

Beaches of the Beaten Track



Small cove along the southern coastal road

Surrounded by the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka is justifiably famous as a tropical beach destination. Golden palm fringed beaches, aquamarine waters and sweeping coastal views are archetypal images of paradise that kick started the tourism industry in places such as Hikkaduwa and Unawatuna. But with more than 1,600km of coastline Sri Lanka offers a chance to get away from the beaten path and experience the charm of some lesser known yet excellent beaches; from secret bays, and jungle clad coves to wild storm lashed coastal dunes, and urban escapes.

Words Nishan Perera and Naren Gunasekera **Photographs** Nishan Perera, Naren Gunasekera and Niroshan Mirando

Despite being the most developed for tourism the southwest coast still has some beautiful and quiet beaches, hidden away close to popular tourist areas. Madiha beach is just a few kilometers from Mirissa but a world away from the bars and nightlife the latter is known for. With a few small family run guesthouses and hotels it is a reminder of what Hikkaduwa and other popular destinations must have looked like 30 years ago. Several other bays and coves scallop the south coast between Galle and Tangalle and many still retain a charming village feel to them. You can while away the hours sitting under a coconut tree with a few friendly fishermen to keep you company. If you are a surfer, there is a good chance to find a quiet bay with good waves all to yourself.

Several of Sri Lanka's National Parks border the coast and provide opportunities to get away from civilisation and experience the island's coast the way it must have been many centuries ago. Well known for excellent animal sightings including leopards and elephants, Yala and Bundala National Parks are located along the rugged southeast coast. The next landmass from here is Antarctica, and large ocean swells generate powerful waves that crash on these wild, windswept beaches. Wind and waves form extensive sand dunes and weather eroded rock outcrops dot the coast at regular intervals.

While Some Beaches Are Virtually Unknown To Tourism, Others Are Hidden In Plain Sight

Wildlife is never far away here. Large whales frequent the seas and turtles come ashore to nest, while a few elephants might be visible on the edge of the scrub forest bordering the beach. Patanangala beach inside Yala National Park is named for the rock outcrop on its eastern side known as Elephant Rock. This is one of the few places in the park where visitors are allowed to leave their vehicles and you can take a break while watching wild boar on the beach.

Guess What?

Wind And Waves Form Extensive Sand Dunes And Weather Eroded Rock Outcrops Dot The Coast

Kudiramalai beach, approached through the Wilpattu National Park, is a quiet landscape of scrub forests, red earthed coastal cliffs and twisted driftwood. A walk along the beach and through the shallow waters is a great experience, with the only sound to be heard being the quiet lapping of the waves while watching white bellied sea eagles soar above. This beach is one of Sri Lanka's most historic locations, where the fabled first king of Sri Lanka, Vijaya landed after his banishment from India. The landscape still looks quite primeval with the red cliffs contrasting with the black petrified remains of ancient coral reefs.

Deep South

It Is An Atmospheric Location Where Time Seems To Stand Still

In the deep south, Ussangoda, is a small National Park with an interesting beach. Like Kudiramalai it is characterised by deep red soils and stunted vegetation bent into fantastic shapes by strong salt laden winds. Ussangoda is home to several archaeological sites dating back thousands of years. According to local folklore the mythical King Ravana from the Ramanaya epic used Ussangoda as a landing spot for his peacock chariot. The waves are usually strong and currents unpredictable for sea swimming but it is an atmospheric location where time seems to stand still.

The north and east of Sri Lanka encompasses an extensive area of coastline that has been largely untouched by tourism outside the three major tourism areas of Trincomalee, Passekudah, and Arugam Bay. North of Trincomalee, beyond the popular Uppuveli and Nilaveli beaches are miles of unspoilt coral fringed beaches providing endless opportunities for beach combing, snorkelling and quiet sunbathing.

Mannar is a fantastic off the beaten path adventure with quaint villages and an old fort

Outside the resort area of Passekudah are largely untouched beaches and small villages where the only person sharing the sand with you might be an occasional fisherman. During the calm season from April to October you can rent a boat and snorkel the beautiful coral reefs around Kayankerni and Vakarai and have a picnic on a private beach. Just 5km from the busy surf point in Arugam Bay is Kudakaliya beach. A beautiful setting with its estuary fronting a collection of impressive forest clad rocks including the well known Crocodile Rock. The coastal area is ripe for exploration and beachcombing although you need to keep an eye out for the elephants that tend to frequent the area.

Famous for migratory birds and a thriving fishing community, Mannar is a fantastic off the beaten path adventure with quaint fishing villages and an old fort, originally built by the Portuguese in 1560. Starting from the tip of Mannar island is 'Adams Bridge,' a chain of small sandy islands and cays stretching all the way to India. The islands are an important nesting habitat for seabirds such as terns and gulls, and during the calm season you can visit them via a boat service operated by the Navy.

Beach Getaway

For A Change Of Pace Or Some Different Scenery Get Off The Beaten Track

Casuarina beach, 20km outside Jaffna town is a hidden gem accessed via a causeway. Popular among locals on weekends, a weekday visit will reveal a beautiful and uncrowded beach lined with the Casuarina trees that give the beach its name.

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An Old Fort

If you are looking for a change of pace or some different scenery then get off the beaten track and visit the beautiful coastline for a mix of adventure and authenticity.

