



Undiscovered Sri Lanka

Getting off the tourist trail in Sri Lanka

Undiscovered Sri Lanka

Getting off the tourist trail in Sri Lanka

Undiscovered Sri Lanka: Getting off the tourist trail in Sri Lanka

Copyright © 2018 Horizon Guides

Presented by:



All our coverage is 100% impartial and editorially independent. Our guides are researched and written by destination experts and are not influenced in any way by our sponsors.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of all advice provided in this guide, the reality is that any travel information is liable to change at short notice. We strongly advise that you verify any important details prior to your trip as we cannot be held responsible for errors or information that has since become outdated.

Published by Horizon Guides
Suite 38, Alison Business Centre
39-40 Alison Crescent, Sheffield, S2 1AS
<http://horizontravelpress.com/>

Edited by Matthew Barker

Layout & design by Simon Ross-Gill

Front cover photograph: Oleksii Sergieiev © 123RF.com





Photo: Berangere Duforets © 123RF.com

Contents

Using This Guide	6
About The Authors	9
Trip Ideas	11
Welcome to Sri Lanka	
In The Land Of Serendib	14
Undiscovered Sri Lanka	16
Undiscovered Sri Lanka	
Natural Wonders	20
Culture And Heritage	27
A Long History	32
Beach Escapes	34
Luxury Redefined	38
Active Adventures	40
Resources	
Climate, Seasons And When To Go	46
Family Friendly Sri Lanka	48
Sri Lankan Cuisine	50
Sri Lanka Travel FAQs	52
Travel Directory	56
Travelling To A Better World	58
Responsible Travel	60
About Yonder	64
About Horizon Guides	66
Also In This Series	67



Using This Guide

If measured by size alone, Sri Lanka would be a middleweight – the planet's 25th largest island, roughly equal to Tasmania, and significantly smaller than Ireland and Hokkaido. On a map the country appears as a modest dot below the vastness of its northern neighbour India.

But measured by cultural heritage, natural diversity and physical beauty, Sri Lanka is a global heavyweight, which might explain the country's meteoric rise to prominence as a travel hotspot in recent years.

From ancient ruins to a vibrant and welcoming contemporary culture; from lazy afternoons on glorious beaches, to hikes through the rolling hills of tea country and wild elephant spotting in untouched national parks; this is a destination that truly has it all.

Newly peaceful following several turbulent decades, Sri Lanka's tourism infrastructure is developing in leaps and bounds. Hospitality is warm and abundant, transport is convenient,

and accommodation – particularly in the independent boutique sector – is world-class.

But there is a downside to the country's tourism boom. Rampant commercialisation along parts of the southwestern coast has led to a proliferation of awful resorts and crowded, dirty beaches. Many of the most popular locations are busy, polluted and poorly-managed. Animal tourism, especially involving captive elephants, leaves a dark stain on the country's environmental credentials.

Fortunately, as this guide shows, it's remarkably easy to get away from it all and experience what might be called the real Sri Lanka. While the crowds line up at hotel buffets and squabble for sun loungers, you can get well and truly off the tourist trail and enjoy the country in all its diverse and authentic glory.

It might take a little extra effort, and perhaps the assistance of an expert tour operator or travel agent, but an undiscovered Sri Lanka awaits. And it's certain to be worth the effort.



Photo: rawpixel © 123RF.com



Photo: © Yonder

About The Authors



Vidya Balachander

Vidya Balachander is a food and travel writer based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Formerly the features editor of BBC Good Food India, her work has also featured in Mint Lounge, Vogue India, National Geographic Traveller India, Time Out Mumbai and the 2010 edition of Fodor's Essential India guidebook. Follow Vidya on Twitter for more food and travel insights from Sri Lanka and beyond.



Ethan Gelber

Ethan first visited Sri Lanka in 2004 as a guidebook researcher and author. He is a freelance writer, editor and translator of more than 20 years and scores of projects focused on travel, culture and education. He specialises in family travel, along with local, responsible and sustainable tourism. His written work has appeared in dozens of magazines and websites including Lonely Planet, AFAR and the Huffington Post. You can follow his travels on his website, [The Travel Word](#), and on Twitter.



Photo: itsmejst © 123RF.com

Trip Ideas



Tea and Beaches

Enjoy the absolute best of Sri Lankan hospitality from an exclusive plantation house in tea country, before unwinding on a secluded beach in Tangalle.

- 10 days
- £2,100

[See more](#)



Sensational Ceylon

A grand journey through the Cultural Triangle, tea country and Yala national park, followed by some serious R&R on the beaches of Galle and Tangalle.

- 14 days
- £2,900

[See more](#)



Hills and Thrills

An adventure to an exclusive tea country ecolodge, followed by safari in Yala national park and finishing with a luxurious beachside retreat in Galle.

- 11 days
- £1,700

[See more](#)



Treasure Island

A luxury odyssey from unexplored Jaffna in the far-north to Galle in the far south, and virtually everywhere worth seeing in between.

- 23 days
- £3,600

[See more](#)

Presented by: **YONDER**



PART 1

WELCOME TO SRI LANKA

Photo: rawpixel © 123RF.com

In The Land Of Serendib



Ethan Gelber

In 2004, my fiancée was posted to a yearlong volunteer job in Sri Lanka. I willingly joined her, inspired by the opportunity to explore this fabled South Asian island: Pearl of the Indian Ocean, Nation of Smiling People, ancient land of Serendib. As an emerging travel writer and editor, I imagined I could use the unfamiliar location and the discovery of its history, culture and landscapes to indulge in my craft.

What we experienced changed us forever. We were in the country during unique and trying times, including the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami, a fragile civil war ceasefire, and a bitterly contested presidential election. Even in the face of so much turbulence, rather than finding ourselves as outsiders inured to others' troubles, we were embraced by the communities in which we worked and, in turn, developed a powerful bond with and concern for their well-being.

Particularly meaningful to me were the weeks and months immediately following the tsunami, when I was assigned to survey Sri Lanka's coastal regions for a travel guide. Many of the people I met were still traumatised by natural disaster, war and political injustice. And yet also unified in believing that they would eventually rebound, find their way

out of crisis and lend themselves to sharing Sri Lanka's captivating beauty. Their passion for the land they called home became my passion too.

In fact, despite the tumult, my fiancée and I decided to get married in Sri Lanka – our official wedding certificate is in Sinhalese – and welcomed our families and overseas friends to the country for a 10-day tour, including the attractions of Colombo, the train trip to Kandy on one of the world's most scenic rail lines, natural and heritage highlights of the Cultural Triangle, a peek inside the walls of Galle and quiet time in the Hill Country, all within easy sniffing and nibble distance of Sri Lanka's inimitable rice and curry dishes. The tour was capped off by a ceremony against a backdrop of tea plantations and infinity views from a lodge on the edge of the southern escarpment. It was as magical then as the memory of it is today.

For me, the affection for the people and country of Sri Lanka extended well beyond our year-long residency. As a writer focused on responsible, sustainable and local travel, I joined forces with a major Sri Lankan national NGO to research, write and design a special "responsible travel map" of the country. From off-the-beaten-path waterfalls, gardens, tree nurseries and other hidden natural areas to little lace-making collectives, traditional arts cooperatives and local lodges emphasizing ethics over earnings, it included people and organisations that urged

accountability, and places where nature and animals come first.

Sadly, given the challenges of the moment, the map was a bit ahead of its time. Just a few years later, with the long-awaited end of hostilities in 2009, tourism in Sri Lanka started picking up enormously, paving the way for new development and opening new areas to mainstream exploration, not all of it as conscientious as it could be.

Thankfully, this guidebook taps into so much of the wonder that I

encountered, as well as the concern about conscious tourism. While not shying away from acknowledging the country's list-topping attractions, it takes a strong and appropriate stand on pointing travellers to less-visited places that carry the same (if not more carefully managed) exciting 'oomph'. Herein is a fine collection of natural expanses, cultural heritage and active pursuits that make me wish to visit the country all over again.

Happy travels!



Photo: Anton Gvozdikov © 123RF.com

Undiscovered Sri Lanka

INDIA

COLOMBO

SRI LANKA

Jaffna – The newly-peaceful north is home to superb beaches that are unspoiled by the resorts and development found further south.

Kitesurfing in Kalpitiya – Another stretch of peaceful coastline with pleasant beaches and an emerging kitesurfing scene on the vast Puttalama lagoon.

The Cultural Triangle – Firmly on the tourist trail, and the popular Anuradhapura and Sigiriya are a must, but opportunities to escape the crowds abound.

The Knuckles Range – A haven for birdwatchers and nature lovers. Enjoy peaceful hikes through undulating valleys, cloud forests and tea plantations.

Gal Oya National Park – A relative backwater that is overlooked by most tourists. A watery paradise whose chief attraction is its population of swimming wild elephants.

Anuradhapura

Polonnaruwa

Kandy



PART 2

**UNDISCOVERED
SRI LANKA**

Photo: Ann Dudko © 123RF.com

Natural Wonders

Sri Lanka's natural heritage is one of the country's biggest draws. With two marine sanctuaries, 26 national parks and a dazzling diversity of scenery and wildlife, Sri Lanka is one of the world's ecological heavyweights.

The country has its fair share of wildlife celebrities, such as the Sri Lankan leopard, elephant, and sloth bear, all of which can be readily observed in the wild. But visitors also enjoy bird watching, wreck diving, and hiking through Sri Lanka's storied landscapes.

Bin the brochure

In Sri Lanka you never have to go out of your way in search of nature, but the country's fame for its natural wonders has come at a price. Many of the better-known wildlife attractions are overcrowded all year round, and there are serious concerns about the impact of mass tourism on the country's ecological well-being.

