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THE FINAL FRONTIER

Since emerging from a 16-year civil war, northern Sri Lanka now offers an enticing glimpse of Tamil culture and hospitality as well as a divinely pretty coastline, emerald-green forest and coconut-infused curries

WORDS: Mark Stratton

T'S FIVE YEARS

since the Sri Lankan military defeated the Tamil Tigers in northern Sri Lanka. So when fellow passenger Mr Kumarasooriya looks over his shoulder as our blue, wooden ferry draws closer to Delft Island and whispers, "There are still paramilitaries on our island", I'm taken aback.

"There are Tamil Tigers here on Delft?" I ask?

"No, they were annihilated," says Kumarasooriya. He looks around again.

"They're the Kelam People's Democratic Party [EPDP]. They still want a separate Tamil state and they're occupying my sister's house without paying rent."

The seeds of Sri Lankan Tamil radicalism were already being sown by the time of Ceylon's (its former name) independence from Britain in 1948, as nationalism fermented among the island's Sinhalese Buddhist majority. It would lead to discriminatory policies against the minority Tamils, Hindus who largely inhabit the north and east. By 1983, after a bloody, island-wide pogrom against Tamils, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ('Tamil Tigers') countered with a violent campaign of terror, infamously characterised by suicide bombings. They carved out a de facto Tamil state in Sri Lanka's far north. This fell during the government's massive military offensive in 2006-9, which obliterated the Tigers and killed their mercurial leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. After the brutal campaign, which left up to 40,000 Tamils dead, the north lay in ruins.

After 30 years of self-imposed exile in the UK to escape the troubles, Kumarasooriya recently returned to help with the rebuilding efforts on Delft — now a peaceful tropical island warmed by sultry sea breezes.

Typical of the Tamil hospitality I'm to receive all week on the Jaffna Peninsula, Kumarasooriya shelves his plans and takes me around Delft in a *tuk-tuk*. We visit a chunky 17th-century fort built by the Dutch who named the island; stop by his relatives to share coconut-infused curries; sigh at white-sand beaches, and savour the nutty zestiness of freshly tapped palm wine toddy.

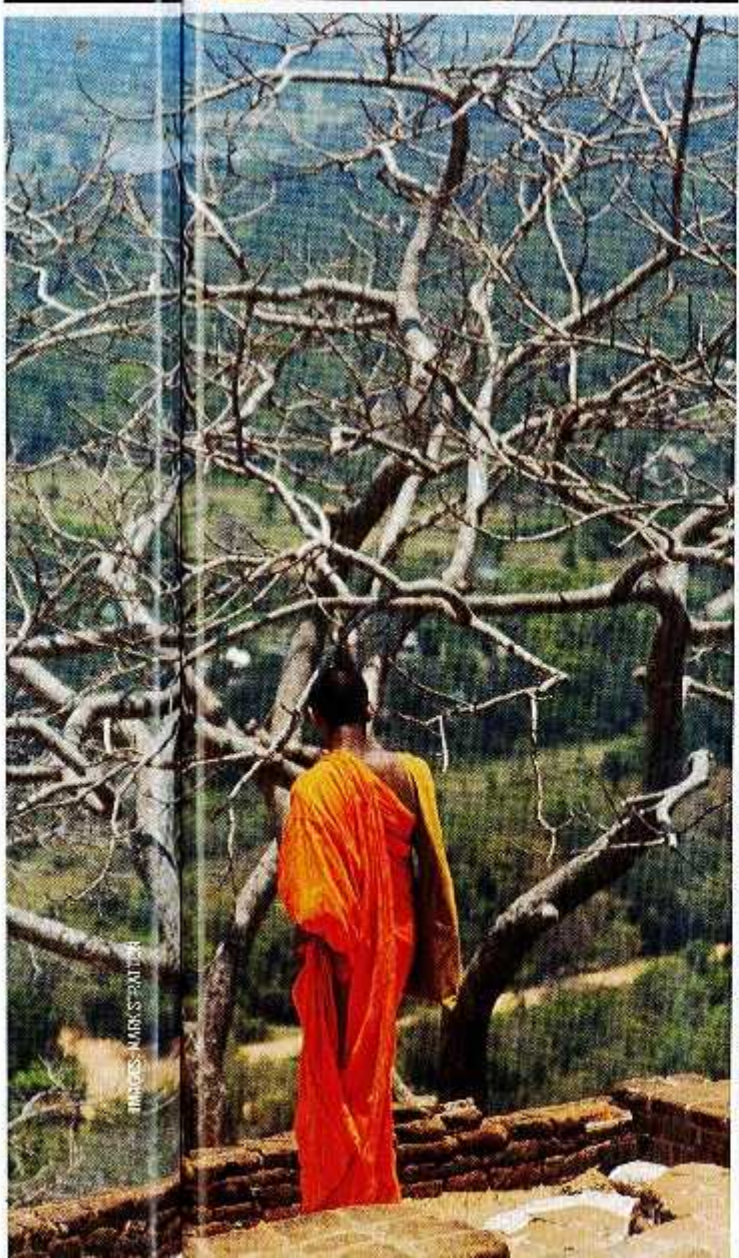
"There's not much water so people drink toddy like sodas," says Kumarasooriya. Little wonder the islanders have permanent smiles on their faces. And as for the EPDP? These days they're a legitimate political party. Yet they really do occupy Kumarasooriya's sister's house.

