



# Sri Lanka Travel Guide

Sri Lanka, formerly known until 1972 as Ceylon, is an island country in South Asia near south-east India. Lying within the Indomalaya ecozone, Sri Lanka is one of 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world! Although the country is relatively small in size, it has the highest biodiversity density in Asia.

A diverse and multicultural country, Sri Lanka is home to many religions, ethnic groups, and languages. It is famed for its stunning ancient Buddhist ruins, and its flavorful cuisine reflects its history as a maritime hub and cultural melting pot.

# Understanding Sri Lanka

Located in the Indian Ocean just south of India, Sri Lanka is an island that is a popular holiday destination. Well known for its natural beauty, Sri Lanka has stunning beaches all along its coastline, great wildlife and biodiversity and a rich culture and heritage dating back several millennia.

Sri Lanka was engulfed in a bitter civil war for 30 years between the government and the Tamil Tigers, who were fighting for an independent state for the Tamil speaking minority. The war officially ended in May 2009 when the Tamil Tigers were bloodily defeated.

## History

Sri Lanka has more than 2,500 years of continuous written history by means of the Mahawansha, and was also mentioned in several ancient Indian texts. One of the most famous is the **Ramayana**, in which the island, which was referred to as Lanka, was the island fortress of the king Ravana, who captured the wife of Rama an incarnation of the Hindu God, Vishnu. Legend has it that Hanuman the monkey flew over to Lanka and destroyed the capital by setting it on fire, while Rama and his remaining troops later crossed over from the mainland by building a land bridge across the sea.

There is however a school of thought, though largely unsupported, that Sita the wife of Rama, eloped with Ravana while Rama was away. It is argued by those who support this view that, this is why Rama subjected Sita to undergo an “agni pariksha” (test of fire) to prove her purity. Nevertheless, this theory is widely criticized by believers of Valmiki's version of the episode.

The Sinhalese arrived in Sri Lanka late in the 6th century BC, probably from northern India. Buddhism was introduced starting from the mid-3rd century BC, and a great civilization developed in cities like Anuradhapura (kingdom from c. 200BCE to c. 1000CE) and Polonnaruwa (c. 1070 to 1200). Other later notable kingdoms are the Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Gampola, Kandy and Jaffna Kingdoms.

Occupied by the Portuguese in the 16th century and the Dutch in the 17th century, the island was ceded to the British in 1796, and became a crown colony in 1802. As Ceylon, it became independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972.

## Climate

Since Sri Lanka is a tropical country, you can expect the rain anytime of the year in most parts. However, the two major rainy seasons are the

**North-East monsoon** (October to January) and the **South-West monsoon** (May to July).

Being an island, the climate of Sri Lanka changes dramatically from one part of the country to another. For example at Nuwara Eliya, in the hills of Central Sri Lanka, has a temperature around -5 to 20°C throughout the year, whereas Hambanthota, located in the dry zone, has a temperature consistently around 30-35°C.

In general, Sri Lanka also has very hot temperatures all year long, which is why most Sri Lankan men wear sarongs while Sri Lankan women dress lightly with a long dress.

## **Terrain**

Mostly low, flat to rolling plain; mountains in south-central interior.

- Highest point: Pidurutalagala, 2,524m.
- Second highest peak: Kirigalpotttha (Horton Plains) 2,388m.
- Third highest peak: Thotupola Kanda (Horton Plains) 2,357m.

# The awesome languages of Sri Lanka

Sinhala, spoken by the majority Sinhalese, and Tamil, spoken by the minority Tamil and Muslim groups, are Sri Lanka's two official languages. English is commonly used in most cities, especially Colombo, Kandy and Galle, and by government and tourism officials. But while most of the people in Colombo can speak English, don't expect everyone, everywhere to be able to speak it fluently. In the beach and tourist areas you will have no problem with English. Most people in rural villages, however, cannot speak any English, beyond a few simple words.

- **Sinhala Language** The greeting in Sinhala is "ayubowan". It means "May you live longer"; 'Thank you' is "Bohoma sthuthi" and "how are you" is "kohomada", pronounced "Ko homede".
- **Tamil Language:** The greeting in Tamil is "Vanakkam"; 'Thank you' is "Nandri".

Sinhala writing is much more curved than Tamil. After a while, you'll learn how to distinguish between the two.

# How to get to the lovely Island of Sri Lanka



**NOTE:** Sri Lankan police will arrest and may deport people sporting tattoos of Buddha or any other tattoos which can be interpreted as having religious significance. If you have such a tattoo then it is strongly advisable to cover it up or avoid visiting Sri Lanka.

## Visa rules

New visa rules have been imposed where an online travel authorisation must be obtained by non Sri Lankan passport holders except Maldives and Singapore nationals. This has to be done in advance, before entering the country. The "Tourist ETA visa" is valid for 90 days, starting from the day is approved, and can be applied for online. Visa charges are USD15 for SAARC countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan) and USD30 for others.

