

An aerial photograph of a prominent, conical mountain peak in Sri Lanka. The mountain is covered in lush green vegetation, with a small white temple complex perched at its summit. The surrounding landscape is hilly and forested, with a clear blue sky and scattered white clouds. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day.

well travelled

Seeking solace in Sri Lanka

As the island paradise of Sri Lanka welcomes British holidaymakers once more, two writers embark on contrasting journeys to recover and recharge

HIGHLAND TREK ON THE TRAIL OF THE GODS

Soul-seeking Ellen Tout sets off on a moonlit mountain pilgrimage, and learns to let go

IT'S MIDNIGHT, AND WE'RE SNAKING through the tea plantations of Dickoya. I want to rest my weary head on the window of the minibus but, to keep myself awake, I check my kit. As we approach Adam's Peak, I forget about the lure of sleep in my distant colonial tea planters' bungalow.

We arrive at one in the morning, when the peak is a mere silhouette. Standing at the foot, all I can see are the glimmering lanterns of pilgrims making their way to the top. If we start the four-hour climb now, we'll be rewarded with sunrise views.

Every night, pilgrims flood here hoping to see the peak's hollowed footprint, or 'sri pada', an indentation in the rock near the summit. One of Sri Lanka's most sacred places, it is where faiths unite – some Muslims attribute the footprint to Adam, Hindus to Shiva, Christians to St Thomas and Buddhists to Buddha. My guide, Sejan, says locals may make the climb 10 times in their lives, to mark occasions such as births or to pray for healing when their health is failing.

Sweet surrender

At the base, car horns toot and tuk-tuks whizz around in typical Sri Lankan style – drivers unfazed by the pilgrims. It feels chaotic – a glaring juxtaposition in this holy place – but to Sri Lankans, the fusion of modern, ancient and sacred is commonplace. This is a land of contrasts and the unexpected. As I quickly learn, you are wise to accept it and allow yourself to be swept along by the colour and noise.

I'm guided up the mountain by my senses. Although it's dark, stalls dotted along the steep trail light the path. The aroma of steeping tea engulfs me as I pass. People play music, others sell flowers for offerings and many prepare rotis.

It's no easy climb. As we progress, the temperature plummets and the sweat turns icy on my back. The steps are relentless; I think of my bed as I plod along. But it's a privilege to walk here, one that pilgrims – even those who are ill – will fight to complete. Around me, it gets busier still with families, mothers cradling babies, leading the way barefoot. Many waft incense and chant songs. Older relatives are carried by those who love them, hoping to find comfort at the peak.

Turning a corner, we are met by masses of people. I can barely move, squashed in the crowd – and it's still an hour to the top. This is not how I'd imagined the holy mountain at dawn. We retreat to a canvas stall and sip steaming tea.

People rush by, pushing through the pack in their bid to reach the top. My guide explains there's little chance of reaching the summit today. There are too many people and, in this situation, locals will sleep on the steps, dedicating days to their journey. It's disappointing, but Sri Lanka has taught me

"No civilisation, just the birds soaring and buffaloes making their way to the lake to drink"

to let these things go. Whether faced with the overwhelming heat, busyness or even finding a – relatively harmless – leech crawling on my person, it's in flowing with the unforeseen that you can fully experience the beauty of this country. As we descend the mountain, the sun begins to rise and the call to prayer fills the air.

I rest for the afternoon before enjoying a traditional rice and curry dinner and a wander around the

undulating tea plantations. Sri Lanka feels so far from home, so different from our culture and yet, the carpet of Ceylon tea around me is just one of the marks the British left behind. As I wander down the tea pickers' path, children wave and women continue carefully selecting tea leaves before stowing them on their backs. Later, I visit an organic and ethical factory and learn more about tea production. The fresh, sweet aroma stays with me for days.

I spend two weeks trekking in Sri Lanka's highlands. Each area offers a contrasting landscape – rice paddies, jungles, mountains and tea plantations, as well as the famous Sigiriya, or Lion Rock, an ancient stone fortress. Our walking efforts bring incredible views and total peace. Everywhere we go, people are kind and welcoming. A family serves us tea and sticky rice in the foothills of the Knuckles mountain range, so named because it looks like a clenched fist. Generously, they send me on my way with more food wrapped in banana leaves. At the top of the Manigala hiking trail, I open my lunch of dahl, rice and sambal.

Liberation in the wild

That evening is a highlight. We camp by a small lake – a prospect that had been terrifying me. I search my tent for snakes and critters, then psych myself up to brave the makeshift shower – a pipe in a canvas frame. I jump under the cold water and squeal. How freeing! The air is fresh and clean; there's no civilisation, just the birds soaring above and buffaloes making their way to the lake to drink.

