My search for leopards in Sri Lanka

IN SEARCH OF THE ELUSIVE LEOPARD OF YALA

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



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THE JEWEL OF ASIA

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a family of wild boar passing by

The island of Sri Lanka – known to some as the jewel of Asia – is a mini Africa located in the Indian Ocean. I say this because it is a mysterious land with a similar wildlife to Africa but it combines that with the intriguing life style and traditions of India. Beyond the sandy beaches of the island lie the landscapes of some of the best-preserved nature reserves in the world. There are several national parks in the north for example Wilpattu National Park; in the centre (Minneriya National Park and Maduru Oya National Park) and in the south – Yala National Park.

Yala National Park, (5 to 6 hours journey from Colombo via the highway and coastal roads) on the southeast coast of Sri Lanka, offers an opportunity to experience the nature and a wide variety of species in over 98,000 hectares of land. The park is a sanctuary for rare animals such as the leopard, one of few places on earth where a large concentration of these cats have a safe and protected home. It also is the home to many species of mammals, avifauna, birds and types of fauna.

I

MY SAFARI HAD ALREADY BEGUN



monkeys drinking from the hotel pool

On arrival, you can either stay in nearby towns or, if you are looking for a holiday combining the best of two of the assets of the country, you could stay slightly further away in one of the beach resorts around Galle and Beruwalla and make a day trip to Yala. But you can also stay next to the park as well such as at the Cinnamon Wild Hotel.

This hotel is just off the main road and up a sandy lane with the final lap of the journey being slow as the driver stopped every other minute to show me crocodiles in the lake. It seemed my Safari had already begun even before checking into my hotel.

Set in the forest, the hotel shares its setting with the forest, a sandy coast and where human and animals co-exist. I could see a large number of small monkeys were playing in the trees as I walked close by.

I kept my distance and passed them slowly. These weren't the only animals I saw in the first minutes of my stay. A family of wild boar passed in front of me. I always thought boar were dangerous creatures but I was told that they were used to humans and that providing I didn't get close to the youngsters which might make the mother a little aggressive, I would be fine.

A walk around the lake helped me recover from the flight and it took me to where crocodiles could be found. I kept a safe distance and they, in turn, concentrated on sleeping rather than watching me.

II

A LOCAL LEGEND FROM THE 2ND CENTURY BC



next to a white stupa

The nearby seashore was reached via sand dunes and when I got there I could see several abandoned fishing huts. It was a beautiful but dangerous sight as I was told it was dangerous to swim there as waves are very rough on this part of the coast.

Too late in the day for a safari trip I settled instead for a visit to the ancient Buddhist temple of Kirinda in Palatupana which was about 12 kilometres away. Out of respect for a holy place it is usual to approach a temple barefooted. That walk taught me that my feet need toughening up to cope with the rocky ground.

Atop the rocky ridge, next to a white stupa, (a mound containing relics that is used for contemplation) is a huge, standing Buddha. The temple is devoted to Queen Viharamahadevi, the heroine of a local legend from the 2nd century BC. According to myth, she was a princess who was sacrificed by her father King Kelanitissa at a time of hardship in Ceylon. The King ordered her to be cast adrift on the sea, but her boat floated to Kirinda where she married King Kavantissa, the ruler of Ruhuna. A statue of her stands on the site in her memory.

The Kirinda Temple is the site of pilgrimage throughout the year. Here you can enjoy a panoramic view of the ocean, the rocky shore and the sandy beach whilst, in the distance, you can see great swathes of green bushy vegetation growing in the sand dunes.

