

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

**Ayubowan - a traditional Sri Lankan Greeting:
May You Be Blessed with a Long Life**

Sri Lanka FAM May 2022



Dear Friends,

I am sure you have been following Sri Lanka's economic situation as it unfolds on the media channels, and I can imagine this is giving you pause. With this in mind, it feels like the right time to share the recent Rebecca Recommends FAM trip story in anticipation that it will rekindle a curiosity for this exceptionally diverse destination.

Sri Lanka is a country of resilience and with tourism one of their main economic drivers, they really need our support now more than ever. I can honestly say that you and your clients will feel warmth, grace and genuine hospitality from every person you encounter on a journey through the land of serendipity.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

The team at Resplendent Ceylon say it so much better than I can, with their obvious passion for their homeland. Please take a moment to listen to their message in this stirring video (make sure you have a tissue at the ready).



This FAM trip was originally planned in 2019 for travel in 2020. After several postponements due to the pandemic (you all know that story), this much-anticipated FAM finally moved forward with the group due to arrive in Sri Lanka on May 4, 2022, for their 10-night adventure.

I think we were all a little stunned when just a month prior to arrival, the media coverage about the political and economic situation in Sri Lanka became more prevalent. Safety is absolutely our first priority, so we reached out to our co-host Ventours International, who provided the reassurance we needed, sharing that travel and tourism is completely unaffected by the happenings. That was all the comfort this amazing, determined group of advisors needed to move forward with their plans.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

Samantha from the Rebecca Recommends team was privileged to host the FAM with our fabulous DMC Ventours International together with award-winning hotel collection Resplendent Ceylon, who feature in the Rebecca Recommends portfolio. We hope you enjoy the stories and the experiences reflected here.

We do hope you will enjoy our Sri Lanka FAM story and it provides some insightful information about visiting and navigating this wonderful country.

For news about the evolving situation in Sri Lanka, Please visit this [LINK](#) which is updated regularly.

The fabulous team at Resplendent Ceylon have included their Top 5 reasons to visit Sri Lanka and also shared this [VIDEO](#) with feedback from their current in-house guests.

We know that festive availability in all the obvious locations is always challenging so why not think about sending your clients to this exotic destination. Whilst Sri Lanka is a year round destination, the best time to visit the Cultural Triangle, West and South Coasts is December through to April. Wildlife in Sri Lanka is abundant and with the dry conditions at this time of year, animals will gather more frequently around watering holes making them just that little bit easier to spot.

Please join me in supporting Sri Lanka - these incredible people will be forever grateful for your kindness.

With fondest regards

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rebecca".

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

OUR JOURNEY THROUGH SRI LANKA

There is nothing better than arriving at a destination to be greeted at the airport with a VIP meet-and-greet service. The Silk Route welcome at Colombo International Airport, organized by Ventours International, was particularly lovely. Their team was on hand to collect luggage and manage the immigration process whilst we sat back and enjoyed our first cup of Ceylon tea.

To acclimatize, our first afternoon was spent exploring the highlights of Colombo. This fascinating city is an inviting mixture of past and present. The original trading settlers - the Portuguese, Dutch and British - left behind churches and monuments, religions, costumes, food and smatterings of their languages, which have been absorbed by the Sri Lankans over the centuries.

Our truly delicious welcome dinner was hosted by the Shangri La at Shang Palace, a brilliant location and fantastic hotel for travelers who appreciate western influences and want to tiptoe gently into their journey through Sri Lanka.

We spent our morning exploring more of Colombo with the opportunity for shopping at Paradise Road and Barefoot, before we enjoyed a light lunch at a local favorite, the Barefoot Café.

A quick stop at 'Number 11', the private home of Geoffrey Bawa, an icon in the world of architecture and is perhaps one of the most celebrated and influential Asian architects of the 20th century, was swiftly followed by the highlight of our day - a heritage walk through colonial Colombo with local expert Mark Forbes.