Elephant rides and visits to elephant orphanages are staples of many a glossy brochure but the elephant tourism industry is fraught with controversy (see: **Elephants In Asia, Ethically**). So-called orphanages and sanctuaries are not always what they seem, and taming elephants for direct human contact can involve abusive training practices – see these magnificent creatures in the wild instead.

Most package tours include a visit to tea country, and Nuwara Eliya's cool weather and crackling fireplaces make it popular as Sri Lanka's "little England". But the romance fades during peak season, when the city's

narrow streets can be choked with traffic and garbage.

Roads less travelled

Prefer to get well away from the well-trodden tourist trail? Seek out the following backwaters instead.

See the swimming elephants of Gal Oya National Park

Just outside the town of Ampara in the south-east of the island, Gal Oya National Park's remoteness – and bumpy connecting roads – have kept it a relative backwater, usually overlooked by visitors.

Built around Sri Lanka's largest man-made reservoir, the Senanayake Samudraya, Gal Oya's chief attraction is its population of wild elephants (and leopards, although in smaller numbers). Having adapted to the local ecosystem, Gal Oya's elephants have learned to swim from island to island in search of food. The best way to spot them is on a leisurely boat safari – this is the only national park in the country to offer one – especially between the months of March and June.

The circuitous but scenic drive from Colombo to Gal Oya takes six or seven hours, factoring in a pitstop in Kandy. The Central Expressway linking Colombo to Kandy should ease journey time but won't be completed until 2020. Travelling by 4x4 or a car with high ground clearance is recommended.

There aren't many accommodation options inside the park. A decent bet is Gal Oya Lodge, an eco lodge that was thoughtfully designed to blend

in unobtrusively with the surrounding forest.

Stay at least three nights to make the most of Gal Oya.

Birdwatching in the Knuckles Mountains

The Knuckles Range gets its name from its distinctive rock formations which resemble the knuckles of a clenched fist. The range was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010 for its incredible biodiversity: Its undulating valleys, moss-covered peaks and evergreen cloud forests are home to more than 120 bird species, and more than 50 species of mammals and reptiles.

The Knuckles Range is renowned for its birdwatching. Some of its endemic bird species include the small and rare Sri Lanka whistling thrush, the

Sri Lanka green pigeon (which has a distinctive green hue), and the dull-blue flycatcher.

Kandy, near the foothills of the Knuckles, offers a convenient entry point. The road which meanders through picturesque tea estates in the heart of the mountains should take roughly an hour and a half.

The higher reaches of the Knuckles are challenging to access and require permits, so it is advisable to organise your expedition through a reliable tour operator.

For accommodation, the Madulkelle Tea and Eco Lodge is a good choice, with 18 rustic yet luxurious tents that offer spectacular views of low-hanging clouds and mist-covered mountains. The hotel can organise



treks, hikes, camping trips and bird watching expeditions.

Allow yourself two nights in the Knuckles, plus an additional day if you intend to do any trekking or hiking.

Off the beaten path in tea country

Despite its growing reputation as a hipster haven, the hill town of Ella has far more mystique than Nuwara

Eliya. Surrounded by terraced tea gardens, valleys and waterfalls, this sleepy village is the perfect launching pad for easy and moderately difficult hikes and treks.

According to local legend, Ravana, the 10-headed demon king of Hindu mythology, kidnapped the princess Sita and held her captive in this area – which is why many of its natural

attractions are named after him. Of these, the Ravana caves, a network of tunnels connected to the nearby Ravana waterfalls, are arguably the most popular.

If you'd rather get off the tourist trail entirely, hire a tuk-tuk from Ella and make the 45-minute trip to Wellawaya, a town unremarkable in itself, but one which offers access to many secluded waterfalls. These include Ella Wala, a rock pool hidden from view by jungle, and the Diyaluma Falls, which has the distinction of being Sri Lanka's third highest waterfall.

The most enjoyable – if time-consuming – way of getting to Ella is by train from Colombo. The 10-hour journey offers views of tea gardens and mist-engulfed towns, and is considered one of the world's most scenic train routes. Make sure you reserve seats in advance in the first-class observation cars that have large windows. Although you cannot book tickets online, a quality tour operator can arrange tickets for you.

Since getting to Ella takes the better part of a day – and delays are common – spending at least three nights is advisable.

Wreck diving in Pasikudah Bay

Pasikudah, an isolated hamlet on the east coast until the end of the war, has become a popular tourist destination. With a number of shipwrecks in shallow water and a couple of deeper Second World War wrecks not too far from its popular tourist stretch, Pasikudah is emerging as a hotspot for wreck diving.

Some of the famous wrecks near the Pasikudah coast include the British Sergeant, a British tanker that was sunk during a Japanese air raid in 1942; the Gladys Moller, a transport ship that was wrecked in very shallow waters, and three so-called boiler wrecks that are an excellent training ground for divers looking to improve their skills. An hour away, off the coast of Batticaloa in deeper waters lies the wreck of HMS Hermes, the first custom-built aircraft carrier that was sunk during a Japanese air raid. At a depth of 42 to 53 metres, this is considered one of the world's great wreck dives, suitable for trained and experienced divers.

A few dive shops in Pasikudah organise both easy and more advanced dives. Some hotels in the area also have their own dive schools with PADI-certified scuba trainers and dive masters to accompany you. If you are a serious diver, ensure that you check beforehand about the facilities before choosing a hotel.

Pasikudah is an approximately six or seven-hour drive from Colombo, accounting for traffic along the way and breaks. The diving season on the east coast runs from May to October which is also the high season for this coast, so make your bookings in advance.

Wild elephant spotting in Udawalawe National Park

With Sri Lanka's largest wild elephant population, Udawalawe National Park is a quieter alternative to the frequently overcrowded Yala National Park. (It is also the only



Photo: Volodymyr Goinyk © 123RF.com

national park in the country where an elephant sighting is virtually assured).

Just south of the Central Highlands, the park is a four-hour drive from Colombo.

Eco-conscious travellers with an appetite for adventure will enjoy staying at Banyan Camp. Just outside Udawalawe's perimeter, the lodge is built of natural materials, uses recycled furniture and eschews air-conditioning. This isn't your average resort, so it would be prudent to expect a few surprises.

The best time to visit Udawalawe is in the dry season between May and September.

Walks by the bund in Anuradhapura

Best known for its Buddhist stupas and ruins, Anuradhapura – an ancient capital of Sri Lanka – is at the heart of the Cultural Triangle (p. 27). But it is also a great nature spot, ideal for contemplative walks along the banks of the reservoirs that were built to serve the once-thriving city.

Largely secluded and quiet except for the odd passing vehicle, the reservoir embankments provide a great vantage point from which to spot large flocks of water birds at sunrise and sunset.

Ulagalla Resort, near the Wannemaduwa Reservoir, offers eco-conscious visitors luxury within easy reach of Anuradhapura. The hotel also offers private birdwatching tours led by naturalists. Consider spending two nights here, which will give you enough time to visit some of the

country's most culturally significant sites.

Anuradhapura, which is in Sri Lanka's arid north-central province, is easily accessible by train and road and is about four hours from Colombo.

Explore the mangrove forests of Madu Ganga

The beach town of Bentota, on Sri Lanka's south-western coast and easily reached from Colombo, is a tourism hotspot – the beaches here are crowded and a tad dirty in peak season.

But just half an hour's drive from busy Bentota is one of Sri Lanka's best-kept secrets: A dense tangle of mangrove forests on the Madu Ganga river. Part of an inland coastal wetland, they are among the last untouched mangrove forests in the country. Local operators offer boat tours that weave through the mangroves and past small river islands.

Bentota is a little under two hours' drive from Colombo so you could easily make it a day trip. Stop for a Sri Lankan rice and curry lunch at Lunuganga, country home and estate of Geoffrey Bawa, the renowned 20th century Sri Lankan architect. (Make a lunch reservation in advance; a tour of Lunuganga's landscaped gardens is included in the entry fee.)

The best time to visit this part of the country is between January and April.



