

# Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



## A natural paradise

From wildlife parks to bustling streets, beautiful beaches to mountain temples, **Bernadette Fallon** finds a slice of nirvana in Sri Lanka

There's an elephant standing a few metres away from our jeep in Sri Lanka's Udawalawe National Park, engaged in a very elaborate breakfast routine. Kicking the grass to loosen it, he tugs it free, then rolls it painstakingly with his trunk, constantly repeating the process over and over – kicking, tugging, rolling – an awful lot of hard work to make each small mouthful.

So far this morning we've seen elephants, spotted deer and water buffalo as well as a myriad birds. But the most magical moment of all was on our way to the elephant transit centre, where abandoned baby elephants are cared for before being introduced back into the wild, when a – clearly selfie-conscious – large male elephant came to the edge of the road for a photo.

Standing the other side of a thin wire fence where a few other jeeps had also pulled up, he moved over to

each new arrival, waiting patiently until they'd had their photo taken with him before moving on to the next group. "This is such kindness," said our guide Palinder in wonder as we snapped away furiously.

Palinder is the sustainability manager at the Shangri-La Hambantota Resort on the south coast of Sri Lanka, which is doing much to conserve the local environment, with its wonderful wildlife and natural beauty. It's an environment he has grown up in – back when he was a graduate student, he discovered a new species of spider there.

The evening before he'd taken us on a riverboat safari on the river Walawi, a short tuk-tuk ride from the hotel. Chugging up the wide river close

*The presenting of coconuts is a ritual that is to be regularly repeated*



**The luxury of the Shangri-La Hambantota, main. Elephants are a big attraction, above**

Photographs: Rob Wilson Jnr at Fluid4Sight.com

to sunset, he pointed out majestic purple herons, roosting white cormorants, five types of eagles and perching peacocks. Langur monkeys leaped through the trees alongside us and Flying Foxes hung upside down on the branches, the impressive bats of scary horror films.

We spotted two salt water crocodiles up ahead in the water just before the boat docked at Godawaga beach, where soon five different types of turtles will come to lay their eggs. A beach conservation project to protect the turtle habitats is just one of the plans on the horizon for the Shangri-La. Working with hotel staff, guests

and the local community, ongoing projects include support of the nearby Dahigahalanda school and activities with disabled artists and orphanages.

Coming back down the river as the sun sets, the bats have all woken up and their dramatic black shapes overhead darken the sunset. Flocks of Riesling ducks are heading for home and flying peacocks trail their magnificent tails across the river. It's rush hour on the Walawi.

The men who drive this boat receive all of the money we pay for the experience; the hotel sets up it up but does not take a cut. Nor does it take a cut of the craft village in the resort grounds, featuring the work of local designers and artists, showcasing skills that are today dying out.

But let's face it. To build this Shangri-La – a shining white city of luxurious rooms with balconies and private terraces in beautifully landscaped beachside gardens that feature three swimming pools, four restaurants and an Ayurvedic spa – in this economically deprived area and not contribute to the local economy would be a travesty. Here streets of

wooden huts, thatched with palm tree leaves and selling everything from cans of Coke to bunches of bananas, stretch almost to the gates of the sumptuous resort. All staff employed here are Sri Lankan, hugely friendly and happy to chat. Food is locally sourced – we eat lots of fresh fish, spicy curries, red rice and the local delicacy hopper, made from rice and coconut milk batter.

Coconuts are everywhere. On our first morning in the country, arriving on a Jet Airways flight from London to Colombo at 4.30am, our driver stops in the middle of the just waking city, to buy us king coconuts from an early morning fruit stall. With the green top cut off and a straw inserted, we drink the sweet watery coconut juice looking out at the river market as the sun comes up.

The presenting of coconuts is a ritual that is to be regularly repeated and five hours later we're sucking straws again as we take off on a tuk tuk tour of the city, a crazy jaunt through the thick of the street action – top down and we're off in a frenzy of beeping. The beeps on the streets here are an ongoing soundtrack, conveying everything from a friendly "Hey, I'm right here beside you" to a belligerent "Out of my way".

