

# Escape

Where to go. What to see. The deals to get you there.

## Snapshot of Sri Lanka

From the busy streets in the capital to the serene shores of the south, **Kate Webster** takes you on a whirlwind trip to Sri Lanka

RANKING in Lonely Planet's hot list, Sri Lanka is the place to visit this year. Just make sure you give yourself more than a week, as that is just not enough time.

Touching down in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo at nearly midnight, I was frustrated to lose day one of just seven in the island nation because of a delayed flight and system outage at immigration. I was determined to make up for time and squeeze seven days into six.

### A lion and a rock

Heading inland and north, my first stop was the famous Lion Rock. An ancient rock fortress located in the northern Matale District near the town of Dambulla in the Central Province, the 200m-high rock is a site of historical and archaeological wonder. The name Lion Rock is derived from the enormous lion that is carved into the rock. Climbing Lion Rock sets you back \$US30 and will take about two hours to explore the entire complex. It is best to visit early morning to avoid the crowds and give you enough time to move on to your next destination.

The drive from Sigiriya to Dambulla is quite scenic, winding through the country roads and avoiding the constant intervention from local buses, but does take time.

### Dambulla sunrise

Waking for sunrise in Dambulla was magical. Jetwing Lake is situated on a lake and surrounded by what can only

be described as a serene panoramic vista. Bird calls broke the silence as the mist lifted off the lake and engulfed the mountainous surroundings. The golden glow spilled across the horizon as the sun rose and a hot-air balloon floated past.

A property that has been built with the harmony of its surroundings in mind, Jetwing Lake is open and airy, which offers an ambience of being one with nature.

### Where bush meets the beach

From Dambulla it was time to move south.

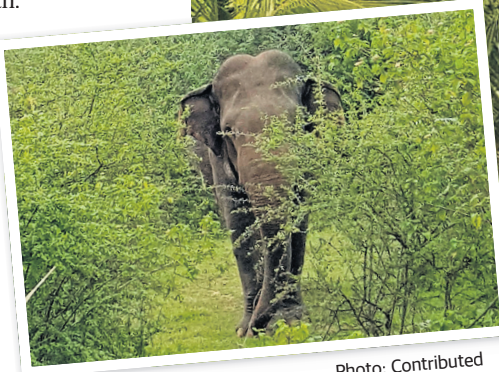
This stretch of the road trip was a long one. At around eight hours' travel time in some of the craziest traffic I have seen, it took up most of the day. I made the decision to make a day of it, stopping off along the way at roadside barbecues, breaks at market stalls and snacks at village hangouts. My final destination was Yala.

Located where the southern and eastern coasts meet, Yala is the gateway to Yala National Park. The tail end of the journey through provincial greenery and coastal roads is most scenic. As I got closer to



BEAUTY SPOT: The relaxed vibe of Hiriketiya Bay makes you slow down.

Photo: Contributed



An elephant at Yala.

Photo: Contributed

the national park the vegetation turned more to grassland and the sightings of elephants began.

On the outskirts of Yala National Park, Jetwing Yala is the closest hotel to Sri Lanka's most popular natural reserve.

I was taken back by the raw beauty and wild luxury that lay before me. Nestled among the surrounding bush and resting upon the shoreline of the Indian Ocean behind the dunes, Jetwing Yala makes

you feel like you are one with the wilderness.

### Into the wild

An early morning start took me on a game safari into Yala National Park. While the scenery was spectacular, unfortunately I found the experience quite busy and disorganised. Safari trucks crowded elephants and rushed to sightings with little consideration on the impact it would have. I was disappointed.

This disappointment soon dissolved as I returned to find Jetwing Yala had a glamping option, Jetwing Safari Camp.

Nestled in the picturesque coastal dunes, these elegant tents bring together the pleasure of camping with creature comforts of modern living.

### Blissful in the bay

From Yala I headed west along winding scenic coastal roads that lead to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, Hiriketiya Bay, a small stretch of beach that curves around the outside of Dikwella. The relaxed vibe of Hiriketiya makes everyone slow down.

The place is a surfing mecca and also a hot spot for yogis, potters and designers. I

checked in to Salthouse, a short walk from the beach and run by Australians Cristal Napper and Rob Dixon.

Here there is a yoga shala available for daily practice, a healthy menu packed with goodness and smoothies to boot. Rooms are designed to keep you in touch with nature so I decided to spend a few nights here.

It had been a fast but full week in Sri Lanka, leaving me with that taste of wanting more. Next time I visit though, I plan on taking it a lot slower with more days to play with.

## Mongolia by motorbike: a rider's dream

EXPERIENCE the vast expanse of Mongolia's striking landscapes on the back of a classic Royal Enfield motorbike on some of the world's most open roads with a special offer from Extreme Bike Tours.

Appealing to the more than one million Australians who ride motorbikes, Extreme Bike Tours is offering a special 10 per cent discount on a Mongolian tour starting on August 2, with a discount on sale until April 15.

Extreme Bike Tours' 11-day Mongolian adventure tour starts in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, home to almost half of Mongolia's total population.

The tour gives thrillseekers

the opportunity to open throttle on the open roads and the rarely visited vast countryside of Mongolia, the world's emptiest country, on the back of a 500cc Royal Enfield Bullet.

Boasting 1.6 million square kilometres and a population of just three million, Mongolia is the least densely populated country in the world, with only two people per square kilometre.

One of the world's last true frontiers which few foreigners



get to visit, Mongolia straddles ancient, cultural crossroads between east and west.

It is an exotic and fascinating destination for riders to explore.

Riding between the remote frontier towns of Hugnu Haan and Hatgal, the off-the-beaten-track tour will have riders eating around campfires and sleeping in traditional Mongolian yurts at "ger" camps.

The route stretches through

some of the world's most unvisited scenery, including 17th century forts, wide-open plains, towering mountains and the pristine Lake Huvsgul, one of the 17 ancient lakes around the world that are more than two million years old.

The 11-day guided tour begins in Ulaanbaatar on August 2, and is available for \$A6094 for licensed riders including the 10 per cent discount.

The cost includes fuel, meals, accommodation and transfers once in Mongolia.

Mention the discount when booking.

Extreme Bike Tours offers tours in the Himalayas, Bhutan, Mongolia, Madagascar, India, Sri Lanka and Cuba.



Photo: Contributed

To book or for more information, visit [www.extremebiketours.com](http://www.extremebiketours.com). Tours and fares are subject to availability and conditions apply. Prices do not include international flights to and from Mongolia.