

Destination Sri Lanka

When the noted writer Sir Arthur C Clarke made his home in Sri Lanka in 1956, he claimed the island jewel of the Indian Ocean was the best place in the world from which to view the universe. The author of *2001: A Space Odyssey* passed away in 2008, but no doubt the futurist would have logged on to Google Earth to gaze back at his island home from an online universe. And concealed in the sky-high imagery of this teardrop-shaped nation, he would have recognised an amazing diversity for somewhere so compact.

Fringing the coasts is an array of gently arcing golden-sand beaches, now making a comeback after the devastation wreaked by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Zoom closer to spy the giant tanks (artificial reservoirs) built by the first Sinhalese rulers around the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa. In the Hill Country, a layer of cotton wool clouds obscures the view, mirroring the misty mornings travellers often experience in this area of waterfalls and verdant tea plantations.

To the northwest, a gossamer-thin land bridge *almost* connects fragile Sri Lanka to the modern juggernaut that is India. Two and a half decades of civil war reinforces this bridge to Tamil Nadu is as much cultural as geographic.

The traditional conflict between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009. International pressure is now on President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government to craft a durable political solution. Significant issues of ethnic and economic exclusion remain for Sri Lanka's Tamil population, and it's inconceivable that the path ahead will be free of tension and violence. Key questions remain. Will the rights of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority be taken up by less-radical advocates than the LTTE? And will the LTTE just fade away, or regroup and carry on its struggle in a less-structured, but potentially more threatening, manner? The world should also expect bitter recriminations from both sides as the cloud of propaganda that masked the final months of the conflict finally clears.

But it's wrong to imply travelling in Sri Lanka is challenging or dangerous. Irrespective of their cultural background, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim locals will welcome you with pride. Pride in their criminally underrated cuisine, pride in their national parks and wildlife, and – especially – pride in their national cricket team. Whether you're a humble three-wheeler jockey or a British-trained lawyer or doctor, the sport that frequently stops the nation is always worthy of discussion. How will the boys do in the upcoming series against New Zealand? Will the country be ready to host the World Cup in 2011? And have you seen how much that opening batsman from Kandy is earning in the new Indian Premier League?

From the days of Arab traders in the 7th century AD, Sri Lanka has always been buffeted by the ebb and flow of international commerce. In a new century, the debate is now about expatriate workers returning home jobless from the Gulf States, or the roller coaster price of tea. And in a country dependent on fuel imports, whatever happened to the government's idea of converting all of Sri Lankan's three million three-wheelers from petrol to gas?

Faced with funding a war and weathering a global financial crisis, Sri Lanka's proud population has been doing it tough for a few years. But equipped with a stellar combination of scenery, culture and history, a growing focus on sustainable tourism and (hopefully) a more settled society, Sri Lanka is firmly back on the radar for curious travellers seeking unique experiences.

FAST FACTS

Population: 21.1 million

Life expectancy: female 77%, male 73%

Adult literacy: female 90%, male 95%

Number of universities: 11

Year women received the right to vote: 1931

Number of three-wheelers: 3 million

Cost of a new three-wheeler: US\$3500

Number of waterfalls: 103

Highest waterfall: Bambarakanda Falls (240m)

GDP per capita: US\$4400

Getting Started

Compared with travelling in nearby India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, getting around Sri Lanka is enjoyably straightforward, but a little planning will go a long way towards making your trip more fulfilling, hassle-free and fun.

In the south and west of Sri Lanka and in the central Hill Country, you'll find a good range of accommodation from simple guest houses to heritage boutique hotels. In the recently war-ravaged north and east, options may be more limited. Public transport by bus or train is uniformly cheap, and even the cost of a car and driver is affordable compared with other destinations.

Sri Lanka's last 25 years have been beset by war and natural disaster. Hopefully the country can now look forward to a more settled future. Irrespective of what tomorrow brings to the Indian Ocean's fabled isle, you can be sure of a warm response from a well-educated, curious and welcoming population.

