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YALA NATIONAL PARK P138**



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Itineraries



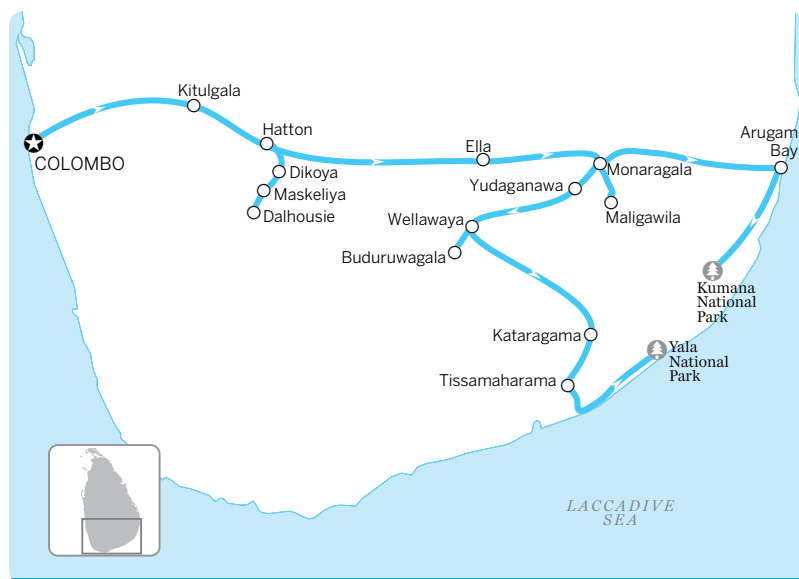
Essential Sri Lanka

This compact trip covers a core selection of Sri Lanka's must-see sights.

Start in **Colombo**, exploring the markets and visiting the city's vibrant Buddhist temples. Then take the train south along the coast to amazing **Galle**, avoiding the often traffic-clogged road on the west coast and the ho-hum towns along it.

From Galle, go get some beach time. The **Tangalla** region has a growing selection of lovely beach places on its beautiful 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 into the heart of the Hill Country and put down roots for a few days in **Ella**, a cool town with a fun travellers' vibe.

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.



Natural South

It's not a big island but Sri Lanka still manages to have some beautiful wilderness areas, especially in the tropical peaks and valleys, national parks and beach-lined southern coast.

Start in **Colombo**. On your way east, **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. Continue 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 more than a thousand years old.

On the coast is the ever-more-popular **Arugam Bay**, with its easygoing surfers' vibe and excellent seafood. 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. Explore the seldom-visited wilds of **Kumana National Park**, then 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.

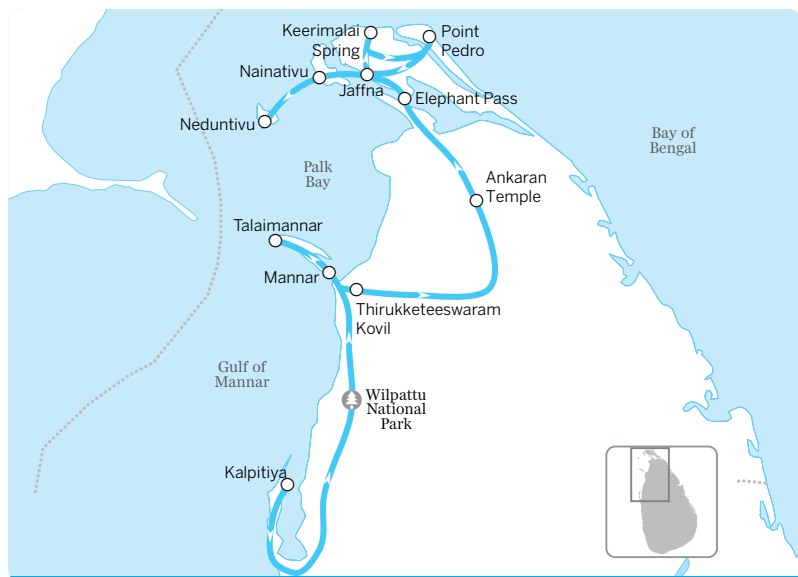
Descend from Wellawaya to the coastal plains of **Kataragama**, the terminus of the Pada Yatra, a pilgrimage that begins at the other end of the island. Nearby **Tissamaharama** has a lovely lakeside setting, which is also a convenient entry point for the hugely popular safaris into **Yala National Park**, where you can spot elephants, leopards and most of Sri Lanka's other iconic critters.



Top: Newburgh Green
Tea Factory (p180), Ella
Bottom: Cave temples,
Dambulla (p197)



CHRISTIANMOERER / GETTY IMAGES ©



Emerging North

Visitors are now discovering the beauty, beaches and culture of Sri Lanka's north, which was off-limits for many years. Roads and rails services have been greatly improved.

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 has leopards and many other large mammals.

