If crumbling temples, lost cities and sacred sites get your heart racing, it’s time to peel yourself off the beach and head up-country. It was here on the hot central plains of Sri Lanka that ancient Sinhalese dynasties set up their capitals, built ambitious irrigation systems and supported massive artistic and architectural endeavours. Eventually these kingdoms fell, as kingdoms do, giving nature a chance to reclaim the land.

For more than a century, archaeologists have been slowly shedding the many layers of history from this overgrown landscape. The Rock Fort at Sigiriya, the bulging dagobas (stupas) of Polonnaruwa and the serene Buddhas scattered around Anuradhapura are but a few of the sites now considered national treasures. Recognising their historical and cultural value, Unesco has bequeathed protected status to some of the bigger sites.

The area covered in this chapter lies roughly between Kandy, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, colloquially known as the ‘Cultural Triangle’. Amateur archaeologists and anyone interested in Buddhist art will want to maximise their time in this area. Lay travellers should mix in some of the excellent national parks – there are great opportunities for spotting elephants, deer and other game.

You’ll need a minimum of three days to hit the major attractions in this chapter, but plan on five or more days to take it all in at a leisurely pace. The roads up here are in good condition and there is accommodation to suit all tastes. The region can be explored as a loop trip, or you can hunker down in a central place such as Sigiriya and go on a series of day trips.
Information

Foreign visitors must purchase tickets to visit the major Cultural Triangle sites as well as a few of the minor ones. You can buy either a ‘round ticket’ that covers most of the major sites, or individual tickets at the sites themselves. Currently a round ticket costs Rs 5400 (payable either in US dollars or in the rupee equivalent) and covers the following: Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Ritigala, Medirigiriya and Nalanda, plus a few sites in Kandy (but not the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic).

The round ticket is valid for three months from the date of purchase. In theory, you must finish using your ticket within three weeks of the first time you use it, but in practice no one checks the dates that closely. The ticket entitles you to one day’s entry only – if you wish to spend a second day at any site, you pay the full day’s fee. If paid for individually, the tickets cost US$25 each for Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya; US$10 for Medirigiriya; and US$5 for Ritigala and Nalanda. All foreign nationals and even foreigners with resident visas must pay the full amount. There are no student discounts on the round ticket, though sometimes you can get half-price tickets for individual sites if you sweet-talk the ticket seller. Children under 12 years are charged half-price, while those under six get in free.

Many Buddhist shrines within the Cultural Triangle area, including the Dambulla cave shrines, Sri Maha Bodhi and Mihintale, are