

# NORTHERN EXPOSURE

A stone's throw from the Subcontinent and just a few years removed from no-go status, the ancient bastions Jaffna and Trincomalee open to reveal the India-inflected charm of Sri Lanka's Tamil homelands. **BY JOE CUMMINGS**



Outside Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, the spiritual heart of Jaffna.

PAUL KENNEDY/GETTY IMAGES



Fishermen moored on Point Pedro. **Opposite:** At Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil.



IDRIS AHMED/GETTY IMAGES, OPPOSITE: KEVIN CLOGSTOUN/GETTY IMAGES

It took me four visits to Sri Lanka before I finally made it to Jaffna and Trincomalee. These jewels of the Northern Province had been ravaged by more than two decades of civil war.

Jaffna, though one of the oldest inhabited places in all of South Asia, also has been one of the most hotly contested over the last 400 years. Tamil chieftains from India founded a powerful kingdom known as Aryacakravarti here in the early 13th century. Financed by rich pearl and elephant exports, the dynasties dominated the northern peninsula, only to lose it all to the seafaring Portuguese empire-builders who in 1619 moved in on the calm bays and lagoons of Jaffna, kicking off generations of ownership disputes. Trincomalee has also long been prized territory, boasting a natural, deep-water harbor—the world’s fifth largest—that drew seafaring traders from around the globe for centuries, and battling navies during Europe’s Thirty Years War. Trinco, as it is popularly known, was heavily embattled during the Sri Lankan civil war, and further devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Now, both cities are reawakening to the world.

Descending towards Jaffna’s Palaly Airport aboard a Sri Lankan Air Force-operated MA-60—a vivid reminder that national security remains an issue, in Colombo’s mind at least—I’m awed by the thick carpet of greenery extending between the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal coasts.

War has a way of being a boon for natural conservation wrapped in a curse for local lives and livelihoods. Some 85 percent of Sri Lanka’s palms are found in the Northern Province, one of many ways in which the local geography stands apart from that found in the rest of the island nation.

My first stop in the city, Jaffna Fort, was established by the Portuguese to defend their entrepôt from competing imperialists. Massive stone walls, flaring buttresses and deeply recessed corridors couldn’t stop the Dutch navy from seizing the city shortly after the citadel’s completion. The Dutch, who expanded and strengthened the fort, were in turn usurped by the British by the turn of the 19th century. Today, the city’s most emblematic and photographed attraction escapes its historical role on weekends, when the grassy grounds and adjacent beachfront come alive with picnic blankets and Tamil families clad in colorful saris and *lungis*.

Jaffna’s more ancient, spiritual heart is Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, a large Hindu temple dedicated to Murugan, one of Lord Shiva and Parvati’s two sons and brother of the elephant-

## THERE'S MORE OF INDIA THAN SERENDIP IN JAFFNA. SHIVA AND GANESH GUARD TRAFFIC CIRCLES IN PLACE OF BUDDHA

headed Ganesh. The previous *kovil*, built in the mid-15th century, was destroyed by the Catholic Portuguese in their attempt to rid Jaffna of all Hindu places of worship. The temple was rebuilt several times, most recently in 1807 during British rule, and today is surrounded by red-and-white striped walls in much the same style as its counterparts in southern India.

But, completely at odds with my experience at many temples in India, I'm allowed through the gates of Nallur Kandaswamy without any fuss about my devotional loyalties or birthright. I leave my shoes with attendants, and continue towards the temple's inner sanctum, topped by a brightly painted tower of entwined deities. Following a small group of old men wrapped in white *lungis*, and bearing sacred cotton string across their torsos to display "twice-born" high-caste status, I'm stopped by a temple guard. Expecting to be denied entry as a foreign outcaste, I instead realize he's gesturing for me to remove my shirt in demonstration of humility and openness. Smiling at this reversal, I move through the temple interior past rows of niche shrines framed by carved, gilded arches.

In the hour-and-a-half I spend at Nallur, I don't spot a single non-Tamil visitor. This turns out to be the case everywhere I go in Jaffna. It's a striking contrast to my experiences throughout the rest of Sri Lanka where, no matter the season, I've always encountered plenty of other foreigners. Here, it's almost as if I've traveled to another island nation apart from the teardrop of tea plantations and the Cultural Triangle.

In fact there's more of India than there is Serendip in Jaffna—no surprise as the Palk Strait separates Sri Lanka from India by only 35 kilometers. Gaudily painted *gopurams* replace whitewashed dagobas on the skyline, while statues of Shiva, Murugam and Ganesh stand guard over traffic circles in place of Gautama Buddha. As in India, locals show a keen interest in preserving old British cars, and one sees more Austin and Morris badges on the street here than anywhere else in Sri Lanka.