Photo: © Yonder

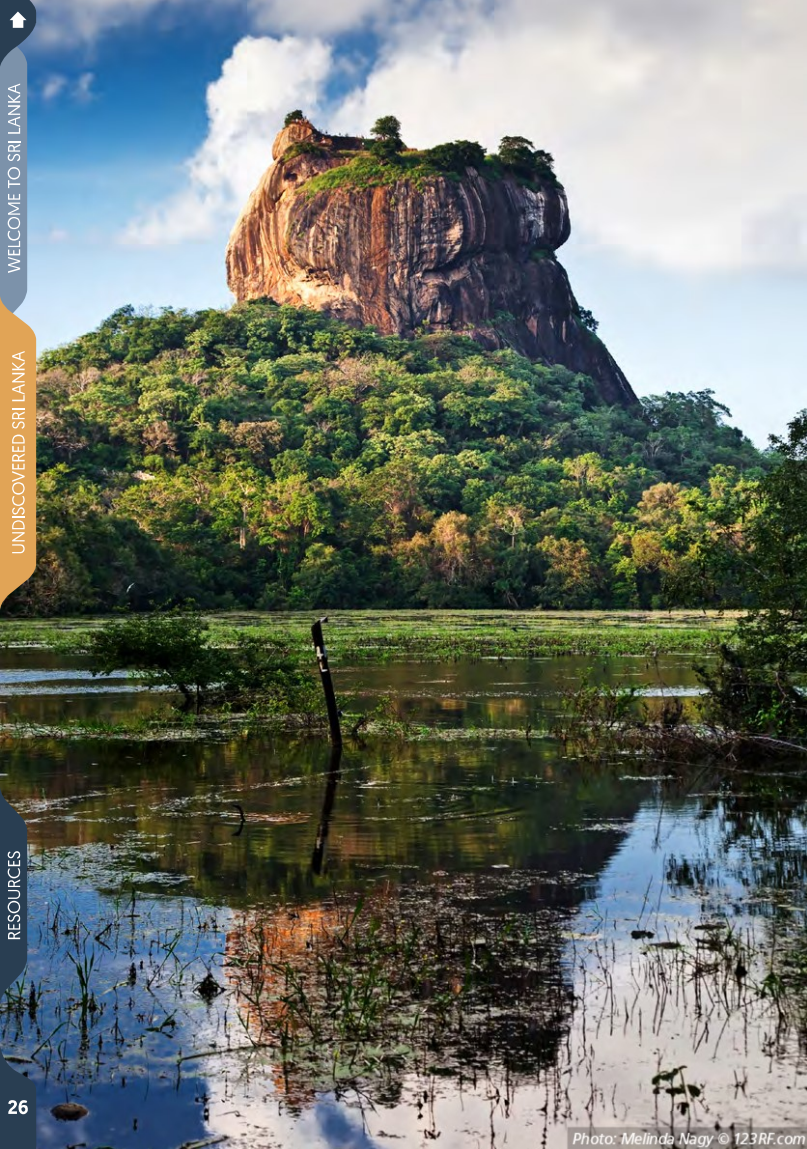


Photo: Melinda Nagy © 123RF.com

Culture And Heritage

Sri Lanka's cultural landscape has been shaped by millennia of religious influences, global commerce and the legacy of colonial rule. While the central part of the country is dotted with significant Buddhist sites, the Tamil-dominated north is a Hindu heartland. And throughout the country you will find lingering reminders of the Portuguese, Dutch and British empires, each of which left their own fingerprints on the country's cultural heritage.

This heady blend of influences has endowed Sri Lanka with a vibrant contemporary culture alongside a wealth of historical and archaeological sights, all of which are guaranteed to fascinate inquisitive visitors.

Culture vultures

Sadly the country's cultural diversity is largely ignored by the mass tourism industry, which focuses its attention on a small number of busy tourist traps.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy. Millions of visitors flock to Kandy all year round to visit the temple, which houses the Buddha's tooth. Ill-equipped to handle the crush, the city's infrastructure is strained and solitude is almost impossible to find in the temple grounds.

It's a similar story at Sigiriya Rock, Sri Lanka's most-visited tourist

destination at the heart of the famous Cultural Triangle (see below). Sigiriya is cursed by large throngs of visitors, so expect lengthy queues to ascend the rock.

Scratch the surface

That said, it's surprisingly easy to get away from the tourist bustle and catch more than a few glimpses of the 'real' Sri Lanka.

See a little-known side to Sigiriya

For an alternative view of Sigiriya Rock and its history, consider visiting the often overlooked yet thoughtfully curated Sigiriya Museum, among the finer museums in the country. Designed to reflect the architectural finesse of Sigiriya and its surrounding moats and gardens, the museum has a diorama of the monument, and an accurate reproduction of the famous rock-cut frescoes.

The museum is near the ticket booth and the main entrance to the monument. A visit to the museum is included in the entrance fee – \$30 for people from non-SAARC countries (those belonging to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation); \$15 for people from SAARC countries).

Allow yourself two nights in Sigiriya, and an additional one if you would like to explore the cave temples of Dambulla or the Minneriya National Park, both a short drive away.

The Cultural Triangle

The Cultural Triangle, the spiritual centre of Sinhalese civilisation, plots a vaguely triangular expanse between three key historical centres: the city of Kandy, and the two ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Contained within are some of the country's most important historical and archeological spots including Sigiriya, the ruins of Anuradhapura, the cave temples of Dambulla, the pilgrimage site of Mihintale, plus numerous lesser-known sights. Most itineraries will include the hotspots, but do try to explore further afield for a deeper look into Sri Lanka's rich history.

Explore an ancient capital city

It's not hard to imagine the ancient splendour of Anuradhapura, which served as the capital of Sri Lanka between the 4th century BC and the 11th century AD. A UNESCO World Heritage Site and once the centre of the Theravada sect of Buddhism, Anuradhapura has a wealth of historic and religious ruins that can make for several days of leisurely exploration.

Start at the Jetavanaramaya, a towering, 400-foot-tall Buddhist stupa or meditation centre that only lost its status as the world's tallest stupa in 2007. Make a pit stop at the Kuttam Pokuna, two well-preserved bathing ponds that are believed to have been used by monks from the prominent Abhayagiri monastery. And spend a few minutes marvelling at the

Moonstone, an ancient, semi-circular stone slab with an intricately carved depiction of samsara, or the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

The \$25 admission fee allows access to some of the important sites in the old city. But note that to visit others such as the Sri Maha Bodhi or sacred Bodhi tree, which is believed to be the oldest documented living tree in the world, you have to pay a separate fee.

Anuradhapura's ruins are spread out over a vast area, so rent a tuk-tuk or pushbike to get around. Most hotels and guest houses in the area have bikes for hire. Beware of tuk-tuk drivers who offer to organise tours that don't require buying entrance tickets – this is a common scam that usually ends with the driver pocketing your money. A good tour operator will deal with the logistics for you.

The best months to visit are between January and March, and June and September. Stay at least three nights to cover all the cultural sites in the area.

Witness temple festivities in Jaffna

Culturally and visually distinct from the rest of the country, the northern city of Jaffna is a bastion of Hindu culture. The whitewashed stupas and Buddha statues of the rest of the country are notably absent here. Instead, you'll find a profusion of candy-coloured, vividly decorated Hindu temples sprinkled across the Jaffna peninsula.

The largest and most significant of these is the Nallur Kandaswami Kovil, an imposing temple crowned

with a gilded gopuram or tower, which stands out against the squat skyline of Jaffna. In July or August every year, the Nallur temple hosts the 25-day-long Nallur Festival, a riotous celebration of faith in honour of Murugan, the presiding deity of the temple. Thousands of devotees throng the temple during this time to participate in the daily pujas or rituals. The streets surrounding the temple become a colourful bazaar with vendors selling luridly coloured sweets, saris, trinkets and toys.

The festival concludes with a chariot procession called therthiruvizha (shortened to ther), during which the deity is paraded through the streets of Jaffna. A visually resplendent spectacle, the ther also features

devotees performing acts of self-mutilation as a display of their faith.

The timing of the festival varies from year to year, but it usually falls between late July and early August. Hotels in Jaffna are booked to capacity during the festival, so it is best to plan your trip well in advance. We recommend staying for three to four days.

Visit monastic ruins inside a biosphere reserve

Often overlooked by visitors, the Ritigala mountain in the north-central part of the island is a fascinating confluence of natural splendour and historic ruins.

The mountain's higher slopes are designated a "Strict Nature Reserve" and are out of bounds to visitors.



Photo: takepicsforfun © 123RF.com

But the accessible lower reaches are home to the well-preserved ruins of an ancient forest monastery that is believed to have once been occupied by an order of austere ascetics called Pansukulikas. The Pansukulikas are said to have worn robes made of rags to distinguish themselves from the monks in nearby Anuradhapura. The ruins include bathing tanks, raised meditation platforms and even the remains of an ancient Ayurvedic hospital.

Even before the ascetics, the mountain is believed to have been home to the Yakkas, a legendary tribe of fearful warriors. It also finds mention in the Ramayana, the Hindu mythological epic, as one of the spots where the monkey-god Hanuman accidentally dropped a chunk of the Himalayas – said to be a reason for the mountain's exceptional biodiversity.

Also in the north-central province, Ritigala is accessible by road from many key cities in the Cultural

Triangle, including Anuradhapura and Habarana (both are about four to five hours from Colombo). Since the mountain is in a secluded area, it is best to organise your trip through a reliable tour operator.

The roads leading to Ritigala get treacherous in the rainy months. Visit during the dry season from June to September.

Visit the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Rising 1,000 feet above the flat terrain of the north-central province, Mihintale has a special significance for Sri Lankans. In 247 BC, it was on the summit of this mountain that the ruling king, Devanampiya Tissa, is believed to have been converted to Buddhism by Mahinda, the son of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. Ever since, Mihintale has been revered as the birthplace of Buddhism in the country.

Mihintale makes for a pleasant and gentle climb – broad stone steps flanked by trees lead to terraces on multiple levels that contain remains of an ancient hospital, an alms hall or refectory, a dagaba or monastery, and the main shrine. On full-moon night in June, called Poson Poya, millions of pilgrims visit the shrine for a colourful festival to commemorate the day that Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka.

Mihintale is 12 km east of Anuradhapura (approximately half an hour), and about four hours from Colombo by car. There isn't much choice in terms of accommodation

in the town itself, so it would be advisable to stay in Anuradhapura.

The best time of year to visit is between June and September.

Explore Galle Fort on foot

The quaint charm of the 430-year-old Galle Fort – a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Sri Lanka's most-visited destinations – is best experienced on foot. The cobblestone streets and narrow alleys of the fort, first built by the Portuguese and later fortified by Dutch colonisers, are particularly good for unhurried walks.

The Fort packs a number of architectural and historical landmarks into a compact space. Some of these include the 17th century Dutch Reformed Church, the Maritime Museum, the courthouse where typewriters are still used, and the Meeran Mosque, a striking structure that is a testament to the Fort's multi-ethnic social fabric.

Allow yourself at least three hours for a thorough exploration. A good guidebook and map will help you plan your walk, although it is impossible to get lost inside. We recommend staying at least two nights to fully soak in the laid-back vibe of the Fort.

Given its location on the southwestern coast, the best time of year to visit is between December and April.



Photo: © Yonder

A Long History



Vidya Balachander

Nowhere do the ancient and modern coexist as happily as they do Sri Lanka.