Being here forces me to log off and immerse myself >>>



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT into the wild means modest accommodation in tents, but nature is the hostess with the mostest; since 1867, the island, formerly Ceylon, has had a thriving tea industry; imposing Sigiriya, or Lion Rock; hundreds of pilgrims make their winding way down Adam's Peak; Ellen learns to go with the flow in a land of geographical wonders and sacred sites; all aboard Sri Lanka's little red buses, or tuk-tuks; previous page, Adam's Peak, where faiths converge in pilgrimage to honour Adam, Shiva, St Thomas and Buddha



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHANE HALLIDAY



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT Grace down by the riverside – in the arch of a temple; sail into the sunset in Benawa; the emerald glory of Horton Plains National Park; take the train from Pattipola and meet ordinary Sri Lankans on the go – selling and laughing through the valleys; Grace grins proudly after completing 1,200 steps to the top of Lion Rock; during the dry season (July to September) water supplies reduce drastically and elephants congregate at a reservoir in Minneriya National Park, where the grasses are rich and fertile



in the moment. I eat dinner outside, listening to the frogs and cicadas in chorus as fireflies twinkle in the trees. Retreating to my tent, I feel nervous about creepy companions but soon slip into slumber. It's pleasantly warm and still all night and I am awoken at sunrise by dogs barking and birds chirping. It's the best sleep I've had in a while.

Past the cloud forest into the tunnel

Going off the beaten path like this allows me an authentic experience of Sri Lanka. I will always remember the hike and train journey through Horton Plains National Park. Sambar deer, water monitors and purple-faced monkeys are among those that call the protected grasslands and forest home. My route takes me through the cool cloud forest to World's End. At the top of the 880m plunge into the valley, I wonder at the views while listening to the chatter of monkeys. As I pass Baker's Falls, the heat rises and the clouds cover this wondrous place in their mist.

To end my journey, I head for Pattipola railway station, the highest in the country at 1,889m above sea level. At home, a train ride would be insignificant, but this one is

different – a cultural and sensorial experience. There are no spare seats, so I stand, hot and tired, but I soon see it as an opportunity to witness a nugget of real life: people run along the train line selling vegetables to passengers through the window. Families travel with children on grandparents' laps, mothers and fathers alongside; generations huddled together. It is hot and stuffy, with desk fans strapped to the ceiling. From the rich red of the paint to the carefully lacquered wooden interiors, little has changed since these routes were commissioned by the British. It's a festival of colour and community. Despite the squeeze, yet more people trundle through the carriage with baskets of samosas and spices for sale. Passengers hang their arms, and heads, out of the window to cool down and for precious air. The train shunts through the valleys and, when we shoot into a tunnel, everyone – and I mean everyone – leans out the window and screams. I can't help but laugh. Unpredictable, abundant, unforgettable Sri Lanka.

• Ellen travelled with Endavour on its 'Highlands of Sri Lanka' train. From £2,249 for 16 days with flights, accommodation, transport, most meals and guides included, endavour.co.uk

REDISCOVERING JOY IN THE ARMS OF NATURE

A physically and emotionally worn-out Grace Holliday fends off fatigue on a jungle retreat in Dambulla, and seeks Ayurvedic healing in Beruwala on the coast

I ARRIVE IN Sri Lanka truly exhausted, and not just from the flight. This tiredness stretches back over a decade of chasing my career like it was an extreme sport. In the same period, my husband and I had three wedding ceremonies (a long, religion-based story), moved to new houses and cities eight times, and adjusted to a huge pay cut while becoming self-employed.

As so much changed around me, I learned to manage my mental health by instilling stability: routines, to-do lists, nights of *Grey's Anatomy* reruns and Sunday self-care sessions became my baseline. Monotony meant security.

Get me out of here!

Then came the itch. It started slowly, but I recognised it immediately. Tired and overstretched as I was, the order that had once kept me mentally balanced was becoming too dull to bear. I plan a solo two weeks in Sri Lanka as motivation to get me through the winter and the inevitable bout of SAD that it will bring. I think carefully about my packing. No to hair appliances or full coverage foundation. Yes to ugly but comfortable trainers, a stash

of chocolate and 14 Yorkshire tea bags. I leave all but a couple of my WhatsApp groups and set my first firm out-of-office in years.

It's 10pm, dark but still warm, when I arrive at Diyabubula jungle retreat in Dambulla. My water villa sits below a vast ceiling of reclaimed wooden railway sleepers. Ahead lies a private balcony jutting out into the trees, where the next morning I will watch a dozen monkeys play so close to my sun lounger I could reach out and touch them. Behind me is a dramatic, wall-sized painting, the work of the creator of Diyabubula, Laki Senanayake.

Artist, sculptor and all-round environment healer, Senanayake planted the forest rustling in the dark around me 40 years ago. As it grew, he built a home and studio, and drew up the plans for six guest villas. I've been promised I can meet him but, for now, food is waiting, as is my first hot shower in what feels like days. As I climb into my lacy mosquito net tent, it's peaceful; silence broken only by birdsong and occasional thuds that I presume to be ungraceful wildlife. I wake up two or three times that first night. Each time, the tall trees become a little bit clearer. >>

Then, a banging wakes me. I'd left the blinds open on all 14 windows around my panoramic view of the forest, and that noise is a hard-beaked bird, tapping at the wood around my window. My breath is quite literally taken away. I can see now that I am entirely immersed in the forest, each tree adorned with monkeys, birds or both.