III

NO LEOPARDS TODAY



posing like a model

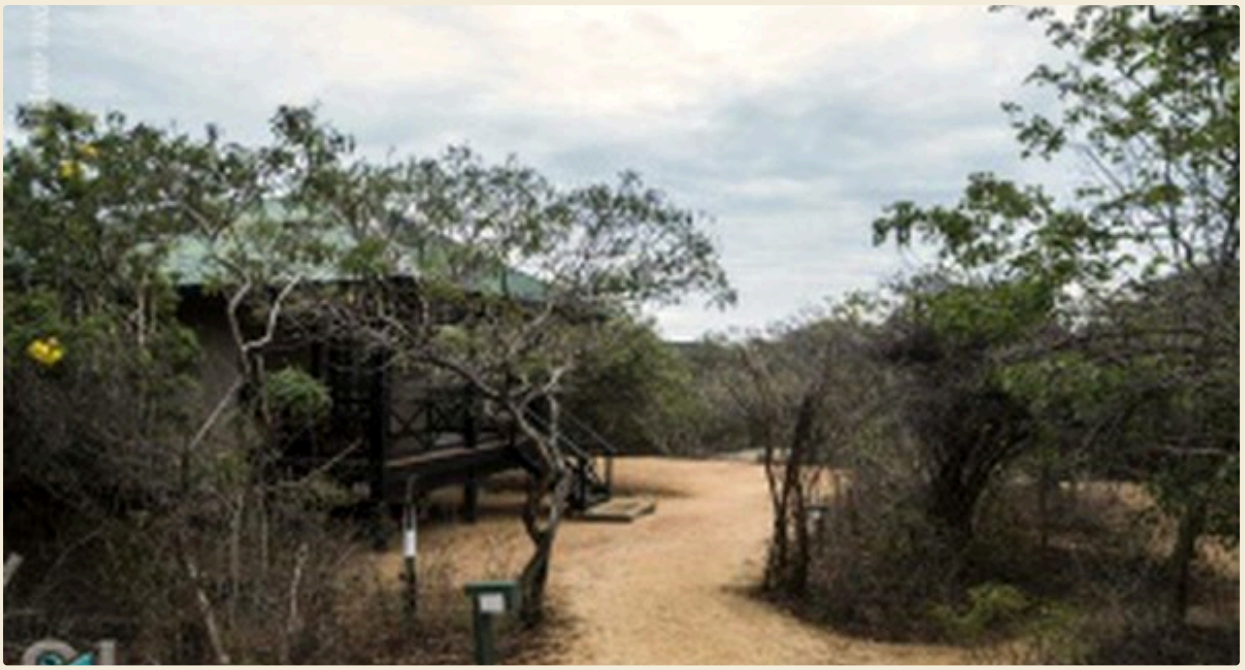
Just as back home where there are road signs warning you of animals crossing, you find the same here. It is just that the animals are creatures like elephants and, on my return journey, I passed one by the side of the road. Unconcerned by me I was told it was just looking for food. There it stood, posing like a model and seeking our attention perhaps thinking I had food for it!

Next morning, a four am departure was necessary to be at the Yala National Park by dawn, the time (and at dusk) when it is the best time to see animals. The Yala is divided into five sections. It was annoying that the popular section (one), next to the Cinnamon Hotel, was closed due to major maintenance work. Therefore, we had to travel to the other end of the park to enter section five, a journey of over one and a half hours from the hotel.

But we did make it by dawn. As did others and there were many other safari Jeeps all in search of a glimpse of the leopards. We saw monkeys playing in the trees, monitor lizards and a large group of buffaloes in the lake, but no leopards. As one guide talked to another to see if anyone else had been lucky in spotting leopards we frequently stopped whilst information was traded. But there was no joy – no leopards today.

IV

THE LEOPARD PROJECT



through winding and dusty paths

Elsewhere in the park is the Weheragala Reservoir Dam which has become an important landmark of the country and it appears at the back of the 5000 rupee note.

In a more tropical section of the park, I was taken to a dense forest through which a river flowed. I saw a peacock and several deer but the leopards were elusive. My guide emphasised that there is a difference between a zoo and natural wild life habitat. You can only expect to see animals if they wish to appear and today, leopards just didn't want to come and be seen.

My guide told me about the Leopard Project run in conjunction with the hotel at which I was staying. This protects against the hunting of leopards by local farmers who, in the past, used to kill leopards to protect their cows. The Cinnamon Project found a solution by providing farmers with free–of-charge, portable steel-fenced pens to keep the domestic cattle safe from hungry leopards. These donations have saved many leopards from untimely deaths.

In the morning, my guide took me to a farm to show the fencing provided by the project. We arrived in the early morning as the farmer had just started milking his cows. There was an open field where cattle were feeding on the grass and several fenced sections placed next to the field for animal protection. All cows are owner-marked so that the farmers can collect and lead the cattle to their enclosures, every day, before dark.

V

THE HILL OF QUIET MIND



praying in front of the statue of Buddha

We continued our journey to the heart of Yala and, close to the Buddhist pilgrimage town of Kataragama, there is the second century monastery of Sithulpahuwa Rajamaha Viharaya. You will need to climb a steep and stony path to reach the top of the 122 metre high rock and see the large white stupa located there. Some people were praying in front of the statue of Buddha, others were taking in the view of the valley below.

Centuries ago, the popular pilgrimage site of Sithulpahuwa was a great monastery where thousands of Buddhist monks used to live in caves and shelters. The summit is called 'The hill of quiet mind' and it is the quiet and tranquillity that I remember most from my trip along with a visit into one of the rock caves which was decorated with wall paintings, inscriptions and a large statue of Buddha.

Descending into the valley you'll find a natural lake where crocodiles were snoozing, always with an alertness that belies their apparent laziness. My luck in seeing other animals was still out: no elephants and deer today!

Continuing our journey we climbed the opposite side through winding and dusty paths to reach the summit. In some places, we had to go through tunnels in the rocks and narrow passages making it one of the best hiking experiences I have encountered.

It was a great adventurous experience to live for a few days in the heart of freely roaming wildlife and see animals in their natural habitat. It was great to see a few elephants in Yala, but another trip will be required to see those elusive leopards!

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Reza flew to Sri Lanka on a direct SriLankan Airlines flight from Heathrow to Colombo.

There is a useful and free app called 444 about Sri Lanka enabling you to book tickets to a variety of places and events in the country.

To see more of Reza's images of Sri Lanka, go to www.purevisionjourneys.com/sri-lanka/.

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