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A magical tour in Sri Lanka with encounters of Blue Whales, Sperm Whales, Leopards and Elephants.

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“Daddy, they are watching us” asks Amali my youngest daughter her voice slightly tense. From the inky black depths of the sea, where there is no light and some predators hunt using sonar, the hunters have gathered behind us. They are spy hopping, lying vertically in the water with their eyes above the surface. They are talking in a language, a coda, a series of clicks. I wish we could talk to them and ask how old they are. I imagine them to be as much as two hundred years old. They may have been around when whalers arrived here and their relatives were slain. In the 21st century they seem to know they are safe. Even safer with me because they have profiled us with their sonar and realised I am with two children. The whalers never had children on their boats. So perhaps these whales sense that we are no risk at all. They swim up to us and ‘scrum’ with each other, writhing bodies churning the water into a froth. They are engaging in what marine scientists dryly describe as ‘active socializing’. They are now only a few feet away from us and we are just gob smacked at how tactile they are and how they have accepted us. A mature female is with them. Perhaps she is excited at the prospect of male company. A bull may be visiting having travelled a few thousand kilometers from a more northerly or southerly latitude. She signals her interest. Forty metric tonnes of Sperm Whale hurls itself out of the water and lands on its back.

We are 35 kilometers east of Trincomalee on the 'East Coast' of Sri Lanka on a whale watch hosted by Chaaya Blue, a John Keells Hotel, one of the top two hotels in Trincomalee. My wife Nirma, and children Maya and Amali together with a friend Tilak Conrad are busy data logging as I call out details on a spectacular repertoire of surface behaviour. There is a special relationship between Sri Lanka and Sperm Whales. Sri Lanka is the best chance in the world to see a super- pod of Sperm Whales on a commercial whale watching trip.

Chitral Jayatilake, the head of Eco Tourism for John Keells is pioneering the use of quieter engines for responsible whale watching. Besides a fast, quiet boat and his best boatman, he had also supplied me with a back up GPS, satellite phone and the Trincomalee admiralty charts for my whale watching research trip. I was out in April 2012. A few weeks earlier in March, a group of underwater photographers on a tour led by Amos Nachoum had encountered a super-pod of Sperm Whales. The super-pod had not been far from where we were now watching, a much smaller pod of 20 Sperm Whales. Andre Steffen a German Researcher who had studied them in Dominica wrote to me that there were at least a hundred and Nachoum who was taking images underwater estimated the number between 60-80. John Keells naturalists B. Dayarathne and Nilantha Kodithuwaku who were on the boat looking after their clients estimated that there could have been over two hundred whales.

The grand family adventure for us had begun with a luxury tented safari in Yala National Park, the best location in the world to see and photograph Leopard. Mahoora the pioneer of luxury tented safaris, offers visitors the privilege of staying inside the park. On the first night, as we

dined over a five course campfire meal, the eerie howl of a Jackal (*Canis aureus*) drifted through the darkness that had shrouded the trees. I fell asleep listening to the soft 'ugh' calls of a troop of endemic Toque Monkeys (*Macaca sinica*) that squabbled in the riverine tree canopy over the tents. During the night, Nirma woke me up; she had heard voices. The staff were chasing a tusker elephant away. Leopards come close to camp as well. A Sloth Bear sometimes walks through the camp which means of Sri Lanka's Big Five, the terrestrial three are all seen close to the Mahoora camp. One morning, just yards away from the camp, we stopped to photograph butterflies in a little open glade where the sun snuck through an otherwise impenetrable tall canopy of luxuriant riverine trees. A Common Indian Crow (*Euploea core asela*), a butterfly was flying with its hair pencils everted from the tip of its abdomen, wafting pheromones to be caught by the jungle breezes which curved around the gnarled trunks of ageing kumbuk (*Terminalia arjuna*) trees. In those few minutes a Sloth Bear walked through the camp. We missed it and my popularity took a dent.

Without even trying hard during a three night stay we saw over 137 species of birds in the park and close to 30 species of butterflies. On the first evening game drive, we sat by a waterhole and watched three families of elephants with babies coming to water. I was taking down some notes when a shuffling noise drew nearby as if someone was walking with loose rubber slippers. Two adults with a juvenile brushed past the vehicle.

We left the waterhole as the evening was wearing off. Priyantha, the Mahoora driver was experienced and kept his distance when a short while later, a male Leopard marking his territory emerged from the thorn scrub. I imperiously gestured to another safari vehicle that we should all hang back. Good behaviour has its rewards and we watched it do a belly crawl up to the flimsy cover afforded by a leafless line of thorn bushes. It locked a steely gaze on a buffalo calf under the care of a vigilant mother. Priyantha whispered that it was getting late and we need to head back to comply with the park rules to return before sundown. We drove off leaving the hunter and passing another a young female leopard bravely carving out her territory. The late Ravi Samarasinha in his conversations with me always maintained that in some parts of Yala's block 1 the density of Leopards could be as high as one per one square kilometer. This seemed plausible as I have had sightings of six different Leopards once on a 600m stretch of road and others have observed six Leopards in view at a waterhole in the dry season. Andrew Kittle and Anjali Watson, two Leopard researchers, believe that an average density estimate (not to be confused with home range sizes) is more likely to be one Leopard for three square kilometers. Where ever the true figure may lie, it is high and Yala remains as the top spot in the world for Leopards. Yala can now have its bad days of safari traffic, a victim of its success as a result of Leopard-centric branding by people such as me.

