

Travellady Magazine™

Dry Grass, Rocks and Elephants in July

By Malavika Srinath

With the arrival of summer, the wanderlust set in. Where does one go for complete peace and quiet? Striving to break the mold, no clichéd beach holidays were on the shortlist. So when my husband discovered the Elephant Corridor Hotel, with its promise of complete relaxation and privacy in its twenty-one luxury suites, private pools and private gardens, we were sold. Although central Sri Lanka is not at its best at the peak of summer, a resort buried in the middle of a forest reserve threw up images of shady green trees and little water pools. As a result, after nearly a five-hour drive from central Colombo, I found myself swaying with the winding movements of the taxi. We had crossed Kandy, hills of dense green tea, and rivulets trickling by the roadside. We had filled our mouths with fresh cashew nuts, bought from provocatively dressed Sinhalese women, beckoning the cars from their stalls by the roadside. Our taxi-driver, a chatty local who claimed he knew seven European languages, seemed confident that he would find this hidden-away resort.

Dry Grass

We nearly missed it. The resort is set very far back from the road, with an oh-so-discreet sign that assures every visitor of privacy and exclusivity. After a sharp bend in the dusty track a giant elephant carved from rock emerged from the tall, dry grasses. Diagonal to the elephant was a lookout point built from bamboos, where our names were ticked on a bamboo clipboard by an official looking ranger. Sitting on canvas chairs, our bags whisked away by the hotel staff, I felt momentarily like I was lost in the wild. However, soon enough, a little golf cart was putt-putting its way back to the resort with us on its back.

Set in the heart of the jungle plain at the foot of the Sigiriya Rock fortress, the resort itself looks like a simple rural settlement with its thatched roofs and dully-coloured walls. In reality, its almost Spartan exterior has been designed to blend with the surrounding teak forest, tall grasses and the large manmade lake created in 1500 A.D.

The arrivals area affords a panoramic view of the entire resort as well as the Sigiriya rock in the distance. About ten yards uphill, we entered large stone reception area, with smooth, shiny stone floors and a bubbling whirlpool at the centre.

After bright smiles and the customary Sinhalese greeting of Ayobowan, we were seated on a cane chairs, and offered cold mango sorbets. The whole atmosphere is that of an exclusive, indulgent spa where reality seems very far away. The open plan reception area allowed the wind to pass freely through, so it was cool and breezy, but walking over a wooden bridge to the rooms, however, was reminder enough that this was the middle of July.

Our room was a large, airy, deluxe suite with high ceilings, French windows and an earthy

theme. The sitting area--complete with a carved dining table, fresh fruits, TV & DVD player, artists' easel and binoculars-- led to the sleeping area. My eyes were immediately drawn to the plunge pool at the foot of the bed: Cool, dark blue tiles with pretty white araliyas floating on the surface. An ornate wooden four-poster bed with mirrors on its ceiling. A thatched-in private garden with a sun-lounger. Large bathing area, with a tub; separate toilet and shower areas; complimentary herbal shampoos and soaps, packaged in bits of straw--It was perfect; Classy and spacious, decorated in warm earth tones. Resisting the temptation to spend the rest of the afternoon indoors, we made our way back to the main resort.

After a quick lunch of French Onion Soup, bread and Achaaru Salad at the Ambrosia restaurant, we slathered on sunscreen and grabbed bicycles from the reception, and rode off to explore the resort. The Fables & Tales bar, with a snooker table and coffee-table books about Srilanka, is contained within the main resort area. A five-minute ride through dusty tracks, however, leads you to the Spa, the Jungle bar and the swimming pool. The open plan, Roman-style pool with its cold blue tiles, loungers and cane baskets with sun-warmed towels were irresistible, despite the heat of the day. But after a tall iced drink in the poolside hammock, we were on our way again. The tracks wound deeper into the grassy jungle and opened out into the sporting area, which was at the time undeveloped.



By late afternoon, we had succumbed to the temptation to simply relax!

Rocks



When you have had the chance to cool your sunburned skin in your own little plunge pool, unwind in a bar, gazing across the jungle plain at the twinkling resort lights and dine by candlelight in the poolside restaurant, time flows as seamlessly as wind through the tall grasses. So naturally, it was with a bit of reluctance that we dragged ourselves to the car the next day, for an hour-long drive to the Sigirya Rock Fortress in Habrana.

After an unsuccessful attempt to pass ourselves off as Srilankans to avoid the Rs.1500 entrance fee, we began our trek to the top of the rock.

The avenue of trees that leads to the start of the climb is flagged on either side by pools that the royal family bathed in. The base of the rock rises a mysterious 656 ft from the surrounding jungle and is ringed by a moat and ramparts—sophisticated security systems for those times. The legend of King Kasyapa, the king who built the fortress in 5th century A.D, is a powerful magnet for tourists. Derived from historical records called Parampara pustaka it is believed that the fortress (called Akasasaila at the time) was originally began by King Dhatusena. Most modern tourist guides omit this fact, perhaps because the legend surrounding the fortress began with Dhatusena's illegitimate son, Kasyapa. It is said that Kasyapa was driven by the fear that his half-brother and legitimate son of King Dhatusena, Mogallana, would assume the throne on his father's death. He threatened to imprison Mogallana by sealing him into a wall alive. When Mogallana fled to

India, Kasyapa, fearing the invasion of his exiled half-brother, ordered the incomplete fort at Sigiriya to be finished. "He cleared the land, surrounded it with a wall and built a staircase in the form of a lion".

After the death of King Kasyapa, the palace fell to ruin, till it was re-discovered by Major Fobes in 1830. On the way up the rock, we passed the Mirror Wall, which has been inscribed with ancient graffiti.

