

Adventurous at heart

The hills and plains of central Sri Lanka are better known for cultural and natural sights, but now an extra dimension – adventure – is being embraced, and promises to pump new life into tourism

By Steve White



PHOTOS: WADE CAMPBELL (TOP); GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

Sri Lanka's prodigal son, author Michael Ondaatje, has called it "a pendant off the ear of India". Others evoke a different image, calling it teardrop-shaped. Both of these attempts to describe the simple form of Sri Lanka are revealing: the beauty of its jungles, hills and beaches is unquestionable, but it is also a frustrating country where opportunities have been repeatedly lost to political differences, large and small.

In his best moments, man has managed to add to nature's abundance of riches, in the distant past by building great cities that survive to this day as picturesque ruins, and more recently by sculpting the delineated forms of the tea country, and setting up the national parks system.

While political turmoil remains, the country is now trying once again to build on the promise of its natural and cultural treasures. The north and much of the east coast are outside the government's control and thus are usually visited only by independent travellers. But elsewhere the tourism infrastructure has grown ever more sophisticated in recent years, with a greater choice of quality accommodation and more options for those inclined towards adventure.

The beaches have traditionally been important to tourism here and there is a strong surfing scene, as well as diving, windsurfing and kitesurfing. But I was especially interested to see how the centre's twin axes of mainstream tourism – the ancient cities and the hill country – were likely to be

opened up as the island increasingly looks beyond its beaches and embraces more adventure tourism.

Basket case

I decided to begin with an early morning balloon ride from outside Dambulla to get a unique view down on the past glories of the cultural triangle. Ballooning here in such a hot country is an early morning thing by necessity: while there is still a wide difference between the temperature of the air inside and outside the envelope, the balloon will climb easily. Later in the day this gets more difficult.

It was therefore still dark when we assembled in a school field to watch the pilot fire up his burners and gradually inflate the balloon til it stood high over our heads. Once all was ready, we clambered in. I glanced across at my driver, Prem. He'd been offered a free ride but had opted to follow us across country with the car. He was beaming and almost hopping with excitement as we quietly slipped the earth's surly bonds and rose above the trees.

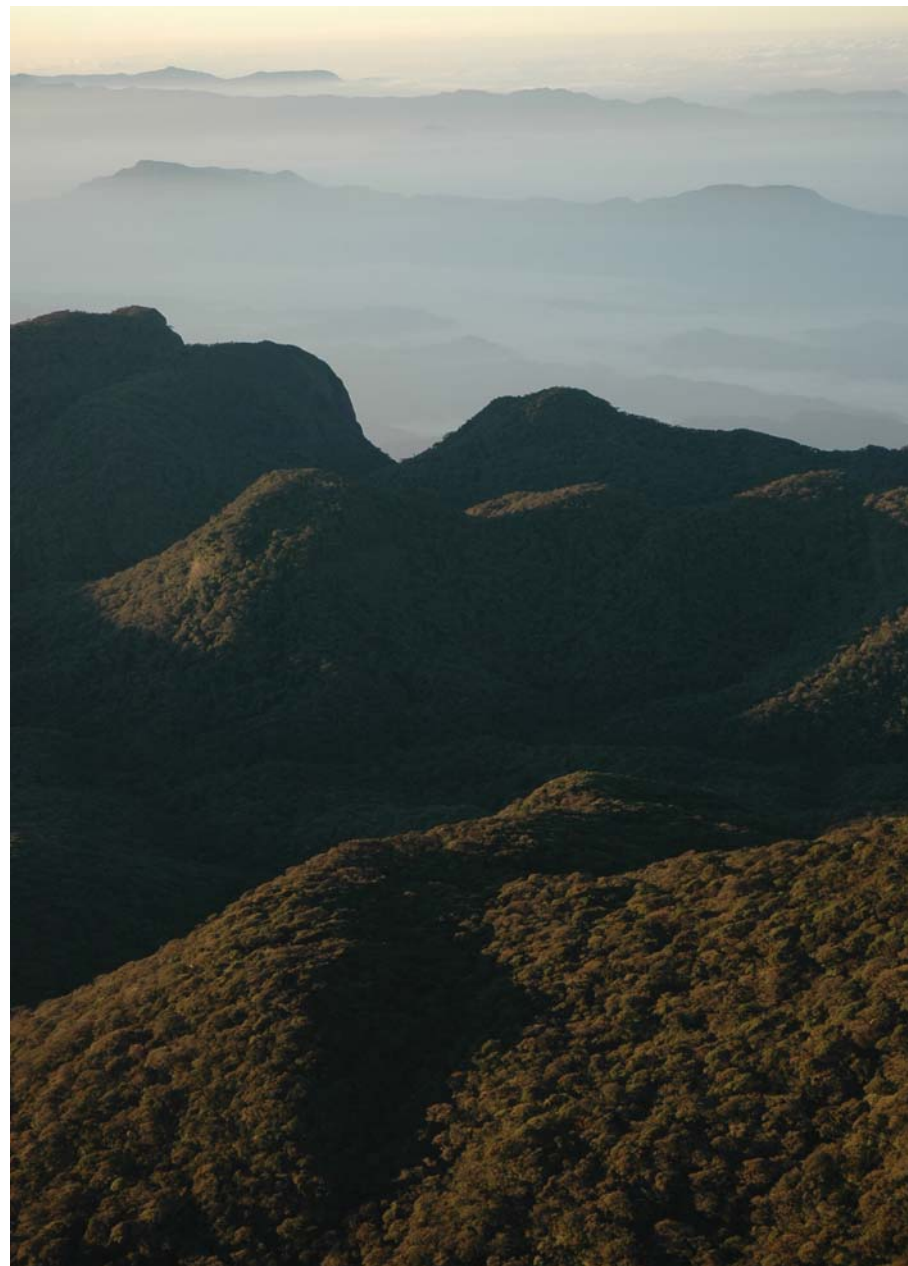
Mist still lay pooled in the hollows of the land as we climbed to around 250m. Some of the country's most important cultural landmarks were immediately revealed: the hilltop Buddha marking the site of the Cave Temples at Dambulla was clearly visible to the southwest while 15km to the northeast, was the distinctive flat-topped rock outcrop cum fortress cum palace at Sigiriya.

