

# East side story

Despite being battered by tsunami and civil war, Sri Lanka's beautiful east coast is again open for business. But as **Chris Haslam** discovered, the leopard-rich national parks and surf beaches are still waiting for the tidal wave of travellers to return

**T**he leopardess was but the twitching tip of a tail and the onyx gleam of an unsheathed claw. She was hidden in the chiaroscuro canopy of an ironwood tree half a kilometre from the beach at the southern tip of Yala. The water buffalo, ambling past like fat tourists, didn't have a clue, and the calf, an inquisitive, lolloping half-yearling, didn't have a chance. Perhaps it heard a rustle of leaves, because the moment before it died it glanced upwards. The killer's timing was exquisite – as she snapped the calf's neck the mother, just 10m distant, turned, a visible shudder running along her mud-encrusted flank. Then she charged. The leopardess grabbed the calf by the throat – its limp body longer and heavier than her own – and with superfeline strength hauled it into the tree as the horns of the buffalo tore into its trunk. The kill had taken less than ten seconds, but now the leopardess had a problem. Her victim's mother was below, bellowing in fury, and the leopardess had nowhere to go. Suddenly she dropped the calf – perhaps by accident, or maybe because she knew the mother would thereby accept its death and move on. Either way, it worked. While the buffalo nuzzled her lifeless child, the killer slipped down the far side of the tree and fled into the long grass.

What happened next was even more remarkable. A second leopard emerged from the bamboo, like a Rousseau dream – a jowly male with a shimmering coat and whiskers that sparkled in the sunlight. As the buffalo cow walked

away he grabbed the carcass and vanished like a Cheshire Cat, while human witnesses wept in astonishment.

Nowhere on earth has leopards like Sri Lanka's newly reopened Yala National Park, home to the world's highest density of the species. Closed for security reasons for much of the past two decades, this spectacular swathe of grassland, jungle, swamp and beach is home to perhaps 200 members of the endemic subspecies *Panthera pardus kotiya* – conceited beasts with the muscular confidence of tigers. In this jungle the leopard is the apex predator, displaying none of the shyness and hyper-vigilance of his African kin. Put simply, the Yala leopard doesn't have to stash its kills in trees because there's no species capable of stealing it.

You don't need to be a feline fan to justify the buttock-numbing, occasionally terrifying seven-hour trip from Colombo to Yala. Birdwatchers will find chestnut-headed bee-eaters as common as sparrows, as well as brown-capped babblers, crested serpent eagles, grey hornbills, the endangered lesser adjutant and the extremely rare black-necked stork, among 230-odd avian species.

There are crocodiles, king cobras, elephants and jackals, but ignoring the leopards is impossible. They sashay down tracks. They lounge like glamour pussies on rocky outcrops, making love to the camera with their amber eyes, and they loaf in trees like C-list slebs on Caribbean sunbeds. Chitral Jayatilake – wildlife photographer, conservationist and resident guide at Yala – will warn you that spotting a leopard in the park

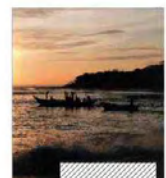
is never guaranteed, but you can take his caution with a pinch of salt.

## From big cats to blue whales

The whales, however, are another matter. Co-stars in Sri Lanka's new wildlife tourism extravaganza, the cetaceans are found within 9km of Dondra Head, the southernmost point of the island and the spot where the continental shelf is closest to the shore. Twenty-seven species have been recorded here, but the headline acts are the huge blue whale and the sperm whale, drawn to feeding grounds >

< enriched by the outfall of Sri Lanka's 105 rivers. Exactly what they're doing offshore apart from sucking krill and munching squid isn't fully understood: some theories suggest that the island lies on the blue whale migration route from the Bay of Bengal to the western Indian Ocean, while others believe the population is resident year round – the sperm whale in particular may be an endemic subspecies. But how easy is it to see them?

"Dead easy," said free divers Andrew Sutton and Chris Walker of whale-snapping specialists Eco2.com. I found them sitting in a hotel bar at Mirissa, wearing that look photographers get when they've nailed the money shot. Their procedure was to motor due south in a Zodiac until they found the pods. Then, wearing just fins and a mask, and carrying underwater cameras, they



swam with them. Their shots justified their goofy grins but I wasn't so lucky. In three days of seeing nothing bigger than a dolphin, the only fluke was that I wasn't seasick.

