



SPLENDID SRI LANKA



Less well known than its northern neighbour India, this drop-pearl shaped tropical Island is a must visit, for its genuinely kind people, fascinating cultural and historical attractions, delicious food and lush vegetation full of endemic birds. In certain areas, you may even encounter an Asian elephant.

By Gillian McLaren



Sri Lanka is an unforgettable destination and though it is as full of energy, life and colour as India, it is a more gentle place, with way less people. Based in owner run boutique hotels, selected by Sri Lanka in Style, an exclusive ground handling operation, you can have a luxury holiday and still experience the authentic and exotic aspects of the nation.

In the traffic on this vibrant island, even in big cities like Colombo and Kandy, tuk-tuks galore accelerate into spaces between older models of cars, some lovingly restored from the 1950s. Motorbikes manage to transport whole families of five or even six. You may see domestic water buffalo pulling an old-fashioned wooden cart. Traffic is relatively slow, so it takes time to travel between areas, which gives a pleasant pace to a holiday here. Trains are fun and you will meet the gentle locals, who insist you share their home-cooked meals. Preferably choose first class, as it is air-conditioned, with individual padded seats. Most convenient of all, is the private, air-conditioned car with personal guide that Sri Lanka in Style can provide as a transport option between all or some of your hotels.

Casa Colombo - a quirky hotel with zany décor, where you have your own butler and excellent food is served in a restaurant with a mural of gurus in various yoga positions in the sky – is a good base if you want to spend a few days seeing the sights of Colombo, the capital City. The post tsunami and post-war boom in the economy is visible, with many new buildings being erected and roads being improved. You can walk, take a taxi or tuk-tuk from Casa Colombo to shopping precincts, including popular ex-pat haunt Barefoot known for quality clothes, books, souvenirs or a cup of Ceylon tea.

If you want to ignore the bustle of big city and prefer a retreat with a luxurious spa, or need to overnight when you fly into or out of Sri Lanka, The Wallawwa is perfect, as it is fifteen minutes from the airport and has comfortable rooms and a big swimming pool in verdant gardens, where you can spot palm squirrels. The restaurant serves exceptional food, including succulent prawns from the Negumbo area.



Religion is integrated into the daily life of the Sri Lankan people, so each morning women and children pick flowers to place on shrines in their home or temple. Buddhist and Hindu shrines and temples abound, from smaller ones in villages to grand ancient edifices in the cities or sites of pilgrimage. Some holy sites draw pilgrims of many religions, like the famous temple of Kataragama in the nearest village to Yala National Park, which is visited by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims alike. It is common for members of one religion to visit another religion's temple to ask favours of the other god. Within a family, you may see a shrine to Buddha, alongside a shrine to Ganesh.



To visit the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, it is convenient to stay in Elephant Stables, which has elegant mid nineteenth-century colonial furniture and crafts in six exclusive rooms with glorious views of rolling mountain peaks. Transported in a lovingly restored Austin 1954 to see the cultural sights of Kandy or the neat Botanical Gardens, you draw wide smiles from the local people.

If you want to be further from city, but still accessible to Kandy, Bougainvillea - located near Rajawella, in the Victoria Golf and Country Resort - has an achingly lovely view of the foothills of Knuckles mountain range as you gaze over an infinity swimming pool. Parrots streak through shimmering light in luminous green flashes, a Black-Hooded oriole calls with an evocative liquid note and a Garden lizard with spiked skin sits like a sculpture on a sun-warmed rock: an idyllic spot for a Tanqueray gin and tonic. Plan for several days here, as it is a restful and peaceful spot, with agreeable walks, pleasing cuisine and impeccable service.



If you can bear to leave the tranquil surrounds of Bougainvillea, interesting day trips include a guided visit to Tamarind Gardens - a small Sri Lankan farm - near a village where you can watch home industries like incense-making, a jeweller crafting wedding necklaces, worshipers preparing food for a religious celebration, or chat with people in their homes. At Kandy Samadi Centre, for Ayurvedic consultations and Yoga, you can have a Sri Lankan meal and bathe in the cool river or under a waterfall. Led by a guide, a day hike in the Knuckles Mountains, with its ravishing panoramas, is invigorating.

Thought to be the site of the ancient Phoenician city of Tarshish - where Jonah fled to escape from God and King Solomon drew ivory - Galle on the West Coast has an important historical fort. Close to Galle, but in a quiet village street is Why House, where you can whittle away the hours in colonial comfort, when you have walked the high walls of Galle Fort, which face the ocean and overlook the natural harbour. Fishermen sail out each morning, returning with their catch to haggle with buyers. Dozens of orange coconuts are carried on bicycles, to provide coconut water for a refreshing drink.

Why House is an oasis of calm and quiet, with palms and cinnamon trees in manicured gardens next to a long swimming pool, excellent for a decent swim. All rooms have a garden view, king-size four-poster bed with pure cotton linen and throws, tasteful pieces of furniture and a spacious shower-room with fluffy white towels. On a leisurely morning walk, you can see sari-clad mothers taking their children to the local school. Throughout the land, girls wear modest white dresses with ties and the lads wear white long pants, shirt and tie. Tuk-tuks specialised as a bakery or lottery seller trundle past, playing tinny music to attract the people walking to work. The beach is nearby, with golden sands, crashing waves and the unique sight of men fishing whilst seated on tall sticks placed in the sea.



After a walk on the beach or a few lengths in the pool, you welcome the breakfast in the open-sided restaurant at Why House. Well-trained staff serve juice squeezed from fresh local fruit like papaya, mango or woodapple, freshly baked pastries and bread, as well as a choice of cooked English fare or a variety of Sri Lankan curries with stringhoppers - a type of rice noodle. Of course, a selection of the finest Ceylon teas is always available.

Although Asian Elephants do wander freely in certain regions, it is becoming more rare and most are found within the safety of the National Parks. For a memorable safari where you have a good chance of seeing the Sri Lankan sub-species of leopard, Sloth Bear, Asian Elephant and hundreds of bird species, stay with Leopard Safaris in their tented camp near Yala 1's less known entrance gate. Enjoy being pampered in a customised vehicle with a well-informed naturalist.

The home of Ceylon tea; an island with major world religions permeating everyday life in a fascinating way; site of ancient civilisations and script dotted with fecund jungle vegetation and wildlife; Sri Lanka is a destination not to be missed.

Photos by [Iga Motylska](#)

CONTACT DETAILS:

Sri Lanka in Style is skilled at organising bespoke trips, for discerning travelers who want excellent service in well-run boutique properties.

www.srilankainstyle.com

Getting there: For air tickets from your hometown to Sri Lanka, contact Debbie Taylor-Auld of Travel Avenue: debbie@travelave.co.za / www.travelave.co.za

Casa Colombo - www.casacolombo.com

The Wallawwa - www.thewallawwa.com

Why House - www.whyhousesrilanka.com / www.mantiscollection.com

Bougainvillea - www.bv-retreat.com

Elephant Stables - www.elephantstables.com

Leopard Safaris - www.Leopardsafaris.com / noel@leopardsafaris.com

Other recommended places to stay:

Ulagalla Beautiful private villas with pools surrounded by jungle-type vegetation for nature walks, trips to fascinating ancient Anuradhapura, plus delectable dining.

www.ugaescapes.com/ulagalla

Ceylon Tea Trails

A Relais & Châteaux member property in a high altitude area, which has four authentic bungalows in tea plantations, with spectacular views from walking trails.

www.teatrails.com / sales.teatrails@resplendentceylon.com