

## BACK TO NATURE

By: Jon Ashworth

*Vil Uyana fuses Maldivian sophistication with Sri Lanka's rustic charm. Jon Ashworth lets the stress melt away at this distinctive wildlife resort*



RESORTS in the Maldives are famous for thatched chalets built on stilts above the calm, blue-green ocean, with wooden walkways stretching out towards distant reefs. Imagine the same in a landscape of paddy fields and marshland, with steamy blue mountains fringing the horizon, and you have Vil Uyana, Sri Lanka's newest luxury resort and spa.

Sri Lanka usually comes off second best to the Maldives, just an hour's flight across the Laccadive Sea. Well-heeled travellers flock to its resorts, leaving Sri Lanka to budget holidaymakers and birdwatchers. Sri Lanka's charms are more rustic: bone-rattling roads, little spoken English and an insistence on serving tea with hot milk. (An ironic reality in the home of tea.)

Yet there are exceptions. Vil Uyana, close to the famous Sigiriya Rock in north-central Sri Lanka, has imported Maldivian sophistication to this steamy, tropical country. About four hours' drive from Colombo international airport, the first impression is of African-style safari villas rising from reed beds and grassland, with immaculately turned out staff in golf buggies awaiting your arrival. A network of raised levees lead to reception, where formalities are dispensed with over a chilled welcome drink.



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Although Vil Uyana means “water gardens”, guests have a choice of four different villa experiences – water, paddy field, forest and marsh – each with its own distinct character. The best rooms – more accurately large chalets – are the water dwellings, perched on stilts in a lake. Stress melts away to a chorus of frogs and crickets as kingfishers skim the surface, sending ripples radiating. And despite the water setting, mosquitoes and other biting insects are non-existent.

Opened in November 2006, the 25 villa-resort is a fusion of African safari lodge, exclusive resort and the neo-rustic luxury retreats found in northern Thailand. Jetwing Hotels, a Sri Lankan operator, spent two years transforming 24 acres of disused farmland into a resort within a wildlife reserve; architect Sunela Jayewardene drew inspiration from the London Wetland Centre in Barnes, with its marshland, ponds and reed beds.

The result is a distinctive resort with a serene atmosphere. The villas are cavernous, built from locally grown teak and with bamboo roofs and coconut thatch. The rooms are up to Maldives standards, with crisp linen, thick towels, Vil Uyana-brand soaps and lotions, DVD player, satellite TV and candles around the bath. There are UK plug sockets, avoiding the need for travel adaptors, and the air conditioning stays on when you leave your room, taking the edge off Sri Lanka’s perennial humidity.

Vil Uyana’s general manager, Tissa Wickramasuriya, was brought up in Jamaica and has worked in hotels in the US. This explains why the resort is run to Western standards, while other supposedly upmarket Sri Lanka hotels suffer the curse of misplaced cutlery and bumbling waiters. Staff attend compulsory weekly English lessons. Membership of Small Luxury Hotels of the World adds a further stamp of approval.

Villas are scattered around the property, so there is plenty of privacy. Secluded patios gaze across water and grassland to Sigiriya, the ancient rock fortress that rises 600ft above the sweeping plains. Tourists and locals alike brave the rickety iron walkways to reach the summit, with its panoramic views over green jungle and hazy mountains.



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If that seems too much like hard work, guests could instead take a day trip to Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka's ancient capital, or an African-style safari in nearby Minneriya National Park. More than 300 elephants converge on Minneriya between August and October in an annual migration known as The Gathering. The area teems with birdlife; a morning jeep drive brings sightings of painted stork, black-headed ibis, grey heron and red-wattled lapwing.

Then again, there is no pressing need to venture out at all. It is perfectly acceptable to while away the time watching birds swooping, before a sumptuous (yet inexpensive) dinner in Vil Uyana's first-floor open air restaurant. Fare ranges from delectable Tasmanian salmon to delicious curries. Meals are complemented by a well-stocked wine cellar, which boasts Dom Perignon and a Chateau Batailley Pauillac for just 11,600 rupees (£51).

A major draw is the Island Spa, set in a lake and reached by a wooden walkway. The quality of the treatments is up there with world-renowned spas such as Chiva-Som in Thailand, but at half the price. I indulged myself with an aromatherapy head and shoulder massage, facial, manicure and pedicure, and reflexology – more than four hours of pampered bliss for a princely £80. They had to wheel me back to my room.

The treatment rooms are open air, meaning you are indulged to the accompanying sound of running water and bird song. I would consider returning simply for a spa break – three days is about right – with two treatments a day and the rest of the time spent lounging.

For true devotees, the resort offers five-day Ayurveda programmes from around £240 per person.

Being close to nature is an intimate part of the Vil Uyana experience. There have been sightings of otters and crocodiles, and elephants sometimes wander close to the property. Guests might catch a glimpse of a loris, a shy, bushbaby-type mammal. Dragonflies and butterflies float serenely on the tempering breeze.



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Anywhere else in the world, Vil Uyana could charge upwards of \$600 per night, in line with Africa's top safari lodges. But Sri Lanka's civil war is keeping the tourists away, and prices are discounted accordingly. Yet while security is tight, in particular at Colombo airport, I felt safer in Sri Lanka than I do walking the streets of London.

The strong pound makes Vil Uyana even more affordable and you are likely to have the entire resort to yourself, making you feel even more like a millionaire. You might even get a decent cup of tea.

### Travel notes

- Rooms at Vil Uyana cost from \$400 (£195, E292) per room per night. [www.viluyana.com](http://www.viluyana.com)
- SriLankan Airlines operates direct daily flights between London and Colombo. Fares from £550 plus taxes. [www.srilankan.aero](http://www.srilankan.aero)
- Jetwing Eco Holidays offers five nights at Vil Uyana and one night at The Beach in Negombo from £930 per person, bed and breakfast, excluding air fares. The package includes visits to Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla cave temple, and a safari in Minneriya National Park. The price also covers airport transfers, chauffeur guide, safari jeep hire and entrance fees. [www.jetwingeco.com](http://www.jetwingeco.com)

### NOTE

For any queries regarding this press release and if you wish to receive this press release in Microsoft Word file format please contact: Angie Samuel – Marketing Communication Executive, Jetwing Hotels

Email: [angie@jetwing.lk](mailto:angie@jetwing.lk)

Web: [www.jetwing.com](http://www.jetwing.com)

Tel: +94 11 234 5700 Ext: 338