

FEATURE



SMILES FROM

# THE TEARDROP ISLE

**TAMER THAN ITS BIGGER NEIGHBOUR, SRI LANKA IS HEAVING WITH CULTURE, WILDLIFE, GEMS, ADVENTURE, WELCOMING LOCALS, AND EXOTIC BEAUTY EVERY WHICH WAY**

**LIKE A JEWEL DROPPED INTO THE OCEAN**, Sri Lanka sparkles bright. Unlike other Asian hotspots, Sri Lanka is virtually untouched by tourism, compliments of the 25-year war. The country is breathing a collective sigh of relief now that the conflict is finally over. The figurative doors have flung open and tourists are invited in as one might welcome a long lost friend, or in this case young friends.







Art imitating colourful life  
in Sri Lanka.





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**ACCOMMODATING RESTAURANT** owners cater well to your cherub's exacting food requirements. Often compared to Indian food, Sri Lankan curries use a wider spice base, less oil and a gentler cooking method to heighten the flavours. The secret is in the freshness and that combined with a high standard of cleanliness ensures safe eating for your beloveds. There are also excellent Italian restaurants, seafood just plucked from the ocean, plenty of Western and Chinese options, and if nothing else, steamed rice and fresh fruit is a healthy option.

Beginning with the capital, and although Colombo seems like an unlikely family destination, it does have a certain charm about it. Built in 1877 and housed in an impressive colonial building, the National Museum is a fascinating starting point to Sri Lanka's cultural history and the museum is on the south side of the city's largest park, Viharamahadevi Park. Nearby is the air-conditioned Odel's department store, offering upscale fashion including a fantastic children's section.

More intrepid families will lose themselves in the Pettah Bazaar and its clothes, jewellery, Ayurvedic herbs and fresh produce; its best to avoid the early morning and after-work crowds.

There are also temples galore and one in particular worth exploring is the Gangaramaya Temple complex, which was established in 1890 and includes a library, museum, hundreds of Buddhas sitting in various positions, a sacred Bodhi tree, and its very own elephant. The elegant Galle Face Hotel makes the most of its westerly direction, offering its guests crimson sunsets and high tea and cocktails. Take a break from the heat and relax like the colonials once did on the cool terrace and lawned area. In the adjacent wing, is the refurbished Galle Face Regency with a salt-water pool open to the public for a small fee. At dusk on weekends, the adjacent parkland called the Galle Face Green heaves with friends and families eating, socialising and flying kites; pack a picnic and join in the festivities.

About 10 kilometres away is the Dehiwala Zoo and although conditions have deteriorated during the country's hardships, the kids will love the monkeys and elephant shows. Nearby is the swanky Mount Lavinia Hotel for more of those sunsets and cocktails, and a small fee gets you access to the pool, its spectacular views and the hotel's private beach. North of Colombo is the charming beach town of Negombo

with several very good hotels and guesthouses, an old quarter and an interesting fish market. Heading much further north is the Cultural Triangle. Although the dusty ancient ruins of Anuradhapura (showcasing Sinhalese culture 2,000 years ago), Polonnaruwa (the former medieval capital), and Sigiriya (palace remains on top of a huge outcrop) may not hold the kids' attention span for long, a safari will. Minneriya National Park and Kaudulla National Park are in the region and host herds of elephants, deer, sloths bears, abundant bird life and the illusive leopard.

The hill town of Kandy is included in the Cultural Triangle and can be reached by a scenic train ride from Colombo. Listed as a World Heritage City and hosting the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, Kandy is famous for its Kandyan dancing and drumming, and for 10 days over the months of July and August is the procession of Kandy Esala Perahera to honour the sacred tooth. The procession includes thousands of Kandyan drummers, dancers and decorated elephants; surely a sight your beloveds will remember for many years to come.

Another awe-inspiring activity is located 30 minutes from Kandy at the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage, which is home to 80 elephants that have been either abandoned, orphaned or injured. Interact and observe the elephants roaming freely around the sanctuary. The sight of them heading down to the river at bath-time is spectacular.

If time permits, take a jaunt over to the tea plantations of Nuwara Eliya. As the mist lifts, green tea bushes weave over rolling hills and you could almost imagine you're starring in a Dilmah Tea TV advertisement. The mild temperature is a cool respite from the flats, and a night or two in a colonial hotel or converted teahouse is an essential escape from the maddening pace. Before heading to the south coast, break up the arduous journey at the pretty town of Ella and its stunning views through Ella Gap, temples and waterfalls.

The south coast awaits with its idyllic beaches, outstanding restaurants, and relaxing pace. It won't be hard to spot the foreigners who came for a visit and couldn't bear to leave. The hippy surf town of Unawatuna hugs the coast and when you're back home, don't be surprised to find yourself longing for this spot. Restaurants and bars dot the palm-tree lined shore as locals and visitors alike frolick in the waves. Young families should head for the area beneath the temple where the currents aren't as strong. Nearby are

the quieter but equally gorgeous beaches of Tangalle, Weligama and the exquisite Mirissa.

A few kilometres west is the picturesque fort town of Galle and its Dutch-colonial buildings, artisans and chic reputation. Unlike most of this region that was devastated by the tsunami, the fort was unscathed and a wander through its winding streets will enchant any visitor.