A tsunami warning of volcanic activity in far away Indonesia resulted in us driving back to the capital Colombo past Uda Walawe National Park, the only park in the world where a wild elephant is guaranteed on a game drive. You don't even need to enter the park as sugar junkie elephants line up behind the electric fence which divides elephant country from farmland.

Two days later, with Ashan Seneviratne of Little Adventures, I skipped down to Mirissa for a day trip on the newly built southern expressway. Ruwan, the skipper of my favourite boat crew (Mirissa Water Sports) greeted me warmly before we headed out in search of Blue Whales. The crew of tsunami affected fishing youth who were set up for pleasure sailing in 2005 now operate

three boats for whale watching. South of Mirissa is the best location in the world for Blue Whales, first publicised as recently as May 2008 by me. Within an hour we had seen a few Blue Whales. Then something magical happened. A pair surfaced so close to the boat that we could hear the whoosh as they exhaled. One side-fluked. This is where it swims on its side exposing the tip of one tail fluke like the dorsal fin of a patrolling shark. This was unusual. A series of unusual surface behaviour suggested we may be watching Blue Whales in courtship. The boat crew have run over 500 whale watching trips and they had not observed similar behaviour until a fortnight earlier.

I took detailed notes and watched. The minutes ticked by as Ruwan kept the boat out for me. There was a time when I would be the only person out at sea with them and they would run the boat for me for the cost of diesel. Just me and them under a blue sky and the vast Indian Ocean looking for Blue Whales that no one seemed to know about. Now the boats are full with tourists and I hang back letting the tourists take the prime spot at the front. But it does not matter as Ruwan and the boys always keep an eye on me and position the boat so that it is always best for photography from where I am. When whales have been seen well, as on that day, the whale watching boats turn back. We were now the only boat left. The sun beat down, desiccating us in the heat. Out in the vast featureless ocean, tour guides on our boat who were leading groups with onward itinerary legs or night flights to catch, grew anxious.

We left what we thought were courting Blue Whales. But Ashan and I had another sea adventure ahead of us at Kalpitiya, one of the top spots in the world for Sperm Whales. A few weeks earlier, Ashan had arranged for a boat from our hosts at Bay Watch Eco Resort Village. Two other boats were to join us to sweep the Sperm Whale Strip between E 079 35 and E 079 38 in a north- south traverse searching for the whales. This was planned several weeks ahead as emails criss-crossed the ether between London and Colombo. But by a fortunate coincidence two days before we set out, the Sri Lanka Navy stumbled across a super-pod of Sperm Whales and put out a press release accompanied by footage which ran on local television. We caught up with the super-pod and left a peninsula where the dolphin watching boatmen had become converts to whale watching.

Sri Lanka is the Best for Big Game Safaris outside Africa. No other place outside Africa offers an opportunity for mainstream tourism to see five large potentially dangerous animals on holiday within a reasonable time frame and at affordable prices. Ganganath Weerasinghe is a manager of Jetwing Eco Holidays, the specialist wildlife subsidiary of one of the largest destination management companies in Sri Lanka. According to him more and more wildlife photographers from India (another good alternative outside Africa) are coming over to photograph Leopards, Sloth Bear, Blue and Sperm Whales. They are also coming over to photograph elephants at The Elephant Gathering, the largest annually recurring concentration of elephants in the world. Sometimes on the lake bed of Minneriya in August and September, as many as 300 elephants may gather in an event labelled by Lonely Planet, as amongst the Top Ten wildlife events in the world.

Sri Lanka is the best for some of the most enigmatic animals in the world. It's best for Blue Whale, Leopard, Sloth Bear, Sperm Whale super-pods and the concentrations of wild elephants. Entrepreneurs like Anuruddha Bandara of the Eco Team who own the brand Mahoora are leveraging this and have launched campsites under the Big Game theme. The

island is also rich in biodiversity with many plants and animals unique to the country in its rainforests. 900 species of vertebrate animals have been described newly to science by biodiversity explorer Rohan Pethiyagoda and his team at the Wildlife Heritage Trust. The Sinharaja Bird Wave in the lowland Sinharaja rainforest is the biggest, longest studied and offers the best viewing of a tropical bird wave.

As my holiday in Sri Lanka draws to a close, with my family I explore the mangroves near the busy Bentota River on a mangrove safari organised by the Avani Bentota Resort and Spa. Soon we find our quarry, the Water Monitor, a gigantic and fearsome looking reptile, sunning itself on the banks. In shadowed streams we find baby water monitors growing up in the shallows. My final trip is to the Talangama Wetland, a biodiversity rich site on the suburbs of Colombo. The water's edge is busy with brightly coloured Scarlet Baskers (*Urothemis signata signata*) and Crimson Dropwings (*Trithemis aurora*), aerial hunters whose basic body design has remained unchanged for 300 million years. They arrived before the dinosaurs and have outlived the dinosaurs. Meanwhile, children leave for school, watched over by endemic and endangered Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys (*Semnopithecus vetulus*) whose alpha males boom from the tree canopy. My field days add up to less than two weeks and yet I have seen the kind of wildlife most travelers would be thankful to see in a lifetime.