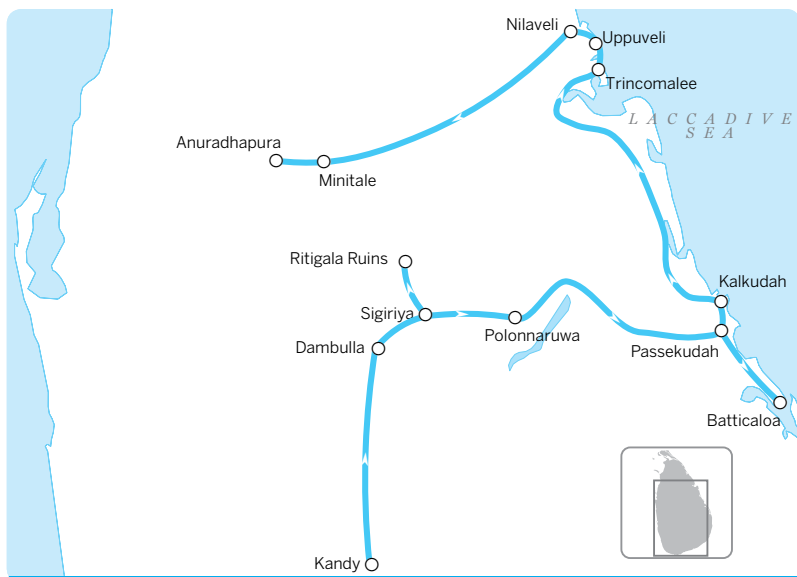
Next, explore another beautiful spit of Sri Lanka extending into the sea: **Mannar** is technically an island but feels like a peninsula. It has white beaches and African baobab trees. From remote **Talaimannar**, Adam's Bridge, a chain of reefs and islets, almost forms a land bridge to India.

Hook around again to the Jaffna peninsula. On the mainland near the coast, 13km east of Mannar Town, imposing **Thirukketeeswaram Kovil** is one of the *pancha ishwarem*, the five historical Sri Lankan Shiva temples established to protect the island from natural disaster.

As you head north on the much-improved A9 highway, stop at Murukandy's tiny **Ankarani Temple**. Locals believe that a prayer here will ensure a safe journey. Further on, marvel at the wetlands beauty as you cross the **Elephant Pass** causeway to **Jaffna**, where the rich Tamil culture is rebounding and temples on shady backstreets await exploration.

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**, with its long swath of lonely white sand at Munai Beach.

Jaffna has nearby islands well worth exploring for their sheer minimalistic beauty, including **Nainativu**, a tiny speck of sand with Buddhist and Hindu temples, and **Neduntivu**, a windswept place beyond the end of the road where wild ponies roam.

2
WEEKS

The Cultured Centre

This tour covers the uncrowded middle of Sri Lanka, which is at the heart of the country's rich culture. You'll see ancient temples and towns, along with some of the natural beauty that has inspired generations.

Start in **Kandy**, which has a lakeside setting with real natural beauty and was the capital of the last Sinhalese kingdom until the early 19th century.

Head north to **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. A short drive northwest will bring you to the Ritigala Strict Nature Preserve. Deep inside this land is one of Sri Lanka's most mysterious sites: the **Ritigala Ruins**. Your inner Indiana Jones will enjoy exploring the remains of this once vast and ancient place.

Further east the former royal capital of **Polonnaruwa** offers an inspiring collection of Buddhist sculptures and monastery ruins dating back nearly a thousand years. Continue 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 seeing much development.

Follow the coast south to **Batticaloa**, a historic port that has provided refuge to ships for years. It has a Dutch fort, while offshore is one of Sri Lanka's most fabled dive sites: the HMS *Hermes*, a British aircraft carrier sunk in WWII.

Going north you'll pass through nature preserves and deserted beaches until you reach the idyllic natural harbour of **Trincomalee**. It has a colourful history going back centuries. Continue on to the beach towns of tiny **Uppuveli** and buzzy **Nilaveli**.

Now head due west into the heart of the country. Prepare for a steep climb up the hillside at **Minitale** to appreciate the Buddhist history here that dates back to the 3rd century BC. A mere 13km further west brings you to **Anuradhapura**, one of the top sights in all of South Asia. Wander or bike around this sprawling landscape of temples, ruins and more.



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 Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Beijing and Delhi, 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 South. Ryan first visited Sri Lanka in 2005 after the tsunami when he covered the aftermath as a journalist. Impressed then at Sri Lanka's 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. Ryan writes about travel and more at ryanverberkmoes.com and @ryanvb

Read more about Ryan at:

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Stuart Butler

The West, The Hill Country. Originally from Devon in the UK, Stuart first made it to Sri Lanka during a long trans-Asia surf trip back in the early 1990s. One wave and one curry later and he was hooked. Since then the food, beaches, wildlife, waves, people and hills have called him back dozens of times. His travels have also taken him across South Asia and beyond, from the savannah of East Africa

to the Arctic tundra. He now lives with his wife and two small children on the beaches of southwest France. Stuart also wrote *Beaches & Activities*, *National Parks & Safaris*, *Travel with Children* and *Environmental Issues*. His website is www.stuartbutlerjournalist.com

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Iain Stewart

The Ancient Cities, The East, Jaffna & the North. Iain has been captivated by Sri Lanka for years but this was his first writing assignment in the country. Highlights on this trip were a 1000km motorbike journey through the hill country and tea plantations, the majesty of Anuradhapura, hanging out with Mark in Jaffna, blue whales offshore and elephants on land, fresh seafood in Mirissa and good old rice and curry by the roadside. Iain also wrote *Eat & Drink Like a Local* and *Sri Lankan Tea*.

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Published by Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd

ABN 36 005 607 983

13th edition – January 2015

ISBN 978 1 74220 802 2

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in China

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