



| Galle: Sri Lanka's answer to Cape Town with Durban weather

“I’ve followed the Proteas to many

I’m peering over the ramparts of a 17th-century Dutch fort, wondering how much closer to the edge I can go before I plummet to an early grave. There’s a fascinating showdown on the grass down below, where a malicious crow mercilessly bullies a monitor lizard in some kind of turf war. Somewhere in the distance, across a road fuming with tuk-tuks, buses and endless herds of schoolkids, the Proteas do battle in a test match

BY RICHARD ASHER

IT could only be Galle. I’ve come here to see Hashim Amla’s men take on the Sri Lankans at their blue-riband venue, Ceylon’s answer to Cape Town. South Africa faces a tough assignment as they leap into the scary post-Smith, post-Kallis era: overcoming the Lankans at home.

I’ve followed the Proteas to many places, but nowhere quite like this. Galle is a weird anomaly. It isn’t really Sri Lanka. Inside the fort walls are creature-comfort guest houses, ice cream parlours (favoured by Sri Lanka’s batting kingpin Kumar Sangakkara, whom I bump into on the eve of the match), farty arty shops and real cappuccinos. Cape Town could pull this off — well if its own Dutch castle were as big.

Which is not to say that Galle and its Fort aren’t pleasant. No way. Sri Lanka couldn’t pull off a tacky, touristy vibe if it tried. The Fort feels lived-in because it is. Think cute colonial houses, scattered among mosques and churches and Buddhist temples. Church schools that seem to mass-evacuate at all hours of the day. Early-morning joggers (I’ve noticed Lanka is Asia’s portliest country, and it seems certain rotund locals have developed an awareness of this), and kite-flyers indulging the nationwide obsession. Even the snoozy tuk-tuk drivers aren’t very good at ripping off the Westerners that frequent the place. That’s Lanka for you: they’re not very good at taking your money.

Day one has been a jol. I’m surprised to bump into approximately four other South Africans here to combine cricket with a holiday in a place that’s kinder to a ZAR-populated wallet than almost anywhere else (their currency is as useless as ours!). We make friends in the grandstand after Amla wins the toss and bats. While Dean Elgar amasses a century, we drink Dilmah iced tea and wolf down top-notch hot dogs. At lunch, we’re set upon by a horde of schoolkids, clad in white and just dying for a handshake or a high-five. When play resumes, though, the shark attack ends as suddenly as it began, and the high-on-life children sit down quietly once again.

As the game wears on — and it’s particularly wearing as JP Duminy crawls to his ton on the second afternoon — the party atmosphere in the ground builds. This despite the home side conceding 455 in the first innings, and ultimately a lead of 163. Lankans need neither a winning side nor alcohol to dance like madmen: give them a drum and they put us to shame with their joie de vivre.

By day three I’ve figured out that the beach outside the eastern gate is a gem.

Where else can you take a dip during lunch and not miss a ball? It’s an essential relief from a muggy climate that would make Durban feel like a walk-in fridge. I leave my bag on the



| There’s more than just cricket to Sri Lanka, but it’s a great place to start



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| Lasith Malinga or Richard Asher?

sand, confident that Lankans are too nice to steal. They don't. But a two-metre dragon waddles over the beach not long after I'm dry. I suspect the crows leave these biggies alone.

As South Africa, led by quick runs from AB de Villiers, top up their lead on day four, I meet some of the local cheerleading superfans. I chat with Dayana, the hunchbacked guy you've seen on TV, and Bangalla, who lets me try his Lasith Malinga wig. And hands me his Sri Lankan flag. I shrug and wave it. I've got nothing but praise for Lanka and its people. If they

weren't playing South Africa I'd be right behind them.

Every now and then I see a handful of bemused tourists wander onto the grass banks. Entry is free. I doubt the Dutch backpacker girls had any clue what this bizarre sporting spectacle was, but they seemed to enjoy the sun and the Lion beer anyway. It's unusual for international sport to sit so close to a tropical tourist hotspot. One evening, up on the Fort once more, I overhear a local trying to explain cricket to a German couple. You can imagine.

There's one more box I want



| Tuk Tuk: not just a form of transport but really a state of mind

to tick after stumps on the fourth evening, the hosts having made a scary good start to their pursuit of 370. I simply must play cricket in Sri Lanka. A park game will do. For this, I head to Fort's recreation area, a bumpy strip of grass perfect for sunset-spotting. Local families chase a variety of balls, picnic and do that enjoying-life thing in the relative cool of evening. And yes, there's cricket going on. Soon I've found a game. A curious little bat, stunted and bowed, and a tennis ball, suffice. I take three clean catches, which is more than I can say for my record in the Oxfordshire Cricket Association's

7th division.

Day five goes swimmingly for South Africa. There lurked the spectre of a miracle Lankan chasedown, fuelled by a steady diet of Imran Tahir long hops, but instead Dale Steyn and Morne Morkel cleaned up the batting. Sangakkara got out wretchedly for the second time in the match, hitting another desperately ordinary ball straight to a fielder. He'd laughed when, that first evening, I'd asked him to be kind to our bowlers. I doubt he intended to oblige like that.

A week later the Proteas clung on

for a draw in Colombo, claiming a long-awaited Lankan test series win in alien, trying conditions. Watching on TV back in health-and-safety land, where you've zero chance of falling off a fort, I was already pining for a return to this chilled-out nation of smiles. *Richard Asher stayed at the Galle Fort Heritage Villa, in the heart of Galle's historic fort district. It's a ten-minute stroll from the cricket ground. See <http://www.jetwinghotels.com/galleheritagevilla/> for more information. All photos by Richard Asher. Follow him on Twitter: @mygreenjacker*