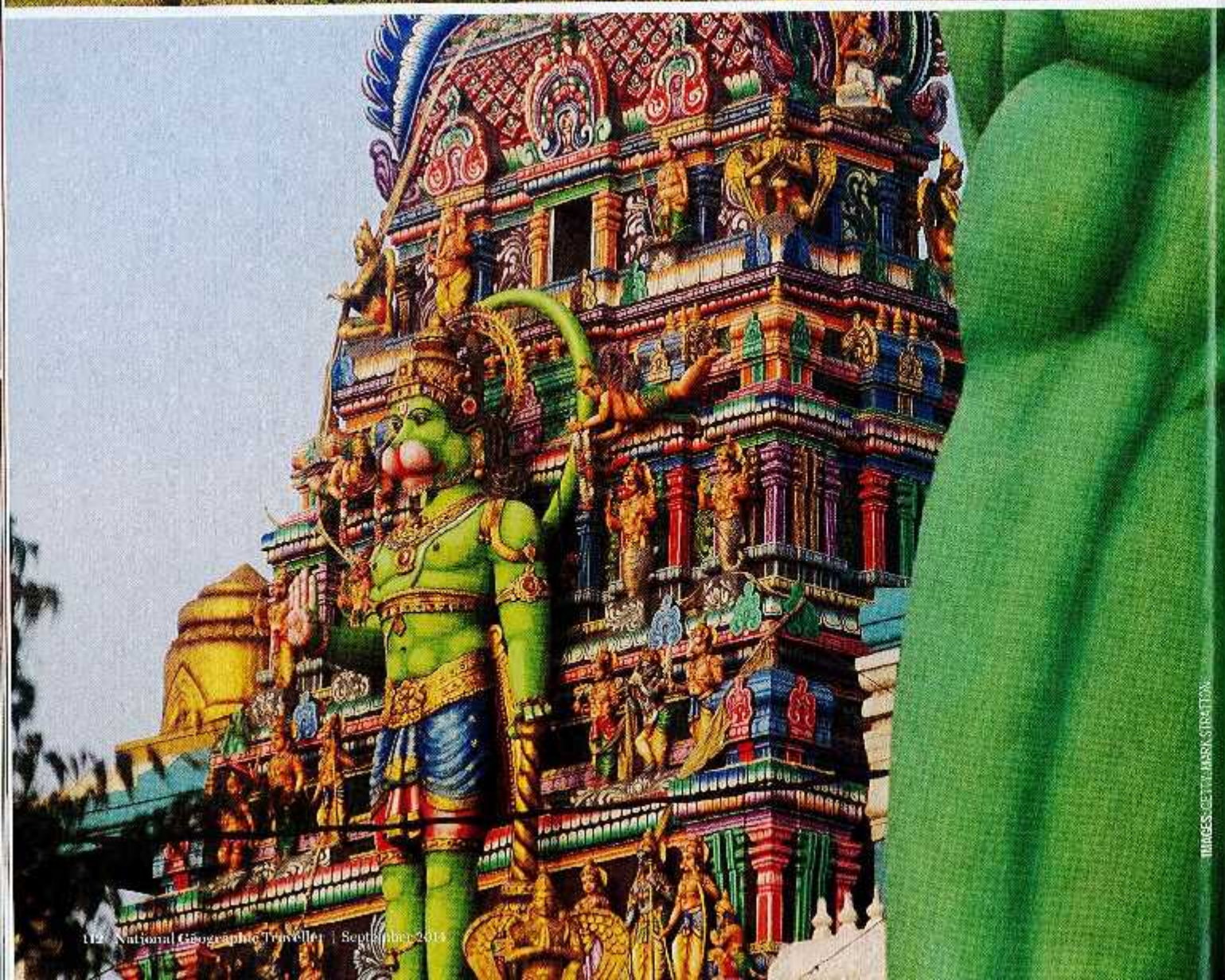
The 5.45am train from Colombo rattles northwards all day bound for Jaffna. If any of northern Sri Lanka's reconstruction projects symbolises attempted reunification of the two divided communities it's this new railway line from the capital, in the south. Fuelled by cups of sugary, milky tea I settle in for a 217-mile scenic ride through the fertile farmland of the Sinhalese central heartland before entering the Vanni region north of Vavuniya, a Tamil stronghold.