WHEN TO GO

Climatically speaking, the driest (and best) seasons in Sri Lanka are from December to March for the west coast, the south coast and the Hill Country, and from April to September for the ancient cities region and the east coast.

December through March are also the months when most foreign tourists visit, the majority of them escaping the European winter. During the Christmas to New Year holiday season, in particular, accommodation anywhere on the island can be tight due to the huge influx of foreign visitors.

July/August is the time of the Kandy Esala Perahera, the 10-day festival honouring the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha, and also the time for the Kataragama festival. In both towns accommodation during the festivals is very difficult to come by, and rates usually double or treble. Be sure to book rooms well in advance. Accommodation is also tight in Nuwara Eliya in mid-April, when many expatriate Sri Lankans return home to celebrate the Sinhalese New Year. Buses and trains are even more crowded at this time, crammed with local Sri Lankans returning to their hometowns for the New

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Bringing along a windbreaker, parka or jumper for cool nights in the Hill Country.
- Packing a travel umbrella.
- Checking with a Sri Lankan embassy or consulate to see whether you need a visa (p301).
- Confirming what medicines or inoculations you need (p312).
- Checking government travel advisories for the current security situation (see boxed text, p293). If you're heading into the North or East, consider registering your travel plans online with your government.
- Serious insect repellent to deal with the serious mosquitoes (p314) you'll probably encounter.
- Building up your chilli tolerance at your local South Asian restaurant of choice.
- Learning just a little about cricket, Sri Lanka's national sport (p53).
- Sunscreen – it can be expensive and hard to find in Sri Lanka.
- Leaving room in your luggage for the cheap-as-chips branded clothing you can pick up for a song at Colombo's House of Fashion (p98) or Nuwara Eliya's market (p183).

FOREIGNER PRICING

You will find Sri Lankans trying to overcharge tourists for anything from a bus fare to a gemstone necklace. In a country recovering from civil war and with a fragile economy that's at the mercy of the turbulence of global trade, it's not really that surprising. Most hotels have one price for foreigners and another for Sri Lankans and expat residents; often the difference will be as much as 70%.

Expect to pay significantly higher foreigners' entry fees, up to 10 or 20 times higher than those paid by locals, at some government-operated attractions. This is especially true of 'Must See' sights like the Pinnewalla Elephant Orphanage or the Ancient Cities, both of which have recorded an increase in admission fees of up to 400% in recent years. It's therefore not surprising that a few ordinary Sri Lankans occasionally try and secure a few extra rupees along the way.

It's not all-encompassing behaviour, though, and you're just as likely to be treated with respect and get the local price when you stop for a roadside king coconut or a few snacks at a local bakery.

At the time of writing annual inflation in Sri Lanka was running at around 10%. Economic commentators were expecting this level of inflation to be maintained for the next few years.

Year holiday season. For more information on the Sri Lankan New Year, see boxed text, p295.

Sri Lanka's climate means that it is always the 'right' beach season somewhere on the coast. The weather doesn't follow strict rules, though – it often seems to be raining where it should be sunny, and sunny where it should be raining. Rainfall tends to be emphatic – streets can become flooded in what seems like only minutes. Chances are the weather will soon clear up and sunny skies will make a speedy return. An exception is the Hill Country, an area that can be covered in a stubborn grey mist for days at a time. On the other hand, you could get lucky there at any time of the year and enjoy crystalline blue skies.

Out-of-season travel definitely has its advantages. Accommodation owners and transport providers are more likely to be open to negotiation, international airfares are often lower and you'll probably get a warmer welcome from the locals. It certainly doesn't rain *all* the time during the low season, but make sure that you pack a compact umbrella just to cover all bases.

The civil conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military ended as a traditionally fought war in May 2009. Most of the LTTE's leadership were reported killed, and the unknown for the months and years ahead is whether or not a seriously weakened LTTE reverts to an increase in suicide attacks and bombings in the rest of the country. In Sri Lanka, be prudent when attending large gatherings, including protests and festivals.

