



The Ancient Cities

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- ➔ Sanctuary at Tissawewa (p236)
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Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Rice Villa Retreat (p225)
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Why Go?

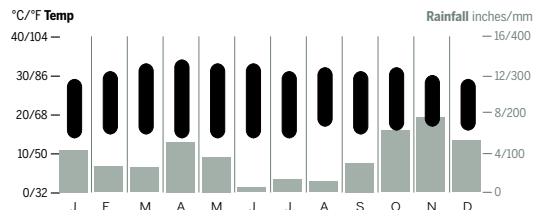
Crumbling temples, lost cities and sacred Buddhist sites are the reason to head up country to the cultural heartland of Sri Lanka. It was here on the central plains that ancient Sinhalese dynasties set up their first capitals and supported massive artistic and architectural endeavours. Eventually these kingdoms fell, slowly to be reclaimed by the forest and jungles.

For more than a century archaeologists have been slowly stripping the many layers of history from this overgrown landscape. The rock fortress at Sigiriya, the monumental dagobas (stupas) of Anuradhapura and the refined carvings of Polonnaruwa are but a few of the sites now ranking as national treasures. Home to four Unesco World Heritage Sites, this 'Cultural Triangle' is a heaven for amateur archaeologists and historians.

Besides the amazing ruins, save time for the national parks, which teem with elephants and outstanding birdlife, and try to visit at least one off-the-beaten-track temple site.

When to Go

Dambulla



Jun A great festival, the Poson Poya, is held at Mihintale on the full-moon night.

May-Sep Elephants gather in the central and easily visited Minneriya National Park.

Nov Ceremonies in Anuradhapura for Unduvap Poya, marking the sacred bodhi tree's arrival.



Ancient Cities Highlights

- 1 Abhayagiri Dagoba** (p231) Feeling utterly humbled by the epic scale of the former capital of Anuradhapura.
- 2 Sigiriya** (p209) Scaling the great rock for epic views, outstanding murals and intriguing ruins.
- 3 Polonnaruwa** (p215) Admiring the exquisite carved

- temples and Buddhas at the fascinating ruins of this former Sinhalese stronghold.
- 4 Minneriya** (p226) Spotting elephants, crocodiles and birdlife on the lake shores and in the jungles.
- 5 Dambulla Cave Temples** (p205) Peering at some of

- Sri Lanka's most stunning Buddhist murals and images.
- 6 Ridi Vihara** (p241) Getting off the beaten track at this little-visited site.
- 7 Mihintale** (p237) Climbing monumental stairways to the stupas and viewpoints where Buddhism first took root in Sri Lanka.