Important: As of May 2014, immigration authorities at Colombo airport are very demanding with respect to the accuracy of the passport number on your electronic travel authorization obtained online. A single digit mistake is taken as a reason to force you to buy a new visa and refer you to some obscure government office in Colombo for refunds of your online payments. Be careful about 1 vs. l and zero vs. O. The number should exactly match the machine-readable section of your passport, and not anything else (for example, Russian passports have a non-alphanumeric number sign that should be completely excluded).

**Extensions** can be made at the Department of Immigration, +94 11 532-9300; M-F 09:00-16:30, 41 Ananda Rajakaruna Mw, Col 10, Punchi Borella, Colombo. The last payments are processed at 15:30. The department sets the cost in US dollars, but you pay in Sri Lankan rupees. A visa extension gives you a full three months in the country and you can apply for your extension almost as soon as you arrive (the 30-day visa given upon entry is included in the three months). A further three-month extension is possible, but you must again pay the extension fee plus another LKR10,000. Extensions beyond this are at the discretion of the department, and incur a LKR15,000 fee plus the extension fee. See above for fees for the first 90-day extension. The whole process takes about an hour. First, go to the 1st-floor office and pick up a visa-extension application form from the person closest to the door. You then work your way along the counter, through six or seven stages of stamps and receipts. Then you wait 30 minutes or so while your passport works its way back down the counter and is returned to you. You will need your passport, an onward ticket and either a credit card or foreign exchange receipts.

Tourist visas for India can be obtained at the High Commission of India (242 1605; info.colombo@mea.gov.in; 36-38 Galle Rd, Col 3). The cost of a six-month visa depends on your nationality, and you'll need to supply two photos. It takes at least five days to process a tourist visa, but only one day if you are a foreign resident in Sri Lanka. Lines tend to be very long. You can also obtain an Indian visa in Kandy at the Assistant High Commission of India (081-222 4563; ahciknd@mailandnews.com; Box 47, 31 Rajapihilla Mawatha). Kandy makes a good alternative to Colombo because it's not as busy.

## **By plane**

**SriLankan Airlines** (flight code **UL**) is the national flagship carrier operating to and from **Colombo-Bandaranayake International Airport (IATA: CMB)** and Hambantota International Airport. Flights are available from cities throughout Europe, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, the Middle East, India, and Pakistan. SriLankan Air also flies to the nearby destinations such as Chennai, Trivandrum, Mumbai, Delhi, Cochin, Bangalore and the Maldives.

**Emirates Airlines** connects many major European cities and others worldwide to Colombo with several flights daily from Dubai and Singapore to Colombo. The airline operates 777-300ER wide body aircraft on these routes.

Indian carrier Jet Airways or its offshoot Jetlite flies to Sri Lanka.

**Mihin Lanka**, Sri Lanka's first (and only) low-cost airline started operating in 2007. They fly to Dubai in United Arab Emirates and Tiruchirapalli and Buddhagaya in India. Mihin Lanka now has non-stop services from Colombo to Dhaka and Jakarta.

**Qatar Airways** has 3 daily non-stop flights from Doha to Colombo.

**Jet Airways** has many flights a day to Colombo from Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai.

**Tiger Airways**, the Singapore-based LCC, flies three times a week between Colombo and Singapore, increasing to four times a week starting November 2012.

The budget airline **Air Asia** now operates from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to Colombo, Sri Lanka. This opens up cheap flight for visitors from South East Asia as well as those who are visiting South Asia and then heading to South-East Asia (or vice-versa).

**Oman Air** has announced flights to Colombo via Muscat and Male, they seem to have special prices for their new destinations' start (Frankfurt,

Munich, Paris, Male, Colombo)

**Royal Jordanian** has a daily flight from Amman to Colombo.

**Ukrainian International Airlines** now has a flight from Kiev to Colombo via Dubai.

Other airlines such as Singapore Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Thai International Airways, Cathay Pacific, Saudi Arabian, Condor (Germany), Spicejet (India), Meridiana (Italy), and JetAirFly (Belgium) operate to Colombo-Bandaranayake from their respective home bases.

An **Airport Express Luxury Train Service** operates between Airport Station (Bandaranayake International Airport) and Colombo Secretariat Station (Near Colombo Hilton) [1](#). Currently the ticket is priced at Rs 500 for a journey.

## **From Canada/USA**

There are no direct flights that reach Sri Lanka from cities outside Asia, the Middle East and Europe. From the American West Coast, the distance is almost half the globe. Depending on your preferences and how much spare time you have, you can consider a stopover in Europe or SE Asia or take a non-stop flight over the North Pole to New Delhi or Mumbai from Chicago, Newark, New York City (JFK), or Toronto. In many cases, this may be the fastest route, but check if an Indian transit visa is required. Another fast and easy idea is to use Middle Eastern airlines from the US with stopovers in either Qatar, Bahrain, or the UAE (no transit visa required). For example the Dubai-based Emirates offers daily flights from SFO, LAX, Houston Hobby (IAH), and Toronto (YYZ) with a very short stopover before the short flight to Colombo. Emirates Airlines offer non-stop service to Colombo two to three times daily from Dubai. In 2013, SriLankan Airlines joined the Oneworld alliance which allows through ticketing with American Airlines, as well as several Asian, European, and Middle Eastern airlines.