The area that was under us is the heart of the 'cultural

Previous spread: Rafting the Kelani; Sigiriya from the air; rice paddies at the edge of a stand of betel nut palm. Below: Keeping the balloon rising means working against the warming air temperature outside the balloon. Facing page: Early light on the hills of the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary.



PHOTOS: STEVE WHITE (FACING PAGE); IAN LOCKWOOD





triangle', a region of impressive city and temple ruins that are what remains of the golden age of Sinhalese culture. Kandy, with its famous Temple of the Tooth, is the southern point of the triangle, with the ruined cities of Anuradhapura to the north and Polonnaruwa to the east. It all ranks as a must-see for first timers in the country.

Between our balloon and Sigiriya lay Kandalama Tank, a lake apparently much larger than usual after this year's prodigious rains. Islands of vegetation mottled the surface, in places just a single tree. The odd outrigger creased the surface, but otherwise the water was an unblemished mirror, providing a twin for every egret or other bird that launched out across its surface.

Tanks are a feature of the Sri Lankan landscape. The coastal wetlands include natural tanks, called *vilus*, but many interior lakes are man-made and are what permitted the drier area around the ancient cities to be so widely settled and cultivated in the first place.

Above: A panorama of peaks including Sri Pada, or Adam's Peak, the holiest mountain on the island and one that is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus and Christians alike. Below, l-to-r: Typical safari experience in Wilpattu; leopard cubs sparring in Yala National Park.

In this case, the tank has given its name to the remarkable Kandalama Hotel which sits on the shoreline, just visible. Intentionally sited under a cliff by local architect Geoffrey Bawa, it was designed to melt into its surroundings and, obscured by the curtain of vegetation that has been allowed to grow down its front, it does just that.

Moving away again from the tank, the balloon headed low over the forest canopy, startling birds from the treetops and buzzing isolated houses and farms until, after a 90min flight, we came in to land in a rice paddy, startling a lady at work in the neighbouring block. She stood transfixed as we drifted in to scrape across one terrace. The pilot was using the stubbled earth as a brake on our forward speed and as we neared the wall of the next terrace up, he artfully tweaked the burner to give us just enough height to lift over it and drop into the next field. In this fashion we worked our way uphill towards the road, where the ground crew who had tracked our progress, were now exiting their vehicles.

Within a few moments we were brought to rest close to the road and were able to get out and walk up to where a crowd had gathered to gaze at the great multi-coloured monstrosity in their paddy field. Glasses of champagne and fresh fruit awaited us and we rather self-consciously indulged.

I later heard that Arthur C. Clarke, the island's most famous resident, had done the trip not so long before. "So, did the Wright brothers get it wrong?" he had asked rhetorically afterwards, "This is the best way to fly."

