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Surf, Sambal, and Safari: The Insider's Guide to Sri Lanka

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Arugam Bay beach, Sri Lanka

Photo: Alamy

EXPAND



Truly great destinations have a well-roundedness that's rare, like the annoyingly gifted straight-A student who's also a star athlete, visionary artist, and genuinely likable human being. Sri Lanka, in a sense, is that person, made somehow even more attractive by little quirks and flaws. The island formerly known as Ceylon is ringed in palm-fringed beaches of caramel-color sand, prime for surfing, swimming, and snorkeling over coral reefs. It also boasts a lush, emerald-green interior with mountains worth trekking, waterfalls worth chasing, and tea plantations worth strolling.

Sri Lanka is a destination that stimulates all the senses. This island of 20 million is where blue whales and humpbacks play offshore (in-season nearly year-round in one of two

locations), and its national parks are some of the world's best places to spot leopards, not to mention, elephants and Technicolor birds (more than 400 species). Expect Ayurvedic therapies and yoga, mind-bogglingly spicy rice and curry, as well as ubiquitous—and refreshing—orange king coconuts, and breathtaking feasts for the eyes in the form of sculptural Buddhist stupas, ornate Hindu temples, sleek Muslim mosques, and what has been called the world's oldest tree. Locals are as good at hauling in fish as they are at mining perfect sapphires (cornflower blue being the most sought after) and elusive gems like blue moonstone and cat's-eye. Increasingly, thanks to a few recent openings in particular, it has some of the world's chicest, most thoughtful boutique hotels, too.

So why is this exotic paradise **just now** seeping into the jet set's collective conscious? Because from 1983 until 2009, the mostly Buddhist island off the southeastern tip of India was embroiled in one of the longest civil wars in recent history, which saw atrocities on both sides during fighting between the Tamil Tigers group—hoping to win independence for the Hindu Tamil-speaking population—and Sri Lanka's mostly Sinhalese military, representing the majority ethnic group and language. There was also a massive 2004 tsunami to contend with, killing more than 30,000. But ever resilient, in the last half-dozen years Sri Lanka has gone into overdrive re-establishing itself as a mecca for luxury-minded travelers whose interests are far from run of the mill.

Despite its hardships, you will find the same vividly colored saris as in India—both classic Indian and the Kandyan style—on women and sarongs on men; tuk tuks flying around twisting yet well-paved roads; gleaming temples; and flavorful food like roti, coconut sambal, and hoppers. Most people speak some English and are overwhelmingly friendly, eager to chat about life, your family, your plans, and impressions of Sri Lanka. They're proud ambassadors, and for good reason.

As an island in the Indian Ocean just above the equator, the country has enviable weather—at least somewhere—at all times. It's home to many microclimates, so when it's monsoon season on east coast beaches like Arugam Bay, the southern shores (Galle, Tangalle) are ripe for wanderlust-y sunseekers. Building an itinerary requires taking a good look at priorities and interests. And try to avoid the temptation of squeezing too much in.

Colombo, the country's main port of entry, is usually the necessary first stop, with the new art-filled Maniumpathy a bastion of calm, Colonial-style cool in the city's center. Eight rooms in a century-old former doctor's estate recall your elegant grandmother's house. Be sure to watch the sun set at the Galle Face boardwalk. From there, if seeing those majestic leopards is at the top of your list, make your way to Yala National Park's **Chena Huts**, hardly rustic and exceedingly well designed. Domed "huts" alongside a beach and lagoon are outfitted with dramatic wooden beds, arched ceilings, pristine bathtubs, plunge pools, and motion-sensor lanterns. Don't get too comfy under the covers, though, since ranger-led safari drives and walks start before sunrise—all designed to get the big cats in action or on the prowl in late afternoon, stalking their next prey post-nap. Stay for a few days and you may even see elephants wandering the beach.

For a wellness-packed adventure inland, hop a bumpy but air-conditioned train from Colombo to Kandy (if trains aren't your thing, book a small flight), where staff from Santani will collect you for a one-hour drive to their magical mountaintop resort—one of Sri Lanka's best dedicated spa properties. There's an Ayurvedic doctor on hand to diagnose your dosha; a pedigreed chef who cooks bespoke meals pertaining to any imbalance (it's full-board); and expert yoga, meditation, fitness, and outdoors guides alongside spa therapists hailing from places like Ananda in the Himalayas. It's Eden for those battling stress, exhaustion, or weight gain, or anyone with a simple desire to put away the iPhone (Wi-Fi access is by request only) for an escape into the great, refined outdoors.

Several hours north, Anuradhapura is a must-visit for anyone interested in seeing iconic, sacred Buddhist sites including the 2,000-plus-year-old Bodhi Tree and spectacular equally

old stupas, which draw white-clad pilgrims and orange-robed monks who pray and place flowers, oils, and talismans around their circumference, surrounding shrines, and Buddha statues. A must: climbing Sigiriya, aka Lion Rock, Sri Lanka's answer to Machu Picchu. Hire a local guide and mount the 1,202-steep moonstone steps to the winter palace ruins atop the citadel constructed by King Kashyapa I's subjects in the fifth century. It's said that his harem of roughly 500 lived atop the 660-foot-high rock with him for only 20 or so years before his empire was crushed by his half-brother (the rightful heir), and the site largely forgotten until the British began uncovering its cave frescoes, multiple swimming pools, and the "mirror wall" in the 1800s. While in that area, sleep among mewing peacocks in the stilted tree house-like villas of Ulagalla Resort.

The Indian Ocean is the main attraction at Owl and the Pussycat in Thalpe, an easy tuk tuk ride from Galle (Galle Fort, built in the 16th century by the Portuguese, is worth an amble) and pristine beaches Hikkaduwa (known in the '70s for the hippies who gathered there) and Unawatuna. The 16-suite boutique hotel has a quirky aesthetic that plays off shabby-chic textures, bold shades, and an Edward Lear poem that serves as a namesake. The mixed-media art is unmistakably Sri Lankan in spirit. Waves crash morning and evening up to the open-air restaurant, The Runcible Spoon, where dishes both Sri Lankan and Western feature the island's unrelenting heat. A pool, library, yoga deck, live music, and activities like swimming with turtles and fishing on stilts with locals keep things lively.

Nearby Tri on Koggala Lake delivers on ultimate Zen. It's 15 minutes from the beach, in case the mood to surf or dive strikes, but its idyllic location on the jungle-encircled lake doesn't make one want to go far. The food is beautiful and flower-strewn, and excursions include one to Cinnamon Island to meet locals harvesting the indigenous spice. There's plenty to do, such as swim in the photo-ready infinity pool—the edge of which blends into the smooth, silvery lake—and practice morning yoga above the treetops, with co-owner Lara Baumann, whose method of Quantum Yoga uses the doshas to dictate sequencing. Understandably, you'll want a few days at the eco-friendly paradise.

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