Bombings of public transport have traditionally been of local buses, so if you stick to the air-conditioned and intercity buses, the situation will be significantly more secure. It's also worth noting that although the civil war caused 70,000 deaths from 1983 to 2008, that figure included no foreigners.

COSTS & MONEY

Sri Lanka is more expensive than India, but costs are still very reasonable. Simple double rooms with bathroom, mosquito net and fan cost about Rs 1000 to 1750, while an international-class hotel room may run to Rs 25,000 or more. Most top-end hotels quote room rates in US dollars, or increasingly euros, but US dollars, euros or rupees are all accepted.

See Climate Charts (p292) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

Air-con bus Colombo–Anuradhapura Rs 350

2nd-class train Ella–Haputale Rs 50

Lunch packet Rs 125

Cultural Triangle round ticket Rs 5400

Midrange guest house double room (Kandy) Rs 2200

The cost of accommodation in the touristy areas drops considerably out of season. Expect to pay triple the usual accommodation price in Kandy during the Kandy Esala Perahera and in Nuwara Eliya during the April New Year season. Because of the lack of tourism infrastructure following long years of war, room rates are also much higher than the norm in Jaffna.

Local food is reasonably priced, though it's about three times more expensive in guest houses than in local restaurants. Dinner costs around Rs 400 to 550 at a guest house, and as little as Rs 150 at a local restaurant. Dinner at the country's better restaurants costs around Rs 2500 per person.

At national parks, entry fees plus (often mandatory) 4WD hire and other extras add up to something between Rs 4000 and 7000.

Public transport is cheap. Hiring a car (or van) and driver for a day is around Rs 5500 to 6600.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

At the time of writing Sri Lanka was emerging from 25 years of civil war, and the global financial crisis was decreasing the income of many communities. Now, more than ever, is a good opportunity to take advantage of Sri Lanka's growing focus on sustainable tourism and responsible travel. For information on travelling sustainably within Sri Lanka, see the following websites.

TRAVELLING IN COMMUNITY STYLE *Ethan Gelber*

In this new age of green schemes, community-based tourism (CBT) in Sri Lanka has emerged as an important ethical travel trend. It encompasses initiatives collectively owned and operated by – and/or benefiting – marginalised villages. With the gulf between haves and have-nots gaping ever wider, redistributing a little wealth to people otherwise disengaged from mainstream tourism isn't a bad thing. Especially since CBT meets different, nonmainstream travel criteria championed by responsible travellers.

Until 2006 CBT activity in Sri Lanka was definitely on the rise, albeit somewhat hidden from view. By early 2009, however, due to the political upheaval, many initiatives had suffered terribly or had been suspended. When conditions improve, most will welcome you more enthusiastically than ever.

Use the following information and sources to help requite the awesome generosity of the people whose land you are exploring. You will be giving directly to those who need it most. Other worthy projects are detailed on *LOCALternative Sri Lanka – a responsible travel map* (see p297).

At One with Nature

Communities are rooted in place. Now some of them are focused on caring for the natural beauty around them, not just exploiting it.

Emace (www.bolgodalakesrilanka.com) Leads a community charge to rehabilitate and protect Bolgoda Lake. See p70.

IFS-Popham Arboretum (www.sacredcat.org/rukragaganno/projects.php) Near Dambulla, Sri Lanka's only dry-zone arboretum is managed (with a visitors facility) by the Ruk Rakaganno (Guardians of Trees) charity.

Ittavana Mangrove Cultural Centre (☎ 034-492 3624) Inland from Aluthgama, trained by nonprofit environmental consultants (www.eecsrilanka.com), village entrepreneurs staff a mangrove forest visitors centre.

Nagenahiru (☎ 091-225 6621; nagenahiru@mail.ewisl.net) Boat tours, local eats and crafts sales are part of fishing-community projects around Madu Ganga Estuary (p70), spearheaded by Nagenahiru.

Rainforest Rescue International (www.earthrestoration.org) Projects include guided forest, plant nursery and spice 'safaris'. See p73.

Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS; www.slwcs.org) Innovative wildlife conservation programs involve community and volunteer participation. See below.

Responsible Tourism Partnership Sri Lanka (www.responsibletourismsrilanka.org) This umbrella organisation combines the membership of the Ministry of Tourism, community-based tourism projects and some of Sri Lanka's most influential travel companies. Download its excellent Travellers' Tips summary.

Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS; www.slwcs.org) Recognised by the UN in 2008 for community-based projects that made a tangible impact on poverty, the SLWCS has opportunities for volunteering. See p302 for more information on volunteering in Sri Lanka.

Lakdasun (www.lakdasun.com) Visit the helpful forums on this website to get up-to-date information from knowledgeable Sri Lankan locals on how to 'Discover, explore and conserve the natural beauty of Sri Lanka'.

LOCALternative Sri Lanka (www.localalternative.com) Information on an excellent map (see p297), which details 170 opportunities to practise responsible tourism in Sri Lanka. For our pick of the best, see boxed text, opposite.

Responsible Travel (www.responsible-travel.org) A no-nonsense website with common-sense advice on travelling with a conscience.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Considering what a colourful and culturally rich destination Sri Lanka is, it's surprising that more writers haven't left a trail of ink or keyboard strokes chronicling their experiences in the country.

Make Yourself at Home

Ecolodges are unique, down-to-earth and increasingly upscale, and some are staffed and supplied by – but also subsidise – local communities. For the latter, try **Galapita** (www.galapita.com), **Samakanda** (www.samakanda.org), **Tree Tops Jungle Lodge** (www.treetopsjunglelodge.com) and **Ulpotha** (www.ulpotha.com).

It's taken time and host-family training, but homestays are finally attracting interest. **Sinharaja's Mederapitiya Homestays** (☎ 041-227 3821, 077 386 3243) and **Kudawa Homestays** (☎ 045-222 5643, 077 386 3243) have strong community anchors. For more details, see p206 and p206.

Two more unique projects built around community participation:

Mahausakande (www.mahausakande.org) Tropical forest regeneration, holistic and healthy living and community support wrapped up in one; see p210.

Ranpathwila Enterprise (☎ 011-493 8800; sleco@sltnet.lk) Spend a night in a simple facility, cared and cooked for by villagers united by an ecofriendly poverty-reduction program.

Building Bridges Between People

Arugam Bay and Pottuvil host CBT initiatives, like the **Community Eco-Guide Association** (cega.arugambay@yahoo.com), Arugam Bay Tourism Association (p251), fishermen society–managed Sea Safaris and Pottuvil Lagoon Ecotours. For more information, see p250.

CBT work sometimes needs a local mentor. Here are several of Sri Lanka's most able:

Gami Seva Sevana (www.gamisevasevana.org) The simple integrated hostel's meals are examples of this organisation's commitment to social and environmental security through organic farming and human development.

Responsible Tourism Partnership Sri Lanka (www.responsibletourismsrilanka.org) This member-based organisation helps promote sustainable tourism in Sri Lanka; see opposite.

Sarvodaya (www.sarvodaya.org) The multiproject Community Tourism Initiative of this large national charity emphasises direct communication between visitor and host.

Sewalanka Foundation (www.sewalanka.org) A busy national charity driving the development of a country-wide CBT network. Volunteering is also possible; see p302.

Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation (www.ecotourismsrilanka.net) This pioneering ecotourism organisation continues to help pave the way for CBT projects.

Vinivida NGO Coalition (☎ 032-225 8806; vinividaorg@yahoo.com) Helps 50-plus Puttalam-area community-based organisations empower underprivileged people. Traditional crafts is one tack.

Woodlands Network (www.visitwoodlandsnetwork.org) The long-standing CBT leader in Uva Province. See p194.

TOP PICKS

BRILLIANT BEACHES

Sri Lanka's east, south and lower west coasts are lined with bays, coves and beaches. Here are our favourite sea-and-sand getaways. The 2004 tsunami destroyed many coastal buildings and devastated many beach landscapes. Hard-working efforts from local communities and foreign volunteers removed tonnes of debris to quickly restore beaches such as Arugam Bay and Unawatuna.

