

# The Washington Post

## With civil war and a tsunami behind it, Sri Lanka's east coast is opening up to tourism

By Henry Wismayer

[Travel](#)

December 8 at 5:29 PM



The colorful Koneswaram temple of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, is built on a foundation that dates back to about 205 B.C. (Suranga Weeratuna/Alamy Stock Photo)

Beside the temple on Swami Rock, amid the heady swirl of colorful deities and burning camphor, one object caught my eye. It seemed that a special reverence had been reserved for a statue of a holy cow. Centuries ago, a placard beside it explained, this Chola-era figurine had been buried by concerned priests as the Portuguese colonists sailed into harbor. There it had remained interred, through centuries of colonial occupation and decades of civil war. But in 2013 it was rediscovered and dusted off — returned to its Hindu shrine after almost 400 years. And as I watched the pilgrims queuing to leave offerings at its base, it seemed a fitting symbol for this part of Sri Lanka, where an air of resurrection is precisely what brought me here.



### THE WASHINGTON POST

Sri Lanka's east coast, running from Trincomalee in the north to the grasslands of Yala in the south, has good reason to feel optimistic about the future. Twelve years ago, when my partner Lucy visited the region on a teaching exchange, her minibus had to pass through dozens of army checkpoints to get anywhere near this region. The Tamil insurgency, which blighted Sri Lanka for nearly 30 years, made travel hazardous. A few months later, the east was devastated along with

much of the south coast by the Boxing Day tsunami. The natural disaster claimed 40,000 lives on the island alone.

Today, however, with the civil war ended and the tsunami a fading — still traumatic — memory, the east is finally opening up to tourism. While Sri Lanka's southwest coast starts to strain under the pressure of doubling tourist numbers and rapacious development, the resort's smattering of new resorts and improved road access have grown to offer a beguiling alternative. And so Lucy had come back, this time with me and our two young kids, following a growing number who are drawn toward the island's less-traveled coasts in pursuit of sanctuary.

### **A beachfront indulgence**

Keen to see how much has changed since those more turbulent days, and no less keen to recover from a hot seven-hour drive across the interior from the capital, Colombo, we started with something indulgent. **Jungle Beach**, in Kuchaveli, was the only hotel on its untamed stretch of coastline, but as limited choices go this presented little hardship. A 20-yard walk from our airy, teak-filled cabana, the beach felt remote and wild, its shallow curve backed by driftwood and scrubland. A cashew-shaped pool was sheltered from the sun by rambling trees; a fine restaurant served up wonders under whirring fans.

At times, it felt like a place barely reclaimed from the nature that surrounded it. Wading birds swooped down to the poolside ponds to lance tiny fish from among the lotus flowers, spiny lizards sunned themselves on the trees and mouse deer roamed the grounds. Such wild diversions were nothing compared with the beasts that frequented the neighboring sea. Though the waters were too rough during our visit, this is one of many spots on the Sri Lankan coast where a boat trip promises sightings of blue whales.

It was all too easy, lapping up the delights of **Jungle Beach**, to forget the backdrop of damage, both natural and man-made, during a trip to eastern Sri Lanka. But you didn't have to stray far for reminders. When I visited Nilaveli, the next bay south, the testaments were there — in the bullet-pocked wall of an abandoned house or a doleful concrete husk of what was once a beachside hotel, chafed to its foundations by the wave.

With me on these excursions was driver Roobens, a local-born Tamil, an ethnicity he betrayed with his habit of swallowing the end of sentences with a head-waggle and a hail of words. Like many young Tamils, Roobens was forced

to leave this area in the 1990s to avoid run-ins with a vengeful Sri Lankan army — “I would have been arrested,” he said matter-of-factly — but came back to Nilaveli in 2007, after the Tigers were pushed north. Like many here, Roobens now sees tourism as part of the region’s rehabilitation.

As we headed further south, his hopes found affirmation in scenes of human joy. It was Tamil New Year, holiday season, and everywhere we went we met Sri Lankan holidaymakers, many of them exploring the east coast of their country for the first time.



Families soak one another with buckets of water hauled up from wells at the Kanniya hot springs near Trincomalee. (Henry Wismayer)

The hot springs of Kanniya, where crowds thronged to anoint each other with bucketfuls of geothermal water from brick-lined wells, resembled nothing so much as a giant water-fight, and later, when we arrived in Trincomalee, eastern Sri Lanka’s principal city, the whole population seemed to have decamped to Swami Rock, a giant headland just south of town.

