

A new dawn

Sri Lanka is in the midst of a luxury revival, writes Meera Dattani

“It’s not India ‘lite’, you know,” a Sri Lankan friend told me. “And we have egg hoppers.” As country overviews go, it was succinct, if random.

You can’t deny certain cultural similarities between this island nation – known as Ceylon until independence in 1948 – and its neighbour across the water; deliciously spiced curries, cricket culture, tea obsession, Ayurvedic spas, tuk-tuks and temples, mixed with colonial-era architecture from the presence of the Portuguese, Dutch and British.

Both multicultural and multi-ethnic, here the majority Sinhalese are predominantly Buddhist, celebrating Poya full-moon days, with Hindu Tamils, Muslims from Sri Lanka’s trading hub days and indigenous hunter-gatherer Veddahs adding to the melting pot.

Sri Lanka hasn’t had it easy. A brutal civil war between

1983 and 2009 pitted the Tamil Tigers against the national army, and 2004’s tsunami proved catastrophic. Post-war and post-tsunami efforts have gone a long way to restoring Sri Lanka’s fortunes and although British Airways terminated flights in 2015, Sri Lankan Airlines invested in their stock, and domestic carriers Cinnamon Air and Helitours are growing.

▶ COLOMBO: A CAPITAL IDEA

Sri Lanka packs it in – tea plantations, national parks, ancient ruins and colonial towns sit in an area about the size of Ireland. Two separate monsoon zones ensure year-round beach stints – summer on the east coast, winter on the west – along its 1,000-mile coastline, and many are a comfortable one-to-three-hour drive from the international airport and capital of Colombo,



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an intriguing city with its Pettah bazaar, fort and excellent cotton and jewellery stores.

North of Colombo and six miles from the airport, Negombo beach has a handy location, but farther up the coast is the more impressive Kalpitiya peninsula, which offers excellent dolphin spotting, kitesurfing and Wilpattu National Forest. Top picks include boutique property Bethany 101 and beachfront Dutch Bay Resorts.

South of Colombo, the big hitter

is Bentota, where post-tsunami renovations have transformed the once-tired Taj into Vivanta by Taj, and boutique hotels such as Saman Villas are thriving. The top pick is Avani Bentota, designed by Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa in his signature ‘tropical modernism’ style, while the original hippy town Hikkaduwa counts luxurious boutique Aditya among its options.

▶ SOUTH WEST: HERITAGE TRAILS

This coastline is gloriously interrupted by the Unesco World Heritage Site and 400-year-old Dutch fort of Galle, where atmospheric streets are lined with cafes and boutique shops. Galle’s leading hotel is Aman Resorts’ Amangalla, a heritage property once popular with passengers on P&O steamers, and still retaining original antiques and serving →



LEFT:
Amangalla

RIGHT: The
Fortress,
Galle

BELOW:
Tri Lanka



→ afternoon tea on the veranda. Excellent, less pricey options include Tamarind Hill on the outskirts and The Fortress, a half-hour drive away.

South and east of Galle, the beaches offer more surfing, wreck-diving and snorkelling. Dilmah Tea's Relais & Chateaux resort Cape Weligama is the premier option on the headland with its standalone villas and pools, and sweeping sea views.

Alternatives include Lantern Hotel and Casa Mirissa at whale-watching hub Mirissa, but the latest newcomer to nearby Lake Koggala is the boutique luxury sustainable resort Tri Lanka, which opened last November. Its 11 standalone suites are arranged in a spiral pattern, reflecting the mathematical golden ratio commonly found in nature, and offer either sunrise or sunset views, private gardens and a



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choice of terrace or plunge pool.

At Tangalle, suggest Aman Resorts' Amanwella, another quiet hideaway with a pretty private beach, or eco-friendly resort Buckingham Place.

From here, many continue on to Sri Lanka's national parks, to trek in Sinharaja Forest Reserve or see Udawalawe's elephants, sloth bears, giant squirrels and crocodiles. For birdwatchers, Sri Lanka has more than 230 resident bird species and 500

migratory ones. Accommodation in this area includes the comfortable Grand Udawalawe Safari Resort or Master Campers' tented camp.

At Yala, Sri Lanka's oldest national park, leopard sightings are a common occurrence, and there is well-appointed accommodation at wildlife resort Cinnamon Wild Yala or Uga Escapes' latest property, Chena Huts, which opened in December.