- Kalkudah Bay Beach (p258)
- Induruwa (p112)
- Mirissa (p138)
- Unawatuna (p132)
- Nilaveli (p265)
- Arugam Bay (p248)

HILL COUNTRY SCENERY

Sri Lanka's Hill Country covers a huge chunk of the island and almost all of it could be classed as 'scenic'. For truly dramatic views, however, these are our top picks. Just remember to pack a spare memory card and be ready for a waterfall around (almost) every corner.

- Adam's Peak (p175)
- Haputale (p190)
- Knuckles Range (p175)
- Horton Plains National Park (p187)
- Ella (p195)
- Kandy Lake (p159)

ECOFRIENDLY SLEEPS

Sri Lanka's emerging sustainable tourism ethos means there's an increasing number of ecologically switched-on accommodation options. Many also offer other activities, including yoga, Ayurvedic treatments and excellent organic food.

- Kandy Samadhicentre (p174)
- Ranweli Holiday Village (p110)
- Selara River Eco Resort (p204)
- Rafter's Retreat (p178)
- Mangrove Cabanas & Mangrove Chalets (p144)
- Jetwing Vil Uyana (p220)

WINNING WAYS WITH WILDLIFE

For such a small island, Sri Lanka offers a diverse number of ways to interact with the local fauna. Many projects have a strong conservation focus, so you can feel good and do good at the same time.

- Turtle conservation (see boxed text, p116)
- Bird-watching in Sinharaja Forest Reserve (p204)
- Elephant Transit Home (p203)
- Mangrove cruises in Pottuvil Lagoon (p248)
- Whale watching (see boxed text, p142)
- Leopards in Yala National Park (p150)

Running in the Family by Michael Ondaatje recounts a return to Sri Lanka in the 1970s after growing up here in the '40s and '50s, and captures many of the little oddities that make up life in Sri Lanka.

RL Brohier records his travels around Sri Lanka as a British surveyor in the first half of the 20th century in *Seeing Ceylon* and *Discovering Ceylon*.

Both books capture lots of intriguing historical tidbits that are hard to find elsewhere (even if they're not 100% accurate, on occasion).

A Village in the Jungle by Leonard Woolf is a sombre account of local life in Hambantota. First published in 1913, it is in the same vein as George Orwell's *Burmese Days*.

Woolf in Ceylon by Christopher Ondaatje (older brother of Michael) is part travelogue and part history revisiting Sri Lanka through the writings of Leonard Woolf. It's packed with excellent photography.

An engaging, insightful story, *July*, by Karen Roberts, tells of two neighbours – one Sinhalese, one Tamil – growing up together.

Elmo Jayawardena picked up literary prizes with *Sam's Story*, the tale of an illiterate village boy working in Colombo. It's a simple, often light-hearted read that deftly deals with the wider problems of society.

Sindbad in Serendib by Richard Boyle is an eclectic series of essays about the legendary sailor's voyages around this fabled isle.

More recently Paul Theroux included Sri Lanka in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, retracing his original railway journey chronicled in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. As part of his time in Sri Lanka for *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, Theroux writes about meeting Arthur C Clarke before the death of the *2001: A Space Odyssey* author in 2008.

Published in 2007, *A Year in Green Tea and Tuk-Tuks* by Rory Spowers recounts what happens when a BBC journalist moves his family to Sri Lanka to transform a tea estate into an organic farm. It's a colourful read, and available at bookshops in Colombo and Kandy. For more information on Spowers' Samakanda project, see boxed text, p18.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Art Sri Lanka (www.artsrilanka.org) A gateway to Sri Lankan high culture, this website covers art history, contemporary art and religious art from various traditions.

Colombo Page (www.colombopage.com) Handy news portal summarising Sri Lankan news.