## **By ship**

The Tuticorin-Colombo passenger ferry service, suspended for years due to the civil war, commenced services in June 2011. The Scotia Prince ran twice a week until November 2011 when the ferry was discontinued indefinitely. The company has yet to announce an official date for resumption of the service.

If you would like to travel via cargo ship, please note that according to the customs office in Tuticorin it is considered illegal for a cargo ship to transport passengers from the Tuticorin Port to Sri Lanka.

## **Cruise Ship**

Sri Lanka has been included in its destinations list for 2011 by American cruise operator Zegrahm Expeditions. The line plans four voyages that stop in Sri Lanka in 2011.

# A tour around in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is rapidly expanding its infrastructure and public transport services, making independent travel easier over time. As of now, however, many roads are still thoroughly potholed and at times terrifying due to local driving traditions. Together with occasional massive crowds (especially on holidays), often lacking luggage space and occasional harassment of women travelling alone, buses may not seem like the most appealing way of travel for some. Yet, they offer great opportunities for interaction with locals, are cheap, plentiful and come in different qualities. If you're on a very tight budget, the standard public buses (CTB) lack air-con and are regularly pretty overcrowded, but they're dirt-cheap for western standards and run everywhere all the time. Private buses charge about double but are still cheap and often do have air-conditioning and often guaranteed seats. Your best bet is to inform upon arrival in a destination about your way out, and if possible secure a seat already. In all cases, arrive early and preferably travel light. If you're carrying a lot of luggage, you might have to purchase a seat for your backpack if you don't want to keep it on you lap or under your feet.

Trains offer good alternatives when they are available, and the standard trains are only slightly more expensive than the private buses, if at all. One of the advantages is that 1st and 2nd class train tickets can be reserved several days in advance. Sri Lankan Railways has a useful website in English. There are also more expensive private trains with 1st class wagons and good service to some of the destinations. These obviously come at higher prices, but are still a reasonable and convenient option for travellers on a mid-range or higher budget, with a trip from Colombo to Kandy costing around LKR1700/USD13.

Of course, if you're not on a budget and especially if you're pressed for time, renting a car with driver for the whole or part of the route can offer a convenient way to follow this itinerary, and will in some cases allow to see two sites on one day. Daily rates vary between LKR5000 and 10,000 per day excl. fuel, depending on the kind of car you want and whether you book via a hotel or travel agency that will take a commission.

## Three-wheeler

The most common mode of transport in Sri Lanka is via a three-wheeled automobile appropriately referred to as a **three-wheeler** (*Tri-Shaw*). Also known as **Tuk-Tuks** from the noise of their motors. These operate in a manner similar to taxis, and in many situations are a convenient and highly cost-efficient way to get around. Safety is a concern however, as none of them have seat belts and they are open to the sides. Three-wheelers are ubiquitous in Sri Lanka. On any given street, you'll hardly

have to wait more than a couple of minutes without one going by that you can wave down. If you're travelling with luggage, there are slightly larger three-wheelers with more space for your bags that you can look for. While it may be the most novel way to get around, it may not be the most cost efficient in every situation. Public transport is cheaper by far, and most Three-wheel drivers tend to over-price foreigners, so never agree to the first estimate. The best price you can get is about Rs. 50 – 75 per km for short journeys and about Rs. 30 – 50 for long journeys ( more than 15 km). If you do come across a metered Tri-Shaw make sure the meter is switched on. Taxis are slightly more expensive but surely a lot safer. Having said that, you probably have not experienced everything Sri Lanka has to offer until you travel in one.

## By car



**Rented cars** usually turn out cheaper than three-wheelers, and are less prone to road accidents—and are recommended by most hotels. Rented cars often come with their own drivers. Often the automobile itself is free, whereas the driver will charge a fee for his services. Some drivers/guides are government-licensed; some are extremely knowledgeable and multi-lingual, specializing in historical and cultural knowledge, and environment/natural history for your visits to the ancient sites and the natural reserves. It is not recommended to try driving yourself, unless you are very adventurous, as the driving style is very different from wealthier countries.

## Tour operators

Tour operators are happy to get you a van and a driver who will take you all over the island but beware, the roads are bumpy and slow. If you book

off-the-cuff when you arrive, ask to be shown on a map where you are going before agreeing to any 'tour' of the island and research before you arrive so that you have a clear idea of where you might like to travel. Senseless backtracking to lengthen the trip and increase the cost is a real danger, as is a driver's wish to take you on unwanted shopping expeditions in an effort to gain commission. Travel websites specialising in Sri Lanka are easily found and have greatly increased the choice that is readily available to independent travellers seeking tailor-made tours. The best of them will produce clearly-stated travel itineraries and some are flexible enough to make late changes to itineraries. Ask to see their booking conditions and anti-fraud policies.

