



Your Guide to Spectacular Sri Lanka

It's on the must-see list of jetsetters everywhere, and for good reason—the majestic landscapes, range of wildlife and historical significance of this island nation are unparalleled

By **Eric Rosen**

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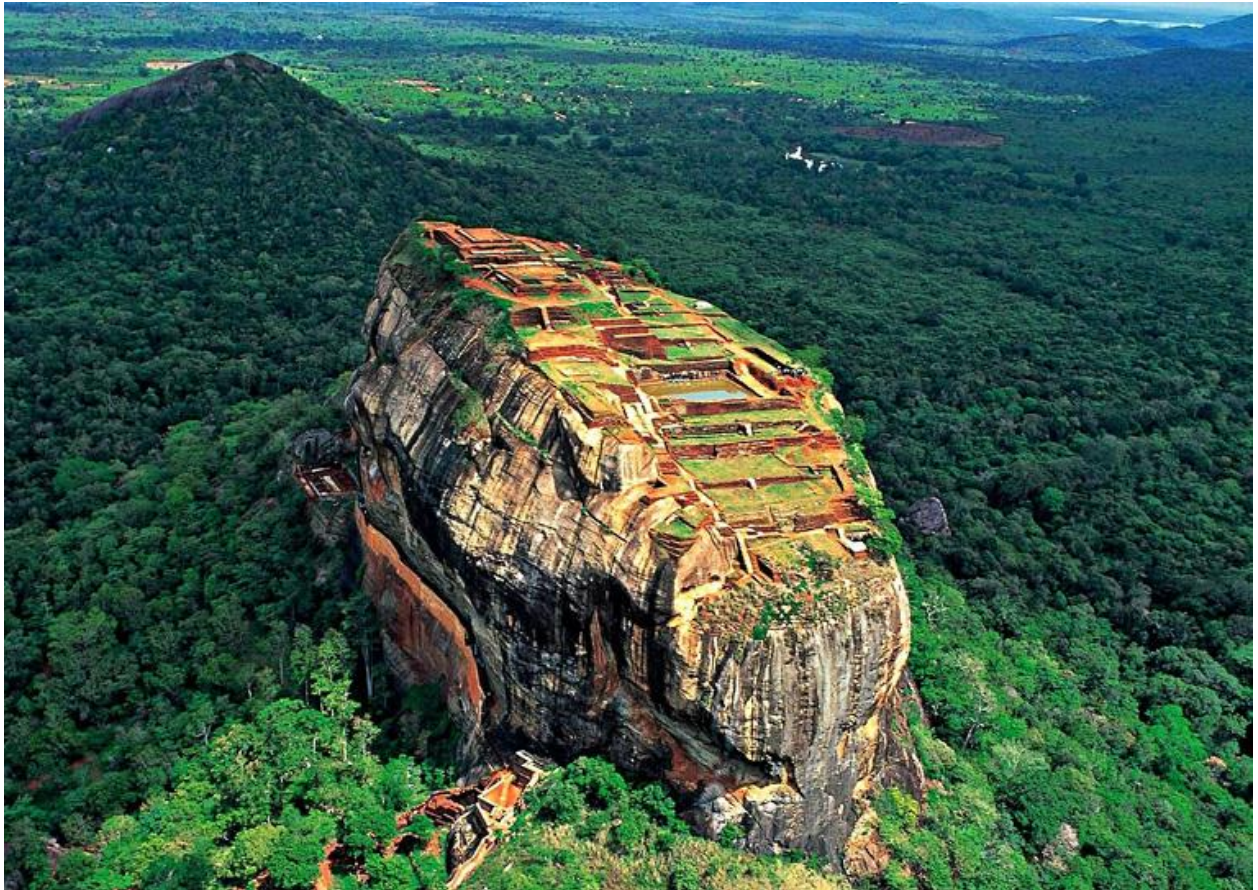
Formerly a no-man's land due to a decades-long civil war, Sri Lanka has been at peace since 2009 and is fast becoming a top spot on every jetsetter's must-hit list. The island nation boasts everything from world-class beaches to ancient ruins, lush colonial tea plantations to national parks teeming with wildlife. Plus, thanks to its compact size, 10 days to two weeks is all you need to explore this fascinating destination.

Getting there is faster and easier than ever thanks to connections from the capital, Colombo, not only to other Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Beijing, but also through the three Middle Eastern hubs of Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha.

Colombo's luxurious grande dame, the 150-year-old Galle Face Hotel

Many visitors skip Colombo altogether, but I'd suggest setting aside at least a day or two there to unwind from the journey. Book a stay at the recently renovated 150-year-old **Galle Face Hotel (\$\$\$\$)**, Colombo's luxurious grande dame. The stately hotel is one of the oldest east of the Suez Canal, and afternoon tea here is practically an institution. Served out on a colonnaded veranda (with a bagpiper who plays for the flag-lowering at sunset), this multi-course affair is a crash course in the country's finest teas served with dainty, delectable pastries.

For a dose of history, take the four-hour drive north to the so-called **Cultural Triangle**. On the way, stop in the former royal capital of Kandy to see the palace and the **Temple of the Tooth**, which houses a relic containing one of the Buddha's teeth.



Sigiriya, mountaintop fort and pleasure palace

One of the Sri Lanka's most spectacular archaeological sites, **Sigiriya** was a mountaintop fort and pleasure palace that dates to the fourth century. The views alone (not to mention the erotic frescoes) are worth a hike up to the top.

Nearby, **Anuradhapura** is a sprawling complex of ancient palaces and monasteries whose major stupas rival the magnificence and scale of the ancient pyramids of Giza.



A master bedroom at the Ulagalla Villas

Accommodations in this part of the country include **Vil Uyana** (\$\$\$\$\$), an eco-resort whose bungalows dot reclaimed wetlands where you might spy a crocodile lazily wading its way among the reeds. Also nearby, **Ulagalla** (\$\$\$\$\$) is a boutique hotel that comprises a 150-year-old mansion and villas set amidst 58 acres of lush gardens. After a day of sightseeing, you can go kayaking alongside local fisherman on the enormous reservoir adjacent to the property.

Your next stop should be the tea country in Sri Lanka's central highlands. The region is a veritable cornucopia whose local produce—everything from roses and strawberries to gourds and carrots—is prized far and wide. The laidback but refined **Mas Villa** (\$\$\$\$\$) is a bed and breakfast in a 200-year-old house owned by a prominent local family. There, you can spend the morning hiking among the tea plantations to remote villages, then head to a tea factory like historical **Storefield** to learn about the industry that made this island one of the most valuable territories in the British Empire. The afternoon is a perfect time for a hike down to the **Kotmale Reservoir** for a swim in the placid waters.

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The explorer-style pavilions of Chena Huts have brought high-end “glamping” to Sri Lanka. From here, it’s a lengthy drive southeast along winding mountain roads (and past some spectacular waterfalls) to the southern coast for a few days of tracking leopards, elephants and sloth bears, not to mention crocodiles, peacocks and armadillo-like pangolins (if you’re lucky) in **Yala National Park**. One of the country’s newest lodges, the rustic-chic **Chena Huts** (\$\$\$\$\$) just opened in December with 14 explorer-style pavilions (each with a private plunge pool) that have brought high-end “glamping” to Sri Lanka. The resort’s expert guides will also ensure you are among the first visitors to enter the park at sunrise, and thus have a better chance of spotting the wildlife.