

THE HABARANA HUB

A DELIGHT FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISTS



Images courtesy of Keells Resorts Hotels

"Like so many destinations in Sri Lanka, visitors who choose to explore beyond the obvious lures will discover new and different rewards. In the 30 years since the arrival of tourist traffic in Habarana, alternative enticements have developed, many of them more in keeping with the responsible tourism ethic increasingly sought after by discerning nature- and community-conscious travellers."

by Ethan Geilber

What is it that makes a tourist destination in Sri Lanka? Proximity to splendid natural and heritage attractions, of course. Perhaps some solid services and easy accessibility. Uniqueness should also carry some weight. But these criteria hardly make for an exclusive list, especially in Sri Lanka. Within the cosy confines of the island, few destinations are far from appealing wonders, few aren't also within easy reach of good food and clean lodging and few corners are beyond the wheels of transport. So what actually lifts some places above the rest?

The answer baffles travel and tour operators still. Some destinations are easy to pick - like Sigiriya, Pidurangala and Ritigala - which bring together history and culture in magical natural settings. Then there's Minneriya National Park, site of the "Gathering" - the largest annual concentration of elephants in Asia.

But what about a place like Habarana, an unassuming crossroads equidistant from Sigiriya, Dambulla, Minneriya and other second-tier temptations? Thirty years ago, Habarana wasn't really on anyone's list of top stops. Today, however, it is an excellent central hub - one of the primary stepping off points - for travellers and safari-goers in the Cultural Triangle.

Don't Resort to the Obvious

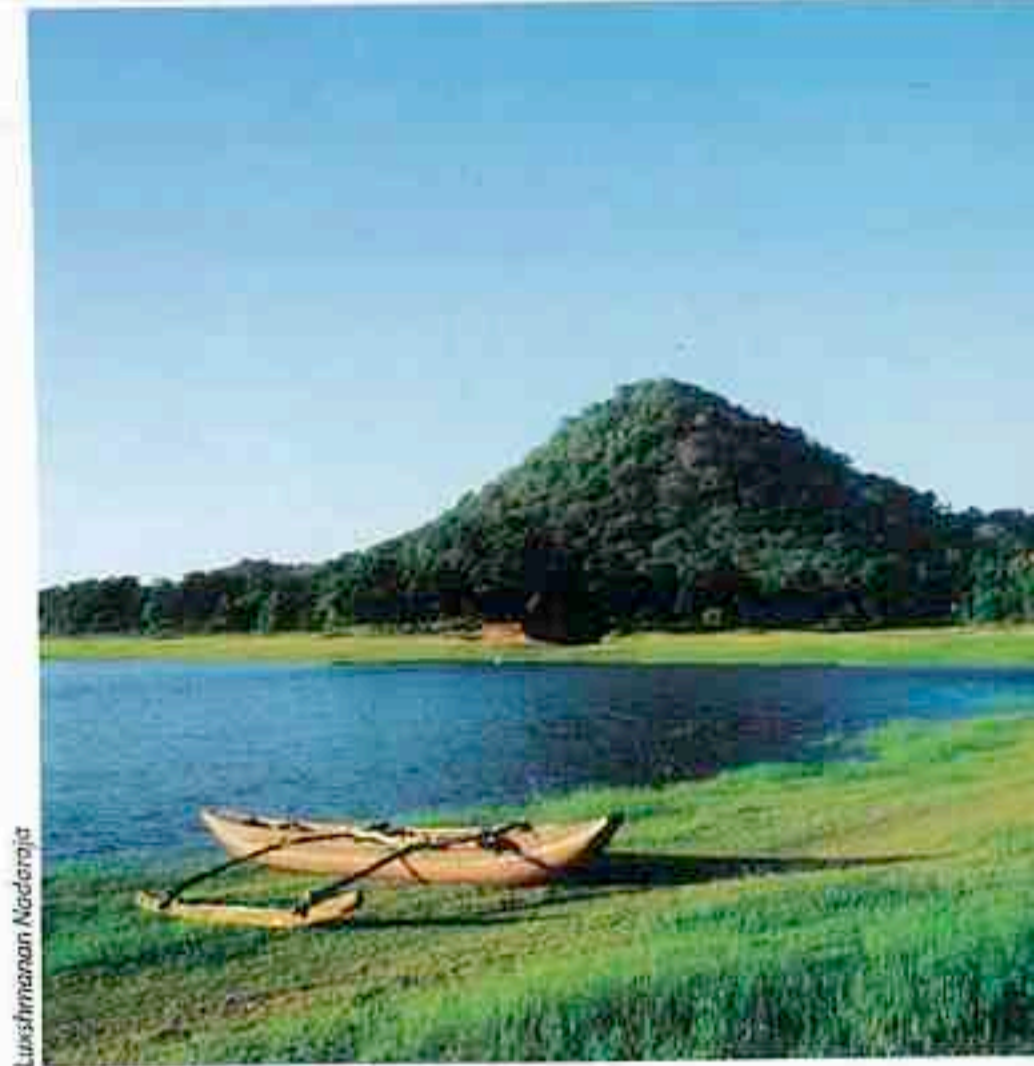
These days, many visitors to Habarana are attracted to its two Keells-group upscale lakeside resorts - The Cinnamon Lodge and the Chaaya Village (see **The Accommodation Guide**, p.14 & p.18). The Village, built in 1976, was the first tourist hotel in town and instrumental in bringing foreign faces and fresh commerce to the otherwise unremarkable city.

