



PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Paradise, twice

Sri Lanka and the Maldives are a match made in heaven, finds Jo Cooke

Getting on a long-haul flight is a big commitment – you’re dedicating almost a day each way just to travelling. But tag on a twin centre and it can be doubly worthwhile, especially when contrasting destinations such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives sit side by side.

Ease of airlift helps no end, and our fam trip – flying with SriLankan Airlines from London to Colombo, and spending a few days in Maldivian capital Malé on the return leg – made full use of the frequent connections

between these capital cities.

Having well-connected hotels also helps, so our multi-centre adventure, staying at Ozo and Amari properties, both owned by Onyx Hospitality Group, was set to get off to a good start.

▶ COLOMBO CALLS

Clients arrive and depart from Sri Lanka’s Colombo Bandaranaike International airport, so why not suggest a night in the capital? As Martin Spencer, reservations consultant at Gold Medal, says: “The capital of any country gives

you a sense of the nation.”

Colombo offers plenty of spiritual splendour. Visit the red-and-white-striped Jami-UI-Alfar Mosque, the Hindu temple of Arulmigu Sivasubramania Swami Kovil, all blue and gold with a central tower of 3D deities, and Seema Malaka Temple, a Buddhist meditation spot in Beira Lake.

The National Museum, meanwhile, encompasses Sri Lanka’s social, geological, agricultural and art history in a cavernous colonial building, with exhibits dating back to antiquity.

Elsewhere, Viharamahadevi Park is the green lung of the city, the town hall is reminiscent of the US Capitol Building, and Independence Memorial Hall marks the end of British rule in 1948 with fountains, stone lions and a colonnaded pavilion.

Transfer times are also a selling point for including Colombo. Kandy is about three hours away, and Galle two hours via a new highway – journeys that might be too much for some straight after a 10-and-a-half-hour flight.

Kate Coleman, travel



→ consultant at Trailfinders, says: “Colombo can make a relaxing last night before an early flight. I book clients an evening tuk-tuk ride to see the array of sights and night market.” **Where to stay:** The Ozo Colombo Sri Lanka is comfortable, contemporary and convenient. The 158 rooms are bright and spacious, with those at the front boasting oversized windows that frame the ocean promenade below. From the rooftop burger restaurant, bar and swimming pool, there’s also a panorama of the city skyline. Bed-and-breakfast rates from £75 a night including taxes and service charge.

▶ SWEET AS KANDY

Kandy is a prime stop on many touring itineraries, and a logical stopover spot for those heading on to the serene tea plantations, Sigiriya Rock or the wildlife-packed national parks.

The first stop on our tuk-tuk tour was Rajapihilla Mawatha, a viewpoint that shows Kandy to be a city edged by misty green hills with an ornamental lake at its centre. Back in the daily hubbub, our nostrils were bombarded with the scents of fresh fruit, fish, incense and spices at Market Hall.

Next, we headed to the botanical gardens, where novelties of nature abound, including more than 360 species of orchid (the scary ‘scorpion’ among them), fruit bats flying overhead in search of nectar, and towering giant java almond trees whose roots rise from the ground like elephants’ feet.

For retail therapy, Kandy offers silk emporiums stacked with scarves, saris and sarongs, plus jewellers that specialise in locally mined gems such



PICTURES: ROOZ AHMADIAN; SHUTTERS TOCK



Inside the ramparts of Galle Fort, a 17th-century stronghold built by the Dutch, are galleries, boutiques and eateries

as sapphires and moonstones.

By night, bag a ticket to a cultural show featuring acrobats, drummers and firewalkers, or join the procession of pilgrims heading to the moated, golden-roofed Temple of the Tooth, placing floral tributes at the shrine said to hold a tooth of Buddha himself.

“Kandy has so much going on,” says Helen Cross, travel consultant at Thomas Cook. “It’s really different for someone who likes exploring.”