This is a centuries-old civilisation, but it is also a young nation enjoying a period of renaissance following a decades-long civil war.

Arab traders coined the name Serendib for the island that was a prized pitstop on trade routes to the east, as early as the eighth century AD. The English word serendipity - discovering interesting or valuable things by chance - is derived from that ancient name for Sri Lanka. The island's generous endowment of natural riches attracted traders and invaders from around the world - many of whom colonised the country.

The influences of colonial rule are writ large on the country's cultural tapestry, including its food, dress and customs. But well before the Dutch, Portuguese and British left their marks on Sri Lanka's heritage, it had already been shaped by centuries of Buddhism which arrived from India in the third century BC.

Buddhism spread rapidly across the island after King Devanampiya Tissa received the Buddha's teachings in Mihintale, in the north-central region. In time, Sri Lanka became one of the foremost centres of the Theravada branch of Buddhism, bequeathing to future generations a wealth of literature and several sites of religious significance.

To this day, some of the country's most visited tourist attractions are Buddhist sites - the ancient stupas and monastic complexes of Anuradhapura; the mountain in Mihintale where Devanampiya Tissa is believed to have embraced the Buddhist faith; the cave temples of Dambulla or Sri Pada (also known as Adam's Peak), and the pilgrimage site where Buddha is believed to have left his footprint, to name a few.

But while Buddhism flourished in the south, Tamil immigration from India established the north as a centre of Hinduism and Tamil ethnic identity, with its own language and distinct culture. This dualism of language and culture sowed the seeds of simmering ethnic tensions, which erupted with devastating impact in the mid-20th century.

Conflict over Sinhalese and Tamil representation in government jobs and universities came to a head in the 1950s, shortly after Sri Lanka gained its independence from Britain. The Sinhala Only Act, which replaced English with Sinhala as the official language of the country (and later as the medium of teaching in schools and universities) greatly marginalised the minority Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim communities.

Following an anti-Tamil pogrom in 1958 in which several hundred Tamils were killed, militant groups in the north began agitating for a separate Tamil homeland. These stirrings of discord developed into a fully-fledged civil war in July 1983, which would rage for nearly three decades, costing more than 150,000

- overwhelmingly civilian - lives and displacing hundreds of thousands more. The war was brought to an end in 2009, putting an end to Tamil independence and ushering in a new period of tentative but welcome peace.

Already struggling with this unstable domestic environment, the country was dealt a further blow by the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. The tsunami killed more than 30,000 people and wiped out large parts of the country's south-western and eastern coasts. It took several years for the country to hobble back to relative normality.

Given this turbulent recent history, Sri Lanka has managed to regain its footing remarkably quickly, ushering

in a new era of peace and breakneck development, aided by a surge in tourism.

The booming holiday industry has had a disfiguring effect in places - particularly along the southwestern coast and in parts of the Cultural Triangle.

But at the same time, previously inaccessible parts of the country, such as the once-embattled north and east, are slowly opening up to foreign visitors. With new highways and high-speed expressways it's easy to get away from the crowds and visit far-flung corners of the island. There is more to see and do in Sri Lanka than ever before - and the country's new-found optimism has a lot to do with it.



Photo: lakthesis © 123RF.com

Beach Escapes

With 1,790 km of coastline, Sri Lanka is virtually synonymous with surf, sand and sunny days on the beach. If your idea of a perfect holiday is to snorkel, surf the waves or simply while away lazy afternoons under a giant umbrella, in Sri Lanka you're spoiled for choice.

There are the postcard-perfect beaches of the southern coast with cerulean waters and powdery sand. There is surf-friendly Arugam Bay in the south-east, considered one of the top surfing spots in the world. And there are the deserted beaches of the country's once war-torn north,

where mass tourism remains blissfully absent.

A crowded coast

But it's not all an unbroken paradise. With a slew of resorts and hotels clamouring for a piece of the prized coastline, many beaches on the southern and eastern coasts are overcrowded, packed with lousy hotels, and littered with trash. The frenetic pace of development and haphazard reconstruction after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has further contributed to coastal erosion.

Many of the beaches that are most easily accessible from Colombo – like Negombo in the west and Bentota

in the south – are congested with cookie cutter resorts which are best avoided if you'd rather not spend your holiday queuing at a hotel buffet.

Rampant commercialism and overdevelopment have ruined popular beaches elsewhere, such as Mount Lavinia, south of Colombo, and Hikkaduwa on the southern coast. And although Unawatuna and Mirissa, the best-known of Sri Lanka's southern beaches, are undeniably charming, they're much more enjoyable in off-season.

Sandy idylls

But Sri Lanka still has plenty of picturesque beaches and coastlines

that have been spared the disruption of mass tourism.

The unspoiled north

Only just opening up to outsiders after decades of civil war, the beaches surrounding Jaffna, at the northernmost tip of the country, are superb, isolated – and, at least for now, refreshingly non-commercial.

Named after a grove of casuarina trees that border the shore, Casuarina is the best known of these beaches. With placid waters and a sandy stretch devoid of people, especially on weekdays, Casuarina makes for a perfect day trip from Jaffna.

There are changing facilities, toilets and a few kiosks on the beach, but it



Photo: Filip Fuxa © 123RF.com

would be advisable to bring your own picnic basket. There are hardly any hotels or guest houses in the area, so Jaffna might be your best bet for accommodation.

Casuarina is about 20 km from Jaffna on the island of Karaitivu, which is connected to the mainland by a causeway. You can get there with a rental car or local bus from Jaffna; alternatively, a quality tour operator will be able to help with transport.

Jaffna is easily reached from Colombo by road or train (it's an approximately six-hour trip). The best time to visit is between May and September.

Hidden gems of the south

Despite its greater popularity, there are still plenty of unspoilt beaches on the southern coast.

Most people don't bother making the trek to Tangalle, which means that the beaches in and around this coastal town are among the most pristine you will find down south.

Beaches between the towns of Galle and Tangalle are generally long, wide and sandy. A few beaches of note include Kabalana, Mawella and Hiriketiya.

A 10-minute tuk-tuk ride from Tangalle, Goyambokka beach boasts clean sands bordered by the country's signature coconut palms, clean waters and an unhurried vibe. Large hotels are still few and far between in these parts, but a number of restaurants along the beach offer fresh seafood, beer and thambili or king coconut water.

Closer than Tangalle but almost as untouched, Talalla is another beach worth visiting. A long, crescent-shaped beach partially hidden from view by a thicket of shrubby trees, Talalla is clean – if underdeveloped – and ideal for an offbeat holiday. A few shacks on the beach offer refreshments and you can also rent beach beds for a small fee. The currents here can be quite rough, so it is best to check conditions beforehand.

Talalla is just over three hours from Colombo by car via the Southern Expressway, while Tangalle takes half an hour longer. The ideal time to visit both these beaches is between December and April.

Beneath the surface

For snorkeling and diving, there are few better locations than Pigeon Island National Park, just off the coast of Trincomalee, a popular beach town on the east coast of the island.

One of two national marine parks in the country, Pigeon Island is surrounded by shallow waters and an abundance of marine life, including corals, shoals of colourful fish, and even the odd sea turtle. The beach itself is narrow in parts and can get crowded at weekends and holidays with visitors who make the 1 km boat trip from Trinco (as it is fondly known).

A number of private scuba operators along the Nilaveli beach in Trinco organise round trips to Pigeon Island throughout the day. The Nilaveli Private Boat Service, run by an association of local boat owners,

also organises round trips at a fixed rate of LKR (Sri Lanka rupee) 2,000 (\$13). You can also rent snorkeling gear for a small fee. Entry tickets to the park cost \$10 per person and \$8 for a group, and are available at the Pigeon Island ticket office on Nilaveli beach.

Pigeon Island can get very crowded in the peak season, between May and September, so make sure you book a boat in advance.

Take a surfing lesson

On the remote south-eastern coast of the island, Arugam Bay is the last word when it comes to surfing in Sri Lanka. Counted among the top surfing destinations in the world, "A-Bay" boasts large swells that wash up to its shore from Antarctica and a number of right-hand breaks that are suitable for beginners as well as more advanced surfers.

About 30 km from Kumana National Park is the country's top bird sanctuary, Arugam Bay. The natural beauty here is stunning. Tucked away in a distant part of the island, A-Bay is a seven or eight-hour drive by car or an overnight ride by luxury bus from Colombo. Not yet as developed as the southern coast, A-Bay has just a handful of hotels. The best time to visit is between May and November.

Hiriketiya, a horseshoe-shaped bay just 10 minutes from the town of Dickwella along the south coast, is a great testing ground for novice surfers. Regarded as one of the country's most picturesque beaches, Hiriketiya is shrouded from view by a coconut grove. It has a year-round surf break that makes it ideal for those learning to ride the waves.

The beach has a few shacks selling fresh juices and renting beach beds. Visit between December and April.



Photo: byrdyak © 123RF.com

Luxury Redefined

Far removed from the tacky resorts and mega hotels that blight much of its southern and western coasts, Sri Lanka is also blessed by an exceptionally strong boutique and independent lodging sector.

The major hotel chains haven't yet ventured beyond Colombo and the overdeveloped beach destinations of Negombo and Bentota, which is great news for visitors seeking something a little different – and who are willing to pay slightly more for the experience.

Many of Sri Lanka's best hotels are independently owned and are often situated in carefully restored historical buildings or environmentally-sensitive ecolodges. As you'd expect from boutique properties, they tend to have just a few rooms, offer an intimate atmosphere, and pay close attention to detail and service.

It's an undoubtedly elegant – even exclusive – way to travel, but it goes well beyond traditional ideas of 'luxury'. Sri Lanka's independent lodging sector is leading the way in a global trend for more sustainable, authentic and immersive travel

experiences. The best lodges offer all manner of excursions: guided hikes in the surrounding countryside, bird-watching expeditions, transport to secret waterfalls, plus a wealth of local expertise that would put a five star hotel concierge to shame.

