



Spotted in Yala

In search of Sri Lanka's graceful hunters



Features:

The Ironmen Cometh
Royal Botanical Gardens
Dutch by Design
Australian Outback Luxury



Destinations:

Sri Lanka Tours
Mini Maldives
Karachi, Kerala & 'KL'
Mirissa Water Sports

All at sea



If a life on the ocean wave appeals, then head for the tiny fishing village of Mirissa, where an enterprising new project promises to put Sri Lanka on the sailing map. Words by Ruby Millington, photography by Lucy Llewelyn Byard.



My grandfather was a merchant seaman who spent most of his life on ships, travelling the world and returning only occasionally to regale his family with romantic tales of faraway lands. Of all the countries he'd seen, the old man maintained that Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) was the nearest thing to paradise that he ever set eyes upon – the jewel of the Indian Ocean, a land closer to natural perfection than any other on earth, a land to fill a sailor's heart with joy.

It is sad, then, that while so many people fall in love with this lush little island, so few get to appreciate its beauty from anywhere other than dry land. Yes, there are boats aplenty here, but mostly they're for commercial fishing. For the majority of tourists, really getting out on the ocean hasn't been an option thus far. But the people at Mirissa Water Sports are determined to change that.

At 7am Mirissa harbour is a mesmerizing place. Multi-coloured trawlers drift idly at their moorings while men in equally colourful sarongs gabble away in Sinhala as they sort and sell their catch. An old man in a precariously tiny orange catamaran paddles in over water that, today, is flat as a mill pond. Palm trees sway on the headland behind, and a lone seabird wheels above.

The water sports centre is adjacent to the main harbour. Reception is a

thatched hut, but don't be fooled by the simplicity. This is a highly professional operation. The six 'partners' and six trainees employed by the project (which is part of the charitable Building A Future Foundation) have been trained in everything from life-saving to book-keeping. Mirissa Water Sports is their chance to build a future for themselves, and you can tell, from the pride with which they wear their casual uniforms and the general air of industry, that it's an opportunity they've seized with both hands.

This morning they're preparing for our trip on the 54-foot *Spirit of Dondra*, a lovely old wooden Indonesian trawler that's been refurbished with posh blue upholstery, comfy deckchairs and (hooray!) a toilet. Apparently the continental shelf drop-off, where large game fish such as tuna, marlin, and wahoo can be caught, is less than eight miles out to sea. Accordingly, *Spirit of Dondra* is kitted out for sports fishing with satellite navigation, fish-finding equipment, rods fitted with gleaming reels and heavy lines – although for those of us for whom fishing is to sailing what golf is to a nice walk spoiled, all that is academic. Besides, the optimum hours for fishing are between 6 am and 12 noon, which, unfortunately, coincides exactly with both ideal sunbathing time and the midday cocktail hour. Our plan this morning is simply to cruise and take in the scenery.



Just west of the harbour, steep red cliffs rise from the sea, some with half-hidden stairs carved into them. Look up and you'll see the starkly imposing and industrial-looking lines of the Jayewardene residence, the last home designed – for the grandson of a former national President – by the late Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's most celebrated architect. At the other end of the bay there's the famous Taprobane, a private island whose luxury villa nestled among the trees can be tantalisingly glimpsed.

But on *Spirit of Dondra* anyone can feel like a major player in *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Or *Robinson Crusoe*, even. The young crew may have received training in everything from speaking English to first aid and fire-fighting, but the boys, who all come from local fishing families, have brought their own skills and knowledge to the project too. They know the best places for snorkeling over live coral, and perfect private beaches where you can moor for a picnic. And, if you've caught a fish, they'll gut and barbecue it in no time.

Most excitingly for us this day, the crew know exactly where and when there's a possibility of being accompanied by pods of spinner dolphins, or of spotting the whales which are often seen during the early months of the year. Sri Lanka's south and west coasts forming part of their migratory route. This April, after sighting schools of whales, including mothers and calves, three to six miles off Mirissa, the project called in the nation's leading marine mammal expert, Anouk Ilangakoon, who

identified them as blue whales and showed the crew members how to log the sightings and thus predict the whales' arrival.

While *Spirit of Dondra* is perfect for either a little luxury or some serious sea-faring, Mirissa Water Sports also offers sailing on 24-foot boats within the bay. These are newly-made copies of an original gaff-rigged Maldivian *dhoni*, which was found washed up after the 2004 tsunami. There's something comfortingly organic about this piece of serendipity and the *dhonis* are appealing little boats which make even the most dedicated landlubber long to find his or her sea legs. Luckily, Mirissa Water Sports is offering sailing lessons from December; meanwhile, anyone can use the craft accompanied by a fully-trained two-man crew. Because the bay, which is 5km across, is protected by a reef, conditions tend to be good even for beginners. There are also one-man Lasers and sea kayaks available for the more intrepid.

The *dhonis* are also used, although this time with a small motor, for gentle trips up the nearby Polwatta Ganga, a sleepy brown river whose banks and overhanging branches teem with wildlife. It's a bird-watcher's paradise, but there's plenty to delight even non-'twitchers'. The boys have been taught by a local naturalist to recognise wildlife. They can point out birds (egrets, bee-eaters, fish eagles, parakeets, and black-capped orioles among them) as well as purple-faced leaf monkeys, monitor lizards (*Kabaragoyas*) and,

Further information

Mirissa Watersports is 40 minutes east of Galle. Turn right off the main Galle-Matara road at the 149km stone and follow the Mirissa Water Sports signposts.