I'd heard I might have better luck at Trincomalee. The east-coast port, with its impregnable Dutch fort, once enjoyed a growing reputation as one of the world's best whalewatching spots – but that was 25 years ago, before the Tamil Tiger insurgency put the city off-limits. A year on from the end of the war, Trinco is off the FCO's naughty step; looking at my tourist map of Sri Lanka it didn't seem that far. Ramjon, my driver, didn't share my optimism.

"It is quite far, sir," he opined, revealing a talent for understatement matched only by his obliquely cheerful pessimism. "And there will be no whales, sir, I positively guarantee."

#### Touring a battered coast

The east coast isn't appearing in many tourist brochures yet, and 15km past Yala – the current end of the tourist trail – it became clear why. We stopped at a roadside shop on the edge of a village embraced by barbed wire. A betel-chewing lady sold me a warm bottle of something ghastly and said the only foreigners she saw were aid agency workers bunking off to see the leopards.

Disturbingly contradictory signs surrounded the village. Some said 'Danger: Mines'. Others warned of wild elephants. But the shopkeeper and a passing cyclist concurred that pachyderm amputees were rarely seen.

"The elephants are clever," said the cyclist. "They can smell the explosives."

The road north is marked by sentry posts dug every 200m or so, the soldiers loitering in the shade of the banyan trees. Platoon-sized encampments have been built every couple of kilometres – some proud with whitewashed rocks and bamboo flagpoles, others shabby military shanties. Police checkpoints guard crossroads and towns, and the SUVs of the Special Task Force prowl like wolves between the shimmering paddies. The Sri Lankan government may have driven a stake through the heart of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) but they're clearly not

convinced that the insurgency is dead.

When we pulled into the former backpacker beach resort of Arugam Bay I was the only tourist in town. The Psychedelic Lounge was boarded up. The buzz in the bars was just the insects and the messy, onshore swell broke unriden on the scruffy shore. In 2004 **this double curve of beach and its coconut palm-covered point was rapidly becoming one of the world's top surfing destinations, catching the same huge Antarctic swells that come to die on Indonesian shores. Then, on Boxing Day, the tsunami struck.**

Merete Scheller had been running the Stardust Beach Hotel for the past 32 years. The monster wave arrived as she was serving breakfast.

"It washed me through the dining room and into the kitchen, trapping me underwater against the ceiling," she said, her gaze flicking between me and the shoreline. "I thought: 'now I die', but then another surge pushed me through the back door. The water was so dirty, so full of debris, and I couldn't tell which way was up or down. Then I saw one of our shutters coming past so I grabbed it. When I came to the surface all I could see were the tops of palms."

The wave carried her 1.5km inland and then, just as suddenly, it was gone.

"I walked back to the hotel and started picking up the pieces," she shrugged.

Her husband's body was found three days later, 3km away, one of 300 killed here that morning. The hotel's lush gardens, destroyed by the tsunami, were his passion, but Merete won't let them grow back. "It's not sentimentality," she said. "It's just that these days I like to be able to keep an eye on the sea."

**As the tsunami receded the aid money flooded in. Survivors who had formerly been living in bamboo shacks found themselves rehoused in brick-built properties with mains electricity and running water, and fishing from brand new, fibreglass-hulled *oruvas*. "People round here call the tsunami the 'wave of gold,' said a fisherman called Mohamed, but faith in the ocean has yet to return. I spent an hour watching Mohamed and his brother trying to launch their boat before they**

abandoned the attempt. "Once upon a time waves like this would have been nothing," he sighed, slumping onto the sand. "Now we're scared of it. The ocean is like a loving father who got drunk and beat us. We don't trust it anymore."

#### Arugam Bay – a new Goa?

It was easy to linger at Arugam Bay. The beach is the stuff of Bounty ads: sugar-soft sands, coconut palms and utter solitude but for the whoops of the surfers riding the point. The locals, delighted to see visitors, are charming. "Come, try this," said a kid called Ali, grabbing my hand and leading me to the family home, where his mother served me lentil *dahl* and coconut *sambol* (chilli condiment). She nodded towards two lobsters in a plastic bucket beside the cooking pot. Neither survived.

