

St. Some Times

V198 Special New Years Issue

HAPPY
2018

**VISITING MADU AND KRISTIN
THEN A YALA SAFARI EXPERIENCE**





Nine Years Ago, In a Galaxy Far Far Away...

Cambodia in 2009

was the last time I had seen Kristin and Maduranga. Lucia was born in Thailand, but only because there was no way they would have had Lucia in Cambodia.

Kristin first met Maduranga while she was on Safari. Madu was her driver and guide. Next thing we all know, Maduranga had moved to Cambodia. Since then, they have raised Lucia in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, New Jersey, and Saudi Arabia. Maya is now three years old and following in her sister's footsteps, only she was born in Saudi. I'll just refer to them as MKLM, MMKL, or some version of those letters.

In those nine years, MKLM moved to Saudi to work at the Kaust school. Maduranga still has his dog grooming business for expats but their school hired him on to lifeguard the pools and teach swimming lessons.

Their Villa is almost ready for paying guests.

Let me just say THANK YOU to Madu and Kristin. This was an amazing trip that lived way past my

expectations. Seeing Lucia all grown up, well, almost 10 years old now, was a real treat. It was not so long ago that you brought her home to Phnom Penh from Thailand. Now it will be exciting to see how Maya, 3 yrs old, will turn out as well.

Your Villa is amazing. Both you and Madu have an excellent vision of what your finished villa will look like and offer to your guests. Like me, I am sure many of your other friends will keep track of your villa on Facebook, so keep the pictures coming. Every step of the way.

There is no doubt that my circle of friends will start signing up for time at your villa and seek out Safari experiences with Madu's connections. Soon, you will be booked during most of the year and your dreams will continue to grow.

I regret not taking a picture of the beautiful frog in my bathroom before I tried to pick it up. Honestly, it looked like a perfect toy replica of a tropical frog that I would never believe was real. Suddenly it fled the scene.

When it opens, you HAVE to set up a visit. Sri Lanka is a beautiful place, the villa even more so.



The Water Tower Lookout Panorama

- ✓ When Kristin and Madu decided to build the waterpower to provide freshwater to the Villa, they borrowed a stellar idea: why not make the space below the water tank into two apartments for workers and a lookout on top? Voila!



The New Years Group of 2018

- ✓ I wasn't the only guest for New Years. Way before I met Madu and Kristin, Kristin worked at UNIS in Hanoi, Vietnam. Kristin met the Larsens and taught with them for several years.

Packer Fan or Simply a T-Shirt? Who Knows?

- ✓ Madu and I went into town to fetch groceries. The local vegetable market had better fruits and vegetables than the supermarket. While Madu made a quick stop inside the market, I spotted this guy. He didn't speak English, but he let me take an "usie" together. I really don't know if he even knew the significance of his shirt, but it sure made my day! Go Pack Go!



Spectacular Guest Rooms with Screened Windows

- ✓ Kristin and Madu had to explain what a screen is and exact specifications for each screen to a window man in town. Nobody has screens in Sri Lanka! When completed, this Villa will meet all of Kristin's expectations, New Jersey style!



Already Awesome but NOT FINISHED

- ✓ Just look at the tub! The bathrooms are designed to be half covered and half open aired with glass partitions. I can't wait to see the finished bathrooms. One morning, I tried to pick up a beautiful rainforest (ultra colorful) frog toy that the kids had left in my bathroom as a decoration. Alas, it wasn't a toy. As I reached for it, the elegant frog jumped into a water basin and disappeared. Too bad I didn't take a photo before I reached for the froggy.



Beautiful Little Lucia, No Longer an Infant, After All These Years

- ✓ Lucia was born in Thailand when I was teaching with Kristin in Cambodia. Madu and Kristin have raised an adorable, intelligent, professional Safari guide. It was a ton of fun to get to know my "honorary" niece from the past. She is a reminder to me that I must keep in better touch with my eight blood nieces and nephews.

Yala Safari Park

It wasn't in my plan to go on safari. I just wanted to spend time with their family. However, when Madu and Kristin asked "Greg, is it OK if we go on a safari tomorrow?", well twist my rubber arm.

Besides the cooler full of Lion beers, the coolest part of this safari was being witness to Madu in his true element. He was just buzzing with energy and smiling like last month's multi-millionaire lottery winner. This is Madu at his finest - well, except when he is holding one of the three women in his life (Kristin, Maya, or Lucia).

Back when I got to know Madu, he was grooming dogs and learning English in Cambodia. That was Madu making the best of a situation. Madu on Safari is more akin to a quarterback returning to the Superbowl.

Two 4x4 trucks picked us up just after 5am on December 30th. Lucia wanted to hang out with the boys and the family in the other jeep so Madu, Kristin, Maya, and I were in the other jeep. I was happy to have the time with just the four of us.

We didn't get there too late, but we certainly weren't very early. When we arrived at 5:30am our jeeps were numbers 330 and 331 out of 450. It was nearly an hour before we could enter the park, so Madu and I cracked a beer while he explained what the park used to be, ten years ago when he was driving. Back then, there were less than 100 jeeps, no wait, no inexperienced drivers, and all the time in the world to watch the plentiful leopards in their element. Now, every Tom Dick and Harry offers a safari. Rangers have to direct traffic away

from the leopard sightings after each jeep has spent a few minutes taking pictures. Now there are backups.

