



The greeting committee as we enter Dambulla.

I first visited Sri Lanka in 2005. When I returned in 2011, I found that it was still a wonderful experience of smiling people, culture, history, tastes, smells, sights and discovery. While every one of my seven days in the country was packed with experiences and activities, the two days in Habarana were possibly the most impressive.

Habarana lies in the centre of Sri Lanka's cultural triangle where a number of fascinating attractions can be reached by car, usually within an hour, including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla and Minneriya National Park. While we did not see Anuradhapura on this trip, we explored the other sites—each being an adventure unto itself.

On the journey from Colombo to Habarana, we spent time at the Pinnawala elephant orphanage. For me it was a return visit but one of the highlights of any trip to Sri Lanka.

Have you ever bottle fed an elephant? or walked up to a mother guarding her baby and had a spiritual one-on-one with nature? Have you ever wanted to play National Geographic nature photographer and snap away at elephants walking a few feet in front of you as they make their way to bathe in the river?

And there you are, watching the elephants cavorting and playing and showing obvious happiness as they socialize in their family groups or receive their daily rub-down from the mahouts. And as if this was not enough, a day later we hopped into jeeps in Minneriya National Wildlife Park to watch the elephant herds, see the mother and aunts standing over their sleeping two-week old babies, admire the soaring eagles and strutting peacocks and get a sense of adventure and involvement with nature that one does not always associate with a trip to Sri Lanka.

Our base in Habarana was the Cinnamon Lodge. Each person enjoyed their own ½ bungalow on the large treed property, bordering a river with some eye-opening surprises: monkey troops patrolling the treetops, a variety of birds visiting the mangroves off shore, and the occasional mongoose poking around the dining hall in search of scraps. It was like living in a park—but with our own house! And we had the opportunity to check out the nearby and uniquely architecturally-designed Heritance Kandalama hotel with its distant views of Kandy and Sigiriya, as well as the Vil Uyana Villas, where you can actually walk to Sigiriya from your luxury private accommodation in about an hour.



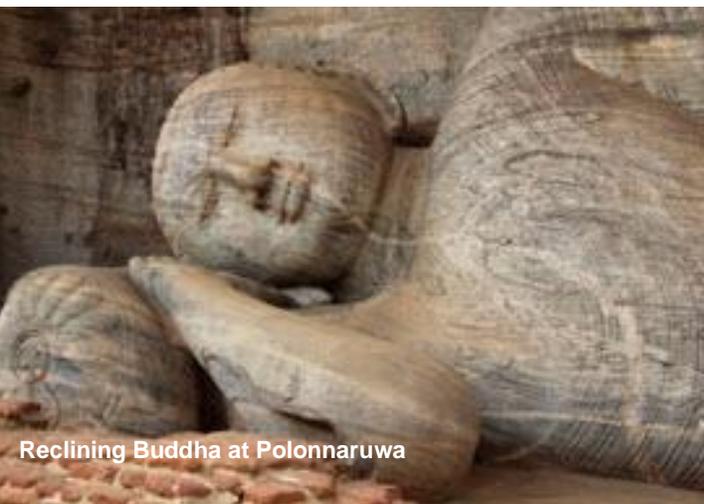
The Golden Temple sits at the base of Dambulla. From here it's a climb to the top to see hundreds of statues of Kings and the Buddha

Sigiriya is a UNESCO Heritage Site that features water gardens, frescoes, an ancient mirror wall and the huge carved paws of a lion which supposedly formed the base leading to a lion's head carved in the rock. The ascent to the top of the rock was through the paws and then through the lion's mouth. This is a walkers'/hikers' paradise, taking you up the 1000+ stairs that lead to the highest level, past the frescoes of Apsaras (celestial nymphs), descending down a winding staircase, and then climbing climb up, up, up. The story of Sigiriya has a few different versions, but each one involves murder, deception and sibling rivalry...the stuff that makes for great myths, legends and history!