"The war filtered out the travellers," said Devon-born Lee Blackmore, owner of the unfortunately-named Tsunami Hotel (he opened the place in 2001, inspired by the Japanese artist Hokusai's wave paintings). "Right now it's only those with a truly adventurous spirit who come here, but it's beginning to change. There's a real holistic, spiritual vibe here – there are signs that Arugam Bay is becoming a new Goa, a pre-rave Ibiza or Ko Pha Ngan."

They're not the only signs: post-tsunami reconstruction projects have left forests of them along the east coast. A fieldside pump was 'a gift from the people of Norway'. An Arjuna tree was 'donated by World Vision' and a sign sticking out of a mysterious pile of rubble proclaimed 'EU Tsunami Partnership'.

We stopped at the ambitious-sounding Passekudah National Holiday Resort – in reality, a shady car park beneath another big sign proclaiming plans for the future. The near-perfect beach – powdery blonde sand, ocean like warm Bombay gin – was busy with locals, and just one bikini-clad Westerner. I thought it important to interview her.

"Coming here is like discovering Thailand in the 60s," she said. Her name was Angelina Cicci – pronounced 'cheeky' – an Italian aid worker based in Trincomalee. "Accommodation is so cheap – I'm paying around €5 a night with dinner and I have a tuk-tuk to take

me to whatever beach I fancy.”

She had plenty of choice: Passekudah and neighbouring Kalkudah are relatively well-known but virtually any right turn off the road north takes you to another heart-stoppingly beautiful stretch of sand. The irritating beach boy culture of the south-west, like the local tourist infrastructure, is non-existent, but the hospitality of the predominantly Muslim fisherfolk is humbling.

But north of Brynthuraichenai, a foetid town plastered with the faces of slippery-looking political candidates, it became impossible to ignore the war. In the banyan shade of a seaside beer garden, I had an extraordinary encounter with the Sri Lanka state security apparatus. I was talking to Nadan Thilainathon, a wet-eyed Tamil I'd noticed drinking Lion Super Strength and staring into the past. He had lost his daughter in the tsunami and his world had stopped turning the same day. The foreign aid was appreciated, he said, but all he really wanted was little Sahalni back. As he became tearful again an SUV pulled up. Four men – two Sinhalese, two Tamils, in aviator shades – ordered beer and took the table next to us. Their leader asked Ramjon what

I was doing, and then said something to Nadan, who made his excuses and left.

“If you are looking for stories of human rights abuses you won't find them here,” he said. His companions smiled like Disney villains. “The LTTE were terrorists like Al-Qaeda and they're finished,” he added, à propos of not much. “Now if someone is suspected of LTTE sympathies, the people inform the authorities. The authorities visit them and they stop being LTTE.” He took a slug on his beer. “Or so I've heard.”

Unsurprisingly there is little overt sympathy for the LTTE in these parts. The LTTE strategy of forcing non-Tamils from their lands in order to gain an ethnic majority only succeeded in creating bullet-pocked ghost towns. At Oddamawady I met Mohammed Jahabdeen and his cousins, building a fence around a half-acre of weeds. “We left here 25 years ago,” he said, “forced out by the LTTE. We moved to Batticaloa, but last week we returned.” The mines were a problem, he admitted, but his dream was to open a restaurant and a shop at this eerie crossroads.

We pressed on, Ramjon's mood deteriorating with the road, which was now a potholed track through

weed-choked paddies and untended farmland. In the flyblown village of Arrua I found a brand new adventure playground – ‘a gift from the people of Milwaukee’ – its apparatus still covered in protective polythene because there were no children around to use it.

We rolled into Trincomalee, tired, dirty and out of conversation. As Ramjon had predicted there were no whales, so I went to the beach. I arrived in time to encounter a crowd of more than 100 Muslim schoolgirls, dressed in lilac burqas, seeing the sea for the first time. At first they gathered in a nervous huddle, dipping tentative toes into the lukewarm water. Then, as braver girls waded deeper, their more timid classmates followed, until the whole year was romping, fully clothed and waist deep in the Indian Ocean.

“We come from Kandy,” explained their teacher. “The girls have never seen the ocean before but now the war is over we have seized the opportunity.”

