

SRI LANKA

BLUE WHALES

Trip Summary



Blue Whale (with remoras)

BLUES, BLUES, BLUES

Sri Lanka, 4 to 13 April 2009

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Day 1. Saturday 4 April 2009

Rendez-vous at the magnificent Mount Lavinia Hotel just south of Colombo.

Day 2. Sunday 5 April 2009 (Colombo to Galle)

After a leisurely buffet breakfast, transfer to Galle, under the watchful eye of naturalist guide Wicky. After the long drive down the coast, arrived at the Lighthouse Hotel with its splendid entrance, the magnificent spiral staircase with metalwork sculptures leading up to veranda overlooking the Indian Ocean.



← *Mount Lavinia Hotel*

↘ *Mirissa harbour*



Day 3. Monday 6 April (whale watching)

We had six days of whale-watching, with boat trips out every morning, leaving the hotel sometime after 0600 and returning to the hotel in the afternoon. We got off to a good start today, with a chance to photograph stilt fishermen on the drive down to Mirissa. Then in the harbour itself, the beautiful morning light on the fishing boats provided more photo opportunities. But the best was ahead, with some world-class whale action. Soon after leaving the harbour we passed an exuberant school of some 300 **Spinner Dolphins**. But we did not stop as there were **Blue Whales** ahead. Over the next three hours we had close encounters with six individuals, including one mother and calf, with plenty of wonderful close views. We even managed to collect a bright orange poo sample from one, which was passed on to a Sri Lanka whale researcher. Then one whale, which had seemed a bit different from the others, gave a

clear view, revealing itself as a **Bryde's Whale**. Finally heading back in, a second group of Spinner Dolphins rounded off an outstanding first day. But it had been a hot morning, and we did not get back to Galle until well after lunchtime, so most were glad of a relaxing afternoon at the hotel.

Day 4. Tuesday 7 April (whale watching)

A second superb day of whale watching, with at least seven **Blue Whales**, possibly as many as ten. Within just 40 minutes of leaving Mirissa Harbour we were amongst four Blues, again including a mother-calf pair. They were diving repeatedly and appeared to be feeding; whatever they were doing they were quite unconcerned by us and allowed numerous photographic opportunities. Eventually we left them, but only to spend time with three other Blue Whales. Wonderful! On the way back in we stopped the boat for a refreshing dip in the ocean, with Andi and Julia braving the 1000ø deep water. During the afternoon we made an excursion into Galle to visit the old walled Fort, a World Heritage Site. We began our tour at the old Dutch Reform Church, with its gruesome tombstones. The VOC emblem on the inside of the fort gateway, was another reminder of the origins of the current walled town. A walk through the old town to the Lighthouse, then along the ramparts led us to the diving rock where local lads risk their necks (literally) diving for money.



Galle rock jumper



Blue Whale

Day 5. Wednesday 8 April (whale watching)

Another day of fabulous **Blue Whale** sightings, with a minimum count of ten individuals, including at least one cow-calf pair. In fact we spent all our time with the Blues, although a second **Bryde's Whale** did put in an appearance. With storm clouds

building offshore we decided to be thankful for the best whale sightings so far, and turn in a bit early today. On the way back to Galle the rain did start, but that did not deter us from stopping to watch a **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, at which time our driver also spotted a **Purple-faced Leaf Monkey** sheltering close by in a tree by the roadside, and sporting magnificent pale whiskers.

Later in the afternoon we had a trip to Hiyare rainforest reserve. We saw more Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys enroute, as well as huge numbers of **Egrets** (and a **Crested Serpent Eagle**) in the paddy fields. On arrival at Hiyare we were lucky to see a **Giant Squirrel**, but it was the birdlife that really grabbed the attention. I noted 36 species just here. We started with a beautiful and very obliging **Black-capped Bulbul**, which we later discovered had a nest just next to the track. Other highlights for me included **Alexandrine Parakeet**, **Crested Tree Swift**, **Brown Fish Owl** and **Ceylon Swallow**. Highlight for younger participants was petting the captive Hog Deer (abandoned fawns being raised at the centre). Also memorable, but possibly not a highlight, were the leeches which found a couple of us especially attractive!

Day 6. Thursday 9 April (whale watching)

Unlikely as it may seem now, we were so sated with **Blue Whales** by this stage that we passed five early this morning with barely a second glance, as we headed further offshore in search of other species. And we were not disappointed, with good views of schools of **Spotted Dolphins** and **Spinner Dolphins** (the latter some 600-strong) before finding a wonderful mixed school of **Shortfin Pilot Whales** and **Bottlenose Dolphins**. Pilot Whales are relatively uncommon off Sri Lanka, so this was a particularly good sighting. Nor did the Bottlenose disappoint, with much cavorting and bowriding. After spending plenty of time with them, we turned and headed back to harbour, passing three more Blue Whales on the way. Today was also a particularly good day for seabirds, with strong passages of **Pomarine Skua**, **Bridled Tern** and **Flesh-footed Shearwater**, and also **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** and **White-winged Black Tern**.