Ground Views (www.groundviews.org) Excellent citizen journalism website that provides an essential balance to the skewed reporting elsewhere on the internet.

InfoLanka (www.infolanka.com) This excellent and wildly diverse website includes recipes, news, travel, nature and entertainment information. Be prepared to spend at least a couple of hours here.

Lanka Library (www.lankalibrary.com) Travel, archaeology, nature and current events.

LMD (www.lmd.lk) Online version of Sri Lanka's leading business magazine, the *Lanka Monthly Digest*. Also provides opinionated comment on Sri Lankan politics and society.

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (www.peace-srilanka.org) This website's regular newsletters provide a neutral and conciliatory balance to the overtly Sinhalese and Tamil point of view most commonly available online.

Sri Lanka Tourist Board (www.srilankatourism.org) The official tourism website, with tonnes of information. It's a good starting point, and its monthly e-newsletter is worth subscribing to.

Travel Sri Lanka (www.travelsrilanka.com) The substantial array of information was gleaned from the smart regular print magazine of the same name.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CAPITAL, COAST & HILLS

Three to Four Weeks / Colombo to Kandy

Start in **Colombo** (p75), sampling some of Sri Lanka's finest cuisine and visiting the city's vibrant Buddhist temples. Then hug the coast south, stopping off in **Hikkaduwa** (p117) for cafe-hopping, sunbathing and surfing. Slow down even more in the languid streets of **Galle** (p124) and its 17th-century Dutch city-within-a-fort. Maybe splurge on a restored colonial villa and local art.

From Galle, head inland to **Horton Plains National Park** (p187) for an early-morning start to visit World's End. Squeeze in a side trip to the 240m-high **Bambarakanda Falls** (p189), Sri Lanka's tallest waterfall, and spend a night or two experiencing the cool climate and British colonial heritage of **Nuwara Eliya** (p180).

Continue north to Kandy, stopping off for tea tasting at **Labookellie Tea Factory** (p179) and, if you haven't had enough waterfall action, **Ramboda Falls** (p179). **Kandy** (p157), Sri Lanka's main cultural centre, offers its mild climate, colonial architecture, frequent festivals and sumptuous Buddhist temples.

From Kandy it's a relatively easy ride back to Colombo, or straight to the airport at Negombo.

This 547km route takes you through Sri Lanka's highlights in under a month. Lie on palm-fringed beaches, check out colonial architecture and stare at stunning Hill Country views. Just watch out for the traffic on the Colombo–Galle road.



NEGOMBO & ANCIENT CITIES Two to Three Weeks / Negombo to Mihintale

As the seaside city of **Negombo** (p105) is closer than Colombo to Bandaranaike International Airport, it's easy enough to kick off your trip here and skip the capital altogether. Whether or not you decide to spend a night or more in the historic city, Negombo is worth a stop to see the historic remains of the Dutch fort, charming Catholic churches, bustling fish markets and the rich marshlands of **Muthurajawela** (p110).

From Negombo, head northeast to North Central Province and into the Cultural Triangle, so-called because it contains three of the country's most significant historical sites; it's also a centre for handicrafts. Your first stop should be **Dambulla** (p214), a series of cave shrines painted with vivid Buddhist murals. From here it's a short jaunt to **Sigiriya** (p217), a 200m-tall rock outcrop that was once either a palace or a monastery (depending on whom you believe) and is truly one of the island's most amazing sights.

Further northeast the former royal capital of **Polonnaruwa** (p221) offers an inspiring collection of Buddhist sculptures and monastery ruins dating back nearly a thousand years. In the vicinity, **Minneriya National Park** (p228) is well worth a visit to view the largest herds of wild elephants in Sri Lanka, along with plenty of other wildlife.

Next head northwest to **Anuradhapura** (p231), an even older ex-royal capital with an extensive, well-preserved historical park containing the ruins of monasteries, palaces and dagobas (stupas). Stop off in **Mihintale** (p238), just 13km east of Anuradhapura, to view its small yet impressive collection of monastic ruins and dagobas, and the remains of an ancient Ayurvedic hospital.