Mark's enthusiasm for preserving Colombo's architecture was apparent as he took us on a fascinating journey through the history of the Colombo Fort District. Mark skillfully navigated our group through the architectural highlights and the hustle and bustle of the market traders who come into the city daily to showcase their produce. Mark alerted us to slightly out-of-control, hand-propelled carts in the market by shouting "side side side" - both terrifying and exhilarating.

The architectural theme of the day continued through dinner at the city's iconic Gallery Café, which was once Geoffrey Bawa's office. This cosmopolitan, open-air restaurant overlooks a pebbled courtyard with Bawa influences throughout - it is such a convivial meeting place and an obvious favorite of the locals with its European-influenced, scrumptious menu selections.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence



On our second morning, we boarded a charter flight for Sigiriya from a port just outside Colombo, on our way to the heart of the Cultural Zone, the site of Sri Lanka's ancient kingdoms. It was amazing to see Ventours' logistical skills at work, as they whisked away our luggage to meet us at our next hotel.

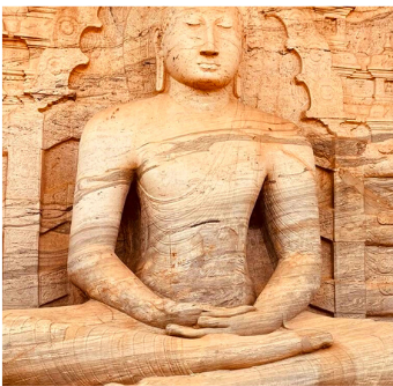
Upon arrival we headed straight to World Heritage Polonnaruwa, the medieval city that rose to fame as a capital between the 10th and 12th centuries. Starting with its museum, we explored Polonnaruwa's highlights: the Royal Palace, Audience Hall, Quadrangle and the spectacular Gal Vihare complex, giving evidence of Sri Lanka's past glory. Earlier travelers compared Polonnaruwa favorably with Angkor Wat and we could definitely see why.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

The adventurous in the group were invited to move from site to site via bicycle - this was also a nice way to move about with a gentle breeze, a welcome relief in the high temperatures.

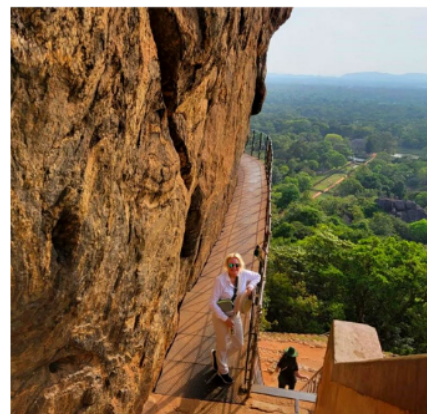
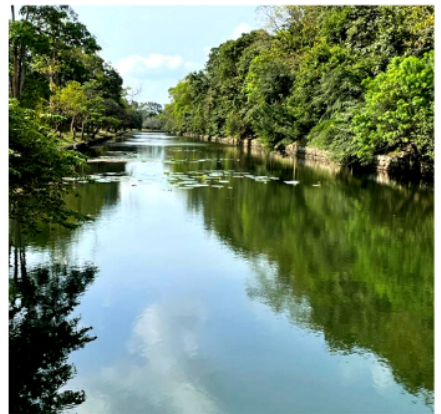
We took a short detour to Priyamali Gedara, a local farm where we enjoyed a typical farmer's lunch prepared using wood fire and clay pots. While this sounds like a simple meal, it was a culinary highlight - the farm owners used freshly harvested ingredients and cooked a delectable feast using their ancient techniques and local spices, slowing down enough to show us their methods.



REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

Post lunch, we drove to World Heritage Sigiriya, built in the 5th century as a bastion and palace of King Kasyapa. The most impressive facets of this unique complex are geometrically laid water gardens, frescoes of beautiful maidens, and the mirror wall with ancient graffiti.