## **Taxi companies**

Taxis are a better way of getting around Colombo than three wheelers as, due to the metering, they often turn out to be cheaper. Rates are about USD0.55 and they have full day packages (approx 8 hours and 80km) for around USD 40. They will also take you outstation for around USD 0.30-0.35 per km with no waiting charges. You can also set up your own itinerary and travel around that way as opposed to whatever the tour operator tells you.

## **By bus**

For those on a budget buses are everywhere. They're sometimes crowded and uncomfortable, but they get you around for almost nothing; it costs about a dollar to get half-way across the island. If you're planning on splashing out, **AC buses** run most routes for twice the price, which offer air-conditioning and a guaranteed seat. However, they're still uncomfortable. Bus stations are confusing places, especially the big ones, but almost everyone will be delighted to practice their English and help you. Also, when travelling by bus, it is local etiquette in most buses to provide or give up the very front passenger seats to members of the clergy such as monks or priests if they are present.

## **By train**

Sri Lanka has an extensive railway system serving all major towns and cities in the island except for the North. The Railway system in Sri Lanka is very picturesque when entering the hill country because of the winding tracks along the mountains especially on the Badullu-Nanu Oya line. Make sure, if you can, to sit on the right side of the train, as it offers the better view. Travel by train is itself a journey to remember, be it travelling to Central Sri Lanka or travelling on the coastal line is just amazing. Highly recommended to travel by train if you are travelling outside Colombo. The Hill train to Badulla is an amazing journey. Preferably choose the express trains, and try to get a reservation beforehand, if you can. There are

special Observation cars for tourists that like to take in the scenery. Trains can be slower than buses, depending if you are on a line that offers an express train or not, but more comfortable and even less expensive than buses.

You can look up train schedules on the official site: [4](#) or using one of the two Android Apps available: [5](#) [6](#). Be advised, however, that these will only give you results for direct connections between stations.

There are three classes of railway cars, although 1st and 2nd class are only available on some Intercity and Express trains. Travelling 3rd class is not as bad as it may sound. Often the difference between 3rd and 2nd class is only a missing armrest between seats.

Trains are sometimes crowded, especially in the morning and late afternoon. Also, observation car seats for the lines popular with tourists (like the Colombo-Kandy line) are often booked out several days in advance in the high season. So whenever possible you should get a reservation beforehand: see [7](#) and [8](#) for more information

Privately owned train services such as **Exporail** and **Rajadhani Express** operates air-conditioned and serviced first-class railway cars to major destinations daily. While this is costlier than travelling by air-conditioned bus, it is much cheaper than hiring a car and offers facilities such as online reservations, friendly on-board services, spacious seating, on-board meals and wireless internet.

## By plane

Sri Lankan Airlines operates small **Seaplane** service to destinations such as Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Galle and many more locations. This is perfect for photography trips because you can get a bird's eye view of the island and takes less time to get to a destination than using the road. Also the seaplanes land on picturesque lakes and tanks around the island.

**Aero Lanka** operates domestic flights between Colombo City Airport – Ratmalana, Jaffna and Trincomalee

- **Cinnamon Air** (*air taxi*), No 11, York Street, Colombo 01, ☎ +94 11 2 475 451. A Domestic Airline offering daily scheduled flights from Bandaranaike International Airport to Sri Lanka's most popular destinations.

# Amazing attractions in Sri Lanka

Please be aware that to get into many of the tourist sites in Sri Lanka, you, as a foreigner will be charged up to ten times more than locals.



Some popular sights in Sri Lanka are:

- Sri Dhalada Maligawa and Peradeniya Gardens in Kandy.
- The ancient temples in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa which are very beautiful.
- Beautiful villages which look like England in Nuwara Eliya. There are many tea estates and Hakgala gardens too.
- The beaches of Unawatuna, Galle and northern areas.
- Whales in Mirissa and Kalpitiya.
- Wildlife in Yala National Park & Wilpattu for the best wildlife Safari experience. Go to Udawalawe to see elephants and Kumana (Yala East) for birdwatching.
- The unexplored Sri Lanka in Jaffna and the islands in the Northern Province (Delft).
- See Negombo's beaches, all sandy and blue.

With a recorded history of more than 2,500 years, Sri Lanka has a rich cultural and natural heritage and its World Heritage Sites are among the absolute highlights in the country. With eight recognized entries, Sri Lanka currently has the second greatest number of listed World Heritage Sites in South Asia (only India, with 30, has more) The most recent addition however are the vast Central Highlands, which were inscribed in 2010. Other than these, Sri Lanka has identified two prospective World Heritage

Sites: Seruwila Mangala Raja Maha Vihara and Seruwila to Sri Pada (Sacred Foot Print Shrine), an ancient pilgrim route along the Mahaweli river in Sri Lanka.

# Fun stuffs to do and places to go in Sri Lanka

There is nothing that you “can’t do” in Sri Lanka and there are a variety of things that you can do depending on your preference. These are some of the list of things you can do:

**Surfing** – from November to April you can surf on the western and southern coast. Best place for the beginners is Weligama on the southern coast. You can rent a board for LKR1,500 per day or LKR400 per hour. Lessons cost LKR2,500 per hour, but bargain.