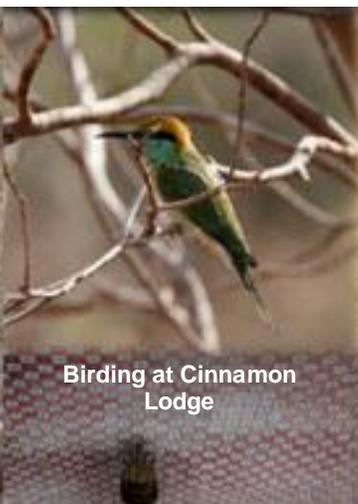
Dambulla, also a UNESCO Heritage Site is a bit of an uphill climb but the caves are worth the huffing and puffing. Five caves are filled with over 150 images of the Buddha as well as some kings of days gone by. Strolling through and reflecting on the peaceful gaze of the Buddha's can be a soul-soothing exercise, especially if you can wait out the bus groups and try to be alone, in silence and contemplation.

And there is more in Habarana. You can tour the spice gardens and learn about ayurvedic medicinal plants (and enjoy a massage while you're at it). At the Primate Research camp you can learn about the indigenous monkeys as well as how to differentiate between the grey Hanuman Langur from the Toque Macaque. (Either way don't get too close or you will lose your glasses or hat or camera)

And again, Habarana is only one area of Sri Lanka. On our trip we spent time in Colombo, Kandy and Bentota Beach, each of which was a feast for curiosity and an opportunity for conversations with Sri Lankans to learn about their lifestyle and share experiences. In fact everywhere we went we heard the Sinhalese greeting of "Ayubowan"—that translates as 'May you live longer and be healthy'. Time to add Sri Lanka to that long list of 'must-sees'



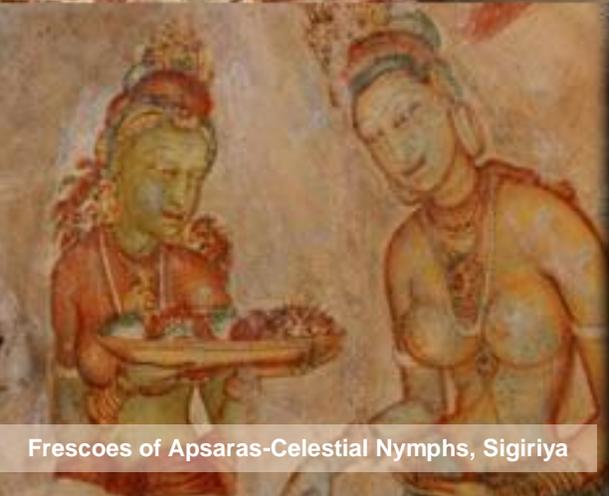
Reclining Buddha at Polonnaruwa



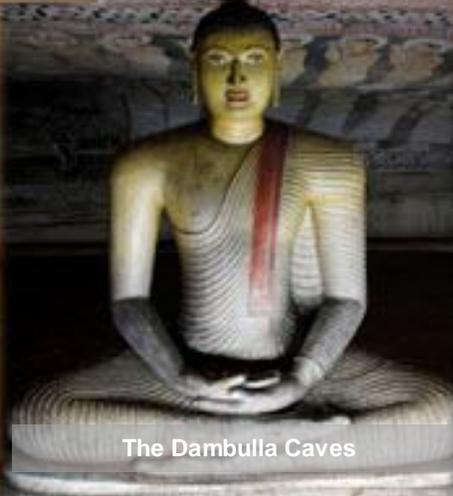
Birding at Cinnamon Lodge



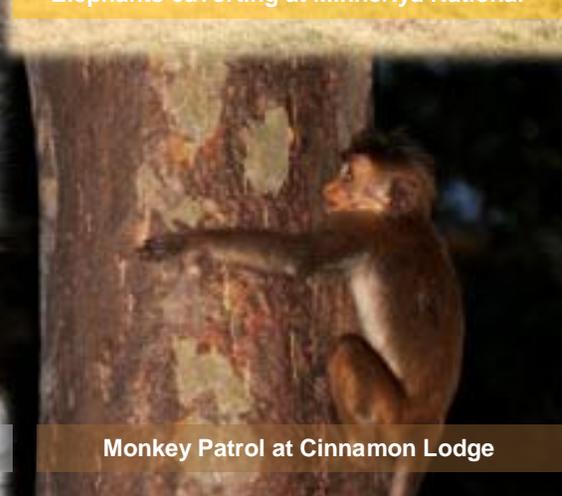
Elephants cavorting at Minneriya National



Frescoes of Apsaras-Celestial Nymphs, Sigiriya



The Dambulla Caves



Monkey Patrol at Cinnamon Lodge