

Five Ideal Package Tours

Sharmini Luther



Grand Hotel. Nuwara Eliya. British nostalgia lingers. Photo : Ceylon Tourist Board.

When planning your travels around Sri Lanka, you can place yourself in capable hands of experienced tour operators who take care of all the details for you. If you feel more adventurous, why not make up your itinerary as you go along with the help of the Tourist Board. There are also some excellent guide books around which can recommend suitable places to visit, all kinds of transport, ranging from car rentals (with or without a driver cum guide) to government-run trains and buses, and what to do and what not. Whichever way you choose to explore Sri Lanka, there are certain places you must not miss. These include the southwest coast, still containing left-overs of Portuguese and Dutch maritime activity, the ancient ruins of the northcentral province and the unique hill city of Kandy, the last seat of Sri Lankan kings. For nature enthusiasts, there are sanctuaries and reserves located all over the island. You can organise your tours in such a way as to sample a little bit of everything or concentrate on your favourites. We have outlined five possible tour packages which will allow you enough flexibility to do just that.

Colombo city and environs.

From the time of Moorish traders, Sri Lanka's present capital, Colombo, has been a well-known trading port on the Indian Ocean route linking east and west. Colonial rulers, such as the Portuguese and Dutch, fortified this port-city to protect its strategic location. Today, no moats and battlements remain but the heart of Colombo's commercial district is still referred to as the 'Fort'. It is a fascinating mix of glass and concrete high-rise buildings that jostle side by side with gracious colonial structures built by the British.

The President's House and, just across from it, the General Post Office, are two fine examples. North of the Fort area, you move into an older world, the bazaar district of Pettah, where narrow, crowded streets are lined with tiny shops selling everything from clothes and handicrafts to precious stones and electronic goods. Two wonderful old buildings worth hunting for in this maze of streets and trading places are the Dutch Museum and the Old Market. Colombo is not all traffic jams and crowded shops, set in quiet surroundings, you will find the Colombo Museum whose star attraction is the regalia of the last king of Kandy. Another impressive building is the Bandaranaike Memorial Conference Hall, an octagonal colossus in the midst of beautifully landscaped grounds. Across the street from the Hall is a gigantic figure of the Buddha, a replica of an ancient sculpture located in the north-central province.

For a different kind of peace and quiet, pay a visit to a Buddhist or Hindu temple. Colombo and its suburbs host a multitude of religious places of worship. A particularly picturesque temple lies on the Beira Lake, close to the Fort area. The most impressive Buddhist temple around Colombo is in the northern suburb of Kelaniya. Meticulously drawn frescoes describe the ransacking of the temple by the Portuguese and its restoration. Two Hindu temples, patronised heavily by Colombo residents, are located along the Galle Road, Colombo's main artery which runs parallel to the coastline.

The Dehiwela Zoo, just south of Colombo's city limits, will enthrall you with its fascinating collection of animals, birds and reptiles in lush, tropical surroundings. Many exhibits resemble the natural habitats of animals. Watch out for the deer park, nesting waterbirds around the zoo's lakes and a magnificent family of lions prowling around grass-covered slopes, and the daily elephant circus. A few miles away from Dehiwela lies the suburb of Mount Lavinia, famous for its fine beach,

almost a mini-beach resort with many facilities for accommodation in hotels and private homes.

The Hill Country

Sri Lanka's highlands are located in the centre of the country with the highest peak, Pidurutalagala, reaching over 8000 ft (2,440 metres) Perhaps the most popular town in the hills is the old capital of Kandy, 72 miles (114 kilometres) from Colombo. Here the climate is mild with gentle hills rising above a central lake. Kandy's chief attraction is the Temple of the Tooth, much venerated for the relic of the Buddha enshrined there. During the August full moon, the relic casket is carried on the back of the temple tusker around the town in a spectacular procession called a 'perahera'.

Every evening, a 'pooja' or religious service is held in the temple. It is well worth attending to listen to the beating of drums accompanying the high, sweet sound of the 'horanewa', a small wind instrument. On your way out of Kandy, you will pass the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, a marvellous collection of exotic flowering plants and trees laid out over acres of undulating ground. The orchid house, fernery and a majestic palm-lined avenue are some of the Garden's best features. Sri Lanka's longest river, the Mahaveli ('river of great sands'), almost loops the Gardens.