Rushing along in six lanes of traffic into a roundabout, we pass sleek SUVs, weaving motorbikes and men pushing huge carts of coconuts, tiny cafes and soaring towers still under construction touting luxury residences and shopping centres. We visit the loud and lively spice market and eat lunch with the locals, where they take pity on my efforts to eat rice with my hand and kindly give me a fork. It's all noisy, fun and colourful – children smile and wave at us from neighbouring tuk tuks as we race along, the atmosphere is vibrant, friendly and happy.

But it hasn't always been like this. Sri Lanka has recently come through a 26-year civil war which scared lots of its tourists away. On a walking tour of the city, we visit shell-marked streets that have only recently been re-opened to the public.

The streets in this area, known as the Fort, tell the story of the island's colonisers, from the 16th century Portuguese, 17th century Dutch and the British a century later, right up until 1948 when Sri Lanka gained independence, though the change

from its British name of Ceylon didn't come until 1972. Colonisation means everybody here speaks English of course, though travelling from the UK you will need a visa, which is available online.

Now the restoration is well under way and the stunning colonial buildings here have miraculously remained intact. We visit Asia's first department store, Cargills, founded for the British upper-classes in 1906 and still sporting vintage signs for its perfumery and dispensary, even though it's now a FoodCity supermarket and houses a KFC.

An 18th century Dutch hospital is now a plaza of shops and restaurants, tables spilling out into terrace courtyards, while nearby Chatham Street was once a canal and formerly on the edge of the ocean. That's why you'll find a lighthouse here, featuring a clock that was built by the makers of Big Ben.

Today 70 per cent of people in Sri Lanka are Sinhalese and Buddhism is the majority religion. It's quite a magical place, with beautiful lush landscapes and kind friendly people. Spiritual too, with its countless shrines and temples. Like the Mulkirigala Rock Temple in the south, where we climb over 500 steps to visit seven caves on five terraces, with their ornate wall paintings and huge reclining Buddhas. We meet a monk called Siriniwasa – who invites my partner to plant a tree with him – and feel blessed.

Back in the day when a primary school set of World Book encyclopaedias was my Google, I loved to pore over the maps of the world and the map of Sri Lanka was my favourite. With its regal lion and bright colours of orange, maroon, gold and green, it was exotic and intriguing, colourful and exciting. All these years later, I'm thrilled to discover that so too is Sri Lanka. ■

**Rooms from £232 at Shangri-La Hambantota** ([Shangri-la.com/hambantota/shangrila](http://Shangri-la.com/hambantota/shangrila)) and **£135 at Shangri-La Colombo** ([Shangri-la.com/hambantota/shangrila](http://Shangri-la.com/hambantota/shangrila)) per night, **airport and hotel transfers available; Jet Airways flies to Sri Lanka from UK with Mumbai stopover from £425 return** ([Jetairways.com](http://Jetairways.com)). **Bernadette Fallon is a travel writer and publishes her stories on Travellingwell.net**



Langur monkeys are to be seen everywhere by the roadside in Sri Lanka

STAYCATION



# It's Whisky Galore

A stylish 'new' hotel on the windswept island of Islay is your gateway to distilleries, historic monuments, golf and more finds **Laura Millar**

"We have a saying here in Islay," beams Colin Gordon, the genial, thirty-something manager of the Lagavulin distillery, who's taking me on a tour of the premises: "Today's rain is tomorrow's whisky!" Judging by the way it's pelting down outside, tomorrow promises to produce a veritable cellar-ful (but then Islay in winter was never going to be particularly dry, or warm). This tiny little outpost of the Inner Hebrides is home to a population of around only 3,000, and – currently – nine distilleries, including Laphroig, Ardbeg and Bunnahabhain; that's one for every 333 people. Whisky is taken very, very seriously here, and Islay is famed for its rich, peat-smoked malts, their character known around the world thanks to the quality of the island's soft water, and its profusion of boggy soil, which, when dried and burned, gives this amber nectar its distinct aroma.

