

The South

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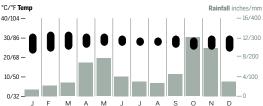
Why Go?

Prepare your senses for overload, for the South is Sri Lanka at its most sultry and enticing: a glorious shoreline of dazzling white curves of sand set against emerald forested hills. Yes, you'll find the region a delight to explore, with each bend in the coastal highway revealing yet another idyllic cove to investigate. Galle, an utterly captivating walled city replete with historic interest, is undoubtedly the South's cultural highlight, but there's also astonishing Buddhist-inspired art in lonely caves and the sacred precinct of Kataragama, an important pilgrimage town.

No matter what you're after you'll find it here. Surfers return year after year to pursue the perfect break. There's the chance to see blue whales surging through offshore swells and turtles crawling onto moonlit beaches. Meanwhile, in the national parks, leopards move like spirits in the night and elephants trumpet across the forest to acclaim the first light of day.

When to Go

Galle



Dec-Apr Whales roll through the sea, the beaches buzz and everything is open.

Jul-Aug Pilgrims perform acts of self-mortification at the unforgettable Kataragama festival. Nov The monsoon rains die out, beach resorts wake up and crowds are yet to arrive.

Galle

2 091 / POP 103,600

Galle is a jewel. A Unesco World Heritage Site, this historic city is a delight to explore on foot, an endlessly exotic old trading port blessed with imposing Dutch-colonial buildings, ancient mosques and churches, grand mansions and museums. Wandering its rambling lanes you'll pass stylish cafes, quirky boutiques and impeccably restored hotels owned by local and foreign artists, writers, photographers and designers.

Built by the Dutch, beginning in 1663, Galle's core is the Fort, a walled enclave surrounded on three sides by the ocean. A key part of the Fort's appeal is that it isn't just a pretty place. Sure, tourism now dominates the local economy, but this unique city remains a working community: there

are administrative offices and courts, export companies, schools and colleges.

Most travellers are utterly seduced by Galle's ambience, and it's undoubtedly southern Sri Lanka's one unmissable sight.

History

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 took shelter in the harbour. Apparently, on hearing a cock (*galo* in Portuguese) crowing, they gave the town its name. Another slightly less dubious story is that the name is derived from the Sinhala word *gala* (rock).



The South Highlights

- **1) Galle** (p107) Strolling the lanes of this uniquely atmospheric Unesco World Heritage Site.
- 2 Blue whale tours (p131) Achieving the dream of a lifetime: seeing the world's largest living creatures on a boat tour out of Mirissa.
- **3 Hiriketiya** (p135) Discovering that most perfect of beaches.
- 4 Handunugoda Tea
 Estate (p124) Learning
 about the gourmet tea trade
 at this famous white-tea
 plantation.
- 5 Tangalla (p137) Enjoying long walks along empty oceanic beaches.
- **6** Yala National Park (p145) Spotting a leopard or camera-snapping a croc in this famous reserve.
- Weligama (p126) Learning to surf in a backpacker-friendly town.
- 3 Bundala National Park (p140) Scanning these wetlands for flamingos, ibis and eagles.
- **Tissamaharama** (p141) Watching the mist rise off Tissa Wewa in the pink glow of sunset.