**Kitesurfing** – from April to September you can kitesurf eastern coast. Best place for the beginners is Kalpitiya (Sethawadi and Kappaladi lagoons), where you can find kite schools and the best conditions in Asia.

**White water rafting** is also available.

**Snorkeling** - off the Coral a Sanctuary near Hikkaduwa is a popular spot to see turtles.

**Hiking** - Horton Plains National park offers a nice hiking opportunity to the spectacular view at World's End.

Go to **Kandy** to see the Sri Dhalada Maligawa and Peradeniya Botanical Gardens. Also don't miss out on the traditional Sri Lanka dance performance held every day at 17:00 in the city hall.

Go to **Matale** and climb the Sigiriya or Pidurangala Rock, see the ancient frescoes and enjoy a panoramic view of the area.

Go to **Rathhota, Matale** and climb Riverstone, see the Mini Worlds' End and directly travel to Wasgamuwa.

Go to **Anuradhapura** and **Polonnaruwa** to see ancient temples, ruins which are very beautiful.

Go to **Nuwara Eliya** to see beautiful villages which look like England. There are many tea estates and Hakgala botanical gardens too.

Go to **Unawatuna**, Galle, Trincomalee (Nilaweli Beach), Pasikuda and north areas to see extremely beautiful beaches.

Go to **Mirissa** and **Kalpitiya** and watch whales and dolphins with privately operated boat tours.

Go to **Jaffna** to see the Portuguese built Fort (1618) it was later expanded by the Dutch (1795), Nallur Temple, Keerimalai natural fresh

water pond just 10 feet from the sea and the islands in the Northern Province (Delft, Kayts, Leyden, Middlburg and many more) to see unexplored Sri Lanka.

Go to **Yala National Park, Wilpattu, Wasgamuwa** for the best wildlife Safari experience. Udawalawe to see elephants and Kumana (Yala East) for bird-watching.

Go to **Kithulgala** for white water rafting in the Keliniya River.

# Things to buy in Sri Lanka

## Costs

Sri Lanka is still a very cheap country comparable with Southeast Asia. Local street food costs around €1, a meal in a local restaurant €2-€5, a bottle of the local Lion beer is €1. All across the country there are simple accommodations, hostels and homestays. The prices vary depending on the equipment at €10 to €20. On the coast many small boutique hotels opened up in the last years with prices of €20 to €30 per night in a double room. For more comfort expect to pay more than €40.

## Currency

The currency is the Sri Lankan rupee: **LKR**. There are coins for 25 and 50 cents (bronze), 1 rupee (old version is big and silver, new version is small and gold,) 2 rupees (silver,) and 5 rupees (gold,) as well as banknotes ranging from LKR10-5000. Coins that are more than a few years old are typically in quite bad condition.

## Things to buy

Handicrafts of Sri Lanka. For reed, cane, cotton, paper, leather, wood, clay, metal, and gemstones have been transformed and re-expressed in an array of batiks, toys, curios and jewelery, all exquisite hand made treasures.

## Credit cards and ATMs, banking services

ATMs are located in many places (especially at bank branches) in the cities and suburbs, less so in the countryside. Be careful of using credit cards, as fraud is on the rise in Sri Lanka. You can withdraw from debit cards too (Cirrus, Maestro, Visa Electron etc.) where the logos are displayed. Mostly your card will be replaced by your bank once you go back to your country. Not every ATM accepts international cards, try Commercial Bank they accept international cards. NOTE! You can't send money by Western Union or Money Gram from Sri Lanka abroad. One can only receive money via international money transfer while in Sri Lanka.

## Delicious meals to eat in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka and South Indian food share a lot in common, and many local restaurants will describe their menus as *Sri Lankan & South Indian*. There are a number of regional variations though, the different types of hopper, devilled prawns/cuttlefish/chicken/etc. and the common fiery addition to any curry, *pol sambol* made of grated coconut, red chilli powder and lime juice. Sri Lankan food is generally spicy. But you can always ask for less spicy options when you are ordering your food. Note that Sri Lankans **eat with their right hands** – this isn't a major problem, because everywhere will be able to provide cutlery if you can't eat otherwise. But try the Sri Lankan way (tips of fingers only!), it's harder than it looks but strangely liberating.

The food is very cheap generally, with a cheap meal costing about a dollar. The most expensive, tourist-orientated places seldom charge more than ten dollars. The staple food of Sri Lankans is **rice and curry** – a massive mound of rice surrounded by various curries and delicacies. If you want to eat a cheap lunch you can follow the Sri Lankan crowds and duck into any of a million small cafes, confusingly called 'Hotels'. These normally sell a rice and curry packet, as well as 'short eats', a collection of spicy rolls. This is ideal for backpackers and those who want to get past the touristy hotels selling burnt chicken and chips – you're charged by how much you eat, and unless you're absolutely ravenous it probably won't cost over a dollar.