Beyond Kilinochchi, new track crosses Elephant Pass causeway: an umbilical cord squeezed by shallow lagoons that joins Jaffna Peninsula to mainland Sri Lanka. Thereafter, with Buddhist stupas left behind, riotous comic book-like *gopuram* temple towers depicting Hindu gods rise above the rice paddies and watery morass of lagoons en route to Jaffna City. The final battles bypassed the city ➤

Previous pages: Nallur Kandawari Temple.

Clockwise from top left: Crossing Islands Causeway, Jaffna. Fishing, Valvettithurai; monk, Sigiriya





From top: Nilaveli Beach, Trincomalee; Maruthanayagam Hanuman Temple, Jaffna

because the Sri Lankan military had previously captured Jaffna from the Tigers back in 1995.

POIGNANT PENINSULA

Tourism is new to Jaffna so hotels are scarce but I manage to find a wonderfully hospitable little guesthouse called Manattril: a refurbished 19th-century family home with four rooms arranged around a courtyard. Their menu offers traditional Jaffna cooking such as red crab curry with *pilau* (balls of coconut rice).

This city of 600,000 is home to colonial relics like the huge pentagonal Dutch Fort; another landmark, the whitewashed Jaffna Clock Tower, was built to mark a visit by Prince Albert in 1875. But otherwise, Jaffna's noisy industriousness, with holy cows wandering amid horn-toting *tuk-tuks*, evokes the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu: 24 miles north of Jaffna across the Palk Strait, from where Sri Lanka's Tamils originated around the third-century BC.

Besides Delft Island, six miles offshore, I explore Jaffna Peninsula with a local Tamil

Along the palm-fringed northern peninsula coastline the Sri Lankan military maintains 'High Security Zones', forbidding entry to dispossessed local Tamil communities. There are so many military checkpoints and naval bases the line between security and occupation seems distinctly blurred.

We stop at a 200-year-old lime-green Catholic church, St Anne's. According to Father Anthony, who we meet just after a service, the missing doors and bullet-ridden interior are testament to military occupation. At Valvettithurai, we watch a colourful beachside fish market, but security is heavy because this was where Tiger leader Prabhakaran grew up. His house has been demolished to deter visiting sympathisers. While at Point Pedro, Sri Lanka's most northerly cape, a young Sinhalese soldier tells us security has been stepped up because they're expecting a fresh invasion of Tamil Tigers by sea from India. This sounds fanciful.

Later, inside a Hindu temple adorned by a green, 100ft-high statue of Hanuman, the monkey god, I watch bare-chested male devotees purify their souls by the fire of a ghee-lamp. What I hadn't expected, given 2009's violent denouement, was the sheer normality of life around the peninsula. How can this be, I ask Pathy.

"Our faith," he responds. "It's had a counselling effect for those caught in the final fighting to believe the hardships they endured in their mortal life will attain a better existence for their future soul."

Religion, however, hasn't soothed every survivor's soul. In a Jaffna café, a young waiter explains he was one of over 300,000 civilians trapped in the Vanni region by the encroaching Sri Lankan military as the war reached its peak in 2009. He shows me a bullet wound on his back and tells me they were subject to indiscriminate shelling by government forces while the Tigers — using them as a human shield — shot at them to stop them from fleeing.

"Every night I close my eyes I see terrible things," he adds.