Our aim for the afternoon was to reach the lion platform of Sigiriya and perhaps the summit. Fueled by our healthy lunch (and a little bit of wine), we started the ascent - it's approximately 1,200 steps to the summit and the group were keen to take in the spectacular panorama of the surrounding jungle and Sigiriya.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

The gardens at the base of Sigiriya are beautiful, so for those who are not so sure of foot, exploring at ground level is an enjoyable option. For the rest of us, the climb was invigorating with the promised vistas truly outstanding and well worth the effort. At the end of our descent, we were met by the Ventours team, who rewarded us with ice-cold towels and fresh fruit platters - the perfect revival tonic.

Our hotel for the night was the Water Garden Sigiriya Resort, inspired by the ancient water gardens of the mountainous rock fortress. The hotel is beautifully blended into its natural surroundings and feels at one with nature. Private plunge pools in each suite offered the ideal end to an exhilarating day - as did the sundowner cocktails.

The next day we departed for the old hill station of Kandy, driving by road with stops along the way. Our first highlight was the World Heritage Dambulla, known for its richly painted cave temples and colossal figure of the recumbent Buddha carved out of the living rock, some 15 meters long. The caves have a mixture of religious and secular paintings and sculptures with ceiling frescoes depicting scenes from Buddha's life and Sinhalese history.

We had the opportunity to stop en-route to Kandy at a spice garden, emblematic of the country's rich spice industry history. The owners of the gardens took us on an enthralling walk, highlighting the plants and spices and their Vedic qualities. Our group purchased spices galore, ready for shipping back to the USA, and a few indulged in mini Ayurvedic treatments before savoring a typical plantation lunch with live-cooking stations.

Our three-hour road trip brought us to the final stop of the day, Kandy, a place of remarkable natural beauty in a peaceful wooded valley overlooking a vast lake. This was the last bastion of Buddhist political power against colonial invasion. The palace, shrines and British period buildings give it a special character, while Buddha's Tooth Relic lends a religious importance to the historic highland capital.



REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

We joined the steady stream of visitors who flowed through the gates to the Temple of the Tooth, purchasing flowers of all varieties to make their offering within the lavishly decorated interiors where the relic is treasured. This was quite a humbling moment as we shared in this daily ritual of the thousands who make the pilgrimage.



Our panoramic tour of Kandy took us to the Kings Pavilion Hotel, located in the hills of Anniwatte, a prime residential area of the Kandyan Kingdom. Our arrival here was very touching as we were invited to light a towering, ornate oil lamp that symbolizes luck, hope, wisdom and new beginnings.

As a special treat, the famous Kandyan Dancers were on hand for a pre-dinner performance in the perfectly manicured gardens of the Kings Pavilion Hotel. With music, dancing and acrobatics, this was a rousing recital for our group and we felt fortunate to be able to enjoy this private enactment.

After an early breakfast, we visited the impressive Royal Botanical Gardens, formerly a pleasure place for Kandyan kings. Our impressive guide Bandara Palipana, a professor of botany, took us on a fascinating walk around the gardens, which cover around 150 acres at an elevation of 1,550 feet.

Onward we went to the quaint Peradeniya railway station to board a local train for a 2½-hour ride to the tea-side town of Hatton. An engineering marvel, this route is spoken of as the most picturesque of rail journeys. In fact, arriving in the fabled Sri Lanka tea country feels like you have entered another world, with its rolling hills, velvety green plantations, placid lakes and gorgeous waterfalls.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence



Resplendent Ceylon's Tea Trails, the world's first tea bungalow resort, is situated at an average altitude of 1,250 meters with manicured tea as far as the eye can see. Our homes for the next few days were the charming colonial planters' bungalows at Ceylon Tea Trails, a little distance from each other, separated by hillside lakes and valleys, with sweeping lawns and swimming pools and gardens of roses, agapanthus and spring crocus. Each bungalow has its own team and chefs onsite who take care of every whim - there is even a button next to your bed for immediate service.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

Ceylon Tea Trails and tea country takes you to a bygone era, yet with all the modern comforts we have become accustomed to on our travels. The pace of our trip changed in a charming way, allowing a little time to relax and take in the most spectacular views of the surrounding tea countryside.