As is always the case with finding independent tourism businesses, the challenge is sifting through endless online reviews of dubious credibility. To make things easier, here are a few properties that we think are worth checking out:

Ceylon Tea Trails (Hill Country)

With five bungalows spread across rolling tea plantations near Hattton, this is widely regarded as Sri Lanka's most luxurious experience. On offer are private tea factory tours, beautiful plantation walks and spectacular views. It's a bit of a trek by car but taking the train part way from Kandy (or flying in by sea plane!) is all part of the experience.

Galle Fort Bazaar (Galle Fort)

The Fort Bazaar is a meticulously restored merchant's house and is a masterpiece of interior design that eschews the predictable colonial-era vibe that has been well overdone elsewhere. Fantastic food and perfectly situated in the heart of the old fort.

Villa Maya (Tangalle)

A small boutique hotel of five rooms just a few minutes inland from Tangalle. The main building is an ancestral house with a contrasting modern addition that houses three

of the rooms. The villa is adjacent to a local temple and overlooks working paddyfields. The gardens, with mature fruit trees and strutting peacocks, are delightful.

Ulagalla (Anuradhapura)

Ulagalla has 20 chalets (each with their own plunge pool) across 58 acres of working paddyfields. At the heart of this eco hotel is an old wallawwa (manor house) which provides a perfect setting for the superlative restaurant. Ulagalla is a short drive to Anuradhapura and offers superb in-house activities such as bird watching, bike riding and horse riding.

Madulkelle Tea and Eco Lodge (Knuckles Mountains)

18 tented lodges set among a working tea plantation offer fantastic bird watching, in-house yoga and fantastic dining, much of which is sourced from the organic herb and vegetable garden. The lodge runs a great community programme, empowering local people and reinvesting profits into the local community.



Photo: © Yonder

Active Adventures

Traditionally known for its rich history and quiet natural charm, Sri Lanka has more recently established itself as an adventure travel destination too. Whereas active holidays in Sri Lanka were once limited to pleasant hikes in tea country, adrenaline junkies of all ages and abilities can increasingly enjoy more boisterous pursuits including kitesurfing, whitewater rafting, and trekking.

This is particularly good news for families, as there is now more to keep the youngsters happy than ever before – in between the temple visits of course (See *Family-Friendly Sri Lanka*, p. 48).

Breaking the mould

Not content whiling away the afternoons on the beach? The more adventurous among us might want to take a look at the following activities.

Guided treks of tea country

Some of Sri Lanka's most high-quality tea is grown in the Bogawantalawa Valley in the central region, marked by misty mountain roads and terraced tea slopes. To soak in fully the beauty and serenity of the surroundings, consider taking a guided trek through the valley, stopping to explore colonial-era tea plantations and understanding the processes that a tea leaf must go through to become the brew in your cup.

The Bogawantalawa Valley is approximately 130 km from Colombo,

and is best accessed by car or train. The scenic train ride to Hatton – the closest station – takes considerably longer than the road trip, but the seven-hour journey will be more comfortable if you are prone to car sickness.

Hatton is pleasantly cool all year round, but the area is prone to landslides in the rainy season. The best months to visit are from January to April.

Kitesurfing in Kalpitiya

A backwater compared to the more popular tourist spots around the country, Kalpitiya, on the northwestern coast, has slowly built a reputation for its kitesurfing. It is at the tip of a slender finger of land sticking out into the Indian Ocean, with a lagoon on its eastern side.

While the relatively gentle winds and calm waters of the lagoon make it a great spot for beginners, more experienced kitesurfers flock to Alankuda beach, which has stronger winds and moderate crowds. A couple of kitesurfing schools in the area provide training, rent out kites and offer basic accommodation. Check out www.srilankakiteschool.com and www.wind4love.com

New kite resorts in Kalpitiya run their own schools and offer special accommodation packages for kitesurfers. Rascals Kite Resort, a rustic hotel with colourfully decorated cabanas, is run by kitesurfing enthusiasts and has direct access to the lagoon. Bar Reef Resort, an eco-conscious hotel at Alankuda



beach, also offers kitesurfing lessons and excursions to nearby lagoons.

For a different kind of adventure, Kalpitiya has excellent opportunities for snorkeling and dolphin spotting. It is also only a two-hour drive from Wilpattu National Park, one of the country's premier wildlife sanctuaries, which has the largest population of leopards. It's well worth planning a day trip to Wilpattu while you are in the area.

Spend at least three nights in Kalpitiya, especially if you intend to kitesurf, and an additional day or two for other excursions.

The ideal time for kitesurfing here is between May and October. Wind conditions are milder but still favourable between December and March.

Hike through Horton Plains

Nuwara Eliya may now be an overdeveloped mess, but it is the gateway to one of the most unique landscapes in the country. Approximately 30 km uphill from the city is the Horton Plains National Park, a protected grassland spread out over a vast plateau that makes for a fascinating and moderately intense trek.

A microcosm of Sri Lanka's diverse topography, Horton Plains is marked by scrawny shrubbery interspersed with green hills and dense cloud forests. The 10-km trek winds through a rugged forest path that leads to a sheer precipice called the World's End, and culminates in the Baker's Falls, one of the park's chief attractions.

While not particularly challenging, the three-hour-long trek requires stamina and some agility. The ideal time to visit Horton Plains is at dawn, when low-hanging clouds lift to reveal the park's surreal landscape. After 10am, the view from World's End is likely to be obscured by cloud cover.

The trip to Horton Plains and back takes half a day (or longer, depending on the length of your trek), so stay in Nuwara Eliya for two days. Your hotel should be able to help you book a van or SUV for the return journey.

Note that low-clearance cars are likely to struggle on the bumpy road to the top.

It's best to visit Horton Plains during the dry months, between January and March.

Explore the northern countryside by train

The train service between Colombo and Jaffna was once a lifeline connecting the two cities, but it was suspended for nearly 25 years during the country's civil war. When the Yal Devi or Queen of Jaffna – an iconic

train that plied the route for more than 40 years – resumed its run in 2014 after extensive track repairs, it became one of the most telling signifiers of the end of the war.

The train remains the most memorable way to see the distinct shifts in landscape as you travel to the country's northernmost reaches. It offers you glimpses of nondescript villages, lush paddy fields and the arid northern countryside, inaccessible until recently. It is a journey that is likely to give you pause – and a break from the brochure-ready beauty of most of Sri Lanka.

With its non-air conditioned coaches and vendors supplying a steady stream of snacks, the Yal Devi makes for a leisurely 10-hour ride. But if you'd prefer air-conditioned comfort, the speedy Inter-City Express is a better bet. The train service to Jaffna is a popular one, so it is advisable to buy tickets in advance from a railway station in Colombo (or in Jaffna, for the return trip). Tickets cannot be bought online, but a reputed travel agent should be able to arrange them for you.

Visit a revered Hindu temple off the coast of Jaffna

Of the many islands scattered off the coast of Jaffna, Nainativu – or Nagadeepa as it is also known – holds a special religious significance for Hindus and Buddhists. Believed to have once been home to a legendary tribe called the Nagas, Nainativu is best known for the Nagapooshani Amman Kovil, an ancient temple

dedicated to Parvati, the consort of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction.

Nainativu's importance is heightened by the fact that it is mentioned in both ancient Tamil and Buddhist literature. Apart from the temple, the island's other religious attraction is the Nagadeepa Purana Vihara, which is counted among the holiest Buddhist shrines in the country. Legend has it that the Buddha visited the Nagadeepa Vihara on Bakmaha Poya, or the full moon day in April.

Getting to Nainativu is an adventure in itself, and one that requires a degree of fortitude. The journey involves taking a bus or car from Jaffna to Kurikadduwan (KKD) jetty, some 36 km away, and then taking a ferry to the island. The ferries run at regular intervals but are notorious for being overcrowded, so keep that in mind when planning your trip.

June and July are the most colourful months of the year to visit Nainativu – the temple hosts a 16-day thiruvizha festival during this period. Check the festival dates beforehand, and expect large crowds.



Photo: Shanti Hesse © 123RF.com



RESOURCES

Photo: Pius Lee © 123RF.com

Climate, Seasons And When To Go

The weather in Sri Lanka is almost always sunny, with the possibility of sudden thundershowers. By and large, the country has tropical weather all year round, with temperatures hovering between 28-32 C (82-89 F), except for the central highlands, with cooler temperatures of 15-18 C (60-64 F).

Sri Lanka has a complex weather system that is largely determined by two monsoons – the southwest (or yala) monsoon and the northeast (or maha) monsoon. Interseasonal rains between the two bring showers to most parts of the island.

On the west coast, humidity can soar uncomfortably during the buildup to the monsoon in late March and April when blue skies can suddenly turn dark and brooding, bringing short spells of rain. Bring rain gear just in case.

The wettest months on the western and southern coasts are between May and early September. Availability is better and crowds are likely to be thin, but the ocean is rough and unsuitable for swimming. It's worth packing an umbrella or raincoat – and be prepared for short but intense bursts of rain.

The southwest monsoon also brings rain to hill country, with an elevated risk of landslides, but again, crowds are much thinner. The busiest time of year to visit hill country is during Avurudu (or Sri Lankan New Year), in mid-April.

Off-season on the west coast corresponds with peak season along the east coast. If you're looking for lazy days on the beach and manageable crowds, it's worth travelling to this part of the country between May and September.

Jaffna, in the island's arid zone, is dry and sunny for most of the year. The heat can be brutal in April, May, August and September, and the coolest time to visit is between October and January, when the northeast monsoon brings rain to the north and east coasts, and the Cultural Triangle.