TIGER TERRITORY

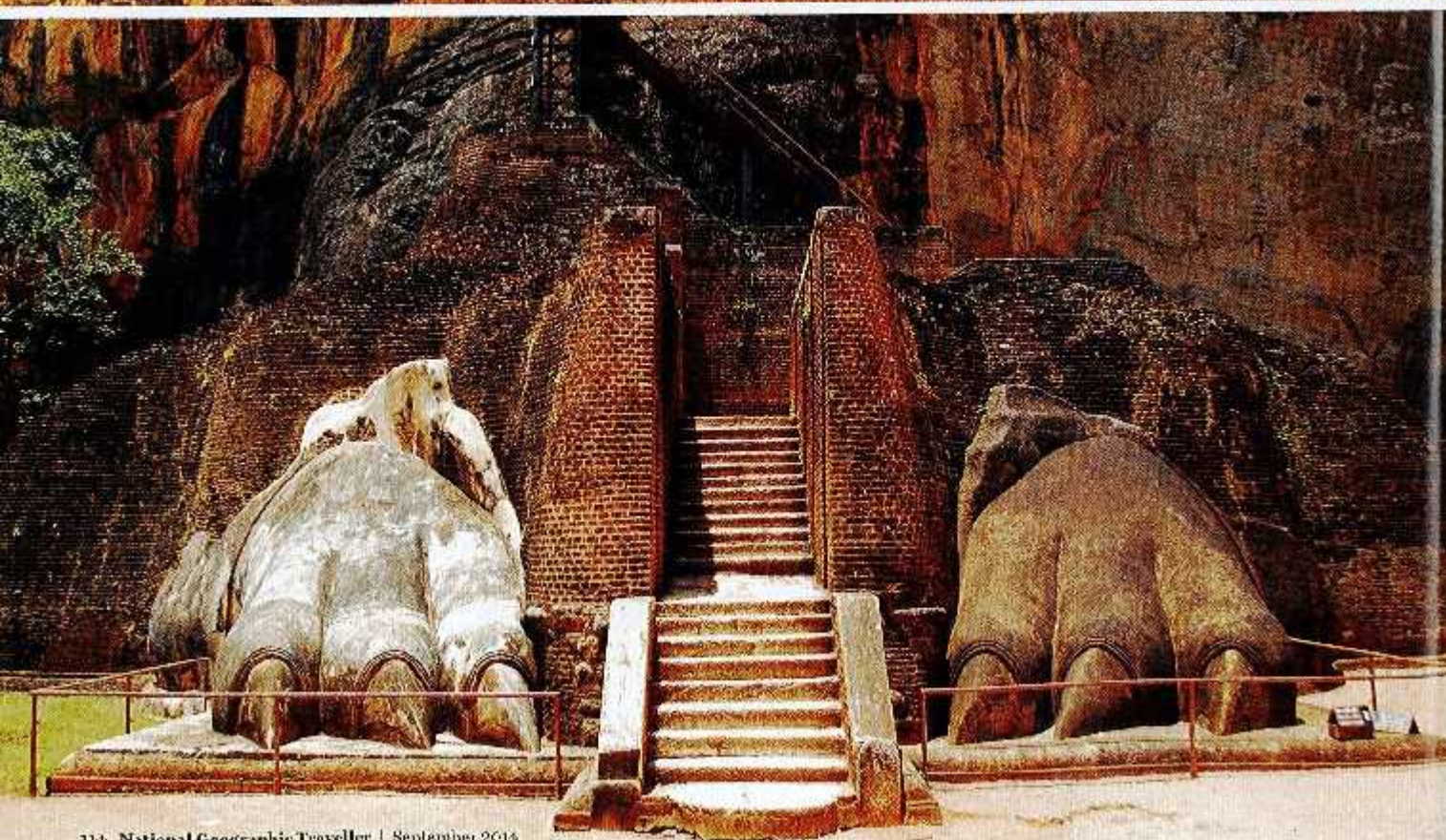
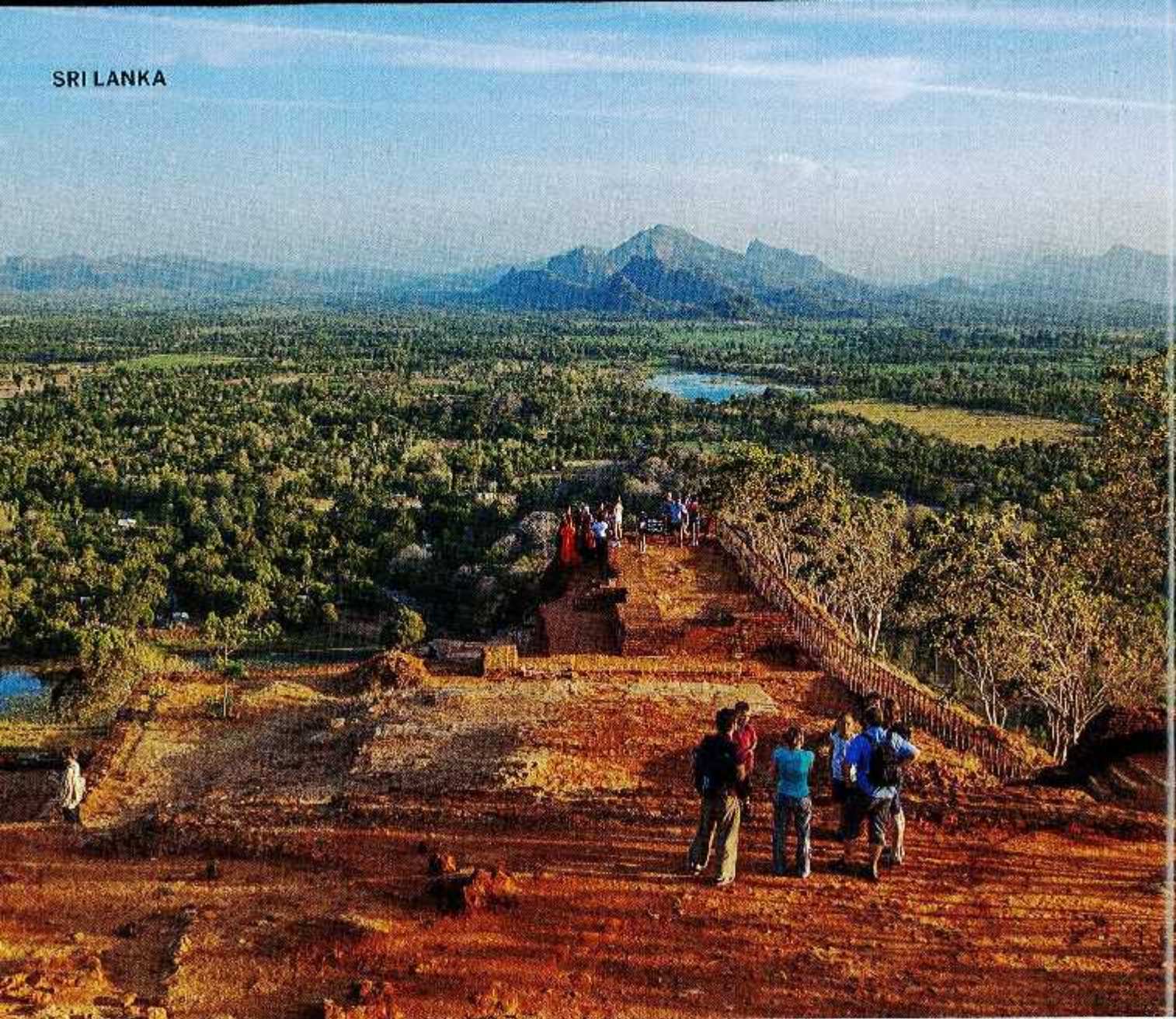
Next day, I head into this Vanni region, which encompasses Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, and Mullaitivu on the east coast. After a week of independent travel, I now have a driver, a Sinhalese man called Harendra. He collects me from Jaffna and we drive south towards Trincomalee for an intensely gripping day.