Where to stay: Sitting above the lake, the Ozo Kandy Sri Lanka’s 122 rooms are modern, smart and feature sleek bathrooms. “It’s way above a standard three-star,” says Amy Holliday, sales consultant at Gold Medal. “The service is amazing and the rooms exceeded my expectations.”

As with most places in Sri Lanka, the food was another highlight. Derek Ramsaroup, senior product executive at Best for Travel, says: “The breakfast has lots of local delicacies as well as international items.”

B&B rates from £73 per night.

▶ GO FOR GALLE

Galle, in the south, can’t help but charm, with its fusion of coast and architecture. The old city centre, enclosed in the walls of Galle Fort, is a Unesco World Heritage Site. A 17th-century stronghold built by the Dutch, it remains largely intact, and inside the ramparts you’ll find galleries, boutiques and intimate eateries in period buildings. While in Galle, you can also sign clients up for a cookery lesson, or a visit to a tea plantation or turtle hatchery.

Back at the beach, fishermen balance on offshore poles to snare the day’s catch, and surfers take on the burly breakers. Swim time, though, is governed by the currents. These can be strong, especially from May to July, so clients need to check with their hotel before taking a dip.

For beach bums seeking calm, crystal-clear waters and white sand, the proximity of Sri Lanka to the Maldives is reason – or excuse – enough to make this a twin-centre adventure. →

ASK THE EXPERT



Uli Williams,
Travel Counsellors

“Sri Lanka is a good introduction to the Indian subcontinent. Friendliness and good service greet you wherever you go. I’d recommend Kandy, Galle and Colombo as a combination, with the addition of a national park to add wildlife to the history, culture and beach mix.”

Martin Spencer,
reservations consultant,
Gold Medal
“The Maldives’ south atoll has fewer flight paths and speedboat traffic than the north, which is closer to Malé.”



ABOVE:
Ozo Kandy
Sri Lanka

LEFT: Galle



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DESTINATIONS INDIAN OCEAN



ABOVE: Amari Galle

Where to stay: The Amari Galle Sri Lanka has 172 sea-view rooms, each with a private terrace or balcony. The swanky pool deck is extensive and edges right up to the sand. There's always lots going on, too, with beach bonfire barbecues, live music, a spa and a kids' club. B&B rates from £123.

► BREATHE IN THE MALDIVES

With nearly 1,200 islands in the Indian Ocean, about 100 of which are home to holiday resorts, the Maldives is an unbeatable destination for a classy beach break, and capital Malé is just an hour's flight from Colombo.

The city is worth a few hours of anyone's time to get a feel for the country's culture, as local life doesn't feature much in-resort.

"I wanted to experience these destinations as a twin centre to see if it was an easy process for clients, and between Colombo and the Amari Havodda, it flowed well," says Holly Fitzjohn, team manager for Thomas Cook.

"No long waits, representatives meet clients at every step, and during the short layover in Malé, there's a complimentary lounge for passengers taking onward domestic flights."

Where to stay: If your clients' image of the Maldives is a remote and beautiful island, with a single property offering a high level of service and upscale accommodation that



Sri Lanka's proximity to the Maldives is reason - or excuse - enough to make this a twin-centre adventure

isn't ostentatious, the 120-room Amari Havodda Maldives in the south atoll ticks those boxes. An hour's flight from Malé and a 10-minute speedboat ride gets you there.

A thicket of tropical foliage runs down the backbone of the resort, cloaking the Beach Villas. Overwater Villas offer the convenience of slipping right into the big blue, with the house reef keeping waters calm. All villas come with exceptionally luxurious outdoor bathrooms.

"The resort's great for water sports," says Mandy Wong, personal travel consultant at Destinology.

"It's a great place to do your Padi dive qualification. Training is in the lagoon, not a pool. You dive straight from shore with the house reef acting as guidance. There's also paddleboarding, a dolphin swim in open water and a sunset dolphin cruise."

Rates from £165 per person, per night, in a Beach Villa, including meals and soft drinks. ozohotels.com, amari.com 