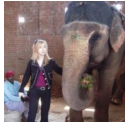


Why You Should Go to Sri Lanka Now - Forbes



I cover singular, luxury travel and food experiences around the world

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

After being mostly off limits to travelers for 26 years while a civil war raged between Tamil separatists and the Buddhist Sinhalese government, [Sri Lanka](#) has been climbing the lists of tourism hot spots since the war's end in 2009. There are various reasons: the UNESCO designated archeological ruins of kingdoms spanning 2000 years, the lush beauty of terraced mountain tea plantations and rice paddies fringed by coconut palms, safaris to see leopards and elephants roaming in dense jungles, beaches and waves that attract surfers from all over the world. Starting last year, a raft of new luxury hotel openings has created an even bigger draw for travelers. And new ones are slated to come on line this year.

Starting in Colombo, the capital and a major business center, high rises from the major luxury brands are in various stages of construction. If you land late and need to stay over as I did, though, a better introduction to the island's history is [Uga Residence](#), the 19th century mansion built by a prominent lawyer and previously operated as a hotel but taken over and renovated by the Sri Lanka luxe hotel company [Uga Escapes](#) last year. Besides the patrician architecture and calm of the gardens, the 11 suites are large and decorated in sophisticated, restrained style with Belgian carpets and handcrafted Sri Lankan furniture. The restaurant is a high point, refined and creative featuring mostly Sri Lankan dishes composed of obsessively sourced local ingredients.



Uga Residence in Colombo is a 19th century mansion that was renovated and opened as a hotel last year. Photo courtesy of Uga Escapes.

For anyone interested in culture and history, the UNESCO designated ruins of past kingdoms known as the [Cultural Triangle](#) are important stops. Groups of tourists from around the world feel the same way and there are large hotels in that area for them. But another of Uga Escapes' properties [Ulagalla](#), a classic 19th century mansion, is a more serene, textured base set on 58 acres that encompass rice paddies and two reservoirs. It's slightly over 12 miles to

[Anuradhapura](#) which served as the country's capital for 1300 years starting in 380 B.C. and was more recently the site of several bloody attacks during the civil war. Now in peacetime, visitors are able to see the monumental [Ruwanwelisaya stupa](#) and the 1900 stone elephants that surround it, the tree that evolved from a branch of the Bodhi Tree, the tree under which Buddha achieved enlightenment, and other significant ruins of palaces, temples and reservoirs.

Recommended by Forbes

IBMVoice: Wimbledon Aces The Digital Experience Served To Tennis Fans Around The World

ForbesBrandVoice

Also in the circuit: an hour away, the [Rock Temple of Dambulla](#) is worth the climb up for its five caves showcasing 150 Buddha images. And farther south, in [Kandy](#), the last capital before the British occupied the island in 1815, the [Temple of the Tooth Relic](#) is the site of a nightly ritual in which the gold casket housing a tooth of Buddha's is revealed with great tension and drama. Another experience entirely but probably the most popular on the island is the [Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage](#) just outside of town in which approximately 100

orphans are in residence. The sanctuary itself has a bit of a zoo-like feel as they're brought out for visitors to watch. But going across the street to the [Elephant Bay Hotel](#) and watching them frolic in the river on their break is delightful.

Watching elephants in their own habitat is obviously preferable and one of the major areas for a traditional safari is [Yala National Park](#) in the southeast part of the island. Unfortunately, safaris in Sri Lanka have the same problem that they do in India—too many large open air vans converging on sightings, too little regulation and parks that close at 6 PM, meaning that the animals might be emerging just as you depart. There had been leopard sightings but we didn't see them, unfortunately. We did see elephants although it was the first time I'd ever seen an elephant in the wild express stress, a situation the ranger pegged to the crowds. I was staying at another Uga property [Chena Huts](#) which opened in December and apart from the artistically designed cottages—many of the accommodations in the park are tents—and exceptional food, both Sri Lankan and Western, this lodge may have an advantage. Due to political connections, the company's owners are planning to build another gate to the park that will allow its guests to have more private access. (Also on the horizon in the park: a new lodge [Wild Coast Tented Lodge](#) scheduled to open later this year from [Resplendent Ceylon](#), the hotel offshoot of the tea company [Dilmah](#) that operates the preeminent lodge in tea country [Ceylon Tea Trails](#) and a resort that opened a few years ago on the southern coast [Cape Weligama](#).)

Another resort that opened in December and was still in very raw form when I was there in January but that has great potential is [Tri](#), located just inland from the southern coast. Owners Rob Drummond and his wife Lara Baumann, a yoga master, are creating an environmentally sustainable resort on pristine Koggala Lake, the country's largest natural lake and one of the most serene settings anywhere in the country. It's also reflective of the importance of the cinnamon crop in Sri Lanka; the resort is surrounded by cinnamon plantations and cinnamon sticks are prominent in the construction, particularly in the resort's water tower. Scents of cinnamon also waft by when the breezes blow.

Like many travelers, I finished my run around the island in [Galle](#), another UNESCO site for its old town founded by the Portugese in the 16th century and then fortified by the Dutch. Since it was a fortuitous day in the Buddhist calendar for weddings, couples posed for their official photos on the fortress fortifications or in the streets (often in front of the jewelers selling the famed Sri Lanka sapphires.) I continued watching from the terrace of [Amangalla](#), the boutique hotel in a stately 17th century building that Amanresorts opened in 2004 days before the deadly tsunami that ravaged much of the coastline. (It survived due to the thick walls constructed by the Dutch.) It's a masterpiece of historical detail, from the original polished teak floorboards to the antiques throughout. Since the war was still going on when it opened, it was an ambitious bet that things would improve. Fortunately for the island overall and the travelers who now get to see it, they turned out to be right.

How to best see the island: Given the complexity of touring here (slow roads, small sold out hotels, calculating distances) and the sheer volume of history and culture to be explained, you need an expert to organize for you. [Remote Lands](#) does detailed, carefully planned, on and off the beaten track custom trips to Sri Lanka. Try to get their country manager Selvaraj Kanagaratnam as your guide; he knows everything and everyone and takes consummate care of his guests.

How to Get There: [Qatar Airways](#) has flights to Colombo through Doha and besides the excellent service on board the aircraft, transiting through Doha's sparkling, state of the art Hamad International Airport is part of the

pleasure.

Follow me on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)