We recross Elephant Pass into the former political headquarters of the Tamil Tigers, Kilinochchi, rising like a phoenix after complete destruction, with new schools, supermarkets, temples and hospitals. Kilinochchi has two striking war memorials worth visiting. The first, a massive water tower resembling a spacecraft crashed to earth. It was destroyed in late 2008 by the Tigers to cut off the water supply as Kilinochchi was overrun by the army. The other memorial is newer: a concrete cube with ➤

guide, Kumaramalingam Pathyran (mercifully abbreviated to Pathy). Suffused in treacly sunshine, the peninsula is a pleasing idyll of rice paddies, vibrant temples, buffaloes wallowing in lily ponds, and fishermen casting nets in shallow lagoons.

We stop by temple festivals and observe a Hindu cremation, but most remarkable is encountering a religious procession on a backwater road. A devotee in a white loincloth is suspended mid-air by hooks eye-wincingly piercing his calves, thighs and back. He's being seesawed up and down on a boom fixed to a garlanded tractor. One of his cheering relatives tells me the medieval torture victim is visiting from London.

I ask if that's how they treat visitors around here? "No," laughs Pathy. "He's returned from the UK to give thanks by this sacrifice to local gods for his prosperous new life abroad after he fled 20 years ago." Perhaps he regrets not just making a simple donation? He looks deliriously pale. Dangling like a bungee jumper who's dived off a riverbank in Superman pose only to be snagged by anglers' fishhooks.



a golden bullet lodged in it, symbolising the military's invincibility. A panel bombastically proclaims 'the resplendent majesty of the nation's glory' — language couched in triumphalism rather than reconciliation.