The girls' joy was innocent and infectious, and as I waded in too to take photographs, 15-year-old Haifa grabbed my hand.

“I love peace, sir,” she said.

But don't we all? ■



## THE TRIP

Chris Haslam travelled as a guest of Sri Lanka Tourism ([www.srilankatourism.org](http://www.srilankatourism.org)) and **Exodus** (0845 863 9600, [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)), which runs a ten-day *Whales and Leopards of Sri Lanka* itinerary, taking in Yala and Dondra Head, from £1,699 including international flights from London.

### ✈ Getting there

Sri Lankan Airlines (020 8538 2001, [www.srilankan.aero](http://www.srilankan.aero)) flies at least daily from London Heathrow to Colombo; return fares for the ten-hour journey start from £472. Indirect flights (for example, via the Middle East with Emirates, Oman Air or Qatar Airways) can be cheaper still.

### 🚌 Getting around

If you have plenty of time, bus is the most intense and sociable way to travel. The two types of bus in Sri Lanka are the state-owned CTB – modern yellow vehicles – and privately run operations, whose buses come in any age and colour. Fares are extremely low: the 110km trip from Colombo to Kandy costs around 50p.

Most tourists hire a car and driver – your hotel can arrange this and you can expect, after haggling, to pay £30 a day.

There are three main railways in Sri Lanka. The scenic coast line runs south from Colombo to Galle and Matara. The central, or main, line climbs the hills east of Colombo, stopping at Kandy, Nanu Oya (for Nuwara Eliya) and Badulla. The northern line starts in Colombo and runs through Anuradhapura to Vavuniya, with branches east to Trincomalee and south-east to Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa. A first-class fare from Colombo to Trincomalee is LKR680 (£4.10); second class is LKR370 (£2.25) and third class is LKR205 (£1.25). Visit [www.railway.gov.lk](http://www.railway.gov.lk).

### £ Cost of travel

Budget travellers can see Sri Lanka for £10 a day if they're willing to go native – a big, air-con, en-suite room at Passekudah Beach costs around £4.50. A daily budget of £40 buys transport, meals, a few beers and a night in a sublime beach spot such as Stardust Beach Hotel at Arugam Bay.

Though you'll be pushed to spend £80 a day, a double at Western-style Nilaveli Beach Hotel, just north of Trincomalee, will set you back £78

half-board. The one caveat is to beware of hotels around Batticaloa, where a shifting population of NGO workers on expense accounts has forced prices up – agree the price in advance, and be prepared to haggle.

### 🍴 Food & drink

Sri Lankan food usually consists of curry and rice served with various side dishes. The fish curries are especially good – prawn and mango curry with *kiri bath* (coconut milk rice), coconut *sambol* (with chillies and dried Maldive fish) and *mallung* (cabbage with coconut, onions and chilli). For breakfast, try *hoppers*: cup-shaped pancakes made from rice flour, coconut milk and a dash of *grog*, with a fried egg and a splash of *lunu miris* – chilli again – to pep it up.

### 🗣 Political situation

Sri Lanka has emerged from civil war, but although the LTTE was defeated in May 2009 the government is concerned that the organisation, which has hundreds of arms caches in the north-east, could rise again. Consequently, a state of emergency is still in force. Be cautious of talking politics in public – as a tourist you probably have nothing to fear but careless talk is dangerous for locals. Beware, too, of photographing military installations or activity.

## SRI LANKA HIGHLIGHTS

### 1 Cave Temples, Dambulla

This vast temple complex (*below*) dating to the first century BC is built into caves at the base of 150m-high cliffs.

### 2 Lion Rock, Sigiriya

The fifth-century fortress of Sigiriya – Lion Rock – is built atop a 370m volcanic plug.

### 3 Polonnaruwa

Sri Lanka's former capital contains the monumental ruins of a fabulous 12th-century garden-city.

### 4 Temple of the Tooth, Kandy

Legend says a tooth was plucked from the mouth of the Buddha and brought to Kandy, where it rests on a solid gold lotus flower.

### 5 Leopards at Yala NP

Big, bold predators strut around this fabulously picturesque national park.