Islandwide, December to late January sees the lowest temperatures, averaging around 27 C along the coast (80 F), dropping to around 18 C (64 F) in the hills.

During peak season from December to March, prices are many times higher and availability of rooms is limited, particularly along the popular beaches of the western and southern coasts and in Nuwara Eliya and the surrounding areas. If you intend to visit the country during this time, make sure you plan well in advance to get the best deals.



Photo: mihtiander © 123RF.com



Photo: © Yonder

Family Friendly Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan culture is deeply hospitable to children, and Sri Lankans will often go out of their way to offer assistance to parents and to make special arrangements for youngsters.

Colombo has the most kid-friendly facilities in the country, such as sprawling parks and open spaces, child-friendly restaurants (or those with special children's menus) and street fairs. However, the rest of the country is fairly adult-oriented, and it may be harder to find facilities for youngsters in small towns.

The beaches of the west coast, well-developed eastern spots like

Trincomalee and Pasikudah, and wildlife parks across the country, are probably best suited for children. You could also include a couple of train rides in your itinerary for an added thrill.

Smaller hotels in the less-popular backwaters may not have such things as infant cots unless they are requested in advance. Check what facilities are available before you book - and if you are travelling with a very young child, it may be a safer bet to stay in a more mainstream hotel.

Many established hotels across the country have kids' menus or would be willing to customise meals for your children, but there are fewer options when you are on the road. Most rest stops will offer rice and curry, or standard options such as fried rice

and seafood dishes, along with a small selection of packaged snacks and biscuits. If you have a young child or will be travelling by car for long periods, it is advisable to stock up on snacks and bottled water.

On trains, a stream of vendors sell freshly-prepared snacks such as vadai or deep-fried lentil fritters, tapioca chips and tropical fruits. It could be a memorable part of the experience for kids. In general, fresh-off-the-fryer snacks and fruit sliced to order are likely to be safe.

Most upmarket, mid-range and boutique hotels have swimming pools, and many will have baby pools for infants and young children to splash about in. Lifeguards are extremely rare, so it's best not to leave kids alone in the pool unless they are proficient swimmers.

In general, the government-run rest houses that are scattered across the country make for excellent pit stops. Most have clean and well-maintained bathrooms (although they may not have changing facilities for babies), and decent restaurants that serve authentic local cuisine.

While nappies, baby wipes, baby food and most medicines are available at supermarket chains such as Cargill's Food City, Keells and Arpico, you'll need to bring any special items or medicine your child might need for emergencies, or during long road trips.

Dengue has become a resurgent epidemic in Sri Lanka in the last couple of years, so come well prepared with mosquito repellent and a foldable mosquito net, if you plan to stay in smaller hotels.



Photo: Valentin Shevchenko © 123RF.com

Sri Lankan Cuisine

Sri Lankan food is often compared to that of South India, and they do share some similarities in terms of ingredients and techniques. But Sri Lankan cuisine has a distinct identity, thanks to the communities and cultures that have shaped the country's history.

Distinguished by simple yet bold flavours and the masterful use of freshly ground spices, Sri Lankan food champions local, seasonal ingredients. Rice, coconut and fish – both fresh and dried – form the building blocks of most dishes, in addition to a variety of tropical fruits, vegetables, seafood and a little meat.

These ingredients are rendered into a flavoursome whole by raw and roasted curry powders, which are made from the island's signature spices, such as cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, black pepper, rampe or pandanus, and fiery red chillies.

Shaped by its geography and the abundance of seafood, northern Sri Lankan cuisine is several notches hotter than that of the south. The region's most iconic dishes, such as the Jaffna crab curry, and Jaffna kool – a signature seafood soup thickened with palmyrah flour – are

unabashedly fiery. Unfortunately, these dishes are increasingly hard to find on restaurant menus in Jaffna – after years of isolation, Jaffna is in a greater hurry to embrace international flavours than it is to showcase familiar, home-style cooking.

Exploding with restaurants serving an array of international dishes, chic coffee shops, bars and gelaterias, Colombo is the most food-centric city of Sri Lanka. And given that it is sustained by tourism, Galle Fort also has a blossoming food and drink scene.

Sri Lankan food

Rice is at the heart of Sri Lankan cooking, and features in one form or another in every meal. It is ground into flour to make appa or hoppers, bowl-shaped, fermented rice crepes that are eaten for breakfast or dinner; idiyappa or string hoppers, steamed noodle cakes that are a morning favourite, and pittu, a steamed rice flour and coconut dish which is a northern staple, and used to make a variety of sweets.

Throughout the island, rice-and-curry is the lunch standard. It is a colourful and nutritious meal of steamed red or white rice, served



with several vegetable, fish or meat curries. This elaborate and usually homemade meal is tucked into a neat buth packet or rice parcel, which makes it a convenient take-away option for office-goers and travellers. Some curry shops will offer you the luxury of choosing three or four curries to go with the rice. The selection will almost always include parippu or lentils, two or three vegetable curries, a mallung or green salad, and a meat or seafood curry, in addition to condiments such as salted and deep-fried chillies and crunchy pappadam.

Other highlights of the cuisine include hot butter cuttlefish (a Sri Lankan-Chinese hybrid of batter-coated cuttlefish rings, flash fried in butter), lamprais (rice, mixed meat curry and condiments, baked together in a banana leaf), and kottu (a beloved street snack made of roti or flatbread, meat and vegetables, all finely chopped on a griddle). In between meals, Sri Lankans have a penchant for snacking on "short eats" – savoury pastries and puffs with egg, vegetable, fish or meat fillings.

Sri Lankans have a pronounced sweet tooth. This translates to

desserts such as chocolate biscuit pudding (made of alternating layers of milk-soaked biscuits and chocolate cream), watalappan (a rich custard made of eggs, cashew nuts and condensed milk) and sago pudding. The most popular dessert is kiri peni, a creamy buffalo yoghurt, served with a drizzle of kithul treacle, made of the sweet sap of the foxtail palm.

Sri Lankan drinks

If Sri Lanka could have a national drink, it would probably be thambili or the sweet juice of the orange-hued king coconut, which is sold throughout the country. Full of essential minerals, it is a convenient and inexpensive way to stay hydrated in summer.

If you'd like something stronger, the country also produces arrack, a distilled alcoholic drink made by fermenting the sap of palm trees. Smooth and similar to rum in flavour, arrack makes for excellent cocktails such as arrack sour, a local twist on the whisky sour with arrack, lemon juice and sugar. Arrack is available in varying degrees of refinement, and makes a great souvenir to take home.



Photos: © Yonder

Sri Lanka Travel FAQs

Will I need a visa?

Citizens of most countries (except Singapore, the Maldives and Seychelles) require a visa or an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) to visit Sri Lanka. To apply for the ETA, visit www.eta.gov.lk – the official e-visa portal for Sri Lanka – and fill out a brief form. The application is usually processed within a couple of hours or a maximum of one day after it is submitted. The non-refundable cost of a 30-day tourist visa is US \$20 for SAARC countries (South Asian Association for

Regional Cooperation) and US \$35 for non-SAARC countries. You will need to print out your ETA (or have it available on your phone) to show immigration officials before entering Sri Lanka.

How much time should I spend in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka is a small country but if you're travelling by road, traffic delays can significantly affect travel times. To avoid exhaustion and experience the country in an unhurried way, we recommend spending at least two weeks there. This will allow you enough time to travel inland from the coast to the hills or the Cultural Triangle, and also factor in a few days of rest.

What is the Sri Lankan currency?

The Sri Lankan rupee (LKR / Rs) is the national currency. Most business in Sri Lanka is conducted in rupees, and tourists will use it to pay for public transport, hotels, groceries, meals and entry to most attractions. Although US dollars or UK pounds may occasionally be accepted in larger hotels, the conversion rate is usually far from favourable.

The Sri Lankan rupee is not an international currency, so it is best to bring cash with you and exchange it, or withdraw small amounts of money at a time from an ATM. The latter might be smartest as the conversion rate is usually better than the one you will get at a bank or exchange bureau. However, ATMs charge a

small fee (usually Rs 200-300; US \$1-2) per transaction and a similar foreign exchange transaction fee. They also have daily withdrawal limits that range from Rs 40,000-60,000 (US \$260-390), although some banks have higher limits.

When changing money it's best to use a bank or an authorised currency exchange service. Currency exchange services at the airport are convenient but often offer unfavourable rates. Avoid unauthorised or fly-by-night currency exchange services to prevent being scammed.

Can we use credit/debit cards?

International credit and debit cards are accepted at larger businesses, hotels, restaurants, etc. But away



Photo: Filip Fuxa © 123RF.com

from the larger businesses and outside of the bigger towns, Sri Lanka is still a largely cash-based economy, so it is best to always have some rupees with you.

How will we get around?

Local buses are the most budget-friendly way to get around the country, although you'll have to be prepared for crowds, occasionally erratic driving, and bumpy roads. The train network serves most of the island, and is a convenient way to travel to the hills or to the far north. But you need to make reservations in advance, especially during peak season.

A good tour operator will be able to arrange a car rental. Given that most of the country is now connected by good roads and high-speed expressways, hiring a car is an efficient and comfortable way to get around, particularly if you plan to visit several places during your visit. Although rush hour traffic in Colombo may suggest otherwise, travelling by road in Sri Lanka is mostly safe. However it's best to avoid winding roads in the hills after dark; rogue bus drivers can occasionally make this a hair-raising experience.

Organised tours will use private cars or minivans for small groups, and luxury buses for larger numbers. An organised tour minimises the hassle of battling touts, queuing to buy tickets or bargaining for the best price with local transport providers and tour guides.

Whether you opt for a private vehicle or an organised tour, it is likely that your driver will expect a small tip for his services in addition to the pre-decided fee. Pay this only if you are satisfied with the service.