East of Kilinochchi, towards Mullaitivu, the Vanni is a flat, sparsely populated mosaic of bush and farmland. This is where the Tigers made their final stand. Numerous signs erected by NGOs working on reconstruction projects and mine-clearing charities are evidence of the ongoing efforts to return the region to something resembling normality.

I'd heard rumours some Tamil Tiger camps remain, so I urge Harindra to stop at the many checkpoints to ask about them. To our surprise we're politely directed to several remarkable sights around Puthukkudiyirappu.

Infantry Division 68 occupies one such former Tiger camp. A short walk through the jungle accompanied by a soldier leads us to an enormous swimming pool complex, 22ft deep. Both of our jaws drop. How could the Tigers have built this undetected? The soldier tells us it was used to train prospective suicide bombers to attack the Sri Lankan navy. These so-called 'Black Tigers' would practice in the pool for their deadly missions at sea.

Elsewhere, we're directed to the house of a senior Tiger commander — whose *nom de guerre* was Colonel Soosai — with its well-constructed bunker complex. Nearby is a deadly assemblage of homemade Tiger war machinery, including fibreglass submarines powered by car engines.

This stark evidence of ethnic strife seems incongruous as we later drive southwards towards Trincomalee, along a divinely pretty coastline, past successive Muslim, Sinhalese, and Tamil fishing villages; communities who'd endured shared hardship in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

I spend several days unwinding at Jungle Beach Resort, at Kuchchaveli, north of Trincomalee. From my jungle chalet whenever exotic birdcalls pause, the Bay of Bengal's rhythmic swell seeps into my subconscious. I swim in the warm ocean before a breakfast of eggs Benedict with crab hollandaise sauce. It tastes sweeter knowing the hotel is an inspiring example for the region's riven communities. Manager Mr Sivapriyan explains that 45% of its staff are Vanni Tamils who'd lost everything and been retrained. They include several Tiger widows. "Our Tamil and Sinhalese staff are learning each other's languages to promote harmony," he tells me.

BUDDHIST LANDS

Inland from Trincomalee we enter the northern central region of predominately Sinhalese communities around Anuradhapura; an area regaining popularity with visitors after it suffered due its proximity to the conflict.

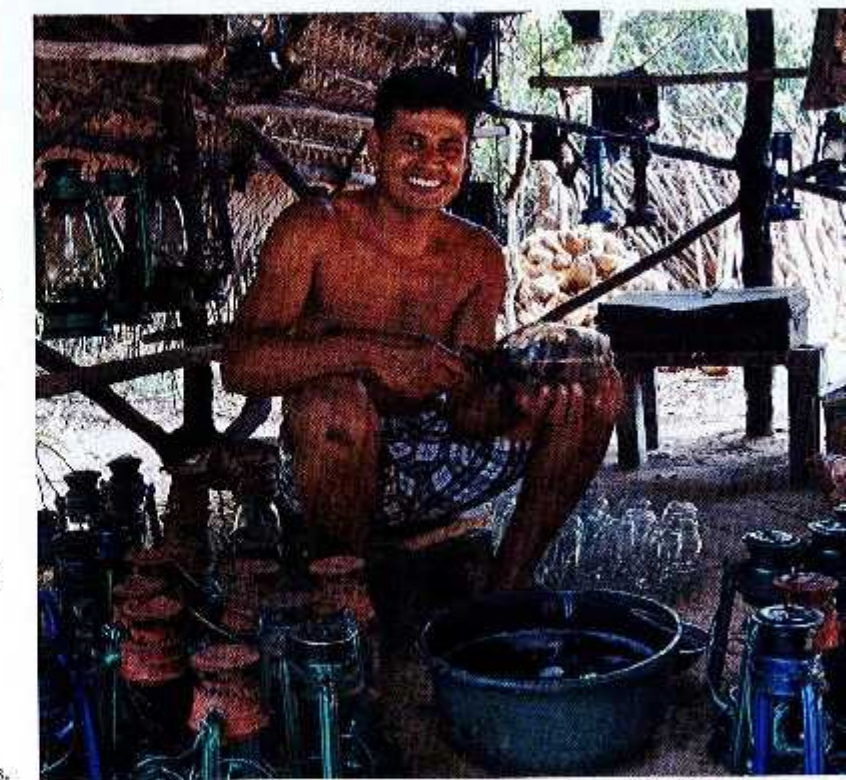
For travellers, the area boasts unusual and elegant accommodation amid farmland belonging to subsistence Sinhalese communities.

