perfect for the shorter 'shoulder' school holidays. It's also a great 'halfway' meeting point for Hong Kong and Europe-based families hoping to catch up.

For those travelling with younger children, Sri Lanka is, in fact, a surprisingly easy place to explore as a family, due in part to its recently upgraded roads, relatively small size, and affordability of hiring a driver. We recently took a

trip to Sri Lanka's southwest with our six-year-old and his two-and-a-half-year-old brother.

Having arranged a car transfer in advance with our guesthouse, we met our driver at Bandaranaike International Airport and began the two-and-a-half-hour journey south towards our first stop, Unawatuna. This seaside resort is located just five minutes' drive outside the ancient city of Galle, a former Dutch settlement, and boasts a wide stretch of pristine sand, lined with casual bars and restaurants.

While most visitors opt for beachfront accommodation, we chose instead to head inland to Villa Mangrove, an independently run guesthouse. After a long flight followed by a

car journey, we were all keen to settle in and unwind, and Villa Mangrove was the perfect place to do just that. The six-room villa had been lovingly designed and built by its owner, and the result is a sophisticated, modern property that combines contemporary design with traditional Sri Lankan accents, such as wooden shutters, vibrant fabrics and lazily twirling ceiling fans.

Having booked a family room, we found that there was plenty of space for all four of us to stretch out in (mosquito-netted) comfort. An unexpected novelty for the boys was the outdoor ensuite bathroom, allowing us to shower in the open air every morning - some

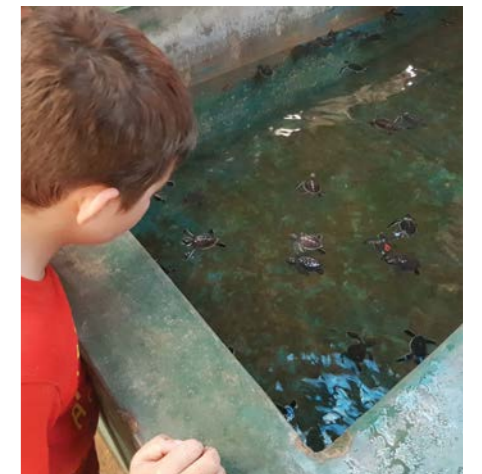
bathrooms also feature cast stone bathtubs. The villa also had a generously sized outdoor pool, open-air yoga pavilion and massage rooms, with traditional Sri Lankan massage that you could book in advance. Meals can be provided on request, with a choice of Sri Lankan or Western dishes. We opted for the Sri Lankan menu, and really appreciated the cook's care in avoiding too much spice in the boys' food, who declared their curries "very yummy".

Our villa was a short tuk-tuk ride from both the beach and Galle itself. This charming colonial city is packed full of narrow alleyways and ancient city walls that are great fun to explore with children. One such exploration

led us to stumble across Galle's annual Children's Day celebration, where hundreds of schoolchildren take to the coastal paths to fly kites. Our eldest son soon made a new friend, and despite having no common language, both children worked together to launch their kite into the dazzling blue sky.

Feeling the heat, we retreated to The Pedlar's Inn Café, a relaxed coffee shop and jewellery gallery, for some freshly squeezed juice.

Which brings me to another huge selling point for visiting Sri Lanka with children - the fruit and vegetables taste amazing, as almost all produce is grown right here on this incredibly fertile island. The lack of air miles means that



Turtle conservation in Bentota

you can really taste the difference in everything that you eat and drink, and we found our boys far more enthusiastic about trying new flavours than they usually are at home in Hong Kong.

With a quick trip to Barefoot, a Galle institution selling traditional Sri Lankan crafts and textiles, followed by a very civilised - and family-friendly - afternoon tea at the colonial-chic Galle Fort Hotel, it was time to head onwards to our next stop: Udawalawe National Park, a three-and-a-half hour drive inland.

