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“All you’ve got to do is decide to go and the hardest part is over. So go!”
TONY WHEELER, COFOUNDER – LONELY PLANET

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Sinhala and Tamil are national languages in Sri Lanka, with English commonly described as a lingua franca. It's easy to get by with English, and the Sri Lankan variety has its own unique characteristics – ‘You are having a problem, isn’t it, no?’ is one example. However, while English may be widely spoken in the main centres, off the beaten track its spread thins. In any case, even a few words of Sinhala or Tamil will go a long way.

SINHALA

Sinhala is officially written using a cursive script. If you read our coloured pronunciation guides as if they were English, you shouldn’t have problems being understood. When consonants are doubled they are pronounced very distinctly, almost as separate sounds. The symbols \( \text{t} \) and \( \text{d} \) are pronounced less forcefully than in English, \( \text{th} \) as in ‘thin’, \( \text{dh} \) as the ‘th’ in ‘that’, \( \text{g} \) as in ‘go’, and \( \text{r} \) is more like a \( \text{Á} \)ap of the tongue against the roof of the mouth – it’s not pronounced as an American ‘r’. As for the vowels, \( \text{a} \) is pronounced as the ‘u’ in ‘cup’, \( \text{aa} \) as the ‘a’ in ‘father’, \( \text{ai} \) as in ‘aisle’, \( \text{au} \) as the ‘ow’ in ‘how’, \( \text{e} \) as in ‘met’, \( \text{i} \) as in ‘bit’, \( \text{o} \) as in ‘hot’, and \( \text{u} \) as in ‘put’.

Excuse me.

\text{samah venna}

Sorry.

\text{kana gaatui}

Do you speak \text{oyaa in-ghirisih kata} English?

\text{karenawa da?}

What’s your name?

\text{oyaaghe nama mokka’da?}

My name is ...

\text{maaghe nama ...}

Accommodation

Do you have any \text{kaamara thiyanawada} rooms available?

\text{Ho kw much is it per ek ra-yakata kiyada} night?

\text{Ho \text{kw much is it per ek kenek-kuta kiyada} per person?}

Is breakfast included?

\text{udeh keh-emath ekkada?}

for one night \text{ek rayak} pamanai for two nights \text{raya dekak} pamanai for one person \text{ek-kenek} pamanai for two people \text{den-nek} pamanai campsite \text{kamping ground eka} guesthouse \text{gesthaus eka} hotel \text{hotel eka}
Why Go?

Colombo is rapidly emerging from the reputation it has carried for decades. No longer just the sprawling city you have to endure on your way to the southern beaches, it has become a worthy destination in its own right. New restaurants, designer shops and other attractions open constantly.

The legacies of colonial Colombo are still very much intact along its often shady boulevards. Fort is in the midst of widespread historic restoration while Pettah brims with markets and ramshant commerce. Even traffic-clogged Galle Rd is getting spiffier, while the seafront benefits from new roads that are spurring hotel construction. Colombo’s cosmopolitan side supports stylish cafés, interesting stores, galleries and museums. Surprises abound in its old quarters. You can easily spend a couple of days exploring this vibrant city and a visit here is an excellent start – or finish – to your Sri Lankan adventures.

When to Go

Jan–Mar

The driest season, with night-time cool breezes. More tourists, so book hotels in advance.

Apr

Colombo feels empty around the Sinhalese New Year as people return to their home villages.

Dec

Although Christians are a minority, Christmas is popular and decorations are everywhere.
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Top Experiences

- **Jaffna**
  - Towering Hindu temples and the sweet fragrance of fruit trees (p248)

- **Anuradhapura**
  - Huge centre of cultural and religious heritage (p202)

- **Polonnaruwa**
  - Intricately carved buildings and monuments from a thousand years ago (p192)
**Sigiriya**
A stunning rock surrounded by gardens (p188)