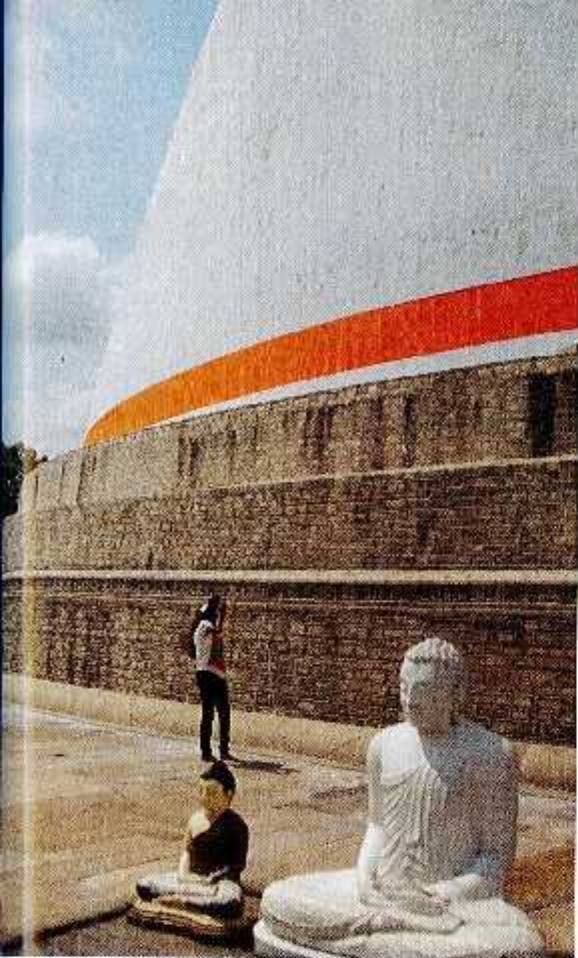
At Ulagalla Resort, I stay in one of 20 chalets set on 60 acres of rice paddies surrounding a century-old mansion. Solar energy and farming provide the resort with much of its power and food. Further west, I spend two nights at The Mudhouse, a quirky retreat near Anamadawa. I sleep in a mud-walled adobe compound with an outdoor shower secreted within a tree trunk. The owners employ a large number of local people, as part of a commitment to the surrounding community's social wellbeing.

Containing many ancient Buddhist sites, this so-called 'Cultural Triangle' region is key to the national identity of a Sinhalese Buddhist culture that arrived on Sri Lanka 2,500 years ago from India. One of the 2.5 billion-year-old sandstone monoliths peppering the countryside is home to the breathtaking ancient palace of Sigiriya. An arduous climb up metal steps, clinging to the towering 364ft-high rock, led me through formal gardens and past exquisite rock frescoes of buxom court ladies to King Kasyapa's ruined palace at the summit. He reigned from AD473-495 after killing his father, King Dhatusena.

Close by, Anuradhapura was Sri Lanka's royal capital from the fourth-century BC to around AD1100. It's awash with the world's largest and most sacred Buddhist stupas. The mammoth 340ft-high whitewashed Ruwanwelisaya Stupa dates from around 140BC. With its central spike, it resembles a WWI German soldier's helmet. White-robed pilgrims queue to present offerings, harassed by pushy macaque monkeys who frequently relieve them of any fruit they're carrying. ➤

Opposite from top: View from the summit of Sigiriya; steps leading up Sigiriya.
Below: Making lanterns. The Mudhouse





The significance of Anuradhapura to the Sinhalese Buddhists wasn't lost on the Tamil Tigers. The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi — a sacred fig tree — is one of the country's holiest sites. I circumnavigate a temple compound surrounding the multi-stemmed tree, touted as the oldest in the world, planted around 288BC. Buddha gained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree in Northern India and ancient island texts suggest this tree was brought to Sri Lanka when Buddhism first arrived.

But in 1985 Tigers attacked the shrine, killing devotees and monks, before heading to the northwestern coast and killing 26 others at Wilpattu National Park.

LEOPARD'S LAIR

"These paw prints can't be more than two minutes old," ventures wildlife tracker Arran Sivaratne. He notes the prints cross over new tyre tracks. "He's headed into the bush; we can intercept him on a track running to our left," he adds.

Wilpattu National Park's beautiful montage of forest with emerald-green undergrowth and shallow lakes, called *villu*, teems with wildlife. Covering 425sq miles, it's Sri Lanka's largest and oldest national park; home to an estimated 120 leopards. Due to terrorist attacks it's been closed for much of the past 30 years.

