

Lifestyle | Travel

**Prime viewpoint for watching jumbos at Kaudulla National Park**

made all the more captivating by the landscaped water gardens at the foot of the rock and the delicate frescoes painted on the cliffs.

The palace was built around 1500 years ago but eventually abandoned, to be rediscovered and researched by archaeologists in the 19th century. Science fiction readers of a certain age will know it from Arthur C Clarke's *Fountains of Paradise*; for our kids, tales of lost palaces inevitably inspired thoughts of Indiana Jones, and this became a theme for our explorations.

Pachyderms on parade

After several stops with an educational bent, it was time for a break from culture and history, and Sri Lanka served up its next family-friendly delight in the form of wildlife. In an open-topped safari jeep we trundled into Kaudulla National Park, where vast herds of elephant emerged from the forest to drink at a shallow lake.

The kids were entranced by their first sight of elephants in the wild, but having experienced safaris in Africa, Kaudulla wasn't really a wilderness experience. Along with neighboring Minneriya National Park, this is a hugely popular spot for tourists, with humans sometimes outnumbering the animals. Despite the proximity, on our visit the elephants seemed undisturbed by the vehicles, but some travelers have found the overcrowding off-putting.

Beach hut living

We'd promised the kids beaches, so we continued our journey northwards towards Trincomalee and Uppuveli, once a sleepy fishing village but now a fledgling coastal resort, where we stayed in palm-thatched cabins just a minute's walk from the beach. A staple of the backpacker experience, beach hut living was perfectly suited to family life. Swimming, paddling and lounging on the sand were the primary activities of the day, interspersed with periodic trips into town to see astoundingly decorated Tamil Hindu temples or haggle for souvenirs in the market.

Plentiful wildlife offshore provided more family bonding experiences: an early-morning boat-ride to watch dolphins frolicking in the waves and a snorkeling-trip to nearby coral reefs where the kids enjoyed swimming among shoals of the brightly-colored tropical fish. Yes, including some that looked like Nemo.

After a day of activity, evenings were a calmer affair,

usually spent in one of the laid-back restaurants overlooking the ocean, where we would drink from fresh coconuts and feast on fresh seafood. Menus were well set up for families, allowing grown-ups to sample spicy local dishes while the kids relaxed with a pizza. As veteran travelers, we always try to encourage the kids to sample new food when travelling, but sometimes they just want something familiar. Fair enough - it's their holiday too.

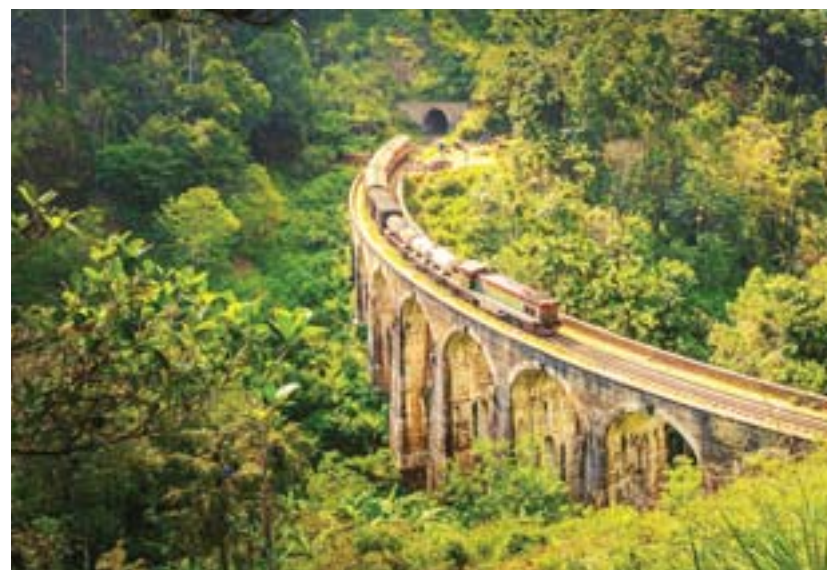
Tea and trains in the hills

The final leg of our journey back to Colombo sliced through the Hill Country at Sri Lanka's heart, where we stayed in a cottage on one of the many historic plantations that produce the island's world-famous Ceylon tea. There was just time for a pocket-friendly ride on the equally famous historic railway that meanders through the mountains, but this was just for nerdy dad; my wife went bird-watching, and the kids stayed in the cottage, making full use of the wi-fi. And so the journey ended more or less as it had begun, with a final look around Colombo before jetting home. Our conclusion? Sri Lanka provided everything needed for a low-stress, good-value and hassle-free family holiday, plus enough adventure to keep the adults on side. The only challenge, in our experience, was keeping to our promise to not cram too much in.

Practicalities

To ease into the trip, we booked ahead at a guesthouse in Negombo with easy access to Colombo airport. The remainder of our accommodation ranged from comfortable midrange hotels to simple beach huts, but at each stop we arranged a car and driver to take us to our next destination, ensuring comfort, flexibility and reduced travel times - thereby avoiding cross and frustrated kids. For getting around towns and cities, three-wheeler auto-rickshaws, known as tuk-tuks by tourists (but not locals), added local color and fun.

Lunches were mostly bread and bananas bought at road-side stalls, but for evening meals we ate at our hotel or a local restaurant: 'devil'd calamari' was a particular cross-cultural favorite. For drinking water, we avoided disposable plastic as much as possible and filled our own bottles with tap water purified by Steripen. We were fastidious about hand-washing, which seemed to pay off, as we all enjoyed a trip entirely free of tummy upsets.

**Barefoot in the sand at Uppuveli****Sri Lanka's mountain railways slice through emerald hills**