

Just like an elephant, Jeremy Head will always remember his Sri Lankan encounter

# UNFORGETTABLE

Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne/Jetwing Eco Holidays

One night the Intercontinental, the next a mud hut, drinking neat Black Label Scotch while flies buzzed around my face. I was drinking with Lars, the owner of Tree Tops lodge. He fell in love with Sri Lanka when he visited as a student; once he found Tree Tops, he never left.

We were talking about wild elephants: there are around 2,500 of them in Sri Lanka these days, a fraction of the 12,000 found at the beginning of the 20th century. Although these remarkable beasts hold a special place in Sri Lankan culture, their future isn't assured. For farmers who have to borrow heavily to buy seed, an elephant trampling through paddy field spells financial ruin.

"You might not see elephants," Lars told me. "I can't guarantee it." But my hopes of a sighting were high. The previous evening Lars, whose bedroom is wide open to the outside, found one of his cushions halfway across the clearing – an elephant had reached in and swiped it.

It was pitch black outside as a storm approached. Lars thought he heard an elephant so we immediately extinguished the lights in order not to frighten it. After a moment, I heard branches breaking and a kind of chomping sound. Lightning forked across the tree tops and I tried to make out something – anything – in the instant of ultra-brightness. There was more crashing and whooshing, but I saw nothing.

Next morning in the rainforest we saw piles of fresh dung – but no elephants. We agreed to look later, after the sun had subsided, but the heavens opened, dashing any hope of seeing the elusive creatures that day. And I had only one day left.

At 5.30am the following day we tramped towards a nearby lake, spotting elephant dung, wild boar footprints and colourful birds – but I wasn't remotely interested. I just wanted elephants.

Shrouded in morning mist, with the rainforest rising behind it, the lake was beautiful. A forest fox darted into the bush and fish flopped in the water; but the elephants remained elusive. We wandered back, tired, muddy and sweaty. Pouring cool water from the well over my head, I tried to be philosophical: I'd heard them, and seen dung so fresh it was still steaming. But that wasn't enough.

“I'd seen dung so fresh it was still steaming”

As I walked back from the well, Lars ran over and told me there'd been a sighting at a nearby village. My heart was racing, although I refused to get too excited. But then...

Five minutes down the dirt track we found him – an old loner the locals call *Pote Aliya* (Blind Elephant) because, thanks to a poacher, he has only one eye. The guides had firecrackers at the ready in case he turned on us but he stayed calm. A bunch of inquisitive villagers watched me snapping away with my camera – but they were just waiting for old One Eye to start munching their crops before they chucked stuff at him. It's illegal to shoot elephants, but it happens. And if you'd mortgaged your house to buy seed and an elephant was eating your crops, what would you do? The very existence of the local people is threatened – and, in response, the lives of the elephants too. ■

ABOVE:  
Only 2,500 wild elephants remain in Sri Lanka

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Sri Lanka specialist Travel & Tours Anywhere Ltd (0800 093 1411, [www.exploresrilanka.biz](http://www.exploresrilanka.biz)) offers a range of elephant experiences. An eight-day stay at Tree Tops costs from £1,399 per person including flights.