Colombo-based Tamil, Radheesh Sellamuttu, was quick to spot Wilpattu's potential after it reopened in 2009. His company, Leopard Trails, runs mobile campsites around Wilpattu in a very African-style safari format.

"Most visitors go to Yala National Park down south to see leopards," Radheesh tells

me, "but it's so popular each sighting might be accompanied by a dozen vehicles. Here you may have a leopard to yourself for an hour."

My spacious A-frame tent was furnished inside with a comfortable bed, vanity table and copper water-tank, with a lush shower cubicle out back. We drink sundowners at dusk, then eat a candlelit al fresco barbecue accompanied by a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon.

The Champagne is to toast a spectacular afternoon's wildlife-watching. As we'd arrived at Wilpattu, an Asian elephant had crashed through the bush and stopped in its tracks upon seeing us. The young male was around 8ft tall; far smaller than his African counterpart, although he seemed convinced he was a big tough hombre. "Look, he's pushing at the tree to demonstrate his strength," said Arran.

After several hours tracing tracks through dense green forest corridors we'd seen herds of spotted deer, huge serpent eagles, who dispatch their slithery prey by dropping it from great heights, brilliantly named mugger crocodiles lurking in lily ponds, and numerous peacocks.

As the sun sinks, Arran's assessment of the leopard we're tracking proves spot on. We intercept it sauntering down a small forest path. He identifies this magnificent cat by its facial patterning as a two-year-old weighing around 110lbs. Like a domestic tabby, completely unafraid, it slumps on the track in front of us and begins cat-licking itself. Even a thorough cleansing of its necker regions has elegance.

I watch, convinced northern Sri Lanka has the potential to be better known for these leopards than its Tigers. ►

WE'D SEEN HERDS OF SPOTTED DEER, HUGE SERPENT EAGLES, WHO DISPATCH THEIR SLITHERY PREY BY DROPPING IT FROM GREAT HEIGHTS, BRILLIANTLY NAMED MUGGER CROCODILES LURKING IN LILY PONDS AND NUMEROUS PEACOCKS

From left: Ruwanwelisaya Stupa, Anuradhapura; leopard



ESSENTIALS

Sri Lanka

GETTING THERE

Sri Lankan Airlines flies daily non-stop between Heathrow and Colombo. British Airways flies between Gatwick and Colombo. srilankan.com, ba.com

Average flight time: 10h.

GETTING AROUND

Sri Lanka is small, but local buses can be slow, so the rail network may be preferable. The journey from Colombo's Port Railway Station to Jaffna takes from 9-10 hours and tickets in the observation car cost from 900 rupees (£4.50). Other places served by the Jaffna line include Anuradhapura, Vavuniya, and Kilinochchi, while a separate line from Colombo links Trincomalee. Wilpattu National Park is best accessed with a pre-booked safari or private transfer from Anuradhapura. For train information, visit seat61.com

WHEN TO GO

Temperatures in the north average a sticky

30C. February to September is the best time to visit Jaffna Peninsula to avoid heavy rains, although the landscape is alive with colour in wetter, cooler October-January period.

NEED TO KNOW

Visas: Required. eta.gov.lk

Currency: Rupee (LKR). £1 = 215 LKR.

Health: Vaccinations are required for polio, typhoid and cholera. Check with your GP about others. The north is a malarial area so a prophylactic regime is essential.

International dial code: 00 94.

Time: GMT +5.5h.

WHERE TO STAY

Manattiri (Jaffna). Simple refurbished 19th-century house. manattiri.com
Jungle Beach Resort (Kuchchaveli). Beach resort with jungle chalets. ugxescapes.com/junglebeach
Ulagalla Resort (Thirappane). Eco-friendly luxurious countryside retreat. ugxescapes.com/ulagalla

The Mudhouse (Anamaduwa). Community eco-lodge of unusual mud-walled accommodation. themudhouse.lk
Leopard Trails (Yala and Wilpattu National Parks). Bespoke safaris based round tented camping with well-trained guides. leopardtrails.com

MORE INFO

Sri Lanka (Bradt Travel Guides).

RRP: £15.99.

The Cage, by Gordon Weiss. (The last days of the Tamil Tigers). RRP: £8.99.

Sri Lanka Tourism. srilanka.travel

HOW TO DO IT

Experience Travel Group offers a 12-night tour of Jaffna, Wilpattu National Park, Ulagalla Resort, and Jungle Beach Resort from £2,900 per person including guides, transportation, and international flights. experiencetravelgroup.com

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