### 6 Whales at Mirissa

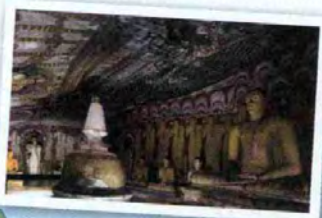
The edge of the continental shelf, just 9km off Mirissa, is becoming known as the world's richest whalewatching location.

### 7 Anuradhapura

Capital for 1,400 years, now a sprawling jungle wilderness littered with ruins.

### 8 Galle Fort

A steamy, spice-scented treasure of 500 houses, two churches, a mosque and a lighthouse, within 400-year-old walls.





# Sri Lanka footnotes

When to go, how to get around, how much it costs, what to eat – the essential details you need to plan your trip

## ONLINE FEATURES

For more on Sri Lanka, including beaches and wildlife, see [www.wanderlust.co.uk/planatrip](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/planatrip)



## VITAL STATISTICS

**Capital:** Colombo

**Population:** 21 million

**Languages:** Sinhala, Tamil, English

**Time:** GMT+5.5

**International dialling code:** +94

**Visas:** UK nationals receive a 30-day visa on arrival

**Money:** Sri Lankan rupee (LKR), currently around Rs165 to the UK£. ATMs can be found in cities and larger towns.

## When to go

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun

Jul Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec

Sri Lanka has two separate monsoons that affect different parts of the island. The north and east are generally drier than the south and interior.

■ Dry season on the west and south coasts and the hill country of the interior. Expect clear skies and highs of 30°C. Late February to mid-March offers the best whale-spotting in the south. Nov-Dec is wet in the north.

■ Dry season on the east coast and in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy; wet May-Aug in the south-west

■ Generally wet in both the south-west and north-east; the quietest, cheapest time to travel.



## Health & safety

Typhoid and hepatitis A

vaccinations are advised, plus malaria prophylaxis and, sometimes, rabies and Japanese encephalitis – take advice in advance.

Follow the usual precautions for travel in South-East Asia: avoid raw food and ice, and drink purified water. Driving in Sri Lanka is hazardous – wear a seatbelt.

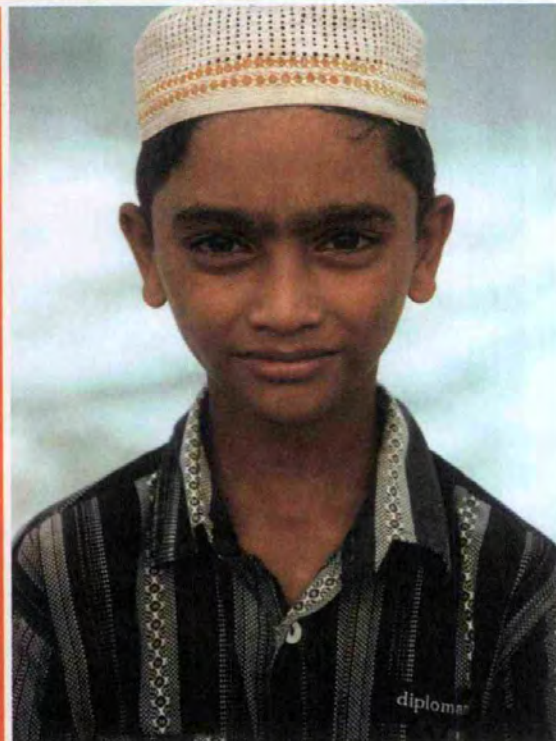
A state of emergency is still in force in former LTTE-held areas, where mines remain an issue, so expect police and army checkpoints along the east coast. The FCO advises against all travel to the northern districts of Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya.

