

The Pearl of the Indian Ocean—Sri Lanka

Not far below the Indian peninsula, lies in all its glory—the magnificent and glorious island of Sri Lanka. My siblings and I were looking for a week-long getaway and Sri Lanka turned out to be the ideal vacation spot for a luxuriant budget experience. The nation has a rich atmosphere that seemed to naturally draw one into its warm embrace. I shared this sentiment wholeheartedly as I touched down on Sri Lankan soil for the first time.

Ceylon, as it was known under the British crown until 1948, reflects its contemporary colonial fashion in synergetic coalescence with its own culture. The population primarily comprises a harmonious potpourri of three languages—Sinhalese, English, and Tamil. Several tourists from all over the world also make frequent trips to dip their toes in all that the country has to offer. As I took to the long and open roads, it felt quite similar, yet different to the Indian roads I was accustomed to. With long trees forming a cascade of lush greenery across the landscape, the drive from the airport feels like a road trip in and of itself.



The calm streets of Sri Lanka observed during the daytime.

Generally recognised as the cultural capital of Sri Lanka, the beauty of the **Kandy** cityscape can be captured through the eyes of its exclusive viewpoint, amidst the winding roads. One can see the tropical rainforest hills, crystal-clear rivers, cascading waterfalls, valleys, and much more. Kandy also houses the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, a Buddhist temple that exhibits an architectural wonder at the heart of the royal palace. This temple is the namesake of Gautama Buddha's tooth, said to be preserved across the ages, exchanged by the hands of several dynasties.

Tucked away in clouds of mist atop valleys and mountains lies **Ella**, undoubtedly the most aesthetic locale in Sri Lanka. The best way to travel to Ella is by train, an adventure of its own that treats one to a simply breath-taking view of the hilltop, bristling with lush foliage in the comfort of a

luxurious coach. The train crosses the famous Nine Arch Bridge, where people can freely roam about the tracks and click pictures during brief periods. While waiting for the train, one can take a sip of the exotic world-famous home-grown tea along the hillside plantations—the country's single largest export.



An angle of the traversable Nine Arch Bridge in Ella.

Walking through the streets of Ella, I was mesmerised by the quaint ambience the small village presented, which felt straight out of a children's fairy tale. The topology provided for a plethora of experiences. One can hike up to Adam's peak, where the primordial human from the Bible is said to have first set foot on earth. At the foothills, one can unwind with a zip-line through dense clouds of fog, making for a unique experience altogether.

On the way to the sunny beaches of **Galle** awaits a mystical boat tour just short of the Indian Ocean. As the boatman paddles, one can revel in the natural elegance with the temperament of wildlife ranging from endemic birds to monitor lizards—and the sporadic crocodile if you're lucky! Apart from the gloomy mangrove caves, the boat also stops at a few islands along the archipelago, each with its own unique idiosyncrasies to offer.

Most of the exotic beaches of Sri Lanka can be found along the coast of Galle and **Unawatuna**. I felt rejuvenated as I stepped foot into the warm and fluffy golden sands of the seaside. The palm-fringed sunbed plays host to a variety of travellers and locals looking to relax and unwind as they feast their eyes on the sun taking a dip into the placid turquoise waters. Furthermore, the crystal-clear oceans allow for excellent visibility, making it a haven for scuba diving and snorkelling as one falls into the ineffable trance of the aquatic kingdom. A multitude of other water activities can also be availed to pass the time. When dusk falls, the idyllic ambience breathes life to the sands through a culturally vibrant nightlife—brimming with music, dance, and laidback parties.

The majestic Galle Fort, considered a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stands strong against the test of time—including a calamitous tsunami in 2004—and serves as an important colonial hereditament. The adjoining Galle Lighthouse follows suit as the oldest lighthouse in Sri Lanka, still operational and guiding sailors to this day. Not too far away was the setting for one of my personal favourite moments—The Turtle Hatchery. I was taken aback by the magnanimity of the Sri Lankan locals towards marine conservation. Following a brief tour of marine life, I was given the gratifying opportunity to release a baby turtle into the ocean. This bittersweet moment left a poignant imprint on my mental scrapbook.



A view of the Galle lighthouse from atop the remains of Galle Fort.

Teeming with stories of lost ancient mythos, the masterfully crafted places of worship abundant in Sri Lanka ethereally call out to the religious soul. Be it Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu, these houses of gods have been around for a lot of the nation's spiritual history. The secularity rampant in the country is admirable and it anchors a society akin to that of Mother India. Gangaramaya Temple is one such temple that boasts a truly novel blend of Sri Lankan, Thai, Indian, and Chinese architecture.

Another prominent part of Sri Lanka's colourful and exquisite culture is its flourishing gem industry. It is affectionately known as '*Ratna-Dweepa*', or Gem Island, owing to the fact that nearly 25% of the total land area of Sri Lanka is potentially gem-bearing, making Sri Lanka one of the countries with the

highest density of gem deposits.

At the heart of it all is **Colombo City**, the commercial capital and the largest city of Sri Lanka by population density. One can witness a drastic transition while heading towards the bustling city centre from the balmy tranquillity of the shores. Colombo is a sultry melting pot of modern life, colonial-style buildings, and monuments. The structural edifices such as the Twin Towers, the adjacent Bank of Ceylon, the Colombo Fort, and the Old Dutch Hospital, are architectural marvels inspired by multiple eras—most notably the British and Dutch. The bulk of the country's major activities takes place here, such as concerts and cultural performances from all over the world. I would recommend wandering about on the old-world sidewalks to truly bask in the picturesque glory of Colombo.



The architectural variety prevalent in buildings across Colombo City [Image Credits: Getty Images]

Although the country was facing economic problems in light of the pandemic, it did not hamper my experience one bit. My one-week sojourn in the Sri Lankan enclaves will always occupy a special place in my heart, from the places I visited, to the moments I lived.

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