

Colombo



Colombo wears many hats. It is the administrative hub and political epicentre where traffic is frequently halted for official motorcades. It is the engine that drives the economy, sporting everything from bustling markets to gleaming skyscrapers. Most of all, it is a patchwork of peoples from around the island nation who come here to seek out their fortunes.

The legacies of colonial Colombo are still very much intact, right down to the rusting trains that chug through town, with locals dangling from carriages. Fort and Pettah, the oldest parts of the city, still brim with market activity and it's easy to get swept up by the crowds – or trampled by them if you're not careful.

Colombo has its cosmopolitan side, too, with wi-fi-equipped coffee shops, glitzy shopping malls, galleries and museums. The horrendous traffic around rush hour will give you a headache, but this is easily cured with a relaxing cocktail in one of the city's many fine restaurants. Colombo also offers the island's best nightlife if you're hankering for some urban buzz.

Colombo doesn't quite embody the paradisaical island image of Sri Lanka, but the main sites – a handful of temples and an excellent national museum – are easily visited in a day or two, making the city a good place to start or end a journey through Sri Lanka.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Buying up bagfuls of tea, clothing and handicrafts from the myriad shops and speciality stores such as **Barefoot** (p97) and **Paradise Road** (p98)
- Diving into the madness of **Pettah** (p83), where you can haggle for everything from jackfruit to gold necklaces
- Visiting Hindu **kovils** (p83) during the Thai Pongal festival or watching elephants and dancers parade during the Navam Perahera at **Gangaramaya Temple** (p89)
- Catching a live music act or dancing the night away in one of Colombo's **nightclubs** (p97)
- Walking through Sri Lanka's history in the remarkable **National Museum** (p87) in the heart of leafy Viharamahadevi Park



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 011

■ POPULATION: 2.2 MILLION

■ AREA: 37 SQ KM

HISTORY

As far back as the 5th century, Colombo served as a sea port for trade between Asia and the West. During the 8th century Arab traders settled near the port, and in 1505 the Portuguese arrived. By the mid-17th century the Dutch had taken over, growing cinnamon in the area now known as Cinnamon Gardens, but it wasn't until the British arrived that the town became a city. In 1815 Colombo was proclaimed the capital of Ceylon.

During the 1870s the breakwaters were built and Fort was created by flooding surrounding wetlands. Colombo was peacefully handed over when Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948. A new parliament was built in Sri Jayawardenepura-Kotte, an outer suburb of Colombo, in 1982.

Isolated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) bomb attacks in Fort over the years caused Colombo's major businesses and institutions to disperse across the city. These days Colombo is spreading north and south along the coast as people migrate to the city to work.

ORIENTATION

Colombo is split into 15 postal-code areas, which are often used to identify the specific districts. Pettah, for example, is also referred to as Colombo 11 (or just Col 11), Slave Island is referred to as Col 2, and so on. See boxed text, p81, for a full listing of codes. From the visitor's point of view, Colombo is a long coastal strip extending about 12km south from Fort (Col 1). The spine of this strip is Galle Rd. Colombo's main train station, Fort, is actually in Pettah, as are the main bus stations – all 10 or 15 minutes' walk from Fort itself. The domestic airport is at Ratmalana Air Force Base, south of central Colombo, while Bandaranaike International Airport is at Katunayake, 30km north of the city.

Travelling south down Galle Face Centre Rd from Fort, you come to a large oceanfront lawn area called Galle Face Green. Inland from here is Slave Island, which isn't really an island at all as only two of its three sides are surrounded by water (though it really was used for keeping slaves in the Dutch colonial era). South is neighbouring Kollupitiya, followed by Bambalapitiya, Wellawatta, Dehiwala and finally the old beach resort of Mt Lavinia, which isn't officially part of Colombo but is definitely within its urban sprawl.

If you turn inland (east) from Kollupitiya you'll soon find yourself in Cinnamon Gardens, home of the national art gallery, the national museum, the university, Viharamahadevi Park, some of the most exclusive residential quarters and many embassies.

Finding addresses is complicated by the fact that street numbers start again each time you move into a new district. Thus there will be a '100 Galle Rd' in several different neighbourhoods.

Some Colombo streets have both an old English name and a post-independence Sinhala name. Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha is also known as Green Path, for example, while RA de Mel Mawatha is also still known as Duplication Rd.

Throughout Sri Lanka, Mw is an abbreviation for Mawatha, meaning 'Avenue'.

Maps

If you're going to be spending some time in Colombo, the 96-page *A-Z Street Guide* (Rs 400) extends as far south as Mt Lavinia and as far inland as Kelaniya, and also covers Galle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. It also includes information on Colombo's suburban and inner-city buses. Free city maps without much detail are available in some hotels and the tourist information office; a slightly better map entitled 'City Map Collection' is sold in souvenir shops and bookstores for around Rs 150.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Colombo has some excellent bookshops. Top-end hotels also often have bookshops where you'll find up-to-date foreign magazines and newspapers.

Buddhist Book Centre (Map pp84-5; ☎ 268 9786; 380 Baudhaloka Mawatha, Col 7) Filled with books on Buddhism; about a third of the stock is in English.

Lake House Bookshop (Map pp84-5; ☎ 257 4418; Liberty Plaza, RA de Mel Mawatha, Col 3) Has an extensive range of books, along with foreign and local magazines and newspapers.

Vijitha Yapa Bookshop Crescat Boulevard (Map pp84-5; ☎ 551 0100; 89 Galle Rd, Col 3); Unity Plaza (Map p88; ☎ 259 6960; Galle Rd, Col 4) Stocks a comprehensive collection of foreign and local novels, magazines and pictorial tomes on Sri Lanka. The branch in Crescat Boulevard shopping centre is smaller.