Ancient kings and baby elephants

I'm supposed to be at breakfast, but I can't move from my spot in the centre of the room, staring at everything and nothing at once. I recognise the feeling as surprise; a package tied up with threads of excitement, shock and an ache that makes my throat sore. It's an old feeling that I've not felt in years.

Three busy days lie ahead. I go to towering Lion Rock, but still taking photographs of the vast areas where King Kasyapa once enjoyed swimming. I've had years of back issues, so I'm not convinced I will get to the pinnacle pain-free, but the walk is not as intimidating as it looks from afar. At the top, I forget my camera, the tourists and my power of speech as I wander, surprise rising yet again. Not only had I made it sans agony, the view is immense and lush – and I feel incredible peace.

Without realising it, I start chasing the feeling every day. It's not hard to find. Before we even arrive at Minneriya National Park for a safari, a baby elephant lollaps across the road in front of our car. I take a boat down a river and see a fluorescent blue jellyfish. A gruelling walk to the Dambulla cave temples rewards me with a view that stretches so far, I need 30 minutes to take it in. Seeking shelter from the sun, I marvel at 150 Buddha statues and groups of schoolgirls in white dresses and long plaits with white bows. They giggle and I wish I had the language to tell them they are beautiful.

Step into my treehouse

The night before I leave, I meet 'Mr Laki'. We share more common ground than I could have imagined having with a robed man in a treehouse office. We cover Brexit, the education system and social media. We chat as the sky changes colour, the sculptures half-immersed in the pond below darkening. Maybe it's because the jetlag has gone, or something more divine, but I sleep soundly that night.

I've been focused on my mind, now it's time to focus on my body. I'm off to Barberyn Reef retreat in Beruwala for a strict seven-day Ayurvedic regime. I've read about 6am daily yoga, a vegetarian diet and tables for one. Then,

treatments... the words acupuncture, oil, massage and enema have appeared in my pre-trip research.

As far as comfort zones go, I am on the outer edge. I'm anxious, but on my first night I meet three other women, Petra, Inga and Lara, in their 40s, 30s and 20s respectively; friendly Germans travelling alone, and I feel more relaxed.

I'm not obese, a smoker or a heavy drinker, so I don't need the restricted food plan or detox that many residents come for – instead, I change into my uniform for the week, a bottle green sheet, and sit down with a sari-wrapped professional

to run through my issues with mental health and scoliosis. The latter has led to not just chronic back pain, but stiff shoulders, tight hamstrings and painful bunions. She tailors my plan: herbal medicines in paste, tablet and liquid form at 6am, 8am, 4pm, 6pm and 9pm. I slide into a routine of massage, followed by 45 minutes of relaxation in a herb garden, fresh papaya on my face and cucumber on my eyes. Next, I climb into a deep bath where a woman pours herbal

water over my naked body in a slow, ritualistic manner. I have a couple of hours free for lunch, then acupuncture.

Healing evolution

My treatment takes up most of the day, but by early evening I have time to swim in the warm sea, a 30-second walk from my bedroom, or take a yoga class. After dinner – a delicious buffet of vegetarian food every third day; small, healthy meals the other days – a paste is applied to my feet, and I collect my medicines for the following day.

If I thought the week was going to be relaxing, I was wrong. A strict routine is necessary, especially as I'm only there for seven days (most people stay for two or three weeks). As the days pass, my muscles loosen, the acupuncture transitions from painful to peace-inducing and I'm sleeping better. My skin clears up, thanks to surpassing my five-a-day fruit and veg requirements several times over, and I stop reaching for my phone like a reflex. Unlike Dambulla, where surprises are sudden, these appear slowly – but they are just as joyful.

On my last night, I see a giant stingray floating on the edge of the shore, eyes flashing. It feels like my hundredth moment of wonder, but no less special.

Sri Lanka will always be the place where I exchanged my safety net for something more exciting, and learned how to marvel at life once again.

• Rooms at *Diyabubula* start at £145 pp per night and rooms at *Barberyn Reef Ayurveda Resort* start at £85 pp per night. Ayurvedic treatment is mandatory at £26 per day. diyabubula.com; barberynresort.com

"I recognise it as surprise; a package tied up with threads of excitement, shock and an ache in my throat"



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: A member of staff carefully prepares Ayurvedic medicines at Barberyn Reef Ayurveda Resort; cheeky monkeys are a common sight in Sri Lanka, as Ellen and Grace can testify; a modest temple on the river at Beruwala; up the steps to Grace's villa at Diyabubula jungle retreat; focus on your physical health at the Barberyn retreat, where a strict Ayurvedic regime is the order of the day; the Dambulla Royal Cave Temple, with its huge Buddha statue and museum, is a well-preserved UNESCO World Heritage Site