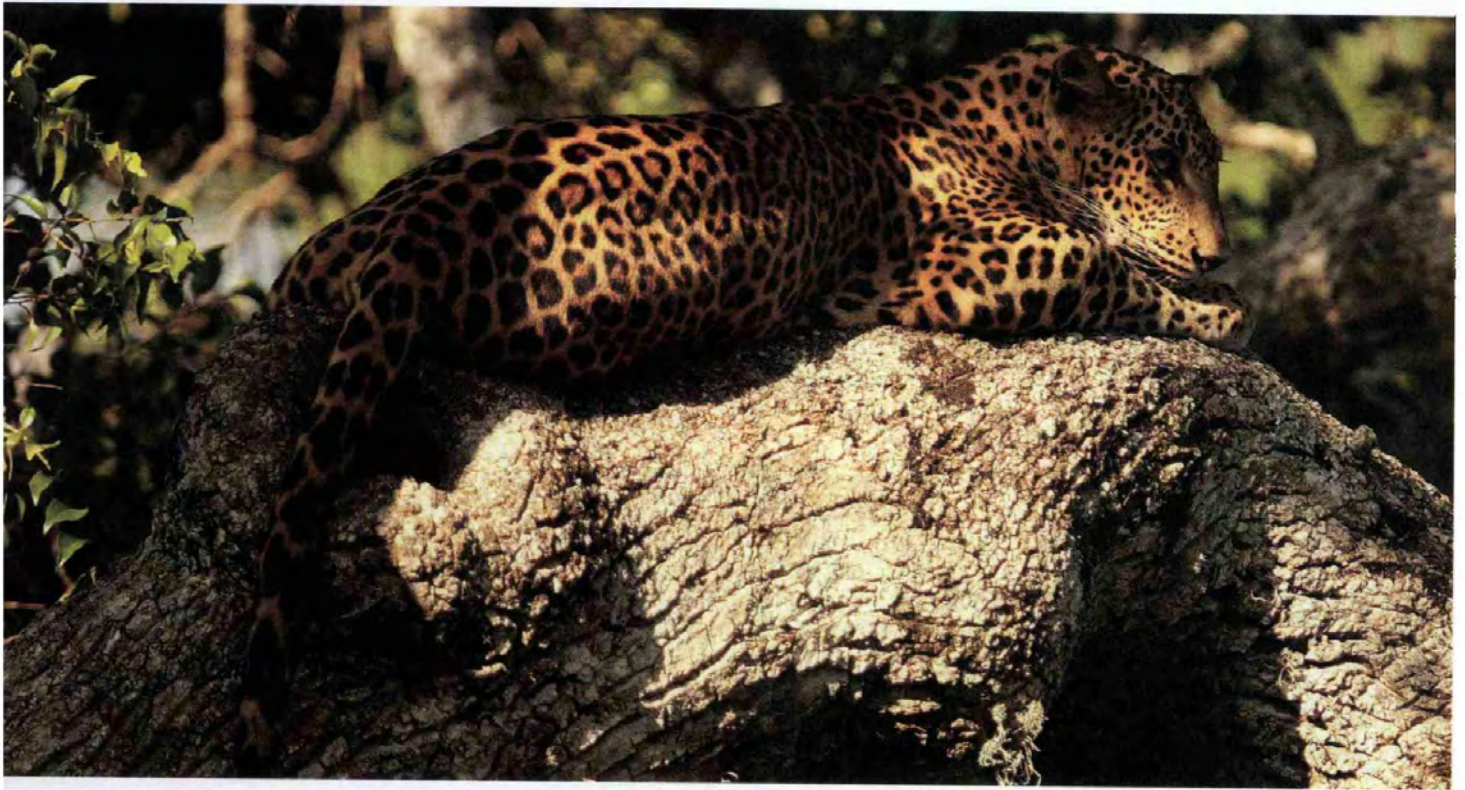
## Further reading & information

*Sri Lanka* (Bradt, 2008) remains the definitive gazetteer to the island. *Sri Lanka Travel Atlas* (New Holland, 2007); get this before travelling. [www.srilankatourism.org](http://www.srilankatourism.org) Sri Lanka Tourism website