Is Sri Lanka safe?

Post-war Sri Lanka is remarkably safe, and the high security and paranoia of the conflict years seem a distant memory. Violent crime is extremely rare, and makes waves when it does occur. In Colombo and other cities, take basic precautions such as avoiding flashy jewellery or carrying too much cash. It is advisable for women to avoid hiring tuk-tuks in the street late at night; cab services like Uber, PickMe and Kangaroo are safer options. In smaller cities, isolated beaches and parts of the north that are just getting used to tourists, women travellers should avoid travelling alone at night.

Unfortunately, touts and tuk-tuks masquerading as tour guides abound around many of Sri Lanka's most famous attractions. Beware of anyone promising to get you free entry or heavy discounts – this is usually a scam.

When buying gemstones, insist on a certificate of authenticity. Most reputed stores in Colombo and Galle will offer you one, especially for valuable gems such as sapphires. Buying cut-price gemstones may be a tempting proposition, but it is more than likely that you will be sold a piece of glass.

What vaccinations will we need?

The recommended shots for Sri Lanka are the standard travel vaccinations – tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis A. If you intend to stay for a longer period, your doctor may also suggest vaccinations for rabies and hepatitis B.

For more information, see: [http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations/asia-\(east\)/sri-lanka.aspx](http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations/asia-(east)/sri-lanka.aspx)

Is there malaria in Sri Lanka?

Mosquitoes are plentiful (and hungry!) but although malaria is present, the risk of contracting the illness is low in all parts of the island. Antimalarials are not usually required, but make sure you bring precautions such as mosquito repellent or a citronella spray with you. If you are staying in homestays or lower-key

accommodation, ask in advance about the availability of a mosquito net, or just bring your own to be safe.

Dengue fever has been a widespread problem in Sri Lanka in recent years. There is no vaccine for it, so it's wise to take precautions such as keeping covered up and using mosquito sprays and repellents, or gentler sticker-patches for children.

Can you drink the tap water?

Most well-known restaurants offer filtered water, but avoid drinking tap water in smaller restaurants or highway stops. Bottled mineral water is widely available, and is generally the safer option. In some tourist areas, fruit juice vendors may offer to use mineral water – this is by far the better choice.



Photo: Jaromir Chalabala © 123RF.com

Travel Directory

TRAVEL INSURANCE

World Nomads - Travel insurance for independent travellers from more than 130 countries. www.worldnomads.com*

FLIGHTS & TRANSPORT

Round The World Flights - Long distance and round-the-world flight specialists. Personal service to help you find the right flight. www.roundtheworldflights.com

Wanderu - Reduce your carbon footprint and make shorter trips by bus or train. Wanderu searches hundreds of services connecting 8,000+ cities across North America and Europe. www.wanderu.com

DESTINATION GUIDES

Travelfish - Authoritative, in-depth and reliable travel guides and coverage for Southeast Asia. www.travelfish.org

Caravanistan - A studiously updated online travel guide for Central Asia and the Silk Road. www.caravanistan.com

Routes North - An independent travel guide to Scandinavia with city guides, money saving tips and accommodation reviews. www.routesnorth.com

New Worlder - An online magazine covering travel, culture and food in the Americas. www.newworlder.com

VoiceMap - Audio tours created by local journalists, filmmakers, podcasters, and guides in over 100 cities worldwide. The app uses GPS to play audio automatically, at the right time and place. www.voicemap.me

Lonely Planet - Still the gold standard of printed, in-destination guidebooks. www.shop.lonelyplanet.com*

READING

Trip Fiction - A website that matches global works of fiction and travel related memoirs with the locations in which they are set. Search by location, author, or genre to find your perfect holiday read. www.tripfiction.com

Maptia - Inspiring travel writing and thought-provoking stories that will make you want to get out and explore the world. www.maptia.com

CONSERVATION & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Born Free Foundation - An international NGO working to prevent animal suffering and protect threatened species in the wild. Born Free provides information on how to enjoy an animal-friendly holiday. www.bornfree.org.uk

Global Heritage Fund - An international nonprofit dedicated to the sustainable preservation of world heritage sites in areas of economic need. You can support their work here: www.globalheritagefund.org

Ethical Travel Guide - Guides and travel advice on responsible tourism in destinations around the world. www.ethical.travel

Sustainable Travel International - Working towards improving lives and protecting places through travel and tourism. sustainabletravel.org

TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Travel Aware - The UK government provides British nationals with the latest travel advice and information at www.gov.uk/travelaware

Travel.State.gov - The US State Department's travel information and advisory portal. www.travel.state.gov

Links marked with an (*) are Horizon Guides' affiliate partners. Making a purchase via these links will earn us a small commission, without affecting the price you pay.

Travelling To A Better World

Harold Goodwin

Our holidays are precious: most of us work hard for that city break or two weeks in the sun, that opportunity to get away from it all, to indulge ourselves.

But the way we travel and the choices we make can make tourism better for us, and for our hosts. We can choose to travel and holiday better. Responsible travel is about using tourism to make better places to live in, because great places to live in are great places to visit.

Holidays should be carefree, but not careless. Very few of us want to trash the places we love to visit. Travel and tourism is what we make it – the small choices we make as individuals add up to make huge differences. Fly less. Recycle more. Avoid disposable plastic. When you walk into a hotel room and the temperature is down at 15° with all the lights and TV are on, complain at the front desk and ask to see the manager. Consumers are powerful if we all speak up.

Value the authentic local experience. Forsake the hotspots and the trophy selfie, and seek out encounters with local people – our memories are made of shared experiences. Seek out local shops, local artists and crafters and buy from them – it will likely be a better experience for you and you will be contributing to the local economy.

Travel with respect and you will be treated with respect, aspire to be a temporary resident and enjoy

your experience of the other, with the other. Think hard before doing things abroad that you wouldn't do at home. You wouldn't expect to visit an orphanage or teach children, unqualified, at home – so why is it OK to do it abroad? Seek out the opportunities for authentic encounters with local people in parks, at the theatre, in markets – forsake the tourist tat and the tourist traps.

To be a holidaymaker or a traveller is to be a guest in someone else's place. Follow Robert Frost's advice in *The Road Not Taken*:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

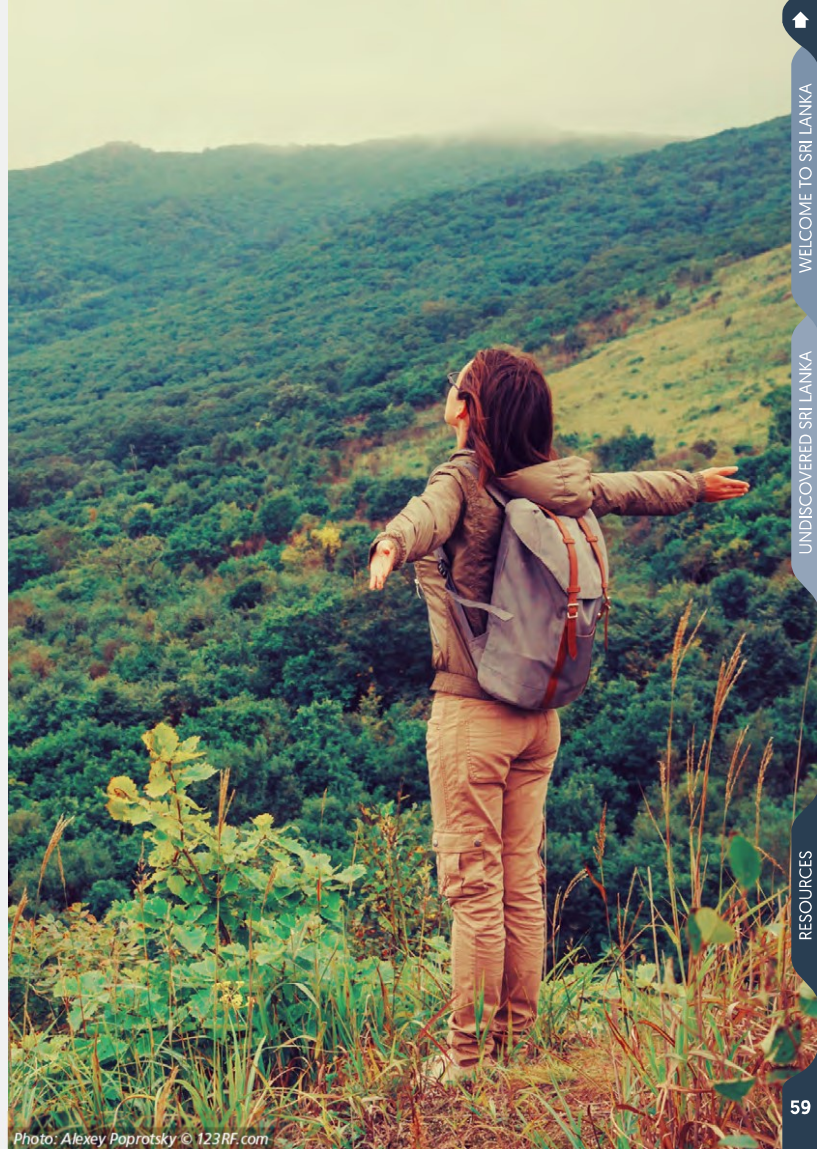


Photo: Alexey Poprotsky © 123RF.com

Responsible Travel

Kaitlyn Brajcich
Sustainable Travel International

Travel and tourism is the world's largest, most diverse industry. Employing 1 in 10 people on the planet, the industry touches places, lives, and communities in all corners of the globe.

But tourism doesn't always have a positive impact. The combined effect

of 1.2 billion tourists quickly adds up, contributing to environmental damage, income inequality and culture loss.

