



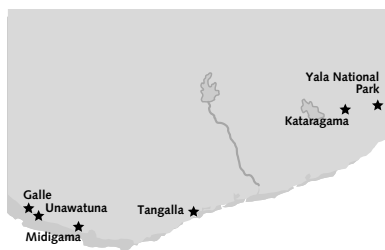
# The South

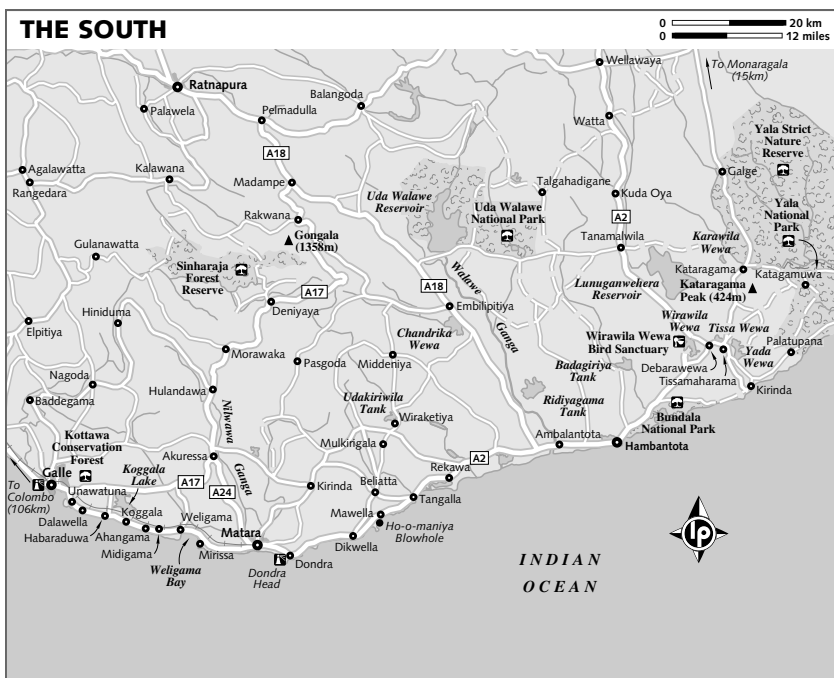
Southern Sri Lanka overwhelms the senses. The landscape is one of utter beauty, the radiant green rice paddies and forests of swinging palm trees contrast starkly with beaches of ivory-coloured sand and an ocean of rich turquoise. The air is heavy with the scent of jasmine and cinnamon and the people drift past in clouds of bright colours. This beauty has been casting its spell on visitors for eternity, and when Marco Polo spoke so poetically of Sri Lanka it must surely have been this southern coast that filled his mind. For the visitor of today that same sense of romance and wonder remains. People here dance across fire on monsoon nights, idyllic sweeping bays cuddle up to a crumbling Dutch city with streets of art, fishermen float on stilts above the waves and at night turtles crawl up onto moonlit beaches.

No matter what you're after you'll find it here. Those who need to stretch their muscles can dive and snorkel across glowing coral reefs or learn to surf on gentle sandbars. The culturally inclined can soak up history in colonial forts and find works of Buddhist-inspired art in lonely caves. For the naturalist there are huge whales splashing through offshore swells, monkeys chattering through the trees and leopards moving like spirits in the night. And for everyone, no matter what their interests, there is the simple joy of knowing that dreams of paradise can come true.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Strolling the sculptured streets of whimsical **Galle** (p124)
- Slipping into the limpid, moonstone-coloured waters of **Unawatuna** (p132)
- Oohing, ahing and staying forever on the perfect beaches of **Tangalla** (p142)
- Speeding through the tube at **Midigama** (p136)
- Spotting a spotty leopard and listening out for big-eared elephants in **Yala National Park** (p150)
- Walking on fire to make your peace with the gods at the spectacular **Kataragama festival** (p152)





## GALLE

☎ 091 / pop 90,270

Galle (pronounced gawl in English, and *gaar-le* in Sinhala) is a town of colour, texture and sensation totally unlike anywhere else in Sri Lanka. It is at once endlessly exotic, bursting with the scent of spices and salty winds, and yet also, with its wonderful collection of slowly decaying Dutch-colonial buildings, vaguely familiar, like a whimsical medieval European town unexpectedly deposited in the tropics. But above all else Galle is a city of trade and, increasingly, art. Today the Fort is crammed full of little boutique shops, cafes and hotels owned by local and foreign – a third of the houses are owned by foreigners – artists, writers, photographers, designers and poets.

Built by the Dutch, beginning in 1663, the 36-hectare Fort occupies most of the promontory that forms the older part of Galle and is an amazing collection of structures and culture dating back through the centuries. Just wandering the streets at random yields one architectural surprise after another. Its glories have been recognised by Unesco who have made the Fort a World Heritage Site.

A key part of the Fort's allure, however, is that it isn't just a pretty place. Rather, it remains a working community: there are administrative offices, courts, export companies, lots of regular folks populating the streets and a definite buzz of energy in the air.

Galle is easily reached as a day trip from Hikkaduwa and Unawatuna. But an increasing number of travellers are staying within the atmospheric walls of the Fort.

## History

Although Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa are much older than Galle, they are effectively abandoned cities – the modern towns are divorced from the ancient ruins. In contrast, both old and new Galle have remained vibrant.

Some historians believe Galle may have been the city of Tarshish – where King Solomon obtained gems and spices – though many more argue that a port in Spain seems a more likely candidate. Either way Galle only became prominent with the arrival of the Europeans. In 1505 a Portuguese fleet bound for the Maldives was blown off course and