This 347km trip through Sri Lanka's ancient cities region takes in centuries-old dagobas (stupas), monasteries, sculptures and palaces as it rolls across hilly green plains and farming valleys and meanders through arid, East Africa-like topography.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

TEA, TREKS & TEMPLES

Four Weeks / Kitulgala to Mirissa

Start in **Kitulgala** (p178), a gateway for rafting the Kelaniya Ganga, as well as for jungle hikes and bird-watching. Take the short hop to misty **Hatton**, **Dikoya** and **Maskeliya** (p177), three small towns in some of the most scenic parts of the Hill Country. Spend a few days tasting fragrant single-estate teas and bed down in luxurious ex-colonial tea planters' bungalows, or cosy guest houses in **Dalhousie** (p176), the traditional starting point for the pre-dawn ascent of Adam's Peak.

Head east to **Ella** (p195) for more hiking, wonderful views and guest houses renowned for having some of Sri Lanka's tastiest home-cooked food.

Travel southeast to **Monaragala** (p246), the jumping-off point for one of Sri Lanka's most atmospheric ancient Buddhist sites. **Maligawila** (p247) is home to an 11m-tall standing Buddha that's over a thousand years old.

Continue east to **Arugam Bay** (p248), with its easygoing surfers' vibe, excellent seafood and few travellers compared with the southern beaches. Don't miss a boat trip exploring the nearby Pottuvil Lagoon. After a few days on the beach, veer back inland via Monaragala to **Wellawaya** (p202), and find time for a brief detour to Sri Lanka's tallest standing Buddha at **Buduruwagala** (p202).

Descend from Wellawaya to the coastal plains of **Kataragama** (p152), the terminus of the Pada Yatra, a pilgrimage that begins at the other end of the island. One of Sri Lanka's oldest and most venerated dagobas is in nearby **Tissamaharama** (p146), which is also a convenient entry point for forays into **Yala National Park** (p150). From 'Tissa', beach hop via **Hambantota** (p145) along the south coast to laid-back **Mirissa** (p138), a good base for going whale watching (see p142).

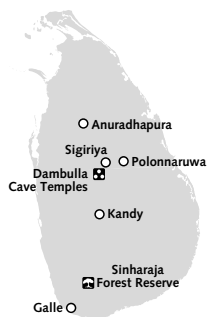
Expect hairpin curves and breathtaking views for much of this 474km outing; hike, taste a sample of Sri Lanka's tea, and view ancient Buddhist sites and some of Sri Lanka's quieter beaches.



