

WILD THINGS

Glamping at the edge of Yala National Park in Sri Lanka means befriending a resident wild boar and tarantula **By Kalpana Sunder**



It's pitch-dark by the time I arrive at Wild Coast Tented Lodge, on the dramatic southern coast of Sri Lanka, seven hours from Colombo. I cannot discern much of my surroundings in the darkness, and peer at the board outside the restaurant:

"(The lodge) is not fenced off. Elephants, leopards, sloth bears, wild boar, crocodiles and other denizens of Yala National Park could enter the lodge... We request you not to walk around in the night unless accompanied by a staff member."

Wild Coast is situated in the buffer zone adjacent to the Yala National Park, a hotspot with one of the largest leopard populations. My temporary home is a glass-

fronted, cocoon-shaped tent that looks like a UFO which has inadvertently landed in the jungle. But look inside and you see that the lightweight structure of polyester has teak floors, porthole windows, slated blinds and a distinctly colonial decor—four-poster beds, vintage-style trunks that double as mini bars, and leather planter chairs. But the show-stopper is the claw-foot copper bathtub in the bath tent, which was crafted in Jaipur.

Wild Coast's architecture strongly reflects its ethos of having porous borders, and blends seamlessly into its surroundings. As I walk out of my room through meandering tree-lined paths and aloe vera bushes, I see how tents are arranged in clusters. Each group



has a mossy water body at its centre, designed to attract wildlife. Some 'cocoons' face the beach and have private plunge pools, while the Family Cocoon Suite comes with an adjacent 'urchin' outside—smaller tents for children. The browns and the sepias in the decor mirror the craggy egg-shaped boulders and sand dunes outside.

The entire resort is laid out in the shape of a leopard's paw. Luxury pampers in every corner, but the space is eco-friendly too. Use of stone and bamboo, solar power, composting of organic waste, recycling grey water, the way heat generated by air conditioners also powers the water heater—these details stay with me as much as the creature comforts I enjoy.

The centerpiece of the property is the restaurant, whose vaulted ceiling reminds me of a rustic cathedral. I'm told it was built with the help of local fisherman who wove the thick strands of bamboo for support. The rest of this open-to-the-elements space is crafted from tawny bamboo and teak shingles, and has a pebbly, sandy floor. From the restaurant's open arches, white plumes of the crashing sea and the lawn with sun loungers and canopies are framed like an Impressionist painting. A free-flowing pool of salt water meanders through the restaurant and bar. I laze in the nearby library, browsing through hardbound issues of the National Geographic from the 1960s and '70s, and coffee table books on tea, sipping on a divine concoction of mango, coconut milk and cinnamon from the bar.

Wild Coast is an unabashed paean to nature. The surf-lashed, boulder-strewn beach, the friendly resident wild boar that lounges on the lawn, the monitor lizard that slinks past you in the reception area are all reminders that you are part of the land. At dinner, a British guest suddenly shouts out that he has found a tarantula behind the cushion, which crawls on to his T-shirt before he dramatically flicks it off onto the sand.

Come sunset, the place acquires a magical look. Hurricane lamps light up the lawns, leading you to sundowners on the beach. The bamboo and teak domes loom like prehistoric monsters and the only sound is of the sea. I feast on Sri



Guests at the Wild Coast Tented Lodge near Yala National Park live in cocoon-shaped tents (facing page) with a distinct colonial feel (top right); Meals at the resort are a mix of modern and local cuisine such as Sri Lankan rice and curry (bottom); Elephants and crocodiles teem in Yala, but its main draw is the stealthy leopard (top left).

Lankan rice and curry with an assortment of vegetables and salads, from piquant cucumber and dhal to curries cooked in creamy coconut milk, and okra stew.

I am often tempted to linger in the library or loll on the sun lounger, but Wild Coast is dedicated to safari experiences. One afternoon, a group and I set off into Yala. The ranger in our vehicle, Pratibha, has a deep, abiding love for wildlife and the country; she has climbed Adam's Peak 18 times and though she has a degree in I.T., she followed her heart and trained as a naturalist. She engages Sam, an 11-year-old American in a fun way—discussing leopard sightings and jungle fowls, and pointing out bee eaters and painted storks.

We drive on bumpy trails through scrubland, ironwood and tea trees, and rocky monoliths interspersed with brackish water bodies. Kingfishers swoop down in the waters; egrets plod in the mud flats. Yala National Park unfolds in cinematic splendour before our eyes—mongooses slink past, cheeky macaque monkeys swing from branches, jungle fowl dart across the path and a herd of wild elephants trample through the bushes. We watch out for the elusive leopard without luck. The last morning I flout the cardinal jungle rule—I oversleep and miss my safari call. I later learn that my group spotted two leopards, one of which was stalking a buffalo. But I have no regrets. As I leave the camp after a puja ceremony with the staff for the Sinhala New Year, I know I have experienced a place close to Sri Lanka's heart. ●

ESSENTIALS

Wild Coast Tented Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, lies adjacent to Yala National Park, about 230 km/7 hr southeast of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo. Cinnamon Air flies from Colombo to Hambantota airport, which lies 60 km/1.5 hr from the lodge (www.resplendentceylon.com/wildcoastlodge-yala); tents from \$600/₹41,350 per night, inclusive of all meals and beverages including select spirits and wines, in-room mini bar, one daily game drive, limited laundry, Wi-Fi, taxes and service charge).



PHOTO COURTESY: WILD COAST TENTED LODGE YALA

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