

The rise (and rise) of Sri Lanka



Words: Alix O'Neil.

Hailed as one of the world's top travel destinations for 2017, Sri Lanka has never been hotter. (In the metaphorical sense. Climatically, it's always been a scorcher.) It's easy to see why so many of us are making tracks for this Indian Ocean gem. Though relatively small – Sri Lanka is around the same size as the Republic of Ireland – the country lays claim to an incredibly diverse landscape, from deserted white beaches to verdant tea plantations and jungle dense with exotic wildlife. There are few places boasting as many Unesco World Heritage Sites and equally as seductive as Sri Lanka's natural beauty are her ancient temples. Then there's the food – rich curries, kottu – a popular street snack made from leftover rotis mixed with meat and spices, and hoppers, bowl-shaped fermented rice and coconut milk pancakes.

Sri Lanka hasn't had an easy run of it. A 20-year civil war and the 2004 tsunami had a profound impact on the country's tourism industry. But with peace restored and many of the areas devastated by the flooding reconstructed, investment has poured in, and grand resorts and boutique ventures alike are popping up all over the country. I had the tough job of finding out whether the luxury hotel scene lives up to the hype (Spoiler alert: it does), staying in three vastly different properties in Sri Lanka's cultural heartland, majestic hill country and the laid-back south coast.



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Jungle boogie

Most travellers bypass Colombo and head straight for the coast or inland. They're missing out. OK, so the capital can't compete with the fierce energy or cultural wealth of some of India's cities, but it has plenty to recommend it. Highlights include the Gangaramaya temple and Barefoot, an old villa converted into a cheering courtyard cafe and shop filled with hand-loomed textiles, clothing and gifts. Check out the impressive views at Cinnamon Red's rooftop bar or soak up the city's colonial past at Galle Face, Colombo's seafront grande dame hotel. For foodies, the Old Dutch Hospital houses Ministry of Crab, arguably the country's best restaurant. (It's owned by two former captains of the Sri Lanka cricket team and renowned chef Dharshan Munidasa). Bring an appetite – and a bib.

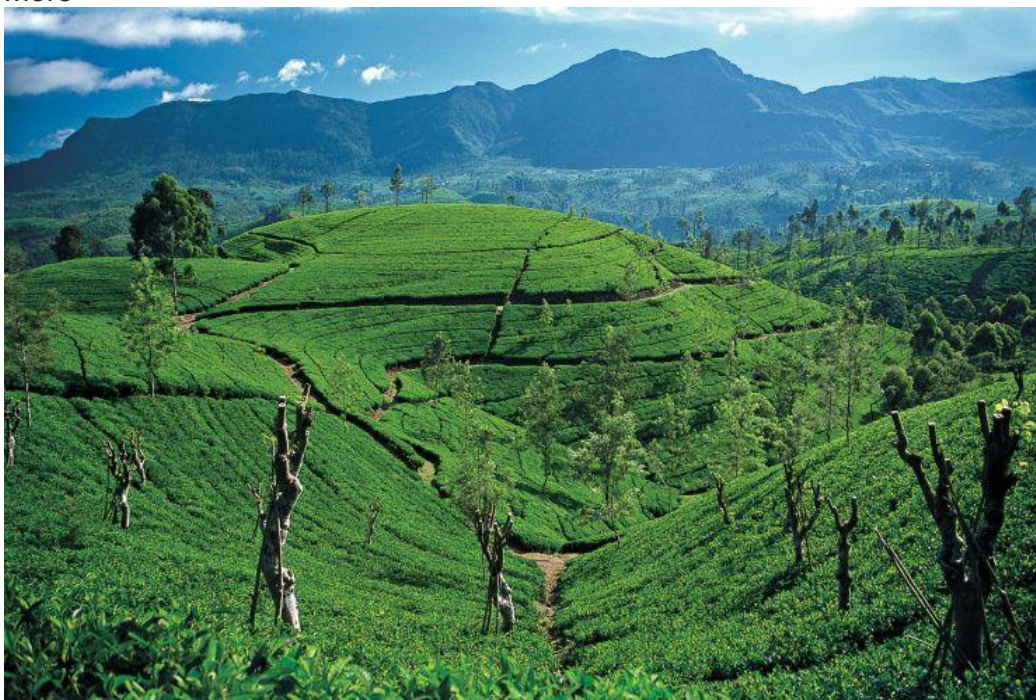
A four-hour drive from Colombo, beyond the beeping horns of brazen tuk tuk drivers and pavements packed with tiny shops selling everything from car parts to saris and king coconuts, is [Ulagalla](#). Hidden in the cultivated jungle of central Sri Lanka, the resort – 20 designer villas on stilts, dotted around a 60-acre estate that includes a spa, swimming pool and small fitness room – is the perfect base for exploring the crumbling temples of Anuradhapura and mighty ancient rock fortress Sigirya. Luxury with a conscience is the vibe here – there's a rain collect system and a solar farm that provides more than half of the energy needed to run the hotel.