Coastal Cruising: Minimum hire 2 hours. Maximum ten people. \$50 per hour.

Whale and Dolphin Watching: Minimum hire 2 hours. Maximum 10 people. \$25 per person for two hours.

Sports Fishing: Minimum hire five hours. Maximum four people. US\$50 per hour.

Snorkeling Safari: Minimum two hours. \$15 per hour inc. equipment.

Bay Cruising: Minimum two hours. Maximum four people. \$15 per hour.

River and Mangrove trips: Minimum two hours. Best times for bird-watching are dawn (6.30 to 8.30am) and dusk (4.30 to 6.30pm). Maximum six people. \$15 per hour.

Sea kayaking: Maximum two people. \$6 per hour.

if you're lucky – or should that be unlucky? – mugger crocodiles (*Crocodylus palustris*). There are books aboard to help you identify the various creatures.

On our trip we saw monkeys feasting on papaya high in the treetops, and Asian paradise flycatchers trailing foot-long tail feathers; we got close enough to photograph an eagle silhouetted majestically against the blue Sri Lankan sky; and learnt that the weird red-eyed bird that makes the infernal racket in so many local gardens is the greater coucal, or *Centropus sinensis*. Luckily we only saw one. The greatest revelation on the Polwatta Ganga is just how serene nature can be. And, as a way of travelling, the gently chugging *dhoni* is a nice contrast to some of the island's more frantic forms of transport – and the waterway was completely clear of traffic.

The river is likely to stay that way. But with plans in place to build Sri Lanka's first international yacht marina at Mirissa, it's likely that the seas will be welcoming a whole host of vessels in the future – and the Building A Future Foundation (BAF) says it's helping to prepare the locals so they can take full advantage of this new opportunity.

This umbrella organization, which was founded after the tsunami, is devoted to generating long-term livelihoods for local youth. It provides both hope and opportunity and, perhaps most importantly, doing it through pioneering schemes that are refreshingly innovative.





BAF intends to create realistic, sustainable businesses by providing infrastructure, equipment, and on-the-job training for employees. Current projects around the Mirissa area include boat-building and repair, sail-making and workshops in mechanical and electrical engineering. There's also a scheme to teach locals to build and install timber-decked pontoons in Mirissa harbour, and the bigger picture includes integrating these new skills into the creation of the marina.

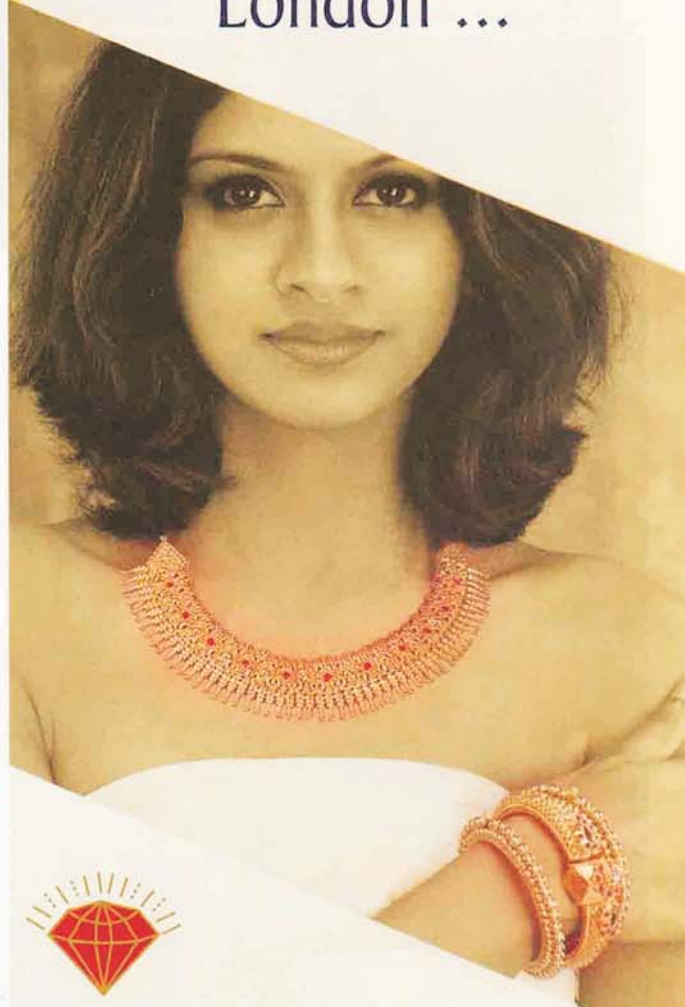
For Mirissa Water Sports and the rest of the local economy, that can, without doubt, only be a good thing. Let's just hope they don't do away with the hut. ✍

www.mirissawatersports.com.

Ruby Millington lives in Mirissa with her husband and five dogs.



The best jewellery store in London ...



LAKSHMI

Jewellers

Explore New Designs

276, High Street North, Eastham,
London E12 6SA, UK
Tel : 020 8470 5600 Fax: 020 8470 3448.