**Kandy**
The cultural capital of the island (p133)

**Colombo**
Colonial charms and fascinating shopping (p46)

**Adam’s Peak**
A beautiful walk to where Adam first set foot on Earth (p150)

**Galle Fort**
A colonial-era fort, good for wandering (p95)

**Mirissa**
See blue whales on a boat excursion (p111)

**Bundala National Park**
Buffalo, sambar deer, crocodiles, masses of birds and elephants (p176)

**Uda Walawe National Park**
One of Sri Lanka’s finest birding destinations (p121)

**Horton Plains & World’s End**
Wild and windswept moorlands (p163)

**Arugam Bay**
The heart of Sri Lanka’s nascent surf scene (p220)
OUR STORY
A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, Across Asia on the Cheap. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.
Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

Ryan Ver Berkmoes
Coordinating Author, Colombo, The Ancient Cities
Ryan Ver Berkmoes first visited Sri Lanka in 2005 after the tsunami, when he covered the aftermath as a journalist. Impressed then at Sri Lankans’ resilience, he’s only more impressed now as the island emerges from its long time in the shadows. On his visits since, he has criss-crossed this beautiful island looking for the best rice and curry ever. He’s had some great ones but this sort of quest should never end. Off-island, Ryan lives in Portland, Oregon and writes about travel and more at ryanverberkmoes.com.

Read more about Ryan Ver Berkmoes at:
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Stuart Butler
West Coast, The South, The Hill Country
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 many times. He now calls the beaches of southwest France home. 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. Read about his travels on http://stuartbutler-journalist.blogspot.com.

Read more about Stuart Butler at:
lonelyplanet.com/members/stuartbutler

Amy Karafin
The East, Jaffna & the North
For almost 20 years Amy Karafin has been meditating and reading the ancient Pali texts first written down in Sri Lanka. She’s also been fascinated by Tamil culture since living in a hut in Tamil Nadu on her first South Asia journey in 1996. The North and East, with their long histories of spiritual exchange, were a natural fit for her, and she jumped at the chance to be among the first travellers to visit islands, beaches, temples and natural springs that had been closed to civilians for decades. When not on the road, Amy lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Read more about Amy Karafin at:
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Whether you’ve got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travellers.

Two Weeks
Capital, Coast & Hill Country

Start in Colombo, exploring the markets and visiting the city’s vibrant Buddhist temples. Then take the new Southern Expressway south and you’ll be in Galle in no time, avoiding the often traffic-clogged road on the west coast and the ho-hum towns along it. Explore the languid streets of Galle’s 17th-century Dutch city-within-a-fort.

From Galle, go get some beach time. Tangalla has a growing selection of groovy beach places on its lovely and uncrowded ribbon of sand. Head inland and venture up to Uda Walawe National Park, where you’ll see dozens of elephants and many other animals.

Take the winding road up in the heart of the Hill Country and put down roots for a few days in Ella, a cool town with a fun travellers’ vibe. Walk to waterfalls and mountain peaks.

Take one of the world’s most beautiful train rides to the stop for the British colonial heritage town of Nuwara Eliya, where you’ll enter a time warp. Visit tea plantations and stop in iconic Kandy for temples and gardens. From here it’s an easy jaunt back to Colombo or the airport.
Three Weeks

Hilltops & Beaches

Start in Colombo, where you can absorb some of Sri Lanka’s newfound energetic vibe before you head right off the map – almost. Kitulgala is a gateway for rafting the Kelaniya Ganga, as well as for jungle hikes and birdwatching. Movie buffs might recognise scenes from Bridge on the River Kwai here. Take the short hop to misty Hatton, Dikoya and Maskeliya, 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 guesthouses in Dalhousie, the traditional starting point for the pre-dawn ascent of Adam’s Peak.

Head east to Ella for more hiking, wonderful views and guesthouses renowned for having some of Sri Lanka’s tastiest home-cooked food.

Travel southeast to Monaragala, a low-key gateway to the east and the jumping-off point for one of Sri Lanka’s most atmospheric ancient Buddhist sites at Yudaganawa. Also nearby, Maligawila is home to an 11m-tall standing Buddha that’s over a thousand years old.

Continue east to Arugam Bay, with its easygoing surfers’ vibe, excellent seafood and few travellers compared with the southern beaches. It’s easy to spend an extra day or three here, swinging in a hammock at one of the beach guesthouses. 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, and find time for a brief detour to Sri Lanka’s tallest standing Buddha at Buduruwagala. Soak up the beauty of the tiny lakes and listen to the birds.