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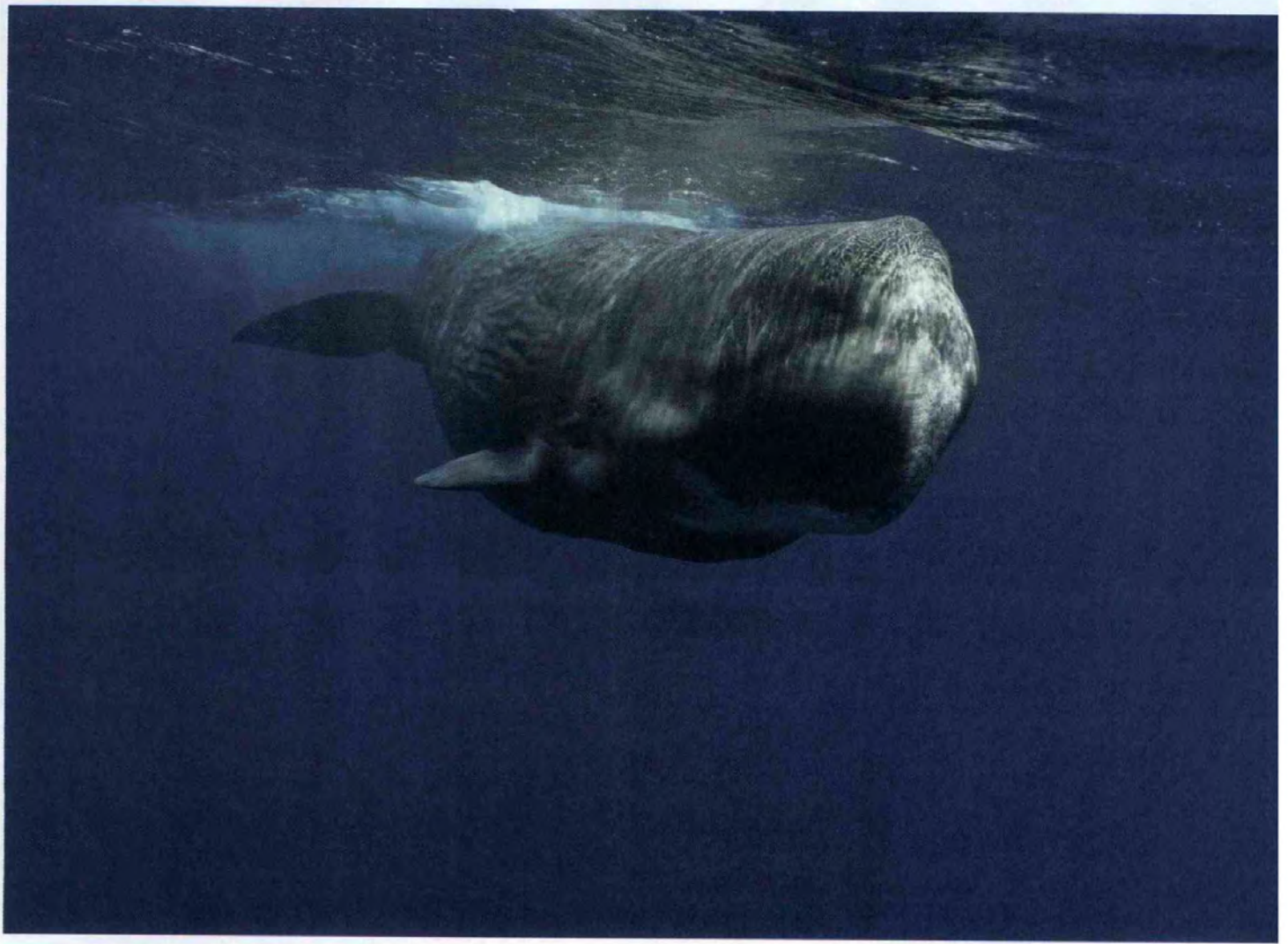


**Sri Lanka's new wildlife bonanza**  
*(Above and opposite)*  
Leopards, water buffalo and painted storks can be seen at Yala NP, while chestnut-headed bee-eaters are 'as common as sparrows' on the road east

**War children**  
*(Opposite)*  
Life is slowly returning to normal for young east coast Tamils and Sinhalese who've grown up with insurgency







**What lies beneath**

Spot (if you're lucky) sperm whales near Sri Lanka's southernmost point, Dondra Head

**Aquaphobia**

Fishermen at Arugam Bay, where 300 died in the 2004 tsunami



**“Now we’re scared of the ocean,” said Mohamed. “It’s like a loving father who got drunk and beat us. We don’t trust it”**



**‘The schoolgirls’ joy at seeing the sea for the first time was infectious. “I love peace, sir,” said 15-year-old Haifa’**

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**Testing the water**  
A group of Muslim teenagers enjoys the sea at Trincomalee, off limits during the war between Sri Lanka’s government and the Tamil Tigers