Each of the 850sqft villas features a separate living room, floor-to-ceiling windows, romantic, canopy-draped beds and a private deck with plunge pool, while hi-tech facilities include a first-class wireless hi-fi system, so you can listen to your favourite tunes while you shower. But with monkeys and peacocks among the resort's abundant wildlife, you'll require nothing but the music of the jungle as the soundtrack to your stay.

Cycling to the main house for breakfast is a joy. You'll pass the observation deck, where sunset martinis are the order of the day. Lit by lanterns at night, the handsome Dutch colonial mansion is surrounded by a generous verandah and kitted out in hardwood furniture and big colonial paddle fans. Decamp here for G&Ts after marvelling at Buddhist stupas and the unforgettable sight of some 200 wild elephants at Kaudulla National Park.



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Tea time

With so much to see in the Cultural Triangle, there's little time to rest, which is why savvy travellers take to the hills for some R&R. It took us a gruelling nine hours to reach Ceylon Tea Trails, in the Dimbula district, but our efforts were amply rewarded.

Consisting of five renovated tea planters' bungalows 4,000ft up among the hills of the Bogawantalawa region, the Relais & Chateau property is widely considered Sri Lanka's

finest hotel. The views alone set it apart from its rivals. All misty lakes, manicured tea bushes and the occasional cluster of Tamil tea pluckers in vivid saris (the bungalows are spread out across a working estate and a fascinating tour of its tea factory is included in your package), there's an otherworldliness to the landscape.

Each of the superlatively comfortable properties boasts just a handful of rooms. It's a home from home – if your home has a spectacular infinity pool, croquet lawns and roomy, freestanding tubs looking out onto your own private garden.

You won't find the latest tech in your bedroom and if you want to watch TV you'll have to head to the communal lounge, though most guests prefer to sip aperitifs by the log fire, play board games or tuck into the excellent afternoon tea on the lawn. The luxury here is unapologetically old-school. Beside each of the four-poster beds is a call button for your butler, who'll bring you bed tea every morning before breakfast on the verandah. Meanwhile, the indulgent in-spa treatments include massages and baths drawn with cinnamon and jasmine leaves.

But the real magic of Tea Trails is the service. At Dunkeld, the newest bungalow to open last year, our chef talked us through the four-course dinner menu after breakfast and was happy to rustle up whatever we fancied during the day. (Lunch can also be arranged at one of the other bungalows.) And on our last evening, our butler surprised us with supper beneath the stars and surrounded by candles. He even managed to wangle a full moon.



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Beach bums

It's hard to top that kind of attentiveness and we were concerned the south coast's Cape Weligama (resplendentceylon/capeweligama), Ceylon Tea Trails' sister property and our final destination, would pale in comparison. Luckily, we had a blast. Weligama lacks the intimacy and uniqueness of CTT, but then, it's a much bigger resort.

Where the hotel really excels is the accommodation. We stayed in an Ocean View Villa, a vast bungalow with its own private verandah, huge bathroom complete with freestanding stone tub and steam room, a walk-in wardrobe and a giant bed looking out over the Indian Ocean. Additional luxuries include a Bluetooth sound system and well-stocked film library, a semi-private 15m infinity pool just steps away and top-notch butler service – shout out to Mandula, who couldn't have been more accommodating.

There are also two main pools – the stunning Moon pool with its dreamy sea views – a number of sleek bars and restaurants, and plenty of secluded spots to kick back in. Included in the price is a daily activity – the two-hour guided bike ride past rice paddies and cinnamon plantations is a great way to familiarise yourself with the area.

Dining on site isn't cheap and the portions are fairly modest, so it's advisable to venture outside on occasion. Besides, the faded colonial grandeur of Galle fort – a Unesco World Heritage Site – is unmissable. Built by the Dutch in 1663, the walled town is buzzing with boutique shops, galleries and restaurants. Have a pre-dinner cocktail at Amangalla, a chic hotel that pays tribute to its historic predecessor, the New Oriental Hotel. Then enjoy fresh-from-the-ocean seafood around a fairy light-strewn courtyard pool at the upscale Fort Printers.

More affordable options also abound. Surfers' favourite Mirissa Beach is lined with hip bars and restaurants – at Zephyr, we dined barefoot in the sand on the best calamari of my life and toasted our last night with beer and homemade curry at clifftop shack Akilla's Kitchen, before heading back to Weligama for one final sleep in that big old bed.

Ulagalla, from £300 per night B&B; Ceylon Tea Trails, from £525 per night on an all-inclusive basis; Cape Weligama, from £358 per night B&B