Descend from Wellawaya to the coastal plains of Kataragama, 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 (stupas) is in nearby Tissamaharama, which is also a convenient entry point for forays into Yala National Park, where you can spot most of Sri Lanka’s iconic critters. From ‘Tissa’, beach-hop via Tangalla along the south coast to laid-back Mirissa, a good base for whale-watching.
Two Weeks

Emerging Sri Lanka

With peace, parts of Sri Lanka that were off limits – or almost off limits – for decades are opening up to visitors, who will be warmly welcomed. Start at Kalpitiya, the main town on the long finger of land that juts up into the Indian Ocean. The beaches here are just OK but the kitesurfing and reef diving are spectacular. Hook your way around north to Wilpattu National Park. This treasure was closed for years during the war but is now returning to life. It has all of Sri Lanka’s iconic animals and is very quiet.

Next, explore another spit of Sri Lanka extending into the sea: Mannar is technically an island but feels like a peninsula. It has white beaches, wild donkeys and incredible beauty. The remote town of Talaimannar feels like the end of the world. Here a chain of reefs and islets almost form a land bridge to India.

Hook around again to the Jaffna peninsula. Jaffna bears scars of the war, which still seems like a recent memory here. But the rich Tamil culture is returning and charming temples on shady backstreets await exploration.

Roads closed for years have reopened and you can visit Keerimalai spring, a sacred site with legendary bathing pools. It’s close to the Naguleswaram Shiva Kovil, which traces its past to the 6th century BC.

Your next destination is Point Pedro, which is still shaking off the 2004 tsunami but holds onto traces of a colonial past. There is a long swath of the whitest beach you can imagine here.

Jaffna has nearby islands well worth exploring for their sheer minimalistic beauty. There’s actual sights on Nainativu, which you reach via increasingly unsubstantial causeways and a ferry. Buddhist and Hindu temples draw the pious to this tiny speck of sand.

Another ferry ride – which is half the fun – takes you the 10km to Neduntivu, which some still call by its old Dutch moniker Delft. It’s a windswept place beyond the end of the road and wild ponies roam seemingly deserted streets.
Quick Southern Jaunt

This fast trip will warm even the most frost-bitten visitor escaping a frigid winter elsewhere in the world. Begin your jaunt in Galle: founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century, it is one of Southeast Asia's best-preserved, fortified colonial cities. Walk the walls at sunset and enjoy the many cafes cropping up along streets lined with renovated and delightfully dilapidated old buildings.

Hit the beach at nearby Unawatuna, which has an alluring crescent of sand, cafes overlooking the surf and perfectly blue waters luring you in. Now find your inner Tarzan (many of the movies were shot in Sri Lanka) at the Unesco-recognised Sinharaja Forest Reserve, Sri Lanka's last major tropical rainforest.

Back on the south coast, Sri Lanka has a fast-breaking surf scene and you'll find lessons, board rentals and cheap surfer dives in Ahangama and Midigama.

Another short jaunt east brings you to Weligama, which has beach resorts and a lively fishing village with fascinating markets. Not far away is the sandy gem of the south, Mirissa, where cute little places to stay are hidden in the palms.

Culture & Beaches

This tour covers the uncrowded middle of Sri Lanka. Start in Dambulla, with its series of cave shrines painted with vivid Buddhist murals. From here it's a short jaunt to Sigiriya, a 200m-tall rock outcrop that was once a monastery and is truly one of the island's most amazing sights.

Further northeast the former royal capital of Polonnaruwa offers an inspiring collection of Buddhist sculptures and monastery ruins dating back nearly a thousand years. Head due east to the coast and the beaches at Kalkudah and Passekudah. The former is a deserted and beautiful broad strip of sand. The latter is also beautiful and draws locals by the busload.

Continue your beach adventures 20km north at one of Sri Lanka's hidden gems, Vakarai Beach. You're really off the grid here at this paradise and only have electricity a few hours at night.

Go north again and you are on the idyllic natural harbour of Trincomalee. It has a rich history going back centuries that the recent war couldn't erase. Finally, end your cultural and sandy trek at the dual beach towns of Uppuveli and Nilaveli. There's much debate about which is better: you decide.