Like so many destinations in Sri Lanka, however, visitors who choose to explore beyond the obvious lures will discover new and different rewards. In the 30 years since the arrival of tourist traffic in Habarana, alternative enticements have developed, many of them more in keeping with the responsible tourism ethic increasingly sought after by discerning nature- and community-conscious travellers. To find them, you just need to know where to look.

Pachyderm Package

Habarana is Sri Lanka's prime inland location for elephant safaris. Unseen from the road, domesticated pachyderms munch their kittul, coconut and jak fronds in the shaded glens surrounding the town and its large tank, only emerging with their mahouts to work, including toting tourists. Through established operators, up to four people take seats in an elephant-back *howda*, a perfect perch from which to enjoy trips into the jungle.

There are several elephant safari operators in Habarana. Some are on the main road south of town, but most are clustered in a tight corridor on the rocks near the water tank just west of the centre. Access is via a rough dirt road to the left just after the 25km post on the A11 when travelling west from the main town junction.



Lushimanan Madenija

It is impossible truly to know which operators have the best history of reverence for the elephants they employ, but **Adventurers Lanka (T: +94 (011) 279 6167/8 or +94 (011) 494 6267; E: adsafari@sltnet.lk; W: www.adventurerslanka.com)**, in operation since 1981, was a Sri Lankan pioneer in elephant-back safaris and trained many of the other operators in town. Today, at a time when the plight of domesticated elephants and the training, skill and compassion of their mahouts and owners are being carefully studied, Adventurers Lanka, which cares for between six and 10 elephants at a time, claims to be vigilant about its elephant care standards. Its waterside headquarters includes clear information panels about elephants and birds.



Wouvan Sorian

For more information about the proper handling of domesticated elephants in Sri Lanka, contact the Department of Wildlife Conservation or the Department of Animal Production and Health. Additionally, the Captive Elephant Owners Association of Sri Lanka was formed in 1988 to help address the problems faced by tame elephants. Elephant advocates should note that it is now illegal in Sri Lanka to capture wild elephants and tame them. Pachyderms already pacified and owned by individuals are the last of their kind.

Nurturing Nature

Within easy reach of Habarana are several astounding natural drawcards. Fortunately, the three national parks mentioned below can all be visited on jeep safaris arranged from Habarana. When negotiating a trip, always ask whether your driver is a member of the local community-based association of safari jeep drivers. Association members agreed to set minimum levels of quality service and fixed prices for trips into all three wildlife areas.

Foremost among them is **Minneriya National Park**. Its 8,889 hectares are some of the country's most diverse intact natural systems in a small, single protected area, covering hills, *patanas* and *talawas* (types of grasslands) and a large third-century tank. This tank is the magnet for the August/September annual "Gathering" of Asia's largest concentration of elephants – more than 300 – on the fertile shore areas. The park's new visitor's centre, 8km east of Habarana Junction, has an extensive diorama exhibit, covering flora, fauna, history and culture. Success of the free 500m trail around the centre may lead to development of more extensive walking trails inside the park. A community-based organisation operates and benefits from the new park restaurant. An auditorium hosts meetings with local area stakeholders working to solve conflicts of interest involving the land, animals and people.

About 10km north of Minneriya is the park office and museum of **Kaudulla National Park**. The 6,656 hectares of dry, evergreen, monsoonal forest around Kaudulla tank are a new national park and part of an elephant corridor between Somawathie

Chaitiya National Park and Minneriya. September/October is the best time for viewing animals. Catamarans can be hired locally for a sail on the tank.

Back closer to Habarana, just beyond the railroad tracks two kilometres north of town on the A6, is a new official secondary entrance to **Hurulu Eco Park** – the name a shortened form of Hurulu National Environmental Park, declared open in May 2005. Previously better-known as the Hurulu Biosphere Reserve (also one of Sri Lanka's three International Biosphere Reserves), its 25,500 hectares of tropical dry evergreen forest have been combined with the Anambalandawa Forest Reserve's 28,500 hectares to compose Sri Lanka's largest national park.

The final site worth mentioning is one of the area's most unusual. The **Jathika Namal Uyana (T: +94 (025) 226 3253; E: jnu@mail.ewisl.net; W: www.jnu.lk)** is heavily self-promoted as the largest *na* (ironwood) tree forest and largest pink quartz mountain range in Sri Lanka. They were discovered, protected and developed by the Venerable Rahula, a Buddhist monk whose principal aim was to create a *uyana* (garden) and meditation centre. The 120-hectare site also includes ancient ruins. Paid admission helps preserve the natural attractions and benefits nearby communities. Access is 7.5km from a well-indicated turn off the A11 after the 81km post.

Living Lodge

When in the Habarana area, two alternative "eco-lodges" will appeal to visitors without the financial wherewithal to afford the resorts and/or in search of accommodation with a strong responsible bent. **Teak Forest (T: +94 (077) 774 2404; E: contact@theteakforest.com; W: www.theteakforest.com)** consists of five full-service stilted cabins set in a quiet wooded grove with incomparable views across a tank to Sigiriya and Pidurangala. Much more rustic, **Kamatha (T: +94 (011) 270 6961 or +94 (077) 718 2447)** is an authentic wattle-and-daub family compound that can accommodate 12 people in a typical rural setting. ✱