

Can you combine brilliant world birding with a holiday for all the family?

Sri Lanka

A lush tea plantation in Sri Lanka's central highlands

WORDS BY STEPHEN MOSS

SIX THOUSAND MILES from home, in Sri Lanka's most famous nature reserve, I wasn't expecting to see a cockerel strutting around. Then it dawned on me that this was no domestic chicken, but its distant, wild ancestor: a Sri Lankan Junglefowl. This was just one of a dozen endemic species of bird we saw on our family holiday to this magical island in the Indian Ocean.

Other highlights included huge Pied Hornbills gorging on fruit, gaudy bee-eaters hawking for insects, and slender Palm Swifts skating across the azure skies. There were also more waterbirds than I have ever seen in one place: egrets and storks, fish eagles and jacanas, stilts, storks and four different kinds of kingfisher, including the Stork-billed, almost the size of a crow.

And that's just the birds. Sri Lanka is also

one of the best places in the world to see a wide range of other wildlife, such as the Leopard that padded across the track in front of our vehicle at dusk, the Spectacled Cobra having a stand-off with a Peacock, and the largest creature ever to live on this planet, the mighty Blue Whale. We even went swimming with (very small) sharks.

'We' is myself and my wife Suzanne – both keen birders – and our children Charlie, then aged eight, and twins George and Daisy, both aged seven. All are keen on wildlife watching, but until now their experience had been confined to the UK, mainly the area around our home on the Somerset Levels.

This felt like the right time to give them their first real experience of exotic birds and other wildlife, and after I'd taken redundancy from the BBC we could afford to splash out on somewhere special – but where? We briefly considered Africa, but the five-figure price tag ruled that out. Sri



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The incredible Pied Hornbill

Lanka seemed to be a good compromise: safe, good value and packed with wildlife.

Sri Lanka offered all the other things we wanted from a family holiday: sightseeing, good hotels, and most of all, a beach where we could relax for a few days at the end of the trip. A chat with Jetwing Eco Tours – the specialist in wildlife trips to the island – and we soon had a detailed itinerary, along with accommodation, a vehicle and a guide who really knew his wildlife.

It's no exaggeration to say that our guide, Hettie, made the whole experience truly special. Fears that he would only know the 'big stuff', and not be able to identify the smaller, trickier species proved groundless. Even more importantly, he was the perfect escort for our three curious children, who bombarded him with questions about the wildlife, history and culture of Sri Lanka, which he answered with relaxed good humour for two whole weeks.

As soon as we left the airport, the kids



Who can resist a pair of dazzling Bee-eaters?

nanhana de silva / Alamy



The white sandy beaches aren't too shabby either...

Petr Svec / Alamy



Painted Storks kept company with elephants

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Keep an eye out for day-roosting Collared Scops Owls

Nature Picture Library / Alamy



Leopard was one of the highlights of the holiday

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The huge Stork-billed Kingfisher

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were competing with one another to see the first bird. It turned out to be a House Crow – the species that accompanied us on virtually the whole tour. Next came something more exciting: George spotted a White-breasted Kingfisher along one of the waterways en route to our hotel in Negombo, just north of Colombo. We were to encounter many more of these colourful birds, along with their 'Common' and Pied cousins, but would never tire of seeing them.

The next morning, we headed across the island towards the jewel in Sri Lanka's crown, Yala National Park. We would spend three nights here, including two in a tented camp in the heart of this extraordinary place: the genuine safari experience, complete with frogs in the toilet.

The journey, which lasted all day, gave us our first chance to take in Sri Lanka's incredible scenery and vibrant culture – a real eye-opener for children on their first trip outside Europe – and of course the island's many birds. Frequent stops produced colourful orioles and sunbirds, a pair of Collared Scops Owls roosting in a tree, and the first of the island's 30-plus endemics: the Sri Lankan Hanging Parrot and the Ceylon Small Barbet.

A familiar volley of squawks heralded a

flock of Rose-ringed (or Ring-necked) Parakeets in their native home, while Painted Storks fed alongside our first Asian Elephants in pools by the roadside. When we reached our hotel, a troop of Grey Langur Monkeys hopped around on the roof, while fearsome-looking Mugger Crocodiles loitered among apparently indifferent waterbirds on the adjacent lake. By the end of a long day's travel, we had racked up 74 species of which 21 were new to me – and most, of course, new for the children.