If you are taking road trips outside Colombo, there are endless options for places to stop on the road for lunch. Rest houses and hotels along major roads throughout Sri Lanka have good restaurants, and will offer both Sri Lankan and Western menus. If you are less adventurous, you can easily get good sandwiches and soups at these restaurants. These places have excellent rice and curry plates, and you will be served many different types of curries over an extremely generous portion of rice. These meals are extremely delicious and will leave you full and happy at the end of the

meal. Eating will definitely be a memorable experience in Sri Lanka.

**Kottu (Kothu) Roti** (a medley of chopped roti, vegetables and your choice of meat) is a must-have for anyone – tourist or otherwise – in Sri Lanka. It is uniquely Sri Lankan and tastes best when made fresh by street vendors. However, several kottu roti restaurants have been closed down due to their use of stale and old roti, which made some patrons sick. Use caution, and even better, talk with the locals to figure out where the best kottu roti restaurants are.



Other food that you should try are **String Hoppers** , **Hoppers**, **Pittu** and **Kiribath**.



There are many upscale restaurants to choose from in the city of Colombo. There are several fine dining restaurants at the 5 star hotels which offer both Local and International cuisine. These establishments are found largely in western Colombo (along Galle Road), though more are located around Colombo and other major cities.



## What to drink in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka **water** from the tap is not considered to be safe to drink in the country. However if you are using bottled water (1.5 litre for 60-70 LKR in March 2012) please make sure SLS (Sri Lanka Standard Institute) label is present. Also in some parts of the country you'll find hard water due to the high presence of lime in the soil. **Fresh milk**, due to the climate, spoils easily, and so is often very expensive. Powdered milk, however, is safe and is often substituted.

**Thambili** the juice from king coconut, is very refreshing. It's sold at the side of streets throughout the island, you know it's clean as the coconut is cut open in front of you and it's cheaper than bottled drinks at about R30/- each. **Soft drinks** are available almost everywhere, normally in dusty-looking glass bottles. The local producer, Elephant, make a range of interesting drinks – try the ginger beer and cream soda. “Coca Cola” and “Pepsi” also available in large and small sizes (plastic bottles) including several local soft drink brands – all available at rapidly multiplying supermarkets all across the country and grocery shops.

The most common local beer is **Lion Lager** (140 LKR in “wine shops” or 200-300 LKR in restaurants in March 2012). For something a bit different try **Lion Stout**. It is characterized by its tar-like oiliness of body and chocolate finish. Other brews include **Three Coins**, which is brewed by the Mt Lavinia hotel chain, allegedly to a Belgian recipe.

The traditional spirit is **Arrack**, which costs about 4 USD for a bottle, and is often drunk with club soda. The quality can vary depending on how much you want to pay. However, widely recommended brand would be “Old Reserve” and worth paying 7.5 USD for it.

The **Ceylon Tea** is the common name for tea grown in the island nation of Sri Lanka, which was known prior to independence as Ceylon. There is Ceylon black tea, white tea, and green tea.





## **Where to sleep in Sri Lanka**

Accommodation in Sri Lanka has been transformed in recent years. What would be recognized as the modern tourist industry began in the 1960s with traditional beach hotels built on the west coast which were aimed primarily at the package holiday crowd and traditional travel operators. But the past decade has brought a major change, with the growth of villas, boutique hotels, and small independent and individualistic properties offering a huge array of choice.

With the end of the civil war and the defeat of the Tamil forces in May 2009, tourist arrivals have been going up, and as there still aren't a great many decent hotels it's probably better to book early.

## Where to go to get educated in Sri Lanka

- **Buddhist Studies and Pali Language.** The universities of Peradeniya and Kelaniya offer a variety of Buddhist studies and Pali language courses in English.
- **Meditation.** You may find monasteries and meditation centres that offer meditation courses (generally free of charge) in the Lanka\_monasteries\_2008\_jan.pdf Buddhist Publication Society guide.
- **Mahamevnawa Meditation Monastery** is a good place to learn true Buddhism.
- **Dancing** There are many foreign enthusiasts to learn Sri Lankan traditional dance under three categories which are Udarata, Pahatharata and Sabaragamu. And there are distinguished drumming for those categories.

# How to stay safe in Sri Lanka

In June 2009, the Sri Lankan government lifted travel alerts after the military defeat of rebel insurgents in the north of the country, though it is advisable to check with the local travel advisory bureau in your country if there is any doubt. Sri Lanka's lengthy and bloody civil war was ended one month earlier, when the government forces finally wiped out the Tamil Tigers. However, there might be land mines left, which can be troublesome, and the facilities in northern (and some parts of the east) cities and towns are war torn. These were the areas where the Tamils lived. The UN, NGOs and the Sri Lankan authorities are currently engaged in rapidly clearing landmines laid out by the warring parties. It's a long and difficult process.

Bombings and assassinations were a firm part of both sides in the conflict, and there is heavy security in all sensitive locations. While the separatists have never targeted tourists there have been deaths, notably in a landmine explosion at Wilpattu National Wild Park in 2006, and some have been wounded by terrorist actions. War is, after all, dangerous. In general, though, traffic accidents kill more people than terrorism. It's quite safe to travel in Sri Lanka and many tourists from all over the world started to come to the country after the end of the civil war. You'll see many foreign tourists at the tourists sites, mostly Westerners. Locals will greet foreigners with a smile and are generally helpful. It is recommended to avoid going alone after dark. Pickpocketing on public transport is uncommon, but take precaution.