Days were spent tea tasting with expert guides, exploring the working tea factory (and buying lots of tea), taking dips in the pool that overlooked Castlereagh Lake, enjoying cooking classes with the incredible chefs at this fabulous Relais & Châteaux resort, and hiking through the plantations in the wee hours of morning with a guide.

Two of the advisors who joined the trip later gushed about Ceylon Tea Trails:

“Tea Trails is so much more than a hotel. Staying here is truly an experience. What stood out is the staff by far. They have a way of making you feel like a guest in a private home rather than a hotel. They personally made the experience remarkable, and I treasured my time here because of them.”

“This was my favorite [of the trip]. I felt as if I were in an English cottage, with butlers and chefs, but in the middle of tea country. So cozy and comfortable.”

Onward we traveled. The group took an exhilarating seaplane journey, taking off from Castlereagh Lake adjacent to the Tea Trails bungalows for a short flight to the South East Coast and the Yala National Park. There was much excitement about this part of our Sri Lanka adventure - Yala boasts the highest density of leopards in Asia and is home to innumerable wildlife and so, the leopard search was on.

Wild Coast Tented Lodge by Resplendent Ceylon is a luxurious tented camp situated at the edge of the Yala National Park. Our accommodations were in tented “cocoon” suites, which offered total immersion and panoramic views of the jungle. The suites are stunning in design and their seamless architectural blending with the surrounding landscape. What was most surprising about Wild Coast is that it sits on the edge of Yala National Park and is just steps away from the white-sand beaches of the Indian Ocean.

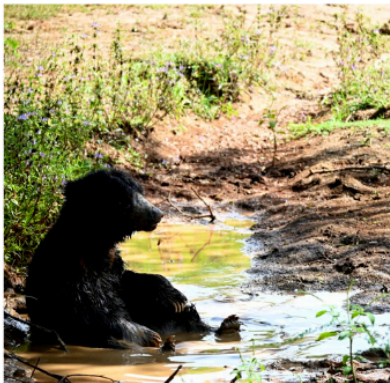
We gathered for sundowner cocktails, sipped while sitting on handcrafted blankets and watching the sun set and the waves crash. As we dined alfresco on the beach, we were approached by a family of wild boar that was gently encouraged back towards the park land by the amazing team who manage these wildlife encounters daily.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

On a sunrise walk through the Yala bush surrounding the lodge, our ranger Keith helped us understand the mystical creatures that enjoy the security of darkness. We saw footprints and signs of the animals and even picked up a few tips in the art of dung spitting - one of our advisors impressively gave it a try and was successful!

During a morning game drive with Keith, we were fortunate to encounter elephants, a sloth bear, an array of rare birds, wild boars, crocodiles and so much more ... sadly, the leopards eluded us. We were close several times, just not close enough.



REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

Hear from two advisors who were smitten with Wild Coast Tented Lodge:

“Wild Coast Tented Lodge was by far my favorite property. I love how well [it] was built into nature. I felt like we were in nature and experiencing wildlife but with all the luxurious comforts we all love. The cocoons were so comfortable and well designed. I also loved the sundowners; an absolutely brilliant idea to set up drinks right along the coast.”

“Oh my gosh. This was my favorite! The destination is absolutely incredible! It's so sexy to have the arid zone right up against the rugged coastline. Being able to explore Yala with such a knowledgeable ranger was also really amazing. The suite is fantastic. I really would love to have had time to just hang out in the room and on deck, but there is so much to do and see.”