As dawn broke, at six o'clock the next morning, we were raring to go on our first game drive. Yala is a mixture of scrub, woodland, open grassy areas and ponds, attracting an enormous variety of birds and other wildlife. Soon Charlie and George were competing with each other to ID the next new species of bird, while Daisy seemed content to take in the scenery and spot reptiles and mammals, which the boys often missed because they were staring into the distance through their binoculars.

Some birds were so close that optics weren't needed, such as the pair of Band-rumped Buttonquails – tiny gamebirds about the size of a sparrow – that we noticed right next to our vehicle. Other wonderfully exotic birds, with increasingly unlikely

names, included bushlarks and prinias, munias and minivets, alongside more familiar species such as Swallows, Redshanks and Ruffs.

But the highlight of our all-too-short visit to Yala wasn't a bird at all. Towards dusk we got a radio message that a Leopard had been spotted near our camp. We stopped next to another vehicle, when suddenly George grabbed my arm and whispered, "I can see it!" Moments later, this svelte cat emerged from the thorn scrub, crossed the track and melted away. One of the best wildlife experiences I have ever had, which simply blew the children's minds.

The next day we saw two more Leopards – including one that unwisely picked a fight with a Water Buffalo – but nothing will ever beat the magic of that first encounter with the most elusive of the big cats.

From Yala we headed north into the highlands, where steep hillsides are terraced to grow tea. A tour of a plantation and factory was fascinating, as was the hotel at Nuraya Elia – a throwback to the imperial era, complete with afternoon tea. We were here to try to see some of the rarest and most elusive of all Sri Lankan endemic birds: those that are only found in the cool, wet cloud forest at the very top of the island.

Blue Whale disappears beneath the waves



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As dawn broke, two hours after a 4am start, we found ourselves shivering in the drizzle, and looking out for a bird – any bird, but preferably the Sri Lankan Bush-warbler and Sri Lankan Whistling Thrush. Two hours later, we had them both in the bag, along with a more familiar Great Tit.

Following this diversion, we craved sunshine and a swimming pool, and found them both at Jetwing Vil Uyana – the most luxurious of all the fine hotels we stayed in. Lying in an infinity pool at dusk, and watching Flying Foxes the size of Buzzards passing overhead at dusk accompanied by a chorus of Peacocks, takes some beating.

But the next day we managed to trump even that. Sigiriya is one of the natural wonders of the world: a vast, orange rock rising up from the flatlands. We took one look at it and murmured words to the effect of "Climb that? You must be joking!"

But Hettie assured us it was well worth the effort – and he was right. The views were magnificent, but were utterly trumped by the sight of a Shaheen Falcon – the local version of the Peregrine – flying towards us at what felt like the speed of sound, before, at the last possible moment, veering away.

For Suzanne and the children, though, the highlights came during the next few days, when first we witnessed the annual gathering of more than 100 elephants at Minneriya, followed by a visit to the elephant orphanage at Pinnawala, where we could get close enough to touch these beautiful and gracious creatures.

In between, though, we enjoyed extraordinary encounters with two of our most special sea mammals. A cruise with the Sri Lankan navy from the north-eastern resort of Trincomalee produced at least half-a-dozen sightings of Blue Whales, emerging momentarily from the water to reveal their vast bulk before sinking back beneath the waves.

Next morning, we were offered a quick pre-breakfast boat trip out from the beach by the hotel, to see Spinner Dolphins. We had just spotted a pod of these charismatic creatures, which lived up to their name by leaping into the air and spinning around, when a whale blew next to our boat. We could hardly believe our eyes – especially when two animals emerged from the water to reveal their identity: Killer Whales! These magnificent creatures swam alongside our small speedboat before diving.

Only when we returned home did we discover, to our amazement, that this was the first ever sighting of Killer Whales off the north-east coast of the island.

Our trip was two weeks long, but the experience will live in our minds – and more importantly the minds of our children – forever. **EW**

MORE INFORMATION

Stephen Moss and his family travelled with Jetwing Eco Holidays, who can arrange personalised itineraries as well as off-the-peg bird and wildlife safaris. They went in late August, but you can visit Sri Lanka all year round, with the peak season being from October through to April when the island's resident birds are boosted by migrants from the north.