For the next hour, Colin happily talks me through the various distillation processes and I inhale the air as we walk around, occasionally getting an addictive malty, yeasty

whiff. He explains that whisky has had a troubled time on Islay in recent years; in the 1980s, it became a victim of overproduction, resulting in the closure of several distilleries (though Lagavulin, which was officially founded in 1816, managed to survive by opening just three days a week). Thankfully, the market is growing again, and today, Islay whisky is just as likely to be sipped in south east Asia as it is in Scotland.

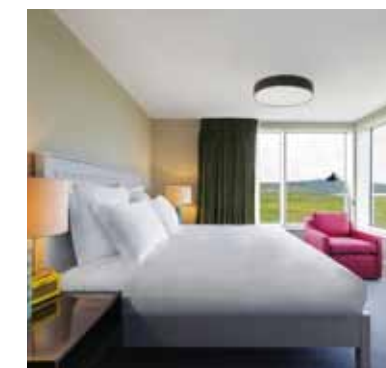
Then it's tasting time, and Colin's laid out a selection of the company's prestigious single malts. I approach them with some trepidation, as my palate normally veers towards the lighter end of the spectrum, but while these are challenging, they are also fabulously complex and distinctive. I find the classic 16-year-old incredibly fiery on the tongue, though when Colin enquires whether I can make out the "wet bonfire" aroma, I have to disappoint him. I fare better with the 25-year-old, created to celebrate the distillery's 200th birthday; aptly for the time of year, it has a festive, Christmassy aroma, with flavours of caramel, figs, raisins, and nougat. It's also £800 a bottle, so I regretfully walk past it in the gift shop as I leave. Outside, the weather's still dreich,

and I'm looking forward to heading back to my hotel, The Machrie. Formerly a fairly un-fancy hostelry, it sits on Laggan Bay, by a superb beach, where the only thing between you and the water is an 18-hole golf course with a pedigree dating back to 1891. Over the past couple of years, it's been taken in hand by celebrated Scottish hotelier and designer Gordon Campbell Gray, who's transformed it from a shabby, somewhat run-down affair into a charming, airy bolthole. The building's Victorian whitewashed brick façade gives way to a modern, newly-added extension at the back, which houses some of the 47 rooms and suites, as well as the

*Islay whisky is just as likely to be sipped in Asia as it is in Scotland*

Stag Lounge and 18 restaurant. It's to the Stag Lounge I repair first. The décor is modern-minimalism-meets-timeless-Scots, or, as Campbell Gray has humourously described it, 'McScandi'. Relaxed, I sip a gin cocktail, before heading through for dinner.

The next morning dawns crisp and sunny, so after breakfast I make for the beach. After my bracing walk, I set off to explore a little more of the island's history, and drive for half



**The Machrie's rebirth has turned an, 'un-fancy' hotel into classy mixture of the old and the new**

an hour through the countryside, dressed in shades of brown and orange, to the famous Kidalton Cross, a magnificent, carved symbol from the eighth century.

Also worth visiting is Finlaggan, the "ancient seat of the Lords of the Isles", the remnants of a 15th century Celtic kingdom overseen by the Macdonald clan. Located towards the north of the island, you can venture out to the small islet of Eilean Mor in Loch Finlaggan, where the ruins of what's thought to be the Grand Hall, chapel and homesteads can still be seen today. The visitor centre also displays various artefacts found in the area. By the time I leave, it's pouring again. There's only one place to end my stay, and that's at The Machrie's cosy Snug. I order myself a wee dram. Looks like they'll be able to make plenty more tomorrow. ■

**Rooms at The Machrie start from £145 a night, including breakfast; to book, visit [campbellgrayhotels.com/machrie-islay-scotland/](http://campbellgrayhotels.com/machrie-islay-scotland/). From 31 March 2019, Loganair will fly direct from Edinburgh up to seven days a week, starting from £54.99 one way; [loganair.co.uk](http://loganair.co.uk). To book a tour of Lagavulin, visit [malts.com/en-row/distilleries/lagavulin/](http://malts.com/en-row/distilleries/lagavulin/)**

48 HOURS IN

## Poitiers

**Monday, 8:30pm**  
Check in to the Hotel Mercure Poitiers Centre (14 Rue Edouard Grimaux, 86000 Poitiers, tel: 0033 549 50 50 60; [mercure.com/gb/hotel-8539-mercure-poitiers-centre-hotel/index.shtml](http://mercure.com/gb/hotel-8539-mercure-poitiers-centre-hotel/index.shtml)). A double room in this 19th century former Jesuit chapel, costs around £90 a night. The station is 700 yards from the hotel, but it's a steep hike. Take a taxi.



