

# Sri Lanka

*It's a long way to go for a game of golf but our intrepid travel correspondent, David J. Whyte crosses the South Indian Ocean to evaluate golf in Sri Lanka.*

BY DAVID J. WHYTE

“You're going the wrong way!” my driver told me! “Golfers like to be different,” I replied. We were heading south towards the country's newest golf resort, Shangri-La's Hambantota Resort & Spa.

The 'right' way, according to perceived wisdom and my driver, Lionel, was to do the country's 'Cultural Triangle' clockwise. But I'd come to Sri Lanka, primarily to play its handful of golf courses.

There is a route, Highway E01 that can whisk you straight south from Colombo to Galle in a couple of hours but, according to Lionel, it wasn't very interesting. We were following the coast road which is heavily populated so progress is slow but it's a great way to get a glimpse of Sri Lankan life.

And that life seemed to spill out onto the roads mostly in the form of three-wheelers or tuk-tuks, tooting and racing round corners sometimes three abreast going all of 20mph. Lionel had the uncanny knack of knowing when to overtake.

There is one phenomena that stands out amidst the motor mêlée, the 'Krishna Bus'. Horns blaring like the terrible host of Lord Shiva, the destroyer of worlds, they appear from nowhere without regard, acknowledgement or earthly care for anyone in their path. And like most buses, they travel in packs, I suspect privateers, pirates-of-the-road racing to get to the next bus stop ahead of the competition.

I was relieved when we pulled into the relative tranquility of a turtle sanctuary. Along Sri Lanka's west coast, female turtles heave themselves onto the beaches to deposit eggs before flopping gracelessly back to the deep, leaving their offspring to fend for themselves.

Few survive to live the 150 years their mothers often do. All of Sri Lanka's seven species of sea turtles are endangered and only one in 5,000 babies survive to be adults.

I'm usually quite cynical about this sort of 'charitable' operation, seeing them as an easy way to sap sappy tourists of their hard-earned holiday cash. But the 'Sea Turtle Hatchery and Rescue Center' in Hikkaduwa was an exception, perhaps due to the tragic tale that is attached to it.

The founder of the establishment was BK Ariyapala, whose untimely demise coincided with the year the centre opened. His daughter took the helm but she also perished in the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 along with six immediate family members. The hatchery was simultaneously decimated.

OPENING PICTURE: The closing holes at Shangri La play close to the ocean.





With admirable fortitude, the remaining family members, (a sister and brother who were in Colombo at the time of the tsunami) along with a few international volunteers, rebuilt the facility.

Following a guided tour of the hatchery and recuperation pools, donations were encouraged and after learning their story, even I - the tight-sporned Scotsman was happy to deposit an extra 1,000 rupees (£5) in the collection box.

A few miles on, we pulled over again, this time to sample Sri Lanka's indigenous alcoholic drink, 'toddy'. This acrid concoction is obtained by fermenting the sap of flowers found at the top of coconut trees.

In Sri Lanka, that's at least 100-feet up and toddy tappers gambol, monkey-like from tree to tree tending their pots. They do all this without a net. Health and safety hath no sway in these parts. I sampled the toddy which has a fermented coconut flavour and let's just say it might not be to everyone's taste!

I drank on however, in the hope that it might dull my senses for the rigours of the road ahead.

### SHANGRI-LA HAMBANTOTA GOLF RESORT & SPA

At last, we arrived at Shangri-La's Hambantotsa Resort. This version of earthly paradise is Sri Lanka's first purpose-built luxury golf resort and from the moment you enter, it is indeed a divine experience.

The resort spans 58 hectares, making it the largest in Sri Lanka with 300 rooms including 21 suites all surrounded by lush tropical gardens. There is an outdoor water park, three swimming pools and a health club.

The Chi Ayurveda Spa offers traditional therapies along with personalised Ayurveda consultations with a qualified doctor.

The next morning, I was on the golf course with Mahesh, my caddy. A buggy and caddy are compulsory here, though the only thing against walking might be the heat. The course is not long - a par 70 at around 6,000 yards playing over three different terrains.

The first is called Coconut Plantation, which was tree-lined and lush. I kicked off with a birdie much to the amusement of the gardeners lopping coconuts from

adjacent trees. My approach shot rattled off the pin and dropped straight into the hole and one of them came over to reward me with a coconut.

The Sapphire Mine section was once a working mine. Now, generous greens and an abundance of water fill its place. This section was a bit rough when I visited but the course was yet new and I'm sure it will have settled well.

The final Dune section sees more elevation changes and teasing glimpses of the Indian Ocean, which results in the ensuing wind confounding play, particularly on the 17th.

The next day we drove north into the relative cool of the mountains towards Nuwara Eliya, the 'City of Light', or better known as 'Little England'. This place is remarkable, much akin to a slice of Surbiton with a much more pleasant climate.

It is also in the heart of tea country, an area established by British planters and civil servants 150 years ago. In its heyday and hot summertime, British colonials flocked here to Hill Country to cool down and immerse in such activities as fox hunting, polo, cricket and golf.