Fortunately, there are many ways to take action and lessen your impact.

Leave only footprints

Before you travel, research environmental issues in your destination. If you're visiting an island challenged by water scarcity you can avoid activities that use a lot of

water, ask hotels about their water conservation policies, and be mindful of your own water usage.

Be particularly alert if you're visiting natural areas or heritage sites. Stick to dedicated trails, follow visitor guidelines and don't remove or damage wildlife or artifacts. You can help alleviate pressure on popular sights by seeking out lesser-known attractions.

Do no harm

Try to learn about local animal welfare and conservation issues before taking part in any wildlife or animal experiences. Be particularly wary of attractions that allow direct interaction with wild animals such as elephant rides, big cat petting, sea-life shows or performing animals.

Find out what species are endangered or threatened and make sure they don't end up on your plate. When purchasing souvenirs, avoid items made from animal products such as turtle shells, ivory, or coral.

Watch out for "greenwashing"

Just because businesses market themselves as 'green' or 'sustainable' it doesn't necessarily mean that they are. Before booking ask the company what they're doing to minimise their impact and support local conservation efforts. Help spread the word to other travellers by providing feedback and writing online reviews.

Respect people and cultures

Read up on local customs and be aware of cultural sensitivities. Understanding the culture will help

you avoid awkward encounters and is an important part of learning from the travel experience.

As a bare minimum try to learn a few key words and phrases in the local language such as 'hello,' 'goodbye,' 'please,' and 'thank you.' By showing communities respect you'll help create better connections between tourism and local people.

Think twice before sticking your camera in people's faces. Always ask for permission before taking someone's photo, especially if there are kids involved.

Support communities

As a tourist you have a unique ability to help improve community well-being. Ensure that your money ends up in the hands of local people or organisations that invest in community development. Choose businesses that are locally owned and hire local staff, eat at restaurants that use local food sources, and purchase souvenirs crafted by local artisans.

Volunteer wisely

The rising popularity of 'voluntourism' may come from the best of intentions but there's evidence that many short-term volunteer schemes can have a negative impact. In fact some, especially those involving children and orphans, can do significant harm. Be careful where you choose to donate your time or money.

Watch your carbon footprint

Approximately 5% of global carbon emissions are caused by tourism, of



Photo: BlueOrange Studio © 123RF.com

which the large majority is due to air travel. When possible, take a bus or train to your destination, or consider exploring your own backyard! If you must travel by plane, choose the most direct route, pack light, and purchase carbon offsets. You can calculate your carbon footprint and purchase offsets using this [online carbon calculator](#).

Reduce waste

Lots of countries have problems with waste management, landfill and marine pollution. Each year at least 8 million tons of plastic ends up in the ocean and experts warn that by 2050, the oceans will contain more plastic than fish.

Avoid disposable products, recycle when possible, and bring along a reusable water bottle and purifier to filter your own water. Instead of bringing all your newly purchased travel supplies in their original packaging, save space and reduce waste by removing the extra packaging before packing. Of course, the best way to prevent waste problems is by reducing your consumption to begin with!

Give back

You can continue to make a positive impact once you're back home. Find out if there is a travel philanthropy fund or identify other local community development or environmental conservation organisations to support.

Get email or postal addresses from people you meet while abroad and send them some holiday photos when you get home. Better still, become

pen-pals and keep in touch with your new friend!

Never stop learning

Becoming a responsible traveller is an ongoing journey. Stay informed and keep learning about how you can help. Along the way, be sure to multiply your impact by sharing your newfound knowledge with friends and family and remember that even simply asking questions can have a positive effect.

Explore Sustainable Travel International's **Travel Better Club**, an online community for travellers to exchange experiences, access sustainable travel tips, and complete an online training course. To join, visit <http://travelbetterclub.org> and enter the coupon code TravelBetterHG to waive the membership fee.



Photo: rdonar © 123RF.com

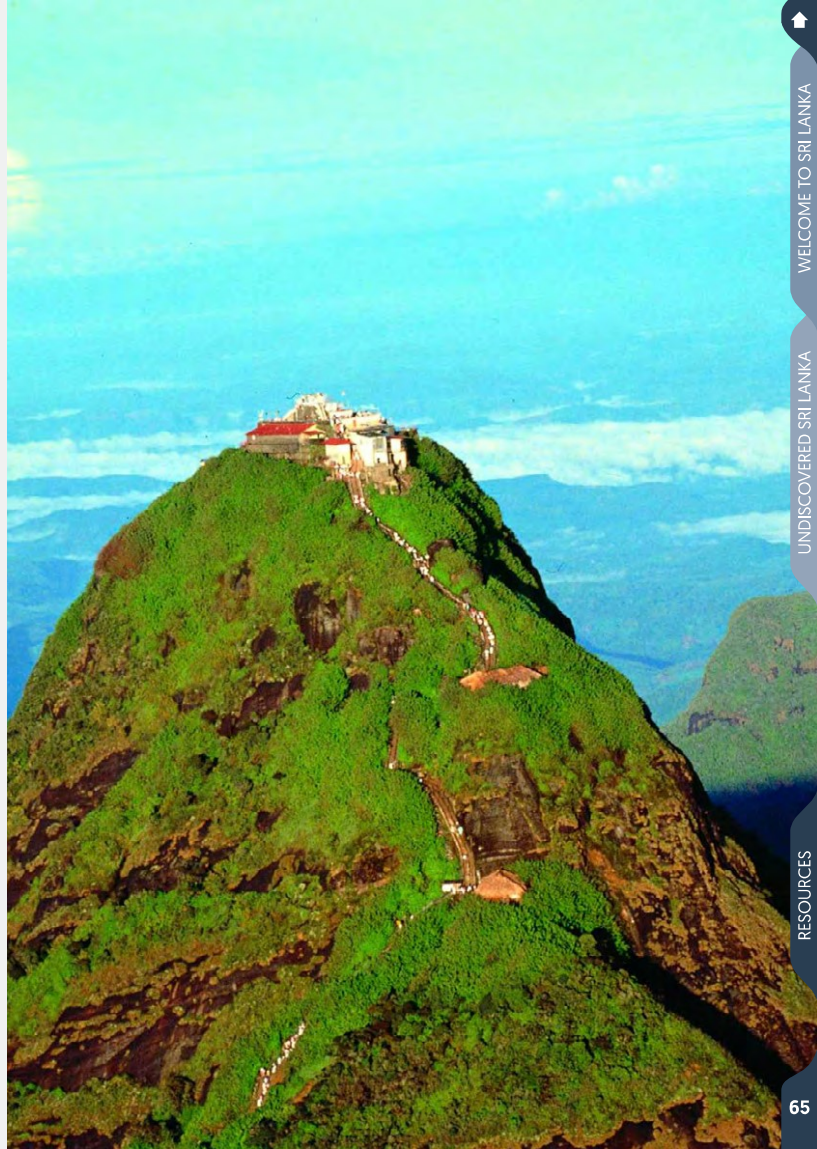


About Yonder

Yonder offers exquisite journeys down the road less travelled, seeking out handpicked luxury hotels and devising tailor-made personalised itineraries. All destinations and hotels offered by Yonder have been sampled and savoured by Yonder executives. Yonder does not cover the globe, just those places that give them such a thrill of excitement they just have to share them with their clients. And they have no time for the conveyor belt of mass tourism.

Sri Lanka is a destination Yonder knows inside out, with staff who have lived in the country and directors who visit regularly. Yonder has long-standing relationships with selected local hoteliers and ground agents which ensures the demanding needs of their discerning clients are abundantly met.

Yonder's travel consultants (they like to call them Escapologists) start by getting to know you, what destinations you're excited by and how you would spend your perfect holiday. Then they will craft your unique itinerary, liaising with you until they've found your holiday sweetspot. Once you've booked, they're on-hand to ensure your wishes are met at every step of the journey, providing 24/7 support and complete financial protection through their ATOL licence, so you can just relax and savour every moment of your journey down the road less travelled with Yonder.



About Horizon Guides

We publish guidebooks to incredible experiences and thrilling destinations. We exist to inspire our readers' curiosity and wanderlust with useful guides to fascinating places.

What we do

We create guides to help you find, plan and book your next adventure. Each of our guides is researched and authored by travel writers with in-depth local knowledge and first-hand expertise.

100% impartial

The information in our guides is 100% impartial and guaranteed free from any commercial influence. We never accept payment for positive coverage.

Travel far, travel well

We believe that travel has the power to change ourselves as people and the world around us, usually for the better.

But we also know that irresponsible mass tourism can be culturally disruptive and environmentally damaging.

Running through all our guides is a common theme: that travel is best when we're open, curious and mindful of our footprint. We're on a quest to promote a vision of travel that is sustainable, responsible and adds to the world rather than taking away.

Our partners are all carefully selected small and independent operators who share our mission. You will never see a Horizon Guide on all-inclusive resorts or mega cruises. We're here to celebrate real places, authentic experiences and mindful travel.

We're proud to support the following organisations who are working to make the world a better place for all:

- [Born Free Foundation](#)
- [Global Heritage Fund](#)
- [Sustainable Travel International](#)
- [The Ethical Travel Guide](#)

Also In This Series



Exploring The Silk Road
Highlights and key routes
2nd Edition (2017)



The National Parks of Costa Rica
Exploring the most biodiverse country on earth
2nd Edition (2017)



Trekking in Patagonia
Best trails and lodges in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park
2nd Edition (2017)



The Northern Lights in Iceland
How to see nature's greatest spectacle
2nd Edition (2017)



The Great Wildebeest Migration
Exploring Africa's biggest wildlife phenomenon
2nd Edition (2017)



Cuba Unwrapped
The island, the people, the culture
1st Edition (2017)