This 300-square-kilometre park is managed by the Sri Lankan government, which takes an active role in ensuring the conservation of the country's indigenous wildlife. Arriving at Udawalawe's entrance at around 6am, we were joined by an official guide (it is compulsory to use a designated guide within the park). Almost immediately, we were greeted by a family of elephants casually strolling past our vehicle - something that utterly delighted both our boys, especially when they spotted the

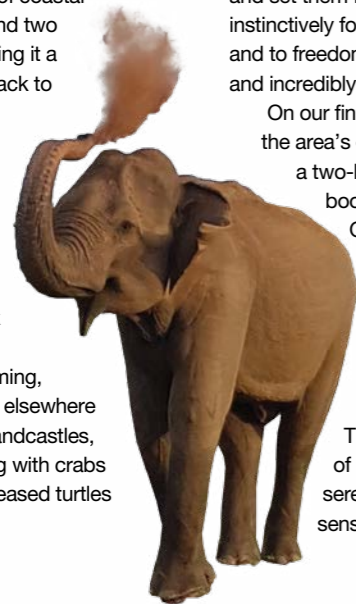


Taking it easy in Unawatuna

party's adorable baby bringing up the rear. Over the course of the next two hours, we eventually lost count of the number of elephants that we spotted – our guide estimated at least 35 – as well as countless peacocks, vivid green parakeets, lizards and monkeys. As animal experiences go, this one was spectacular, in no small part due to the sharp eye and endless patience of our guide, who was happy to impart all kinds of animal facts and field endless questions from the boys.

Elephants duly spotted, it was time to hop back into our car and head back to the coast, and our final destination of the holiday, Bentota. This stretch of coastal guest-houses is situated around two hours south of Colombo, making it a good final stop on your way back to the airport.

Bentota's real draw is the beach, although here I must add a word of caution: as this faces directly onto the Indian Ocean, the waves can be a little choppy at certain times of the year, so do check before you travel. If, however, you find it too rough for swimming, there's plenty of fun to be had elsewhere along the shore, as we built sandcastles, discovered rock pools teeming with crabs and – most exciting of all – released turtles into the wild.



Bentota is known as a key area for turtles to lay their eggs, and while poaching is thankfully on the decline in Sri Lanka, both adult turtles and their eggs remain endangered. The Kosgoda Sea Turtle Conservation Project is working hard to reverse this trend, gathering and hatching eggs in captivity, then releasing the hatchlings into the sea at a few days old, significantly increasing their chance of survival. Tourists can visit the sanctuary to learn more about their work, and even help staff with the turtles' release. This takes place several times a week after dark, and we were all allowed to gently scoop the babies out of their container and set them free on the sand, where they instinctively found their way back to the ocean, and to freedom, which was an unforgettable, and incredibly moving sight.

On our final day, we decided to explore the area's dense Bentota river area with a two-hour river tour (these are easily booked by your hotel or guesthouse).

Our guide expertly navigated us through the backwaters with its densely tangled mangrove forest, before moving into the river's open waters, where we spotted bat colonies, monitor lizards and even a baby crocodile!

There is also a newly erected statue of Buddha, which casts its gaze serenely over the waterways, adding a sense of peace to the experience.



Winding its way to the spot where the river mouth meets the Indian Ocean, we reflected on our action-packed holiday, and I asked the boys whether they'd like to visit Sri Lanka again; "How about next week, Mummy?" was the optimistic reply from my eldest son.

Stay

Villa Mangrove, Heenatigala Road, Unawatuna, Sri Lanka; +94 775 602 396
villamangrovegalle.com

Grand Udawalawe Safari Resort, 912 Thanamalwila Road, Udawalawe, Sri Lanka; +94 703 998 181
udawalawesafari.com

Rockside Beach Resort, Galle Road, Athuruwella, Induruwa, Sri Lanka; +94 715 810 595
rocksidebeachresort.com

Do

Udawalawe National Park, 7th Mile Post, Sevanagala, Monaragala, Uva Province, Sri Lanka; +94 112 888 585
udawalawe.national.park.wv.lk

Kosgoda Sea Turtle Conservation Project, 13A, Galle Road, Mahapalena, Kosgoda, Sri Lanka; +94 912 264 567
kosgodaseaturtle.org

Bentota River Safari, VTS Lanka Tours, Colombo-Galle Highway, Bentota, Sri Lanka; +94 77 838 3030
vtslanka.com

We flew with Cathay Pacific (daily Hong Kong-Colombo flights).

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