Approximately thirty minutes later, hot and out of breath, embarrassed that little old ladies had overtaken us, we stopped at a flattish open area. There it was: The Lion's Paw. While only one paw is now visible, British archaeologists excavated two enormous stone paws in 1898. It is thought that the mouth of the lion and its two paws heralded the entrance to the upper palace platform.

In a sheltered pocket, approached by a spiral stairway, are the famous frescoes, 5th century rock paintings of the maidens of Sigiriya. While most were undamaged, a few had been partially erased. It is believed that the Sigiriya rock was once a monastery and the nude paintings of these damsels distracted the monks from meditation. In a fit of fury, one of the monks is said to have attempted to erase the paintings. But for most part, these frescoes have withstood the elements for over fifteen centuries are probably the finest examples of their kind in the world.

The remainder of the climb is long, hot and precarious. The iron staircase near the summit becomes very narrow and the drop is sheer. While you're squeezing past other [people](#) on their way up or down the wind threatens to blow you off the rock.

Tour guides advise against making a noise at this point, as it could disturb an enormous hornets nest suspended from the rock face. Fighting the urge to look down from this dizzying height, we clung onto the stairs that would take us up to the summit. The topmost point of the Rock is a flat area of nearly one hectare where the palace - the outer wall of which was built on the very brink of the precipice - courtyards, and complicated drainage systems were constructed.

Panting and sweaty, we struggled up the last few feet. The view from the top made all the effort of the climb worthwhile. Millions of green broccoli-like heads of trees, stretching all the way to the horizon; dots of blue, little water pools, sparkling between dense carpets of green; Hillocks rising gently from this carpet; clouds swimming lazily across the sky—it is very easy to imagine why King Kasyapa wanted to rule this kingdom. From the top of Sigiriya Rock, one of the most beautiful parts of the world is at your feet. After the breathtaking view, the climb down was a bit of an anti-climax.

There is much of the Rock and surrounds that is yet to be investigated - perhaps someone will one day discover the truth of the legend that says King Kasyapa took his own life when Mogallana returned to seek revenge and claim his birthright. All that is known is the Sigiriya Fortress was a royal citadel for more than 18 years. The complicated security systems, cooling pools and water gardens still amaze engineers for their early application of complex hydrological principles.

Elephants

Four days was hardly enough time to do justice to the resorts offer for us to ride horses,

have private barbeque dinners under the stars, have treatments in the Spa and do more sightseeing. But we managed a forty-five minute ride atop a large elephant, crushing through the wildflowers and grass around the resort. It was one of those days when the grass is greener and the sky is bluer than usual. Lulled by the rhythmic swaying of the elephant, I was awed by her sheer size. Man is so insignificantly small in comparison, yet we think we rule the world! The elephant, Shanti (meaning "peace"), had thick skin, prickly hair and the habit of stopping every few minutes for a snack of weeds and wildflowers. Shanti and her grinning mahout had given us a taste of the Srilankan Elephant and we were eager for more.

The next day found us bumping along the forest roads to the Minneriya-Giritale National Park. In this national park alone, there are over 160 species of birds and animals. Standing in an open-topped safari jeep, we braved clouds of dust and grit for a chance to see herds of elephants drink from the large man-made Minneriya Tank. The Tank and the woods that surround it are home to an extraordinarily diverse wildlife. In addition to the elephants we were waiting to see, we also caught



glimpses of Spotted Deer and the Sambar Deer. Unfortunately, the Sloth Bear, Muggur Crocodile and the Indian Python didn't appear. Nor, in fact, did any leopards. But we were saved from being disappointed when a flapping sea of black invaded the emerald Minneriya Tank--a flock of two thousand cormorants nose-diving for fish! Keeping them company were large knots of elephants, drinking, splashing, bathing in the same reservoir. The animals were completely unperturbed by the growling jeeps, often twitching their trunks and tails, as though performing for a rapt audience.

As our jeep roamed the circumference of the tank, we saw other similar such groups of elephants. Often, one would be drinking alone. Our local jeep driver-cum-tour guide promptly informed us that these lone elephants were the Outcasts and the Mad Ones. Assuming that we wanted a closer look--- at an out-of-control elephant? ---our tour guide rumbled closer and closer. Mercifully, another jeep driver with wildly gesticulating hands, presumably berating our driver, intercepted us.

With dusk falling, it was time to head back. Cocky and confident, the driver of our jeep decided to take a short cut. The sky was getting darker and darker, the sounds wilder and wilder. After twenty minutes, just when I was about to give up and was sure we were lost, we burst out of the forest, onto the main road. Exhausted and covered in a layer of orange-brown mud, we tested the speed of the resort's room service delivery.

End of a Holiday

I expect that every tourist feels this at the end of a holiday: and unwillingness to pack one's bags mingled with a mild feeling of relief that a trip is over. At the Elephant Corridor Hotel you are left with feeling that you have stayed at this place for longer than that you actually have. Perhaps it is the feeling of being completely at home, or being so relaxed that you are completely at ease with yourself.

We spent four days doing exactly what we wanted: lazing in the sun, swimming, cycling, sightseeing and eating. We had been closer to nature and the wild than ever before and this has only taught us to repeatedly appreciate how insignificant we are in the larger

picture.

We left the beautiful forest reserve with the rising sun, packed sandwiches in a bag and our comments scribbled on the Guest Wall of the hotel. This resort is a highly recommended visit, especially for those seeking 'quiet time'.

As for us, and taxi-driver Viktor, it was time to go home.

The Elephant Corridor Hotel (Kibissa)

Sigiriya,

Sri Lanka

Deluxe Suite start from US\$ 325.00 (Rates for 2006)

www.elephantcorridor.com/elephant-corridor-hotel-rates.htm

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