**9pm**  
Dine at Le 16 Carnot (16 Rue Carnot, tel: 0033 549 41 22 04; [16carnot.com](http://16carnot.com)) The décor is fin-de-siecle with a classic brasserie menu to match: think foie gras, sole meuniere, tournedos rossini and steak tartare.

**Tuesday, 10am**  
Start at the Palais de Justice, formerly the Palace of the Counts of Poitiers, for a look at the 12th century great hall where Richard Lionheart held court and Joan of Arc was tried for witchcraft.

**Midday**  
Stroll through the outdoor market on Place Notre Dame to Le Roy (d'Ys 51 rue de la Cathédrale, tel: 0033 549 88 81 47) for a traditional creperie lunch.

**2pm**  
Visit the Musée Sainte Croix, where stars of the collection of paintings, sculpture and Gallo-Roman relics include five outstanding bronzes by Camille Claudel.

**8pm**  
Dine at Alain Boutin (65 Rue Sadi Carnot, tel: 0033 549 42 02 93; [www.alainboutin.fr](http://www.alainboutin.fr)) where you can expect solid French regional gastronomy.

BARGAIN BREAKS

**Escape to four star luxury**  
With three sleeps to go, make a last minute run for it, as four star hotel, golf and spa resort Gleddoch, in Langbank, has a variety of packages this year for Christmas. These include a two night break from £520 per couple, three nights from £620, or four from £720, each including champagne on arrival, breakfasts and dinners, plus a four course lunch on Christmas Day. **Call 01475 540711 or see [www.gleddoch.com](http://www.gleddoch.com)**

**The bells of St Helier**  
Ring in 2019 in St Helier, Jersey, with an indulgent evening at The Club Hotel & Spa and their Michelin

**Wednesday, 5am**  
Board a hot-air balloon to float over over Poitiers and the surrounding countryside (montgolfiere-sensation.com). Flights last around two to three hours.

**Midday**  
Lunch on the riverside terrace at Le Bistro de Saint Benoit (6 rue du Square, 86280 St Benoit, tel: 0033 549 31 92 70) on Samuel Colin and Christophe Hute's "semi-gastronomic" menu based on local produce.

**8pm**  
La Serrurerie (28 Rue des Grandes Écoles, tel: 0033 549 41 05 14; [www.laserrurerie.com](http://www.laserrurerie.com)) has a buzzy brasserie ambience and a menu that ranges from classic regional to Asian-fusion. ■

Robin Gauldie

**Ryanair** ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) **flies to Aéroport Poitiers-Biard from Edinburgh. Rent e-bikes for €8.00 per day at Cap Velo** ([cap.velo@aglo-poitiers.fr](http://cap.velo@aglo-poitiers.fr)). **Poitiers is 90 minutes from Paris by rail** ([OUL.sncf](http://OUL.sncf)). **Visitor information: [www.tourisme-vienne.com](http://www.tourisme-vienne.com)**

starred, 5AA Rosette Bohemia restaurant. Their New Year's Eve package costs from £240pp for an overnight stay, plus a six course dinner with a DJ and champagne to quaff at midnight. **Call 01534 880 588 or see [www.bohemiajersey.com](http://www.bohemiajersey.com)**

**Short stay in Dubai**  
Netflights.com is offering three nights in Dubai staying at the five star Sofitel Jumeirah Beach on a bed and breakfast basis. Prices start from £689pp and include direct flights from Glasgow with Emirates. Based on selected dates in June 2019. Book by 31 December 2018. **See [www.netflights.com](http://www.netflights.com)**