Our time in Sri Lanka was coming to an end and we had just two more magical nights left. After just 2.5 hours traveling via the expressway, we arrived at Resplendent Ceylon's Cape Weligama on the South Coast of Sri Lanka. Perched on a hilltop, the resort offers 270-degree panoramic views of the Indian Ocean from every corner. Individual villas, restaurants and bars resemble a typical Sri Lankan village with terra-cotta tile roofs and acres of lush tropical gardens.

While here, we visited Top House, a 25-acre, working cinnamon estate just inland from Cape Weligama. A British couple has restored the old plantation and now produce healthy “Ceylon Cinnamon,” which grows along the steep hillsides. The couple's beautiful home is perched on the hilltop with spectacular views over the jungle to the north and the Indian Ocean down south. An artisan distillery has been set up to extract cinnamon oil, incorporating age-old techniques, fine-tuned with modern technology.

We enjoyed our immersive visit with the owners of Top House, who cooked a fabulous lunch and shared personal stories about making Sri Lanka their home, developing a thriving business, building Top House and supporting the local economy.

After lunch we took a drive along the coast to the ancient trading post of Galle Fort, home to numerous boutiques, cafes and galleries. We had lots of time to explore the wonderful architecture and historical landmarks and for more shopping - these last purchases would be made to fit in a suitcase!

There was a little time to visit the famous Stilt fishermen of Sri Lanka. These fishermen sit perched far from shore atop crude crucifixes of sticks and twine, dangling fishing rods into schools of fish. This was a fun photo opportunity for the group, who all had to have a go.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence



And finally, we arrived at our farewell dinner at Cape Weligama's chef's table tasting experience - Tableau. This lively meal was full of laughter and stories about our journey through Sri Lanka and everyone's favorite moments.

There is no doubt that we were visiting Sri Lanka in a time of economic and political uncertainty and whilst we were all aware of the situation, this did not take away from the magic of the country. The people of Sri Lanka are an inspiration, working quietly behind the scenes to make every experience seamless and exceptional, from the guides and hosts with Ventours International, to the magical unexpected moments delivered by the hotel teams.

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence

Ventours and Resplendent Ceylon set the standard for a journey through any country and with its diversity from the cities, to the plethora of World Heritage sites, the amazing national parks and wildlife, to tea country and the coastal settings, Sri Lanka has an incredible story to tell and it should be on everyone's wander list.

What the advisors said:

"Sri Lanka is such a fantastic destination for virtually any type of traveler. It's geographically so diverse, and the number of different experiences that can be enjoyed in such a compact area is remarkable. Sri Lanka is much more modern than I'd imagined, with great infrastructure. Great service and hospitality! Delicious dining. Good shopping. There is something for everyone!"

"This is not an easy destination - it's far, especially from the West Coast of the USA. It's not at the top of most client's lists, especially with the protests going on. But, learning, experiencing, living it, was invaluable. Now that I'm home I think back and am grateful for what I experienced, and I miss the group!"

"Must book with Ventours! Their attention to every detail for the clients makes the trip meaningful, a rich experience, and the clients travel with ease. Sri Lanka is a wonderful destination to promote, despite the issues within the country. The properties and service were over the top, exceeding expectations."

"Sri Lanka provides a very authentic travel experience, and you get to experience so many different climates and cultures in such a small geographic footprint. For those wanting animals, it's a much more affordable way to go on a safari. For US clients, pairing it with the Maldives would be amazing."

"I loved all the guides and attention to detail by everyone on the team, including our driver and bus attendant Sena as well as Walter who is so knowledgeable and personable. Other highlights: All the ground staff with their surprises along the way, cold towels at the right time, socks and sarongs when needed, water bottles filled up daily. All these details made for a flawless and fantastic trip."

"Sri Lanka is a wonderful country, full of amazing history, beautiful scenery and friendly, welcoming people. What appeals is the ability to combine an active vacation (all those temples seem to be on the tops of hills!) with the right amount of relaxation and with enough five-star properties to feel that it is still a luxury vacation."

"I love Sri Lanka and think the country has something for everyone. I could send so many different clients here and they would all be able to get the experiences they want."