Prem was much impressed too – next time he'd bring the wife, he said.

Wheels of fortune

The next leg of my trip was an excursion into the hill country, home to Sri Lanka's vitally important tea-growing industry. Much of tourism here is the preserve of those in search of the best jam and scones to accompany their refreshing cuppa. But today, the area is bulking up its tourism with more hearty fare, including hiking in the wilder country of the surrounding hills and mountain biking between the tea es-

tates themselves. I aimed to try both.

In colonial times, a great number of estates were dotted across the countryside, each with their very English-looking owners' bungalows. Many of those estates have since been swallowed up by larger companies, and those bungalows are now getting a new lease of life, in tourism.

There are all standards of accommodation on offer, from a basic roof over your head up to butler-serviced home-from-homes, but the beauty of them for the adventure-lover is that they put you smack in the middle of the network of mostly unpaved roads and paths that wind through and between the estates.

These trails are the area's secret weapon. These range from treacherously loose rills that quicken with rainwater in a storm, to broad red-earth roadways that chain one estate to another. Few of them see much traffic, making them ideal mountain bike territory as I was quickly to find out. One minute I was sat at lunch overlooking Castlereagh Reservoir near Hatton; the next I was sat astride an imported mountain bike looking up to where we were headed on a ridge



National parks

Sri Lanka is regarded as a global hotspot of biodiversity and its national parks do a vital job in trying to conserve some of that diversity – not easy in a country as crowded as this.

Many visitors are especially keen to see wild elephants and with around 7% of the world's Asian elephants here, the chances are good, particularly in Uda Walawe and Minneriya parks, and at the elephant orphanage at Pinnawala.

Less well known is Wilpattu, to the north of Colombo. The country's largest national park, it has only recently been re-opened. You'll need a 4WD vehicle to see much of the low-lying landscape with its brackish *vilus* (hence the name), surrounded by grassland. This is said to be one of the best places to see leopards, and there are also highly visible populations of sambar and spotted deer and wild boar.

PHOTOS: KULU SAFARIS (LEFT); RUKSHAN JAYAWARDENE (RIGHT); IAN LOCKWOOD (TOP)



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Holiday time again

There are so many holidays on the Sri Lankan calendar that a five-day working week seems almost unusual. Added to the various religious holidays observed on an island part Hindu, part Buddhist and with largish minorities of Christians and Muslims, are the *poya* days (full moon) when most shops and offices are closed. The best way to enjoy this day is to do as the locals do and go and reserve a spot on the green outside the famous Galle Face Hotel in Colombo. By early afternoon, the sward of grass is littered with families picnicking, playing cricket and football, or flying kites. It's a riot of colour that shouldn't be missed.



high above. Beside me were Peter Stewart, who runs this biking operation, and his local guide, Neal, who were to show me some of the trails on their doorstep.

The switchback climb that followed, on what had once been a paved road, led to a broad dirt contour trail that took us to a village for tea workers. Hindi tunes were blaring out over the hills, but the houses were mostly deserted – the workers busy, bobbing among the tea bushes to gather the latest crop of ripe leaves. We discovered their children close by, playing a game of cricket on a rare piece of flat ground, and we exchanged shouted greetings as we barrelled past.

All around, the hills were corrugated with countless blocks of perfectly regular bushes, each line like a row of stitches on a giant knitted tea cosy that had been pulled over the landscape. The effect was surreal enough, but was intensified by the colours, even on an overcast afternoon that threatened rain soon. I could have sworn that the emerald tea bushes had just been freshly washed.

Most of the remainder of the trail was swooping downhill now, the broad empty dirt road giving us ample encouragement to work up some speed. Neal needed no second invitation to take off ahead, while I quickly regretted



Clockwise from above: Water crossings are a common feature of smaller trails; tea trail biking; an emerald sea lapsing over the hills of the tea country; Sri Lanka has many tall waterfalls.

forgetting my gloves as the handlebars pummelled my palms on the stony sections. We had only ridden about 12km or so but I felt I had a good idea of the sort of trails that abound here. My itinerary had allowed just an afternoon ride; others have come here and spent a week or more tracing the hills, riding between bungalows. The possibilities are mind-boggling.

A walk on the wilder side

Having seen the manicured landscape of the tea country, I was eager for something wilder, so next day we headed east, to the area around Horton Plains, for a day hike. After wiping our shoes with tobacco to deter leeches, we set off up a thickly forested hillside before dropping down into the valley beyond. Here was my first taste of the boggy montane grassland which is a feature of the area.

