

The master bedroom features rustic safari-style décor

Each cabin comes with an outdoor deck with a built-in 5m plunge pool

CNT
EXCLUSIVE

Chena Huts by Uga Escapes

GOVIND DHAR test-runs the latest luxury safari hotel to open near Sri Lanka's popular Yala National Park

Standing atop the scatter of boulders lining the beach, our guides look like toy soldiers glued to outsize footballs. In their safari outfits, rangers Haritha and Stuart cut serious expressions, squinting into the crevasses of the monstrous rocks. “What are you looking for?” I ask. “Silver dollars,” comes the reply. I laugh. “No seriously,” Stuart says. “There was a shipwreck off this coast.”

He’s not entirely wrong. In 1961, only 12km from here, the great science-fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke discovered what’s now known as the Great Basses Wreck. The ship, flying Mughal emperor Aurangzeb’s standard, was carrying silver rupees (not dollars), when it sank here in the 1700s.

“Or octopus,” says Stuart hopefully.

Ordinarily you wouldn’t require a guide to accompany you along Sri Lanka’s white sand beaches. But on the rim of its most popular national park, Yala, where the desolate driftwood, termite hills and unchecked scrub and cacti make the beach look seductively virginal, you certainly do. “We once had a bull elephant on the pathway inside the resort,” says Stuart. Sure enough we spot elephant footprints in the sand, just a few hundred metres away from this squeaky-new resort by Uga Escapes – a design-savvy hotel group that has stealthily become the tastemaker’s choice of homes-away-from-home on the Emerald Island. The collection of 14 pavilions is called Chena Huts, after structures on stilts built by sustenance farmers in Sri Lanka’s “dry zone”, named for its lack of rainfall in an otherwise

precipitation-heavy country. And, unusually, there are few palm trees in this south-eastern chunk of the island.

Before we leave the beach, the rangers discover turtle nests buried in the sand. Wild boar tracks lead to the spot from a sandy incline covered in prickly pear, where the crumpled sheaths of eggshell suggest what the boar ate for breakfast.

The rooms at Chena Huts are dotted along seven acres of scrub and thatch on the edge of Yala National Park, offering watering hole, beach or bush views from rooms that are glassed-off on three sides. Setting a new bar for luxury safari stays in Sri Lanka, each grass-roofed chamber is secluded from the next; inside is a column-less, airy 760sqft space with groined-vault domes, muted parrot-green cushions, wood and brass cabinetry, smart bathtubs and his and hers basins. Large beds on wood plinths take centre stage and vintage lanterns light up the washrooms, shower, writing desk and bed. There’s a cosy sitting area with a decibel-busting Geneva Bluetooth speaker, a flat-screen TV, coffee machine and mini-cooler. Look up and the protruding plaster cross of the ceiling races along the interior curve of the roof, as if you were inside a palatial hot-cross bun. There’s a private deck and plunge pool attached to each room, some with views of crocodile, leopard and flamingo, if you’re lucky. Suffice it to say, on entering any of these rooms any similarity to a village hut is purely romantic.

As night falls, the sky reveals stars so numerous that we often interrupt our conversation to stare heavenward. The bartender mixes up a coconut arack and passion fruit juice to superlative effect. Ask him to make a frozen version of this and the



The picturesque Yala National Park



Spot deer at nearby Yala National Park. **Above:** Breakfast at Chena Huts



Enjoy sundowners on the hotel's pristine beach

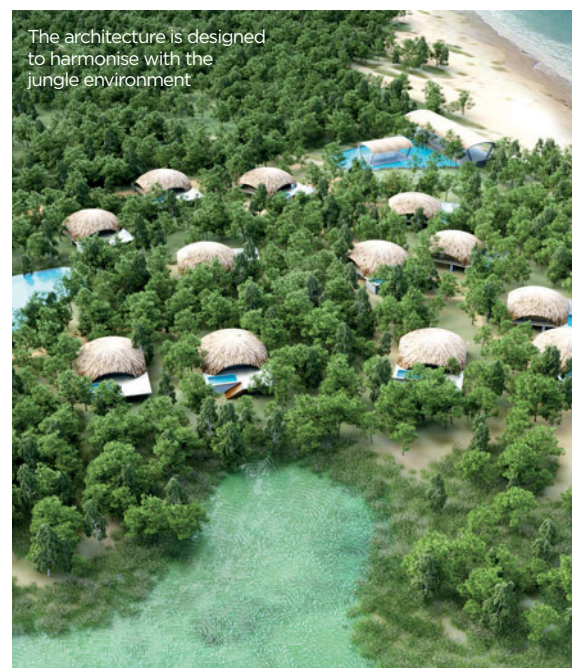
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sweet mash of ice and fruit juice could double as dessert. The next day we enjoy wood-fired, thin-crust pizzas (tomato, cheese and chili prawn is delicious) and a succulent side of lamb with grilled vegetables. In the morning, check out the manly man's breakfast (the Ranger Steuart Special), which is delicious strips of beef steak with fried onions and eggs, or the tantalisingly memorable Sri Lankan breakfast with its string hoppers, *kiribath* rice diamonds and an array of coconut *dal*, chicken and fish curries.

Service at Chena Huts is refreshing. Waiters who didn't understand our orders brought the chef to the table – a rarity in Sri Lankan hotels. When I voiced the opinion that my glass-enclosed shower didn't offer

enough privacy from chinks in the scrub, I found a cinnamon-wood screen erected in front of it that night. And to avoid the hundred or so jeeps going into Yala National Park every day, the hotel sent stewards to pick up tickets in advance so I didn't have to wait to get in the next morning. The safari was breathtaking: exotic birds, ranging from painted and black-headed storks to a brown fish owl and crested hawk eagle; an elephant; wild boar; and some majestic spotted deer. The only creature missing was the elusive leopard, meaning I have a ready excuse to return to Chena Huts soon.

Doubles from AED 3,000; 0094-11-233 1322, ugaescapes.com/chenahuts CNT



The architecture is designed to harmonise with the jungle environment