

# Beaches and Culture in Sri Lanka - Luxury Travel Diary



## Related: [Audley Travel](#)

Sri Lanka, known for its alluring beaches, is often underestimated as a cultural destination. From tea plantations to beautifully carved ruins, it's a diverse island to discover. [Audley Travel](#) Beach specialists [Matt](#) and [Joe](#) have just returned from exploring the island.

Matt shares his knowledge on Sri Lanka's beaches, which make a great starting point for visiting the island.

### **What led you to exploring Sri Lanka?**

Working as a beach specialist, I get to know amazing beaches all over the world. I've always been intrigued by Sri Lanka: it has the beaches, culture, landscapes, a bit of everything.

I previously worked as cabin crew, which led me to explore many Indian cities. I was surprised how different Sri Lanka was to its larger neighbour, India. It has a very distinct culture and atmosphere. I also didn't appreciate how beautiful the beaches were until I actually visited them, the rose colour of the sand I hadn't seen before (and I've seen a lot of beaches).

### **Where are your favourite beaches in Sri Lanka?**

For the best beaches it has to be the south coast from the oceanfront town of Bentota down to the Dutch fortress at Galle – there's nothing like it. The stretches of beach are seemingly endless, and wonderful for long walks, watching the waves crashing in.

Many of the beaches feel genuinely untouched and I saw few fellow travellers. The beachside hotels lie hidden behind the mangroves that line the beach, and you won't find any sunloungers littering the sand.

When I was on Bentota beach it coincided with Poya, a public Buddhist holiday that occurs on the full moon. Families were dotted along the beach playing cricket and enjoying picnics, creating a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. With no tourist shops or T-shirt stalls, this felt like a very genuine experience and I was privileged to share the holiday with them.

### **Which were your favourite beach hotels?**

On the south coast, my favourite hotel was [Saman Villas](#). Set on a rocky outcrop jutting out into the sea, it sits between two stretches of beach that recede into the horizon. On arriving, I was ushered into a little secret garden area sheltered by trees. As you're led up a set of stairs to reception, the landscape opens up below you and you're greeted by a view right across the hotel grounds to the sea below.

The accommodation is spread out across the property and it maintains an authentic feel with local artisan touches and traditional textiles. The rooms are generous and split level with separate sitting areas and outdoor showers. I recommend opting for one of the suites, which include a private pool. Swimming to the edge of my pool, I watched the ocean lap beneath me, sundowner in hand.

My pick for the northeast coast is [Jungle Beach](#). Walking into the hotel over a wooden drawbridge, you see dappled walkways meandering through the jungle, which eventually lead out to the beach.

The accommodation is nestled between the trees, each cabin with a private sitting area and outdoor shower. I'd point you towards the beach cabins, which are set well apart and hidden within the mangroves. The winding path from your cabin leads you straight on to the beach.

You can travel to the nearby Pigeon Island Marine Park to snorkel from here, which was one of my favourite experiences. A short speedboat ride takes you to this small coral edged island where you can easily spend the day. I wasn't in the sea long before I'd seen a family of turtles and a reef shark gliding through the shadowy water.

It's possible to visit Sri Lanka during most of the year. The south coast is best in our winter months, and the northeast coast ideal in our summer months.

### **Do you have any recommendations for honeymooners?**

The service I experienced in Sri Lanka was friendly and thoughtful, so it's easy to arrange something special. I'd try to organise a special activity, such as a cooking course or even a kite making class, which many of the hotels offer.

Hotels also have secluded nooks where they can set up a romantic dinner for you. I saw laid tables overlooking the ocean and right on the beach. Set well away from the hotel itself, you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere.

Joe discusses Sri Lanka's cultural experiences and how you can enrich your beach stay with a short visit to somewhere a little different.

### **Why do you find Sri Lanka such an interesting country to visit?**

Whether it's watching people go about their daily lives, learning about a different religion or exploring ruins, I

love Sri Lanka's sheer variety of things to explore. You can have a snippet of daily life visiting a local town for the afternoon or go a little deeper and spend a few days seeing some of the key historical sites.

### **What cultural experiences does Sri Lanka offer?**

For me, there are three focal areas to consider, which are easy to combine with a stay on the coast: the Cultural Triangle, the city of Kandy, and the coastal city of Galle.

Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle, whose three points are the towns of Sigiriya, Habarana and Dambulla here that form a triangle, is home to some of the country's most important historical monuments. I especially liked Sigiriya Rock, an inexplicable formation that rises from the plains, once topped by a seven storey palace.

I climbed up using modern metal staircases, which have been attached to the side of the rock. I was fascinated by the precariously located divots carved into the rock, once the sole way up. My guide informed me that, incredibly, the king would have been carried up on his throne. On scaling the rock, I immediately forgot how tired I was as I basked in a 360 view of the countryside below.

In this area you can also visit the ancient capital of Polonnaruwa, a sprawling array of ruins and temples. I'd suggest a morning tour of the key highlights and museum. The Dambulla cave temples are also nearby, a cave network hand carved with over 150 Buddha statues, painted with painstaking detail.

Kandy, set in the lush hills of central Sri Lanka, is a bustling city built around the lakeside Temple of the Tooth. One of the most important temples for Buddhists, my best advice is to time your visit when the tooth is being put to bed for the evening. At this time, the temple is packed with local worshippers. You can combine this with a visit to the nearby botanical gardens.

My final suggestion would be Galle, a quaint European fort on the coast. Built by the Dutch, taken over by the Portuguese then ran by the British, you can take a guided tour of its history.

Nearby, I took part in a local workshop to learn the traditional Sri Lankan craft of mask making. These masks take months to make, and I discovered that each has an individual character or meaning, some even representing the village drunk and his wife.

### **Where is your favourite place to stay to experience Sri Lanka's cultural highlights?**

My top choice is [Kahanda Kanda](#), a colonial boutique hotel set in the hills up above Galle. It's within easy reach of Galle, but you can also take a tour of the nearby tea plantation, take a boat on the lake or follow some of the walks in and around the hotel grounds.

The hotel itself is stylishly decorated with quirky finishing touches and local fabrics. The pool area has panoramic views over the countryside below.

### **How easy is it to travel round the island?**

The roads are in good condition, travelling around the coast. Inland, the roads are prone to roadworks so travel here can take a little longer. It can be rewarding to travel by car as your driver can give you little insights into the country along the way. We stopped to try some locally cooked boiled corn, which was lovely.

On my recent trip I caught a sea plane, which as well as being quick and convenient was an experience in itself. Seating only nine passengers, the plane lands on the many lakes dotted around Sri Lanka. The views of the countryside below are incredible – flying over the hills into Kandy, I couldn't keep my eyes off watching the city unfold.



- 1. 1
- 2. 2
- 3. 3
- 4. 4
- 5. 5
- 6. 6
- 7. 7
- 8. 8
- 9. 9