In Jaffna Market, a series of shed-like alcoves and open-air, tin-and-wood pavilions running across several city blocks, the first thing I notice is an overwhelming number and variety of bananas and plantains, for which the Northern Province and Jaffna District in particular are famous. Jaffna mangoes, aided by sandy soils and plenty of sunshine, are also highly regarded throughout Sri Lanka. Jaffna's fishermen stock the market with a daily bounty of crab, prawn, lobster, mullet, squid, sea cucumbers and crayfish. Arrive by 6 a.m. for the best selection; there is little left by 10 a.m.

Keep an eye out for Jaffna cheroots, a homegrown, hand-rolled staple of the peninsula in colonial times, when they were shipped all over Asia and beyond. Jaffna cigars won a gold medal at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, beating the Havana competition. Today, locals say M Chandresakaran, at a stall near the main banana section, rolls Jaffna's best.

My initiation into Jaffna's distinctive local cuisine takes place at Villa Margosa, an impeccably restored 16th-century Dutch villa where I stay for a few days. On the villa's breezy veranda, resident chef Selvin Durairaj serves Jaffna crab curry, a signature dish made with blue swimmers, fresh from the nearby lagoons, smothered in a rich brown gravy redolent of chilies, fenugreek and curry leaves (only the pungent, fresh leaves are used here, in contrast with the dried leaves popularly used in India). Even after all the crabmeat has been cajoled from the shells, I'm eagerly spooning the leftover sauce onto fragrant Northern Province rice. Rounding out the candlelit banquet are delicately fried eggplant slices and a stir-fry of *murunga* ("drumstick" pods from the moringa or benzoil tree), which mate well with *puttu*, cylinder-shaped columns of steamed rice alternating with coconut.

Meanwhile, Mangos, an open-air restaurant conveniently close to Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, offers an extensive menu of Jaffna Tamil, South Indian and Sinhalese specialties, all freshly prepared to order. This is the place to try Jaffna *kool*, another regional specialty in which fish, crab, cuttlefish, prawns and anything else that swims in local waters are simmered into a seafood broth, to which long beans, purple yams, spinach and other vegetables may be added. The broth is thickened with ground Palmyra root, and lightly acidified with a lashing of tamarind before serving. It's as rich and delicious as New Orleans gumbo.

Jaffna has the warmest microclimate in Sri Lanka, so one finds ice cream parlors everywhere in the city. The most famous, Rio Ice Cream on Point Pedro Road, serves tasty *falooda*, a thick Arab-Indian smoothie made with colorful layers of rose essence, cashew nuts, poppy seeds, vanilla ice cream, condensed milk and agar agar.

In the centuries-old seaside village of Point Pedro, one gets another strong colonial whiff. Rows of crumbling Victorian-inspired villas flank a shoreline road, facing Burma across the Bay of Bengal. At almost 3,000 kilometers away, it's not exactly close, but it's a straight line.

One house stands out from the rest—a crumbling two-story affair with a more squat profile than those of its neighbors. The elaborate, carved-stucco façade, aged to a soft ochre by the sea air, makes me think of Mandalay. When I chat with the fruit-shop owner next door, he says the home's original inhabitant was a Tamil sea captain who plied his trading ship between Point Pedro and colonial Burma a century earlier. After the captain retired, he returned here with two wives and a team of builders.



The north is known for bananas, like these in Jaffna Market; Shiva dominates Trinco's Koneswaram Temple (left); at the Temple of a Thousand Columns (above).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JOE CUMMINGS; PAUL KENNEDY/GETTY IMAGES (2)



Along the Grand Bazaar in Jaffna. **Above, from left:** Hoppers, a Sri Lankan staple, await their fillings; a pilgrim at Koneswaram Temple, Trinco.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOE CUMMINGS; JONATHAN & ANGELA SCOTT/CORBIS IMAGES; DIANA MAYFIELD/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF UGA JUNGLE BEACH

**A**nother air force MA-60 flies me southeast to Trincomalee. Virtually off limits to all but locals, relief workers and the military until the truce of 2009, its healthy endowment of idyllic beaches, coral reefs and seasonal blue whales is once again attracting the outside world. Like Jaffna, Trinco is a Tamil-dominated, Hindu-majority area, and my first stop is Koneswaram Temple, the focus of local religious life. Perched atop a bluff called Swami Rock, overlooking the Bay of Bengal, the temple today lies entirely within the Sri Lankan Army-occupied Fort Frederick, named by the Dutch but built by the Portuguese. Actually: *reassembled* by the Portuguese. The ancient shrine called Temple of a Thousand Columns was known far and wide in the Hindu world until 1622, when the Portuguese used chunks of it to construct their fort and then unceremoniously pushed the rest into the sea.