TAILORED TRIPS

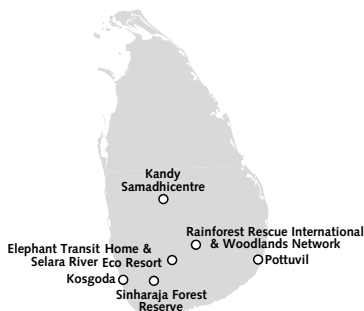
UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Begin in sleepy **Galle** (p124), founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century and now one of Southeast Asia's best-preserved, fortified colonial cities. Detour inland to the **Sinharaja Forest Reserve** (p204), Sri Lanka's last major tropical rainforest. Continue north to **Kandy** (p157). The verdant, lakeside city served as the last capital of the Sinhala kings before British occupation. Kandy's Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic is one of the world's most famous Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Find a good driver or negotiate Kandy's hectic bus station to begin a round trip to the Ancient Cities. The **Dambulla Cave Temples** (p214) have been a pilgrimage site for over 2000 years, with the five caves containing important Buddhist murals and statuary. At **Sigiriya** (p217) the remains of King Kassapa's palace (or possibly a monastery) grace the slopes and summit of a 370m granite outcrop. Don't miss the stunning frescoes as you ascend the sacred rock. At nearby **Polonnaruwa** (p221) the ruins of Sri Lanka's second royal capital include Buddhist and Brahmanic monuments, along with the impressive 12th-century city works created by King Parakramabahu I. Conclude your Unesco World Heritage ramblings by exploring the remains of monasteries, palaces and monuments at **Anuradhapura** (p231), Sri Lanka's most important royal capital.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Kick off in **Kosgoda** (see boxed text, p116) to release a baby turtle into the ocean, and also help out their hard-shelled relatives that have been injured by fishing nets. Continue to the **Sinharaja Forest Reserve** (p204) and the Sewalanka Foundation homestays in Mederapitiya or Deinyaya. After visiting the rainforest roll up your sleeves and help out on their tea and *kitul* palm plantations. At the **Elephant Transit Home** (p203) pay a pachyderm a visit to support the good work being done to rehabilitate injured and orphaned elephants back into the wild in the Uda Walawe National Park. Nearby is the low-key and ecofriendly **Selara River Eco Resort** (p204). At Bandarawela, visit **Woodlands Network** (p194) to learn the secrets of Sri Lankan cuisine with a cookery class at this Hill Country community tourism project. Nearby at **Rainforest Rescue International** (p302) you can volunteer on a forest estate and help develop the Uva Arboretum as an organic herb garden and ecotourism destination. Take a leisurely detour east to **Pottuvil** (p248) for a slow boat trip on Pottuvil lagoon and supplement the income of local fishermen and the regeneration of mangroves. After all your hard work, conclude at the **Kandy Samadhicentre** (p174). Treat yourself to a spiritual and physical makeover at this classy ecolodge that doubles as an Ayurvedic and yoga centre. The organic vegetarian food's got to be good for you, too.



The Authors



BRETT ATKINSON

Coordinating Author, *The Hill Country*

Brett Atkinson first travelled to Sri Lanka in 2001 and returned with tales of gloriously arcing beaches, improbable rock temples and statues, and the poignant remnants of the British colonial heritage. He's written about the teardrop-shaped island nation for magazines in New Zealand and Australia, and is very happy that he lives so close to New Zealand's only Sri Lankan restaurant in his hometown of Auckland. Guess what's for dinner? Brett's travelled to more than 60 countries and has contributed to 15 Lonely Planet guidebooks. He's forever on the lookout for great street food and Sri Lanka didn't disappoint.



STUART BUTLER

West Coast, The South, The East

English-born Stuart Butler first hit Sri Lanka during a long trans-Asia surf trip many years ago. One wave and one curry and he was hooked. Since then the food, beaches, wildlife, waves, people and hills have called him back a number of times and after each visit he returns home a little more infatuated. He now calls the beaches of southwest France home, and in addition to Sri Lanka his travels have taken him across South Asia and beyond, from the desert beaches of Pakistan to the coastal jungles of Colombia. He still waxes lyrical over Sri Lankan curries.



ETHAN GELBER

Jaffna & the North

In September 2004, accompanying his fiancée on her year-long work contract, Ethan landed in Sri Lanka with plans only for travel and personal writing projects. Three months later the tsunami changed everything. Among other things, he journeyed with friends to Jaffna to deliver aid. Shortly after he trawled the East and returned to the North for Lonely Planet for a post-tsunami update. He cemented lifelong friendships throughout the island and avowed a commitment to it that has brought him back several times, most recently with his wife and new son, sadly watching the war in the North unfold. An unapologetic native New Yorker, Ethan is nevertheless currently based out of Australia.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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**MICHAEL KOHN****Colombo, The Ancient Cities**

Michael caught the travel bug from a young age and by the time he reached 21 he had already set foot on six continents. For the past 10 years he has worked as a foreign correspondent in Asia, writing dispatches from far-flung outposts like Mongolia, Nepal, Gujarat and Myanmar. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and over the BBC airwaves. Michael hooked up with Lonely Planet in 2003 and has since written or updated 15 guidebooks. For this book he scoured the back alleys of Colombo, rocked out at Barefoot, scaled the Sigiriya rock and fought off angry monkeys at Mihintale. More of his work is available online at www.michaelkohn.us.

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