

# Sri Lanka

## It's Cool



**HANDLING** THE PR ACCOUNT FOR TOURISM SRI LANKA must be challenging. After years of civil disorder, the country slowly clawed its way back up the world tourism ladder. Just when officials were gloating over the ever-increasing arrivals and recovering from their Christmas Day festivities, the Asian tsunami struck and washed the country back down the ladder.

Everyone felt for countries like Sri Lanka, and assistance rolled in as the waves rolled out. Now the best support these countries could have is to see tourists once again alighting from inbound flights. For those who know Sri Lanka, they don't need to be reminded that while the tsunami devastation was tragic, it was localised along parts of the southern coastline.

Sri Lanka is definitely one of the world's best tourist destinations, with its magnificent beaches, fascinating culture, untouched national parks, superb hotels, and cool mountainous highlands that have yet to be touched by stampeding Reebok trekking boots. Combine all this with its cheap living costs and you have a place just crying out to be rediscovered.

I say "rediscovered" because the island temporarily lost its once healthy tourism industry when the first bullets were fired in the northern homelands dominated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); better known as the Tamil Tigers. Tourists have been reappearing since rival parties started smoking the peace pipe. A revamped Sri Lankan Airlines is doing its best to bring in the happy holidaymakers.

While Colombo is never going to rate as a great city, it has its appealing qualities. Best of all is its coastal location overlooking the Indian Ocean. First time visitors can't go wrong by booking into the Galle Face Hotel overlooking the Galle Face Green. Walking into the hotel's voluminous lobby is like taking a journey back a century ago, when travellers arrived on ocean liners and checked in to enjoy

gin and tonics and all the trappings of colonial living. Not much has changed, and while the hotel needs a facelift, it's a very nostalgic experience. "Gloriously decrepit" is the way one writer described Colombo, and it could also be said for the hotel.

Travellers in need of sun, sand, and surf should turn right upon exiting the airport and give Colombo a complete bypass. The beaches and resorts lining Negambo are the reason for this and admittedly, they offer a more relaxed ambience than Colombo. The sweeping beaches, sunshine, and cold beers appeal to planeloads of Europeans who descend upon Negambo.

While Negambo's beaches are the closest to the capital, they aren't the island's best; visitors should to head four hours south to the southern stretch of beaches from Hikkaduwa to Tangalla.

Galle is a fascinating historic city along this coastal stretch. While it is a walled city, there is a lot of similarity between Galle and Malacca. The Portuguese, Dutch, and British provide colonial influences along with the local culture. This is reflected in the architecture, the places of worship, and food outlets. The historic heart has been recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. There are several places to stay in the town, but if your budget can be stretched a little, venture out of town and to the beachside Lighthouse Hotel.

The highland interior and the small township of Nuwara Eliya is another essential place to visit. Located 2,000m above the lowlands, the climate is cool and similar to the Cameron Highlands. It's not surprising that tea plantations surround the township, and the settlement has developed around a pleasant golf course. The English influence is apparent, so if Devonshire teas, log fires, a spot of croquet, and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding are what you pine for, head to Nuwara Eliya. For the colonial purists, St. Andrew's Hotel is the preferred address. The town can be



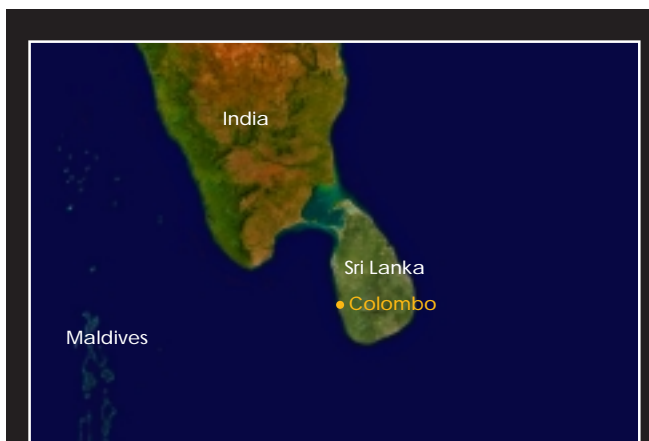
easily walked around, and there are several trails around the hilly surroundings, and visits to tea plantations are also possible.

For those who have been constantly fascinated about the prospects of a journey to the end of the world, a one-hour drive to Horton Plains isn't to be missed. The expansive grasslands dotted with boggy moss that dominate the highland plains here are another example of the constantly changing Sri Lankan landscape. Horton Plains are refreshingly cool, and there are several easy and excellent walks through the national park. The most popular is the journey to the end of the world, or World's End. You won't see Martians or extraterrestrial beings, but the dramatic 700m plunging view to the lowlands below is dramatic if the weather is kind to you. If you arrive too late, the cloud-enshrouded view with visibility reduced to a few metres is a big let down.

To fully appreciate the landscape of the highlands, a train journey is recommended. Sri Lanka is blessed with a good rail network, and while many services are a tad slow, travel is cheap and the journey provides a pleasant respite from the crowded road system. Take the four-hour train from Nanu Oya (9km from Nuwara Eliya) to Kandy and pass through some magical countryside.

Kandy is Sri Lanka's second biggest city, and is a popular destination for Colombo folk who descend upon the lakeside town because of its religious significance. There are many attractions around the town, including the Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, National Museum, the lake, and Botanic Gardens. If you time your visit around the full-moon month in July-August, you can witness the spectacular elephant parades of Esala Perahera.

Travelling around Sri Lanka is not a major problem, and a driver and car is certainly the most convenient method and there are several looped journeys that can be taken to avoid retracing one's tracks.



**Getting There:** Sri Lankan Airlines (Tel: 03-2072 3633) flies to Colombo and direct flights take about four hours. Most visitors receive a 30-day visa upon arrival but call the Sri Lankan High Commission for clarification (Tel: 03-2161 2199).

**What it Costs:** There are competitive packages to Sri Lanka, so enquire at your favourite travel agent. One of the best operators, Jetwing Travel (e-mail: [eco@jetwing.lk](mailto:eco@jetwing.lk), Web: [www.srilankan.aero](http://www.srilankan.aero)) have an excellent trip that includes accommodation, car transport, most meals, and entrance fees costing from \$US600 for a seven-day package.