Noted science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who made his later-life home in Sri Lanka, surveyed the temple's underwater ruins while scuba diving near Swami Rock in 1956. Describing a 10th-century figure as "among the finest examples of Hindu bronze sculpture known to exist," Clarke was largely responsible for expanding public awareness of the historic site and its valued artifacts. In 1963, Trincomalee Tamils restored the temple and reinstalled many of its original images. Although it's much smaller than Jaffna's Nallur Kandaswamy, it shares a similarly pious atmosphere and is considered one of Sri Lanka's most potent pilgrimage sites for Hindus and Buddhists alike.

Today's pilgrims include a steadily increasing number of international visitors seeking out long, pristine beaches north and

south of Trinco. At Kuchchaveli, a wide 4-kilometer expanse of golden sand backed by remarkably well-preserved coastal forest, I settle in at the first resort to open in the area, Jungle Beach by Uga Escapes.

A sturdy timber-and-bamboo bridge, sheltered by palm-thatch, makes a dramatic entry through the native greenery from the parking area. Low-profile yet luxurious villas sit well behind the tree line—I'm told that only two trees were cut during the resort's construction—so as not to spoil the view from the beach, and they're comfortably scattered around the 4-hectare estate to ensure privacy when using decks and outdoor rain showers.

A freeform, tropical pool segues into a cozy outdoor bar, which is in turn linked to a dining area where fresh seafood and authentically spicy Sri Lankan dishes keep one from regretting the fact that there are no nearby restaurants.

Inland lies huge Periyakarachchi Lagoon, aflutter with colorful birdlife. Jungle Beach staff can arrange open-ocean boat trips to observe the blue whale migration from March to November, and, off nearby Pigeon Island, shark-viewing dive trips. At last, after decades—nay, centuries—of turmoil, the worst predators here are found under water. +

## T+L Guide

**Getting There**  
Fly direct into Colombo from Bangkok via **Thai Airways** ([thaairways.co.th](http://thaairways.co.th)) or **Sri Lankan Airlines** ([srilankan.com](http://srilankan.com)); from Singapore via **Cathay Pacific** ([cathayair.com](http://cathayair.com)), **Sri Lankan Airlines**, **Singapore Airlines** ([singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)) or **Malaysia Airlines** ([malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com)); and from Kuala Lumpur via **AirAsia X** ([airasia.com](http://airasia.com)), **Sri Lankan Airlines** or **Malaysia Airlines**. **Helitours** ([helitours.lk](http://helitours.lk)) operates domestic flights from Colombo to Jaffna and Trincomalee from Rp4,150 per person one way.



### STAY

**Villa Margosa** 40 Kandy Rd. (A9), Chundikulli, Jaffna; 94-845/154-1320; [expo-pavilion-margosa-jaffna-sri-lanka.lakpura.com](http://expo-pavilion-margosa-jaffna-sri-lanka.lakpura.com); doubles from US\$110 including meals.  
**Uga Jungle Beach** Kilometer 27, Pulmoddai Rd., Kuchchaveli, Trincomalee; 94-26/567-1000; [ugaescapes.com/junglebeach](http://ugaescapes.com/junglebeach); doubles from US\$189.

### EAT AND DRINK

**Mangos** 359/3 Temple Rd., Nallur, Jaffna; 94-21/222-8294; dinner for two US\$25.  
**Malayan Café** 36-38 Grand Bazaar, Jaffna; meal for two US\$10.  
**Rio Ice Cream** 448A Point Pedro Rd., Jaffna; smoothies for two US\$5.

### SEE+DO

**Nallur Kandaswamy Temple** AB20, Vembady Rd., Jaffna.  
**Jaffna Market** Hospital Road, Jaffna.  
**Jaffna Fort** Beach Road, Jaffna.  
**Koneswaram Temple** Swami Rock, Trincomalee; admission US\$0.50.



**T+L Tip** As the north is still relatively untraveled, consider enlisting the help of bespoke operator **Sri Lanka in Style**, which creates custom itineraries to Jaffna and

Trincomalee (as well as the rest of the country) focusing on cultural immersion and unique, cool accommodations. 94-11/239-6666; [srilankainstyle.com](http://srilankainstyle.com).