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16 of the most spectacular Indian Ocean holidays



In the Indian Ocean one finds a region like no other CREDIT: CREDIT: IAN TROWER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/IAN TROWER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By **Harriet O'Brien**, DESTINATION EXPERT

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Sri Lanka

Romance ****

Activities *****

Family *****

Service and luxury ***

Value ****

Sri Lanka (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/sri-lanka/>) dazzles. It's a land of iridescent birds, piercing-green paddy fields, lakes festooned with pink lotus flowers, misty hills clad in manicured tea bushes. Wild elephants roam its forests, leopards stalk its jungles (Yala National Park is said to have the world's highest concentration of these elegant if elusive cats). The interior is strewn with ancient Buddhist shrines and excavated remnants of historic kingdoms.

This is a great place for families; the Sri Lankans are renowned for their child-friendliness, and there's a huge amount to do here. What's more, in September last year the World Health Organisation declared the country malaria-free.

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Sri Lanka's green and lush tea hills CREDIT: CREDIT: IAN TROWER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/IAN TROWER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

A little land mass about the size of Ireland, Sri Lanka is fringed with sandy shores. But it would be an oversight to regard the island solely as a beach destination. There's so much to explore in the gem-like interior – and besides, the coastal stretches, although attractive, are not quite on a par with the serene looks and levels of seaside luxury that the Maldives and Seychelles offer.

Above all, this is a fabulous island to tour. Visit the Cultural Triangle, a central area liberally dotted with astonishing religious and historic landmarks, several of which are World Heritage Sites; take in vibrant wildlife in one of the 100 or so parks and reserves; enjoy a spectacular train ride through tea country; wander the narrow lanes of colonial Dutch Galle. Then end an island tour with a beach stay; the east coast around Trincomalee offers palm-fringed white sands, but as yet not a wide choice of accommodation. The south coast has some stunning hotels and presents much natural drama, with big seas and great surfing possibilities.

Deciding when to visit can be tricky. The country has two monsoon seasons that affect different parts of the island. Generally, the hilly interior and the south and west coasts are best between October and April, the east coast from March to August.

Of course, in the past Sri Lanka was much troubled; the civil war ended nearly eight years ago and since then tourism has grown rapidly – from just under 600,000 international visitors in 2009 to 1.5 million in 2016. The island's infrastructure has vastly improved; hotels are becoming ever more sophisticated. The Uga Escapes group started in 2010 and offers a string of well-priced boutique hotels; Tri, an eye-poppingly chic retreat on Lake Koggala emphasising wellness breaks, opened in December 2015. Meanwhile, the Resplendent Ceylon group has been setting ever higher standards of luxury: its Ceylon Tea Trails, a group of gorgeously refurbished tea planters' bungalows, was established 10 years ago; Cape Weligama, a clifftop south coast resort exuding glamour, was launched in 2014; and this autumn the company will be opening a spectacularly sited tented camp in the Yala National Park.

23 reasons to visit Sri Lanka



View gallery

What's so special?

The sheer beauty and variety of the landscapes; the dramatic ancient sites; the cultural richness; the remarkable wildlife.

Way to go

Fly direct from London Heathrow to Colombo with Sri Lankan (about 12 hours). Other carriers offer services requiring a connecting stop, including Qatar Airways and Gulf Air.

Where to stay

Stylish package

Original Travel (020 3582 4990; originaltravel.co.uk (<http://originaltravel.co.uk>)) offers a seven-night tour with bells and whistles. A three-night stay at Ceylon Tea Trails followed by four nights at Cape Weligama costs from £4,150 per person including internal travel, flights, all meals and drinks at Tea Trails and breakfast at Cape Weligama.

Natural wonders Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com (<http://ampersandtravel.com>)) has a 16-night itinerary exploring Sri Lanka's natural highlights. It takes in white-water rafting on the Kelani river, game drives in the Yala National

Park and a south coast beach stay. From £3,500 per person including flights, transfers and b&b in boutique hotels.



The temple complex of Dalada Maligawa is a must in Kandy CREDIT: CREDIT: ROBERTHARDING / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/ROBERTHARDING / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Boutique bliss Steppes Travel (01285 601050; steppestravel.co.uk (<http://steppestravel.co.uk>)) offers a seven-day tour from £2,340 per person, including flights, transfers, driver-guide for four days, sightseeing in Kandy and Galle and b&b accommodation in boutique hotels – Uga Residence in Colombo, Kandy House in Kandy and Fort Bazaar in Galle.

Wellness week Healing Holidays (020 7135 2436; healingholidays.co.uk (<http://healingholidays.co.uk>)) offers a six-night stay at Tri hotel (see page 5) on Lake Koggala from £1,499 per person. This includes flights from Heathrow, private transfers, half-board accommodation, yoga classes and Ayurvedic treatments.

Good value

An eight-night trip around Sri Lanka costs from £1,079 per person with Hayes & Jarvis (01293 762456; hayesandjarvis.co.uk (<http://hayesandjarvis.co.uk>)). It takes in the sites of the Cultural Triangle – Sigiriya fortress, Polonnaruwa and Dambulla caves – as well as the Pinnawala elephant sanctuary. Includes flights from Gatwick and b&b accommodation.

Seychelles

Romance *****

Activities *****

Family ****

Service and luxury *****

Value ***

The Garden of Eden was located on Praslin island in the Seychelles – so claimed Britain’s General Charles George Gordon (later hero of Khartoum) in the 1880s. Evangelical fanatic though he was, he had a compelling point. The Seychelles is a