Violent crime is not usually any more serious a problem for tourists in Sri Lanka than it is anywhere. There has been an increase in violent crimes involving tourists in the past few years, but it is still very rare. Tourists should exercise the same care and attention as they would at home.

Under colonial-era laws which are still in place, homosexual activity between consenting adults are punishable by fines and whipping. LGBT travelers should exercise discretion.

## Con artists and touts

Con artists and touts are a serious problem throughout all tourist areas. Using the services of a tout for accommodation, local travel, etc. will most likely increase the price. First time travelers to Sri Lanka may find themselves the victim of scams, however seasoned travelers to Sri Lanka are very rarely scammed and it is simple to avoid becoming a victim of scammers by taking precautions:

- Do not believe anyone who claims to be a professional (e.g. airline pilot), or in charge of a location (like a bus terminal) without proof.

- Scams involving gemstones are common. Do not buy with the intention of selling them in your home country for a profit.
- Be on guard for anybody trying to help you by giving you unsolicited directions or travel advice. Take any advice from taxi and auto drivers with a grain of salt, especially if they tell you the place you want to go to is closed, dangerous, non-existent etc. If you are unsure, check a map.
- If you have been told your hotel is closed or full, give them a call. If you are a first time visitor to Sri Lanka, don't admit it as it will make you a target for the scam artists.
- Unless you absolutely have to, do not agree to hire the same driver for more than a day at a time. They are a dime a dozen at each city and the whole country is so small that you will not have trouble getting between towns via Bus, Train, Tuk Tuk or another driver if you have to. Even though you agree on a daily or hourly rate, the drivers will all generally attempt to make more commission out of you by forcing you to visit one of their friends businesses (e.g. spice, carving or gem shops). Calmly and firmly say you are not interested and if they continue to force you to go then find another driver – they are very common and you will have no problem finding another one.

# How to stay healthy in Sri Lanka

- **Vaccinations** are recommended for Hepatitis A+B and Tetanus. Also, obtain the Typhus vaccination outside of tourist areas especially in the wet season. The CDC also recommends vaccination against **Japanese encephalitis** [9](#).
- **Dengue fever**: During the rainy season use mosquito repellent. When head and joint aches occur get a blood check. There is no vaccination yet.
- **Malaria** : Gampaha (e.g. Negombo), Colombo, Kalutara, Galle, and Nuwara Eliya districts are considered **malaria free**, as is the city (but not the entire district) of Kandy. Elsewhere, malaria exists and is most likely in Anuradhapura. In the dry season, using **DEET repellent** for a mid-day road or train trip to Kandy (including visits to the Peradeniya Gardens) or Nuwara Eliya should suffice. Risk increases after sunset. **Malaria prophylaxis (anti-malarials)** are warranted for trips to the north (especially Anuradhapura), east, and southeast (however some types are not available locally, and it may not be as effective as what you could obtain back home.)
- **Yellow fever**: A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required from travelers over 1 year of age coming from infected areas.
- **Filaria**: Sri Lanka is the first country in the South Asia region to eradicate Filaria [10](#).
- **Polio**: Sri Lanka is considered polio free.
- Visitors should avoid drinking water from the tap. It is best to stick to bottled water for both drinking and tooth-brushing.
- Although **snake bites** are extremely rare among tourists (comparable to being struck by lightning), anyone bitten should seek prompt medical care. This is true even if the bite doesn't result in any pain and swelling. The National Emergency number is 119. In Colombo, dial either 119 or if you want an emergency ambulance – 110.
- There are tiny little **flies** that live in the sand. Any contact with the dry sand usually results in bites and subsequent painful scratches. So avoid even a little sand on your skin, including legs.
- Visitors should avoid drinking water from the tap. It is best to stick to bottled water for both drinking and teeth brushing. Leafy, raw vegetables and salads should also be avoided, as they are washed with tap water.

# How to gain respect in Sri Lanka

There are several customs that, specially for Western travellers, would take a bit of getting used to.

- It is **customary to remove shoes and wear respectful attire (i.e. no miniskirts, tank tops, short pants, etc...)** when visiting temples. It is also the custom to remove shoes before entering a home, though this is not as strictly followed as in places such as Japan.
- **Never touch or pat** Buddhist monks, including younger monks and children who practice at a temple.



- Do not display **tattoos that depict the Buddha**. This can be regarded as highly insulting in Sri Lanka, even if acceptable in other Buddhist countries and regions. Arrest and deportation are realistic scenarios.
- Do not **turn your back** to a Buddha statue while within a reasonable distance. This includes posing for photos, where you **should not** make arm or body contact with the statue. It is advisable to photograph a Buddha statue with all persons facing towards it (as observing it), rather than posing alongside.
- **Public nudity** is illegal in Sri Lanka – nude/topless sunbathing and skinny dipping should be avoided, except in the private beach resorts which allow it.
- Although much latitude is given to tourists, it is more polite to **use your right hand** when handing money and small objects, etc... Of course you can use both hands for something big and/or heavy.
- **Be respectful to monks**. There's no particular etiquette for Westerners – just be polite. Always give them a seat on a crowded

bus (unless you're disabled or very elderly).