TOP PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Shangri La Resort spans 58 hectares, the largest in Sri Lanka; Nuwara Eliya's clubhouse is a step back in time; Nuwara Eliya course can be tight; Nuwara Eliya Golf Club was established in the late 19th century

INSET - LEFT PAGE: Shangri-La's Hambantota Golf Resort & Spa is located along the ancient Spice Route; There are numerous pools and recreational activities.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ravana Falls, Wellaway; Victoria Golf Club near Kandy; 18th at Victoria Golf Club near Kandy; Elephant Safari, Minneriya National Park.

### NUWARA ELIYA GOLF CLUB

Established in 1886, the club is a time capsule with ginger beer and a lunch of 'tatties and mince' served on the veranda. The course follows a gentle valley through the middle of town, fairways narrowed by tall, mature trees.

It is a bit of a challenge off the tees but otherwise a short and enjoyable track. Overlooking the course is the Grand Hotel, another colonial edifice built in 1891 and nearby, the Hill Club Hotel. A stay in either is highly desirable but our shift in schedule meant we had to move on.

Driving down the mountain towards the city of Kandy is a two-hour rollercoaster ride through terraces of tea plantations and avocado trees. Apparently, there is a Hill Country train that might be less tortuous as this style of driving can be tiresome.

### VICTORIA GOLF AND COUNTRY RESORT

At Victoria Golf and Country Resort, a few miles east of Kandy, I stayed in a lodge overlooking the golf course

with birds tapping at my window to get me up for a 7:00am tee time. A fair few players were already teeing off to take advantage of cooler temperatures.

You are paired with a caddy and fore-caddy here. Walking is not easy as it is fairly hilly on the front nine but there are wonderful views over the Victoria River Dam with white-throated kingfishers and blue-tailed bee-eaters flirting with monkeys in the branches.

The back nine is a little more flat and forgiving. If you keep the ball on the fairway, this section is quite easy but if you go into the rough, it is very thick and would make for some work trying to keep a score.

Beyond the golf courses, there is much to do in Sri Lanka. Ancient temples and palaces are high on the list but more young people are discovering the island for surfing, snorkeling, swimming with turtles, elephant safaris or birdwatching. The place is so very friendly and you always feel safe.

The city of Kandy is a must-see for the Temple of the Tooth. Every year, they parade one of Buddha's teeth, the two-and-a-half thousand year old relic that is lasting well.

# ADVERTORIAL MALCA-AMIT



**TOP TO BOTTOM:** Royal Colombo Golf Club is one of the oldest golf clubs outside Britain; The British introduced golf along with cricket and rugby; 8th green, Royal Colombo Golf Club.

In Minneriya National Park, I visited a wild elephant safari and once again, my sense of the incredulous leapt into action as jeeps lined up like taxis to transport tourists to the waiting pachyderms.

Cynicism engulfed me but it was actually a rewarding experience. Encircled by groups of tourists in their safari jeeps, the elephants could not care less and got on with life.

That night we pulled into Heritance Kandalama. It was dark when we arrived so I could not appreciate just how utterly amazing this place was. When I awoke the next morning and stepped onto the balcony, the view that impacted my vision was incredible.

The hotel is built in the middle of the jungle. Lush greenery covers the entirety of the resort overlooking hills and lakes in a wonderful tapestry of nature.

Staying there, one can partake in hot air balloon journeys, elephant rides around the edge of the

lake, hiking, biking and trekking to an ancient village, Puranagama. We could only stay for one night but this is one place I would definitely come back to.

## ROYAL COLOMBO GOLF CLUB

My final round of golf was at the Royal Colombo Golf Club, an exclusive members' club in the island's capital and they go out of their way to remind you of that. My friend, a member, had sent his car to collect me but on arriving at the club, a simple spot of lunch whilst waiting was out of the question.

Eventually, the word got through that I was bonafide and in the system but service was radically slow; a drink took 15 minutes to arrive and lunch another half hour. It seemed a truculent sort of place - at least for a visitor.

I think this might be a hangover from the British colonial times so I cannot blame the Sri Lankans entirely for this one. Though Britain might have moved on, these poor people remain stuck with our colonial past.

It is not a great course either and a bit rough and patchy in places. We set off walking in the heat with an entourage of well-covered female caddies. With a sharp whistle, a goods train trundled straight across the middle of the golf course.

My most memorable moment however was when I came across a 'pond boy', who was a skinny, solitary figure sitting Gollum-like at the edge of each lake and ready to dive into the thick, stagnant pool to retrieve a golf ball should it end up there.

Royal Colombo is one of the oldest golf clubs outside Britain and it is worth a round for that reason although green fees are relatively expensive for the flat, parkland course that it is. The hire clubs are not the best either and everyone seemed to expect a tip.

I got the feeling, visitors are seen as a soft touch compared to the well-healed Sri Lankans who join the club as a step-up on their social status.

Sri Lanka is a wonderful country with a host of remarkable cultural offerings and magnificent natural encounters. It is apparently doing very well with booming tourism and industry contributing towards a modern, thriving society. But the British colonial period is still very much alive and well in certain, well-lined pockets.

The months of January and February are best to visit, so I heard, although March and April are also quite popular. September and October constitute the monsoon season. 



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