As the end draws near, the journey back to Colombo can be broken up with a visit to one of the turtle hatcheries in Kosgoda. See if you can pick out the five different species of these cute critters. Spot the green, olive ridley, hawksbill, leatherback and loggerhead turtles make their perilous journey back to the water – much as you prepare for your journey back to reality. *AGP*

1. Buddha in a hundred positions at the Gangaramaya Temple.

2. Some visitors may also feel like a deer in headlights.







1. Take it easy like the locals.
2. You never know what you're going to stumble upon.
3. Restored glory in Kandy.



## GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Major airlines fly to Sri Lanka direct from India, Maldives, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. Trains run from Colombo to the south, to the hill country, to the cultural triangle and to the east coast, but it can be a bone-shaking trip without air-conditioning. Driving around is best left to the experts; negotiate rates with the driver before hitting the road.

## WHEN TO GO

To avoid the wet season, visit the south, west coast and hill country from December to March. From April to September the ancient cities and east coast are best.

## ACCOMMODATION

- Galle Face Hotel, Galle Road, Colombo, [www.gallefacehotel.com](http://www.gallefacehotel.com)
  - Hilton Colombo Residence, Union Place, Colombo, [www1.hilton.com](http://www1.hilton.com)
  - Kandy House, Ratwatte Walauwa, Amunugama, Gunnepana
  - Serendip Stone Bungalow, Natterampota, Kundasale, Kandy
  - Deer Park Hotel (Angsana), Giritale, Polonnaruwa, [www.coloursfangsana.com](http://www.coloursfangsana.com)
  - Amangalla, Galle Fort, [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)
  - Thaprobhan Beach House, Unawatuna Beach, Galle, [www.thambapannileisure.com](http://www.thambapannileisure.com)
  - Secret Garden Villa, Unawatuna, Galle, [www.secretgardenunawatuna.com](http://www.secretgardenunawatuna.com)
  - Villa Araliya, 154/10 Porutota Rd, Negombo
- Contact [www.go-lanka.com](http://www.go-lanka.com) for more options.

## ATTRACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- National Museum, Albert Crescent, Colombo 7, +94-11-269-4767
- Viharamahadevi Park, Ananda Coomaraswamy Avenue

- Odels Department Store, 5 Alexandra Place, Colombo 7, [www.odel.lk](http://www.odel.lk)
- Pettah Bazaar, Pettah District, Colombo 11
- Gangaramaya Temple, Sri Jinaratana Road, Colombo 2
- Dehiwala Zoo, Dehiwala
- Mount Lavinia Hotel, 100 Hotel Road, [www.mountlaviniahotel.com](http://www.mountlaviniahotel.com)
- Minneriya National Park and Kaudulla National Park, arrange transport from Giritale, 12 km northwest of Polonnaruwa
- Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, Rambukkana Road, Kegalle
- Kosgoda Turtle Conservation Project, Galle Rd (beachside), just north of Kosgoda

## FOOD

- The Gallery Café, 2 Alfred House Road, Colombo, [www.paradiseroads.lk](http://www.paradiseroads.lk); try their black pork curry
- The Green Cabin, 453 Galle Road, Colombo; authentic Sri Lankan cuisine at an absolute bargain price
- The Fort Printers, 39 Pedlar St, Galle Fort, Galle; chic fine dining
- Mama's Galle Fort Roof Café, 76 Leyn Baan St, Galle Fort; casually tasty with lovely views
- Dream House, Unawatuna Beach, Galle; Italian food at its best at local prices

## CURRENCY

The currency is the Sri Lankan rupee (LKR). As at March 2010, US\$1 = LKR114; €1 = LKR155. ATMs can be found in the major towns only, so it's best to stock up on cash before venturing out too far. US dollars and credit cards are also accepted at some hotels, although guesthouses prefer cash.



## THE LOWDOWN

### TRANSPORT

Apart from the roads in the south that were rebuilt after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, many are in poor condition or are in the process of being upgraded. As a result, the traffic is hard-going, and you should always allow more time than you think you will need. Use a recommended driver and inspect the vehicle (particularly for seat-belts) before negotiating rates.

### TUKS-TUKS

These are a fun way to travel short distances. Check out the decorations inside including the tame pin-up posters and take time out to listen to the driver's tales.

### MILITARY

There is a strong military presence and the frequent sight of guns can be a little alarming. There are also frequent vehicle inspections.

### HEAT

The humidity is energy zapping and the sun is harsh. Don't forget your sunscreen, cover up and rehydrate regularly. On the upside, the kids will be pleasantly exhausted and will sleep soundly – as will you.

### BEACH

The tidal currents are strong and the provision of

lifeguards hasn't exactly caught on yet, so always take care at the beach, and if in doubt, ask the locals.

### HEALTH

Sri Lanka is very clean, but consulting with a doctor before leaving home is highly recommended. The chemists and supermarkets are well stocked with medicines but may not have familiar brands. Clinics can be variable; consult with your consulate on the best treatment options.

### UTILITIES

With quite regular power outages, air-conditioning and refrigeration are unreliable and water pressure is low.

### ACCOMMODATION

Hotels can be hit and miss; it's advisable to do your research.

### INSECTS

The mosquitoes are brutal and insect repellent is essential.

### PACE

Things move slowly in Sri Lanka and while this is part of its charm, the little ones might not understand why their lunch is taking so long. Be prepared for long waits in restaurants, at monuments, and when touring and shopping.