Unfortunately, the stream bed also showed another characteristic of the Sri Lankan landscape: the haphazard pits of gem miners, hoping to strike it lucky in a country that is famed for its precious stones. If their hunt had been systematic in any way, it was not apparent from the diggings in front of us and none of us felt the need to scour the area in case anything had been left behind.

We then followed the stream up into an area of spiked palms and rhododendrons, with thick spagnum moss un-

derfoot. It reminded me of Tasmania as we squelched and rock-hopped back into the forest, heading for another ridge. A short descent beyond brought us to the banks of a river. Peter had never been here and was impressed to hear from Neal that we were just above the famous Bambarakanda Falls.

We followed downstream as far as we could before the river dropped away from us – we were going to get no closer than knowing that somewhere just out of sight, the river plummeted 241m in the island's tallest cascade.

We rejoined the trail and now found ourselves following an irrigation channel, tracking across the hillside. Where gullies cut across our path, the channel became a metal trough stretched across the gully and we were forced to climb down and then up the other side. At one point, an especially large gully offered no easy way down and we were forced to use the trough itself as our path, taking it in turns to carefully pace out the 20m or so hanging over the gully.

We then had to bushwack a little up an unused trail. Low-hanging branches and vines were soon snatching at our packs and we spent much of the next hour bent double, with only the occasional clearing for relief. At these moments we stopped to stand straight and look out, but though we knew we were traversing the edge of an escarpment, we were unable to see anything in the afternoon mist.

I didn't know it at the time but we were approaching the

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: WADE CAMPBELL; 2: ADVENTURE ASIA; TEA TRAILS



World's End – the name of a famous lookout and the climax of our day's trekking. When we reached it though, we had to take it on good faith that we were 700m above the forest below, as the cloud was clearly settled in for the day.

Leaving the area by the more usual route that skirts Horton's Plains, I was happy to have reached this spot the way we did. We'd had a peaceful and beautiful day's trekking and the viewpoint itself had been a circus in comparison. Should I come again, I promised myself I would overnight in the area to beat the clouds – as well as the crowds.

Lucky dip?

The third leg of my tour lay back towards Colombo, at Kitulgala. This small town straggled out along the banks of the Kelani Ganga is the centre of Sri Lanka's rafting industry, perhaps the most well known element of the island's land-based adventure tourism.

A number of operators work this stretch of river, taking an hour or so to get the rafters through the six rapids which range from Grade II-III+, depending on the water level which is regulated by the dam upstream.

I was lucky. The water that morning was unexpectedly high when I showed up to meet Wade Campbell who runs one of the rafting operations on the river. The best conditions here are generally in the morning, he told me, but it's not a 100% thing and it's best to call ahead if possible.

The put-in entails what Campbell calls a "Grade V portage to a Grade III river", with the raft needing to be carried down a narrow, irregular stairway. With that done, there was the obligatory safety briefing and then we got underway.

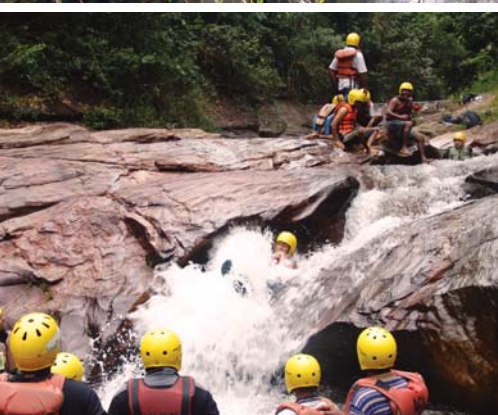
"All the big ones," shouted Campbell to his Nepali raft guide in the back of the boat as we hit the rapids, and the guide obliged, expertly getting us into all the right positions to get the full roller coaster effect, heightened by the fact we were only three in the boat on this trip.

Then, with all but one smaller rapid behind us, came a surprise: "Put your paddle down in the boat," said Campbell. "Now, remember to keep your legs up," and with that he was gone. I followed suit as there was clearly no discussion to be had on the matter.

I am no Ian Thorpe so the thought of riding the next rapid without the boat was not altogether a comfortable one. I didn't struggle with that thought for long though as I was quickly among the waves and shipping water. I heard Campbell shout "Keep your mouth closed in the waves". It sounded like a fine theory which I aimed to follow – just as soon as I could get a breath . . . A few splutters and gulps later I was through and floating in slower water which would carry us down the take-out.

