



city break

Colombo

The sprawling Sri Lankan capital is a worthy pit stop en route to the country's rugged coastline

WORDS: LAUREN ROMANO

Sri Lanka is having a moment. After more than 20 years of political unrest, peace was restored in 2009, prompting a revival in tourism. And its capital city, Colombo, is the perfect starting point from which to explore this diverse island nation, spanning lush tea plantations, 2,000-year-old temples, exquisite coastlines and elephant-filled national parks.

The streets bustle with activity: mango sellers barter at makeshift stalls next to piles of bananas arranged in precarious heaps by the kerb, mere inches from the path of daredevil tuk-tuk drivers who weave through the traffic and swerve around buses with impressive precision.

Once a bustling and influential port city intersecting East-West trade routes, Colombo has been ruled by successive Portuguese, Dutch and British administrations, each of which has left their mark on the city's architecture. Crumbling, faded façades that were once important naval and governmental headquarters are now, slowly, being restored to make way for a new wave of luxury hotels.

Cranes swing in the skyline as far as the eye can see. Over in the Fort district, regeneration has begun apace. The 17th-century Dutch Hospital – the oldest building in the area to survive the Civil War – has now been transformed into a shopping complex, complete with boutiques and restaurants including the must-visit Ministry of Crab, the brainchild of two former cricket players, which regularly makes the 50 best restaurants in Asia list. The jumbo curry crab can be followed by a walk down to the port for a gin and tonic at the once renowned Grand Oriental Hotel, before a stroll to the National Museum of Sri Lanka, situated on the fringes of the peaceful Viharamahadevi Park.



Where to stay

Shut the door on the traffic and general chaos at Residence. Behind its imposing gates sits an 11-suite boutique hotel with an internal courtyard and pool. The former home of an influential barrister, the 19th-century townhouse was once frequented by British governors and Indian maharajas. Yet the cosmopolitan glamour remains, courtesy of grandly proportioned rooms decked out in dark teak and magnolia with jewel-toned accents. From \$260 per night, bed and breakfast, ugaescapes.com

Where to eat

After a gin martini and some live music in the Residence bar, head to Rare, the hotel's candlelit restaurant that is a popular haunt of the city's movers and shakers. Here, traditional Sri Lankan ingredients are given a modern twist. Highlights include crab cakes with pungent tomato chutney and lime aioli; Asian sea bass with a roasted almond crust; and homemade passion fruit and chilli ice cream – there's even a seeni sambol (onion relish) and sprats (a small herring-like fish) soft scoop for those with more adventurous palates.

Don't miss

Evidence of Colombo's glory days can be unearthed at almost every corner, if you know where to look. But to really get under the city's skin, book a walking tour with curator and photographer Mark Forbes of Colombo City Walks. Armed with an iPad loaded with archive images so you can compare then and now, Forbes regales the group with tales of the country's colonial past. As well as historical monuments, pitstops will include a particularly off-the-beaten-track bar, where you can sample the local arrack, a spirit made from fermented coconut flower sap. srilankainstyle.com

suitcase essentials



FEDORA, £395, [LOCKHATTERS.CO.UK](http://lockhatters.co.uk)



BLOUSE, £135, LIVOTTE, [HARVEYNICHOLS.COM](http://harveynichols.com)



BAG, £378, [THEKOOPLES.CO.UK](http://thekooples.co.uk)



DRESS, £325, L.K.BENNETT X PREEN, [LKBENNETT.COM](http://lkbennett.com)



SANDAL, £670, MARNI, [HARVEYNICHOLS.COM](http://harveynichols.com)