Day 7. Friday 10 April (whale watching)

Once again we were happy to pass by the **Blue Whales**, after the briefest of inspections. By 0930 we had recorded no fewer than five. Then we found another group of **Pilot Whales** and **Bottlenose Dolphins**. Were they the same group as yesterday, or a new lot? Impossible to tell, although the presence of one light brown-blonde which we had not seen yesterday did suggest that at least some of these animals were newcomers. Heading slowly back we passed a final Blue Whale before reaching harbour.

As we left Mirissa in the coach a massive lizard was spotted in a pool beside the road, so we all piled out for a look at what turned out to be a **Water Monitor**. On the way back to Galle we stopped again, for somewhat longer, at the Martin Wikramasinge Folk Museum. The Museum itself is interesting enough, but the gardens are the main attraction, with some wonderful birdlife. Today this included a pair of roosting **Brown Hawk Owls**, as well as many other more typical Sri Lankan delights, including **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater** and **Loten's Sunbird** among others. This evening a troupe of traditional Kandyan dancers put on a magnificent show for those able to stay awake long enough.

Day 8. Saturday 11 April (whale watching)

Our final day of whale watching brought two new species. Immediately after leaving Mirissa harbour we had a glimpse of a single **Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin**, but it proved to be rather elusive and did not show itself again. That was soon followed by a **Blue Whale** and then a school of some 60 **Common Bottlenose Dolphins**. Then further east we came across **Pilot Whales** again, accompanied by Common Bottlenose Dolphins as before. But this time there were some 30 **Risso's Dolphins** in evidence as well. Pilot Whales and Risso's Dolphins both feed on squid, for which they presumably compete, and so they generally do not get on well together. Today's encounter was no exception, with the Risso's appearing to harass the Pilots, which eventually made off at some speed to the east.

This evening we paid a visit to the Kurulu-bedda mangrove, just a mile or less from the Lighthouse hotel. On the walk in we saw a troupe of **Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys**. There were exquisite green frogs in the ponds, crabs in the mangroves and fish in the river. There were also plenty of beautiful **Pied Paddy Skimmer Dragonflies** (*Neurothemis tullia*). Caterwauling **White-breasted Waterhens** added to the atmosphere. Back at the hotel, we gathered for a sumptuous farewell buffet dinner. And the by now customary toad molestation by the children.



Blue Whale in the shipping lane (or shipping in the Whale Lane?)

Day 9. Sunday 12 April (Galle to Negombo)

After a leisurely buffet breakfast, and a final walk on the beach for some, it was time to say goodbye to the Lighthouse Hotel. Most people headed back north to Negombo, and their last night in Sri Lanka, at the Beach Hotel.

Day 10. Monday 12 April (Negombo)

Flights home.

Whale and Dolphin Summary

We had a total of 28 Blue Whale encounters, with a total of 41 animals, and sightings every day out. These included 6 mother and calf pairs. We also had a couple of sightings of another big whale species, Bryde's Whale. Then there were our sightings of Pilot Whales (on two days) and no less than five species of dolphin. All in all an excellent result!

Species		Sightings	Individuals
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	28	41
Probable Blue Whale		1	1
Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	2	2
Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	3	120
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	1	30
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	4	1070
Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	1	50
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	4	350
Indo-pacific Bottlenose	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	1	1
Unidentified cetacean		1	1
Total		46	1666

Birds and other wildlife

The main purpose of our holiday was to see whales, but Sri Lanka is such a fabulous birding location that it is impossible not to see good numbers of birds with very little effort. At sea, we had some excellent views of seabirds, particularly tropical terns and shearwaters. On land, Hiyare and the gardens of the Martin Wikramasinge Folk Museum were particularly productive. In total I recorded 62 species, of which two were Sri Lankan endemics (*).

Peacock	White-bellied Sea Eagle
Brown-headed Barbet	Crested Serpent Eagle
Coppersmith Barbet	Reef Egret
*Yellowfaced Barbet	Little Cormorant
White-breasted Kingfisher	Little Egret
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Intermediate Egret
Asian Koel	Cattle Egret
Greater Coucal	Indian Pond Heron (Paddybird)
Rose-ringed Parakeet	Grey Heron
Alexandrine Parakeet	Flesh-footed Shearwater
Indian Swiftlet	Wedge-tailed Shearwater
Asian Palm Swift	Brown Shrike
Little Swift	House Crow
Crested Tree Swift	Jungle Crow
Brown Fish Owl	Black-hooded Oriole
Indian Scops Owl (captive)	White-bellied Drongo
Brown Hawk Owl	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher
Green Imperial Pigeon	Oriental Magpie Robin
Spotted Dove	White-rumped Shama
White-breasted Waterhen	Indian Robin

Common Sandpiper
Red-wattled Lapwing
Pomarine Skua
Great Crested Tern
Common Tern
Little Tern
SaundersøTern
Whiskered Tern
White-winged Tern
Bridled Tern
Brahminy Kite

Common Myna
*Ceylon Swallow
Black Bulbul
Red-vented Bulbul
Black-capped Bulbul
Yellow-eyed Babbler
Yellow-billed Babbler
Pale-billed Flowerpecker
Lotenø Sunbird
House Sparrow
Scaly-breasted Munia

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Blue Whale



Blond Pilot Whale



Common Bottlenose Dolphins



Thanking the crew



Kandyan Dancers



Harassing the locals, Galle



Owl spotting