Passing a section of badly eroded riverbank, Campbell took the opportunity to tell me about another of the coun-

Wrought by water alike, the riverbeds and cliffs of the hill country offer rich potential for adventure. Facing page: Tea workers, almost invariably women.



PHOTOS: WADE CAMPBELL (FACING PAGE & J); TEA TRAILS

try's environmental challenges: sand mining.

Poor rural people are employed to gather river sand which is ideal for the building trade. To get it they have to dive to the river bottom, or in some places can simply dig it straight out of the banks. Either way it leads to ecological harm. The banks become less stable, leading to landslides, erosion and silted rivers. Deeper channels have in places allowed the sea to infiltrate further, compromising freshwater supplies. Undoubtedly some animal and fish species are being affected.

Sri Lanka is a densely populated island and the pressure on available land and resources is growing. The forms of mining I had witnessed in some of its most beautiful settings was a reminder of this. Growing the island's adventure tourism is only going to be one small part of the jigsaw of development needed to move Sri Lanka on.

Earlier in my trip, while returning from Dambulla, we had stopped for a restorative fresh coconut at one of a thousand roadside stalls. Draining the last drops, I offered my coconut to the vendor who looked surprised. She asked something in Sinhala which my driver answered for me. With that, one deft glancing blow from the cleaver to the outer shell provided a handy scoop, and another, more meaty swing, exposed two hemispheres of gelatinous young coconut flesh to be scraped out. To think, I had been about to toss the thing into the bin.

It was a simple lesson in wasting nothing and making the most of the bounty that nature has given this island. Adventure tourism deserves its chance in Sri Lanka because it follows this same holistic approach. There is a huge amount that remains untapped on the island. The scope for biking is nearly endless on the backroads and hillside trails, there are climbing sites near Awissawella and elsewhere, there are other rivers that could be rafted and kayaked, and sea kayaking has a bright future in the wide lagoons that fringe the coast in several places. All of these things could be added to the repertoire with the right encouragement. The pioneers are here and if you visit the island, you can enjoy the fruits of their labours so far. But there is much more out there still to be opened up.

Sri Lanka is often connected with the concept of serenity – stumbling across things by happy accident. It's a connection that will probably never be broken, but as far as helping this country to make the best and sustainable use of its natural resources, luck has nothing to do with it. ▲▲



Practicalities

Getting there

SriLankan have regular flights from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. www.srilankan.aero

Getting around

Many visitors opt for the flexibility and comfort of hiring a driver and car. Rates range from Rp.15-25 per km, with an extra fee per night, though you may be able to arrange a package for several days' travel.

Watch out for the haughty traffic police who levy arbitrary on-the-spot fines with singular relish (especially as the system allows ample opportunity for a little private negotiation in lieu of paperwork).

For faster connections there are also aerial choices. SriLankan Air Taxi, www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi, have a few scheduled services and also run charter flights with their seaplanes which use the rivers and tanks to land close to towns and cities of interest. Alternatively there is **Deccan Helicopters**, tel: (94-777) 703 703.

Climate

With the country subject to both southwest (*yala*) and northeast (*maha*) monsoons, the climate is complex. December to March is the driest time in Colombo, on the west coast and in the centre of the island. The north and west get less rain overall, with the dry season running from February to July.

Visas

Many countries' nationals can get a visa on arrival for visits of up to 90 days. See www.immigration.gov.lk

Accommodation

The **Galle Face** in Colombo is an original. A landmark since colonial times, its old wing retains a special ambience that extends even to the staff. If you want the charming terrace, yet prefer extra mod cons in your room, try the renovated Regency wing. www.gallefacehotel.com

The **Kandalama** near Dambulla is another unique property, mantled with thick vegetation and nestled under a cliff. www.aikenspencehotels.com/kandalama/

Tea Trails is a group of four luxury bungalows set in beautiful gardens in the tea country and designed to be within walking/biking distance of each other. www.teatrails.com

Check out www.boutiquesrilanka.com and www.srilankairstyle.com for a look at many of the island's other beautiful and exclusive boutique resorts.

Operators

Adventure Asia, www.ad-asia.com
Adventure Lanka, www.adventurelanka.com
Borderlands, www.discoverborderlands.com
Eco Team, www.srilankaecotourism.com
Exotic Tours, www.exotic.lk
Kulu Safaris, www.kulusafaris.com
Nature Voyagers, www.naturevoyagers.com
Tea Trails, www.teatrails.com

Latest developments

Look out for Borderlands announcing the island's first sea kayaking trips, and also note that they have just opened Colombo's only dedicated outdoor gear shop.