



# Cocooned in paradise

The Sri Lankan safari lodge that  
lays a light hand on the landscape

*Words /* Stephanie Drax

*Images /* Tim Evan-Cook, Nomadic Resorts



When Wild Coast Tented Lodge opened in an untamed corner of southern Sri Lanka, the eco-resort broke new ground with almost no physical impact on its environment. The site, on the fringes of Yala National Park, offered dense bushland that revealed golden beaches rippled with sand dunes, studded with colossal boulders and pummelled by strong surf. When the hotelier, Malik Fernando, first surveyed the scene for his new resort, it beguiled him: “The beach – unique for a safari lodge – had this single tree overlooking the Indian Ocean, and right there I saw the perfect sundowner spot.”

The site had already been claimed by exotic wildlife, among them Sri Lankan leopards and Asian elephants, so the challenge was to build a safari camp that wouldn't intrude on their habitat. “I wanted to make it playful, using unconventional structures that would preserve the jungle setting,” says Fernando, the scion of the Dilmah tea empire, who runs two other experiential retreats in Sri Lanka through the company's hotel division Resplendent Ceylon. It was Nomadic Resorts who got the nod in 2011, a then-new interdisciplinary design and project development team that had some quirky ideas for sustainable hospitality ventures using pre-fabrication and modular design.

“We consider the entire life cycle of a resort,” says Olav Bruin, Nomadic Resorts' architect and creative director. “At Wild Coast there are no structural pieces that two men can't carry so there's no need for heavy machinery on site.” The landscape is protected, and in the case of natural disasters, political crises or encroaching over-development, the resort can be wrapped up and removed, leaving virtually no trace. When in situ, the property is sustainable thanks to its solar power, greywater recycling and heat recovery from air-conditioning units.

The project was also the first opportunity for Nomadic to utilise its unique tensile membrane pods – 36 double bed “cocoon” and twin bed “urchins” – that appear along a gravel path like landed airships part-concealed by vegetation. “Our biophilic design allows guests to feel part of nature, which is part of our underlying

philosophy,” says Louis Thompson, Nomadic's CEO and landscape designer.

In an ingenious tribute to Sri Lanka's apex predator, Nomadic Resorts configured the clusters of guest tents and watering holes into the shape of leopard paw-prints when viewed from the air. Yala National Park – an unfenced reserve of 980 square kilometres – boasts one of the highest densities of leopards in the world. Wild Coast's expert rangers take guests on daily game drives into the adjacent parkland, where the arid grasslands, forests and lagoons teem with elephants and crocodiles, sambar deer and sloth bears.

Back at the resort, the safari experience doesn't stop: “The cocoons' elevated decks overlook watering holes that were designed to attract wildlife and allow guests a private vantage point,” says Thompson. The elegant interiors, designed by Dutch practice Bo Reudler Studio, build on the theme of discovery, with travelling



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Seen from above,  
the cluster of  
guest rooms  
form a leopard's  
paw-print

Below  
One of the tensile  
membrane pods

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“The perfect  
sundowner spot”

Next page  
The restaurant and  
bar, camouflaged  
amid the boulders









“Our ultimate objective is to make an invisible resort”



Above  
Nomadic Resorts' design allows for the whole resort to be wrapped up and removed, leaving no trace

Facing page  
Top to bottom: the bar's structure was woven from bamboo strips; colonial-style interiors, designed by Dutch practice Bo Reudler Studio

trunks, copper baths, varnished teak floors and exposed piping in an aesthetic that the team describes as “Jules Verne meets steampunk”.

Perhaps most visually arresting, though, are the two gravity-defying pavilions that arch over the restaurant and bar, bisected by a meandering swimming pool that opens out into the garden and can be traversed by bridge. The organic structures, designed to emulate the contours of the beach boulders, were deftly woven from bamboo strips and fixed with reclaimed teak shingles using the skilled hands of local fishermen. As guests feast on traditional Sri Lankan cuisine, a welcome ocean breeze wafts through the space: “We found boulders on the beach with lines of sedimentation,” says Bruin, “so we added those rings into the structures as natural cross-ventilation through the openings.”

Ambitious future plans for Wild Coast Tented Lodge include a leopard research station to better understand one of the country's keystone species, now endangered through habitat loss.

Malik Fernando has been granted government approval to turn the resort's eight square kilometres into a conservation area, replete with visitors' centre where guests will be able to assist researchers on camera traps and photo ID projects. Nomadic Resorts and the local fishermen will be back to build it, designed to blend into the landscape as seamlessly as the rest of the property. “Our ultimate objective,” says Bruin, “is to make an invisible resort.”

*Within 24 hours of Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday terrorist bombings, Malik Fernando had founded the Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance. Via its website (lovesrilanka.org) and social media, the alliance is a credible source for travel advisory updates for tourists and tourism professionals, with 150 hotel members helping to drive recovery and rebuild confidence in the country. “The atrocities this year were a freak event,” says Fernando. “Travel advisories have been lifted and we have been galvanised by what's happened.” The alliance will now lobby for best practices, sustainability and a code of conduct across the hospitality industry.*