The rock’s lower reaches are still dominated by Fort Frederick, a vast bastion built by Dutch colonists in the 1670s. But its ramparts, now home to an army barracks, also guarded one of the region’s most holy Hindu temples. At the base of the fortress, an arched portico buzzed with tuktuks, and up on the point we found thousands of celebrants walking barefoot past gaudy puja stalls.

From the pinnacle, looking past the worshipers milling about the temple, you could see northwest toward the town and the bay beyond, where a single tanker sat low in the water, hinting at the hidden depths that made it a key strategic harbor for British forces during World War II. But the view might have been very different were it not for Swami Rock. In 2004, when the tsunami thundered up the coast on its murderous rampage, the rock's sacred flanks blocked its path, saving Trincomalee from destruction and heeding a million prayers.

### **In transition**

A certain spell broke as we traveled south.

It wasn't that our next stop, the village of Passikudah, which sprawled along a parabola of Indian Ocean coastline, didn't have its appeal. But where Kuchaveli had felt like a secret, this felt like a place in flux. Passikudah is one of Sri Lanka's 45 tourism-development zones, once-sleepy villages opened up to foreign investment as Sri Lanka looked to capitalize on the rush of foreign tourists that followed the end of the Tamil insurrection. However, these zones have proved controversial, seen by many as a way for former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brothers, dethroned and disgraced during democratic elections in 2015, to spread patronage among their cronies.



The sun sets over Passikudah, home to several of eastern Sri Lanka's most luxurious beach hotels. (Henry Wismayer)

It's hard to tell what the current government, elected on a promise to repudiate the corruption of the old regime, may mean for Passikudah. But for now, the

area seemed yet to cross that line between popularity and overdevelopment. What resorts have been built were mostly unobtrusive, and the tourists drawn here responded in kind. Most of them, made supine by arrack cocktails and the prevailing air of lassitude, spent the day just slumbering and perspiring in the shade of flowering frangipani trees.

Unlike the wild beach of Kuchaveli, which shelved steeply into the sea, Passikudah's coast was shallow, calm and much more populated, though this held charms of its own. At dusk, the southern end of the beach filled with Sri Lankan families, the water so stippled with splashing silhouettes as to resemble a holy river at puja time. When we went down with the kids to paddle, locals bombarded us with contagious smiles. And clucking women in saturated saris held out their arms to take the children in warm embraces, cradling them like holy objects for cellphone photos as the sun grew huge and red behind them.

### **A moment in the sun**

We headed south again, and while the landscape remained familiar the temperature continually rose. With my optimistic dreams of traveling by local bus derailed by the unforgiving heat, we descended the east coast in an air-conditioned taxi. While the family slept, I watched the east's central coast whiz by in a haze behind the car's tinted window. We passed griddles of salt pans, smallholdings of tobacco, and somnolent lagoons stained white and pink with flowering waterlilies. Even Batticaloa, the east's second city, seemed stunned into inertia by the sun, while on the outskirts the rice farmers plodded resolutely on, throwing handfuls of seeds across flooded paddies.



Fishing boats line the beach in Arugam Bay, which also is a prime surfing spot. (Henry Wismayer)

Our destination, Arugam Bay, is a relatively old hand in eastern tourism. Its story dates back to the 1960s, when Australian drifters arrived in what was then a tiny Muslim village to find local children bodysurfing on perfect rip-curl waves. For five months from May, those same waves now lure surfers from all over the world.

With our kids too young to surf, and the waves yet to rise in earnest, we spent the mornings seeking shade and the afternoons seeking adventure. Each day after lunch, we squeezed the whole family into the double back seat of a tuktuk and asked the mild-mannered drivers to take us out onto the rutted roads south of the village.

We explored the coast, then delved inland, where wild elephants bathed in shimmering lagoons and crocodiles lurked among the lily pads in tanks, the huge reservoirs built as part of the great irrigation projects of Sinhalese kings. At the forest hermitage of Kudimbigala, we walked up steps cut into great boulders. At the summit, views over the forest, uninterrupted by modernity, stretched to the horizon.

Change was always in the air, though, here in the east. A few years back, I learned from conversations with locals, one of the most idyllic beaches we visited, called Peanut Farm, had been annexed by the government despite local opposition. But the plan had been interrupted by the elections last year. The

new government had returned it — now the local villagers were busy building a guesthouse of their own.

For the time being, at least, the atmosphere that sets eastern Sri Lanka apart looks set to endure.