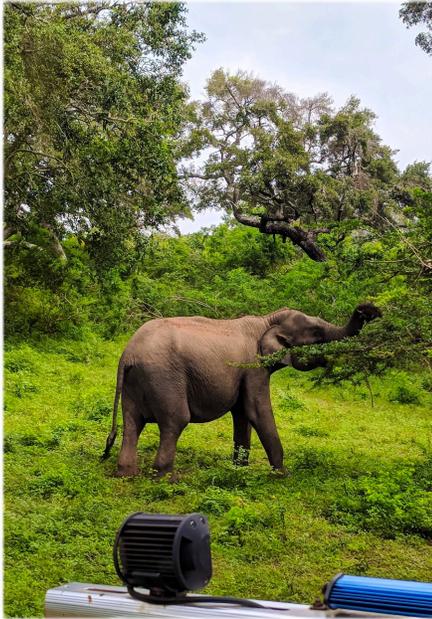
It was still awesome. We saw elephants, leopards, peacocks, prehistoric Godzilla sized crocodiles, water buffalo, mongoose (mongeese?), painted cranes, spotted deer, and more. Madu was pointing everything out like Merle Perkins from the old TV show *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. He was constantly telling our driver where and when to go, which direction to head, and when to stop for pictures.

He just couldn't help himself (or he was jonesing for a cigarette) so Madu jumped into the cab and drove for almost an hour. He was literally going down memory lane. It's been almost 10 years since he drove full time safari.

The photos in this issue are taken with a smart phone. There is expensive zoom lens. The animals really were this close. It seemed like all of the animals had babies too. Everyone loves to see baby animals on safari! These were up

close and personal. Check out the baby Dumbo pic on the next page. She was following her mother around between the many trucks. Luckily, mom was in a good mood. Madu explained that elephants can get cranky. Such a large animal can be very dangerous if they get cranky. Madu has a lot of safari stories to share, like the time he was driving and an elephant stuck it's trunk through the window





and helped itself to a few of Madu's snacks. He wasn't sure what the elephant would do next. It could have toppled the entire safari truck right over on its side.

The Perfect Safari

This was a perfect safari. Unlike the six or more day commitment to an African safari, we spent the day. The drivers set up a rice and curry picnic lunch on a beach. The animals get a forced break between noon and 2pm each day. The half day trucks leave and the all-day trucks stop for lunch.

Yala is perhaps the most popular and best safari in Sri Lanka. It has the world's densest population of wild leopards and a lot of

elephants. There are two or three other parks near Yala, but our group was pleasantly satisfied with Yala. What a way to end my vacation! An unexpected safari led by friends long lost.

The Peacock Dance

Peacocks are abundant in and around Yala Safari Park and Tissa. We could hear them all over the place. The safari was full of them. You can see them everywhere. Every time a firework went off at New Years, a peafowl would sound out a alarming song. It is now against the law to kill peacocks, but there seem to be a lot of peacock feathers for sale along the roadsides.



Just a minute before we left the safari park, we were fortunate to see this jaguar just a few feet away. My camera flashed her eyes.



A Plethora of Bats

Off the beaten path, not even part of the national safari parks, there lies a crop of trees on the outskirts of Tissa. The fruit bat trees. According to Maduranga, there was only one tree when he was a boy. It was filled with bats. Now, years later, there are ten or more trees filled with the flying mammals.

It's not easy to see in the picture above, yet these trees and others around them are completely filled with fruit bats. Each and every branch is lined with black-winged orange bodies, chirping and clicking their echo location, eventually leaving the one branch for another.

Maduranga tried to scare up enough from one tree to show off a bat flight display, but only a few took flight. The noise of the colony and the stench of guano were equally strong. We just sat there in awe, taking a variety of pictures and short video clips.

Where do these bats go at night? It's truly hard to believe how many fruit bats were in these trees. There must be some angry fruit farmer somewhere nearby. This is thousands of bats!



Nope. Can't take credit for the closeups. Thank you internet.



Stylin'

Maya had her own kiddy binoculars along. We thought a photo was necessary. I'm not really looking at anything. We were watching a family of Elk cooling off in a lake.

There were always elephants in the distance across the lakes, peacocks showing off their feathers, water buffalo taking mud baths, and leopards playing hide and seek in the dense foliage. The sloth toed bears decided to pull a Kaiser Sose.



Dinner Out

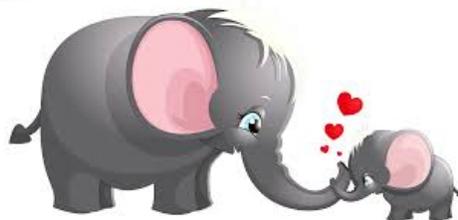
One of Maduranga's best friends, Mandu, has a villa and restaurant nearby. Why cook if we can go out to eat?

Grilled chicken, rice, cold beers, and lots of Sri Lankan foods I cannot remember the names of. All outdoors while everyone back home is cold! Hah.



My 2001 New Years Resolution Still Going Strong

Wake up in a new country every New Years. This year was in Sri Lanka.



2018
HAPPY NEW YEAR



***WE BROUGHT IN THE
NEW YEAR 2018 UNDER
THE STARS***

A roaring fire. The sounds of a random pig or dog bark. Lots of peafowl sounds. Peaceful. Until...

Fireworks are just what you do on a Sri Lankan New Years. Fire a few off and liven up the sleeping peacocks.

Have you ever seen a dog run towards fireworks?

Pinkie runs after them.

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