▶ INTERIOR: TEA TIME

As you head to the central province, Sri Lanka's classic hill country unfolds with a landscape of tea estates, waterfalls and colonial-era hotels. The plains or patanas end and the misty mountains begin with Horton Plains National Park's cloud forests, Adam's Peak and Knuckles mountain range. The ultimate treat is a high-altitude

stay at the luxury bungalows at Ceylon Tea Trails, Sri Lanka's first Relais & Chateaux resort, which added a fifth bungalow earlier this month. Excellent alternatives include Stafford Bungalow near Nuwara Eliya and Jetwing Warwick Gardens.

The winding roads of the high tea country make the low tea country a better option for some. Suggest Estate House at Rosyth near the town of Kegalle, a former colonial tea planter's bungalow transformed into a boutique hotel with a pool and spa, all set on a working tea and rubber plantation. Food is as revered as tea, with cooking lessons from the resident chef and dishes such as egg hoppers (fermented rice-flour pancakes with a fried egg), string hoppers (rice noodles), buffalo curd with honey, and custard pudding watalappan. →



Other low tea country options are Madulkelle Tea and Eco Lodge and boutique Stone House hotel. From here, it's easy to visit the Unesco-listed city of Kandy, the start of the Cultural Triangle, with its Botanical Gardens, Temple of the Tooth and summertime Kandy Esala Perahera festival with processions of elephants, drummers and dancers. Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage and Millennium Elephant Foundation are also popular, although subject to some debate from a wildlife tourism perspective so it's worth giving clients all the information and letting them decide for themselves.

▶ CULTURAL TRIANGLE: INNER PEACE

The Cultural Triangle takes full shape north of here, home to five Unesco World Heritage Sites: Dambulla's cave temples, the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy, and rock fortress Sigiriya.

Most visitors head to either Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, where guided cycling tours are a particularly good way to enjoy the sights. In the monastic city of Anuradhapura, look out for huge dome-shaped dagobas and the peaceful Abhayagiriya



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monastery, and in Polonnaruwa, the preserved ruins and bathing ponds are particularly evocative.

At Dambulla, the stairways and panoramic views culminate in some impressive Buddhist cave temples, but the big ticket is Sigiriya for its palace, frescoes and water gardens, and those who reach its summit are especially well rewarded.

Summer visitors often add Minneriya National Park too, where 'The Gathering' sees elephant herds flock to its reservoirs in huge numbers.

Accommodation in the Cultural Triangle includes the excellent-value Hotel Sigiriya, Aliya Resort & Spa and the picturesque Jetwing Vil Uyuna. Particularly noteworthy is Uga Escapes' Ulagalla, a boutique property centred

around a 150-year-old mansion house, with luxury villas, paddy fields, its own solar farm and vegetable garden.

▶ EAST: ON THE UP

The Cultural Triangle connects well to the east coast. This arid region had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, but the hotels of Passikudah and Kalkudah were abandoned and blown up during the civil war, and it was further traumatised by the tsunami, which rushed inland along its flat terrain.

Now it's on the map again. Colourful fishing boats gather at one end and sunseekers have returned to properties such as Uga Escapes' luxury Uga Bay and Amaya Beach Resort. Other hotspots include Uga Escapes' Jungle Beach resort near Trincomalee, surfing paradise Arugam Bay, Batticaloa town and Gal Oya National Park.

As compact as Sri Lanka is, discourage clients from a pack-it-all-in approach. Fuelled by a fear of missing out, this results in one-night stays and long drives, leaving no time to barter with friendly locals at roadside handicraft stalls, stop for tea, or feast on patties and samosas at 'short eat' shops. In this beguiling island nation, the journey becomes part of the holiday. **TW**



The Travel Gallery offers a 14-night tour from £2,020 in June, staying B&B at Ulagalla in the Cultural Triangle; Jungle Beach, Uga Bay and Gal Oya Lodge on the east coast; and half-board at Estate House at Rosyth. Activities include a jeep safari, Sigiriya visit, walk with a local Veddah chief, Anuradhapura cycling tour, cooking class and tea factory visit.

A 14-night trip with **The Travel Gallery** in November with stays at several luxury properties including Bethany 101 near Puttalam, Madukele near Kandy, Stafford Bungalow near Nuwara Eliya, Grand Udawalawe Safari Resort, and Amangalla in Galle, starts at £2,875. Excursions include whale watching, jeep safaris, trips to Sigiriya and Dambulla. Both include flights and a driver-guide. **travel-gallery.co.uk**



LEFT: Polonnaruwa
BELOW: Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage



PICTURES: SRI LANKA TOURISM