Wildly Beautiful… Chaaya Wild, Refurbished And Relaunched For Safari Goers

Posted on



It’s been five years since John Keells Resort Hotels took over Yala Village, the resort that sits by the edge of the wilderness in Yala. Nine years after it was originally built, ‘The Village in the Jungle’ was showing signs of fatigue. Since the end of the conflict, in a blitz of refurbishments and rebranding, the John Keells Group has been upgrading most of its Chaaya Properties and it was time for Yala Village to be upgraded.

Words and Photographs Chitral Jayatilake

Master craftsman Channa Daswatte was entrusted with transforming the property

that sits on the periphery of Sri Lanka's premier National Park, Yala.

Six months of intense work that kept architects and engineers working through the night, made way for Chaaya Wild to be born, amidst a patch of dry zone wilderness that skirts the ocean waves, surrounded by mighty sand dunes.

Daswatte's creative genius is evident. As you walk into this top notch jungle resort, the restaurant and the public areas adorned by an array of rich batiks meticulously crafted by Ena de Silva steal one's attention.

Guests are greeted with Olu flowers and your attention is drawn across the new lobby, towards the pool and its expansive deck. Extending beyond the original it creates a sense of space and evenings at the edge of this deck are all about

leisurely indulgence. The vast lounge and the new bar with a great ambience add to the character of the very rustic but modern nature of the property, while a choice of refreshing juices carted in on a trolley await you after the long drive from Colombo.

Guests are escorted to their rooms by staff clad in ranger-type uniforms as you enter into the rustic luxury of its jungle and beach chalets, a total of 68 spread across 10 acres of contiguous forest land. The lodge boasts of featuring Yala's big four – elephants, resident leopards, occasional sloth bears and mugger crocs that surface from the man-made lake, visible from the pool deck at Chaaya Wild.

The rooms are very cleverly designed, the bed draped in net along with the furniture, resembles the make-up of a camp. The facilities on offer are akin to a luxury tented facility, while flat screen television with cable reminds you that you are within the reach of all that is civilized and contemporary.

Lunch is served in the newly-extended two-tiered restaurant,and the buffet is impressive for a jungle resort. General Manager Teddy Rowland explains that the choice of food is picked to cater to both the local and visiting clientele, as this jungle resort has almost an even split of foreign and Sri Lankan guests.

As you approach mid-afternoon, it's almost time for the evening game drive. The in-house naturalist team's office sends the guests off in a completely refurbished Land Rover.

John Keells Hotels Group has its own brand of experienced naturalists, Nature Trails,

and their office at Chaaya Wild is headed by a skillful birder and a leopard-tracking guide.

They have been developing leopard IDs for the past four years based at Yala Village, and the teams are now highly experienced in their efforts to track and photograph Yala's leopards. Incidentally the team was hand-picked as guides for a Nat Geo feature programme in Yala last year, focusing on leopard behaviour at night. These men who know Yala's wilderness like they do the back of their hands rarely disappoint when taking Chaaya Wild's guests on guided leopard safaris.

The Nature Trails team is also developing an interesting software that will keep all in-house guests well informed of the hot leopard sightings by a network of information gathered through SMS; a prototype already installed is creating a buzz on where the big cats have been spotted each session.

There's more to the hotel's offerings than its safaris; the naturalists take guests on nature walks across the sprawling extent, bird-watching trails as well as hikes over sand dunes and patches of forest. In addition an excursion to the three ancient reservoirs (tanks) for aquatic bird watching accompanied by a knowledgeable naturalist and field scope is an absorbing experience.

For the more adventurous,the resort offers DSLR cameras on rent and guided expertise to capture great imagery of Yala's biodiversity, which can then be saved on a CD back at the hotel. At this game lodge, every guest gets an opportunity to enjoy great nature photography with semi professional gear.

Utilising the experience of working with Nat Geo, a Night Vision safari has been developed well outside the boundaries of the National Park, done purely using infrared vision. This great experience of seeing the night with no artificial light will be an adrenaline rush for Chaaya Wild's guests soon.

Keeping abreast with the exciting changes, the F&B team is further planning their own dune dining, bush dinners and sundown cocktails by the lake led by Teddy.

Back at the Lodge dining guests have a choice of three bars and an equal number of lounges, but the signature location is its breathtaking fourth-level Observation Deck. Equipped with its own bar and lounge chairs suited for royalty,an evening spent under a million stars on a clear night is both stunning and memorable. A field scope can be set up to help you gaze at the stars. Jupiter seen from Chaaya Wild's

Ob Deck can be an awe-inspiring experience.

It is said that a visit to this park brings one back recharged, with a passion to practice goodness. There is no doubt that Chaaya Wild will make such stays memorable, delivering a total experience that will change the way one sees Sri Lanka’s dry zone wilderness.

[nggallery id=202]