After our overnight flight we arrive in tropical Colombo with a short transfer to the Tamarind Tree Hotel. The remainder of the day is for relaxing - the pool and bar are inviting but the grounds are full of tempting, new birds!

Sri Lanka is a birder's paradise and a chorus of exotic calls and striking looking species will kickstart the list. Yellow-billed Babbler, Black-rumped Flameback, Purple-rumped Sunbird and Oriental Magpie Robin for starters.

After breakfast we head north and east to Anuradhapura. The colourful, bustling roadside life of the tropics surround us and we’ll include stops for birds and other wildlife that fringe the many lakes and pools, or ‘tanks’. White-breasted Kingfisher, Painted Stork, Blue-tailed Bee-eater or remarkable Pheasant-tailed Jacana could be on show.

From the comfortable Palm Gardens Hotel we’ve three days to explore Wilpattu National Park, the largest in Sri Lanka with 130,000 hectares of lowland forest and scrub, marked by sand rimmed pools and lakes (willu). From our four-wheel drive jeeps we’ll watch a variety of birds gather at the water’s edge alongside Water Buffalo and Mugger Crocodiles. There are also Sambar, Barking and Spotted Deer - prey for the Park’s healthy Leopard population and local guides will ensure that we’ve the best possible chance to see this most beautiful of big cats.

Giant Squirrels, Ruddy Mongoose and Toque Macaques will also entertain us and we’ve also seen elusive Sloth Bear. The birdlife is rich and varied and a chance to see the Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Sri Lankan endemics and Sri Lanka Green Pigeon is high on our list.

Exotic wildlife and a wonderfully rich culture, our Sri Lanka holiday is a magical mix of spectacular leopards, fantastic elephants, colourful birds and mighty whales.

- Leopards at wonderful Wilpattu National Park
- Blue and Sperm Whales with Spinner Dolphins
- Colourful birdlife with Sri Lankan endemics
- Elephants, Crocodiles and Fruit Bats
- Pheasant-tailed Jacana and Crested Serpent Eagle
- Langur Monkeys, macaques and ancient temples
- Fantastic hotels, lodges and food
striking with Great Thick-knee, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Crested Serpent Eagle and incomparable peacocks amongst the many treasures.

Anuradhapura is the ancient capital of Sri Lanka and a World Heritage Site, so a visit to the preserved ruins is a must: bell-shaped dagobas and stupas mark Buddhist sacred sites, popular with Grey Langurs and Fruit Bats, as well as the locals!

7-8 From our wonderful lodge at Habarana we visit two special sites: Minneriya National Park is a great place to view large groups of Asian Elephants gathering around wetlands that are brimming with an array of egrets and herons, shorebirds and curious Openbill Storks. The historic fortress at Sigiriya is perched atop a spectacular rock formation – we’ll be sure to watch for Shaheen Falcons as we climb the steps!

9-12 Our last base is the Chaaya Blu Hotel, on the beach at Trincomalee on the northeast coast. We’ve three days of whale watching: 4-5 hour excursions each morning on our 20ft launches equipped with sun covers (no toilets). The inter-monsoon season offers calm seas especially in the morning and we sometimes enjoy breakfast on board!

Leaving from the beach in front of our rooms we could be among the whales and dolphins within minutes. Sociable Spinner and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins are most likely, but our focus will be on bigger things. Trincomalee has a growing reputation as one of the best places in the world to see incredible Blue Whales, the largest ever living animal. Floating alongside these magnificent creatures will be a lifetime highlight.

Anything else could turn up: we’ve seen Cuvier’s Beaked Whale, a little known deep-diving cetacean, and Eden’s Whale – only recently described to science. Perhaps we can repeat last time’s encounters of being surrounded by a superpod of over one hundred Sperm Whales! As supporting cast, there will be a range of tropical seabirds including Bridled, Crested and Whiskered Terns.

Returning to shore around lunchtime, there will be opportunities each afternoon for birding and visits to local sites, including the Commonwealth War Cemetery, a Hindu temple and a Buddhist shrine. Local birds include White-browed Bulbul, Black-hooded Oriole, Purple Sunbird and Orange-breasted Pigeon. At local wetlands there might be Red-wattled Lapwing, Lesser Sand Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Indian Roller or stunning Common Iora.

13-14 After breakfast we drive across country to Negombo, a journey of about 6 hours. There will be birding stops and lunch enroute, before our final night at the Tamarind Tree Hotel, departing next morning for our UK flight.

Outline Itinerary

Days 1-2 Fly overnight to Colombo. 1 night at Tamarind Tree Hotel.

Days 3-6 To Anuradhapura via Tabbowa wetland. Bird and mammal safaris in the Wilpattu National Park. Also temples and World Heritage Sites. 4 nights at Palm Gardens Hotel.

Days 7-8 Transfer to Habarana: Elephant safari in Minneriya National Park. Visit historic Sigiriya rock fortress. 2 nights at Chaaya Village Hotel.

Days 9-12 To Trincomalee via Kantal wetland. Whale watching boat trips. Local birdwatching and visits to cultural sites including Hindu temple and Commonwealth War Cemetery. 4 nights at Chaaya Blu Hotel.

Days 13-14 Return to Colombo birdwatching enroute. 1 night at Tamarind Tree Hotel. Then flight to UK arriving the same day.

Chitra Jayatilake: Leopard, Asian Elephant, Pied Hornbill
Chas Anderson: Sperm Whales, White-breasted Kingsher, Spinner Dolphins

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