- **It is highly controversial to discuss politics, particularly the Sinhalese/Tamil divide or the LTTE.** The 26-year civil war which ended in 2009 saw thousands of attacks throughout the country, including suicide bombings and massacres which have killed scores of politicians and civilians on both sides alike.
- **No photography** of sensitive locations (inside and outside), and inside of shopping malls and tea factories (outside OK). Be especially careful in Fort, Colombo (except on the beach). If soldiers are guarding something, it probably shouldn't be photographed. Don't rely on signs alone, as sometimes they are old or missing. For example, one end of a bridge may have a "No Photography" sign, but not the other.
- Seemingly innocuous **public displays of affection** between lovers such as kissing and/or hugging may be culturally frowned upon as it is considered to be private behaviour but it is acceptable in functions and establishments designated for adults such as nightclubs, casinos and beach parties. Much lenience is given to foreigners and holding hands and public affection between parents and their children is not frowned upon.

# How to stay connected in Sri Lanka

## Phone

The country code for Sri Lanka is **94**. Remove the intercity prefix (**0**) before the area code when dialling internationally into the country (i.e., 0112 688 688 becomes +94 112 688 688) when dialling from abroad). The two next numbers after 94 represents the area code, they are different for every district for more information see Telephone numbers in Sri Lanka.

## Mobile

The use of GSM cellphones is widespread and the coverage is good.

Dialog and Mobitel are two operators that have sales offices at the airport inside the arrivals lounge. Dialog Mobile has the widest coverage in the country including rural areas and has the best quality GSM / 3G / HSPA /4G network. Mobitel also has a 3G/HSPA network. All the mobile operators are having same call rates due to floor rate tariffs. Therefore it is advisable to go to the network which offers you the best quality. All Mobile Operators offers cheap IDD Call rates.

If you want to surf internet, best way is to buy a HSPA dongle and a Mobile Broadband connection. Dialog Mobile, Mobitel, hutch, Etisalat and Airtel offers prepaid Mobile Broadband services which can be activated and used immediately.

Dialog is the Vodafone Roaming Network in Sri Lanka and offers the best range of Value added services for Roamers and the rates are cheaper. Etisalat and Airtel also provide cheap roaming rates specially to India.

Mobile Phones are cheaper and widely available.

## Embassies, high commissions and consulates

- 



**Australia**, Australian High Commission 21, Gregory's Rd, Colombo 7, ☎ 94 11 246-3200, fax: 94 11 268-6453.

- 



**Canada**, Canadian High Commission 33A, 5th Lane, Colpetty, Colombo -03, ☎ 94 11 522-6232, fax: 94 11 522-6296.

- 



**China**, Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 381-A  
Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7, ☎ 94 11 268-8610, fax: 94 11  
269-3799.

•

**France**, French Embassy, 89, Rosmead Place, Colombo 7, Sri  
Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2639400, fax: 94 11 2639402.

•

**Germany**, German Embassy, 40 Alfred House Avenue, Colombo 3,  
Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2580431, fax: 94 11 258 0440.

•

**India**, High Commission of India 36-38, Galle Road, Colombo 03, Sri  
Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2327587, 94112422788">+94 11 2422788, 94 11  
2421605, fax: 94 11 2446403, +94 11 2448166.

•

**Italy**, Embassy of Italy, 55, Jawatta Road, Colombo 5, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94  
11 2588388, fax: 94 11 2596344.

•

**Japan**, Embassy of Japan, No. 20, Gregory's Road, Colombo 07, Sri  
Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2693831 /2/3FORMAT, fax: 94 11 2698629.

•

**Malaysia**, High Commission of Malaysia, No. 33, Bagatalle Road,  
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 7557711, 94117557712">+94 11  
7557712, 94 11 7557713, fax: 94 11 7557714.

•

**The Netherlands**, 25, Torrington Avenue, Colombo – 7, Sri Lanka, ☎  
94 11 2510200, fax: 94 11 2502855.

•

**Norway**, Royal Norwegian Embassy, 34 Ward Place, Colombo 7, Sri  
Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2469611, fax: 94 11 2695009.

•



**Russia**, Embassy of the Russian Federation, 62, Sir Ernest de Silva Mawatha, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2573555, 94112574959">+94 11 2574959, fax: +94 11 2574957.



**Thailand**, Royal Thai Embassy, 46/46 Nawam Mawatha, 9th Floor, Green Lanka Towers, Colombo 2, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 2302500-3, fax: 94 11 2304511-2.



**United Kingdom**, British High Commission, 389 Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo – 7, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 5390639, fax: 94 11 5390694.



**United States**, American Embassy, 210 Galle Road, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka, ☎ 94 11 249-8500, fax: 94 11 249-8590.