As you climb higher into the mountains, tropical foliage gives way to hillsides covered with tea. As you wind your way up the narrow hair-pin bends, you will be rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere. If you are interested in seeing how tea is processed, visit a tea factory on the way. You can also savour a fresh cup of pure Ceylon tea as a bonus! six thousand feet up, approximately 112 miles (179 kms) from Colombo, is the holiday retreat of Nuwara Eliya.

A haven for British colonials in the hot weather, Nuwara Eliya still retains vestiges of the old empire. The Grand Hotel, a British governors residence with lengthy corridors and high-ceilinged rooms, has an atmosphere of its own. The exclusive Hill Club, built in the style of an English hunting lodge, is another ex-colonial stronghold. Also, keep an eye out for Tudor-style holiday homes hidden behind elegant boxwoods and firs. In the centre of town, there is a well-maintained golf course which grants temporary membership to visitors.

A few miles outside Nuwara Eliya town, the Hakgala Botanical gardens, famous for its rose gardens, provides a wonderful view of the surrounding mountains. If you desire rougher country, Horton Plains, remote, shrouded in mist and untouched by human activity, is the place for you. Several miles southwest of Nuwara Eliya off the beaten track. Horton Plains is best traversed by jeep or other 4-wheel drive vehicle. Apart from being a birdwatcher's and botanist's delight, even the ordinary visitor will have much to marvel at. Located at one end of the Plains is World's End where the ground literally drops off into a valley thousands of feet deep. One possible route back to Colombo from the hills is through the town of Ratnapura, about 63 miles (103 kilometres) southeast of the capital. Ratnapura, meaning the 'city of gems', has been famed the world over for centuries for its sapphires, star rubies and cats eyes. You can visit the gemming sites where baskets of gravel are lifted up from water-logged pits and washed painstakingly for any signs of precious stones. If you wish to learn more about gems a visit to the Nilani Gem Bureau would be a rewarding experience. Gems could also be purchased here, with a certificate of quality.

Ancient ruins Most of Sri Lanka's archaeological wonders, dating back thousands of years, are concentrated in the northcentral region where ancient kingdoms flourished. Just under 100 miles (160 km) from Colombo, or if you take the Kandy road, about 45 miles (72 kms) north of the hill capital, lies the town of Dambulla famous for its rock temple. Dating back to the 1st century B.C., the temple is made up of several caves containing many statues of the Buddha and his disciples. A gentle climb up steps hewn into the granite takes you to the entrance above which hangs a magnificently cut 'drip ledge' to prevent rainwater from running down into the caves. The interior of the caves is rather gloomy so look carefully for the intricate designs painted on the rock ceiling. About 20 miles northeast of Dambulla, a bumpy side road leads to what looks like a misshapen lump of dough on a flat board.

The rock fortress of Sigiriya, also called the Lion Rock, rises 600 feet (200 metres) above the surrounding plains. If the archaeological splendours of Dambulla and Sigiriya have whetted your appetite for more, head east towards the town of Polonnaruwa. It served as Sri Lanka's capital in the eleventh century in the midst of a fertile agricultural region. Ancient kings built a complex system of irrigation tanks and channels to water the fields. They are still in use today. To get to Polonnaruwa, you must pass by the Giritale Tank while the town itself is

situated beside the Parakrama Samudra, named after the king who commissioned it. Amongst the many ruins of temples, monasteries and other constructions, the most noteworthy is the Gal Vihare or stone shrine, a collection of three Buddha figures carved out of rock. The Polonnaruwa ruins are lent a certain poignancy by the jungle which seems to be striving to overcome them completely.

Wildlife and Archaeology

If you are in the mood for combining ancient ruins with a look at some of Sri Lanka's splendid wildlife, then you should head for another ancient capital, Anuradhapura, which you reach via the country's largest nature sanctuary. Head north from Colombo along the coastal road that runs by the fishing town of Negombo upto Puttalam, about 82 miles (129 kms) away. Go west towards Anuradhapura and you will be skirting the southern boundary of the Wilpattu Reserve.

Covering about 400 square miles (640 sq. kilometres) of jungle dotted with 'villus' or waterholes, Wilpattu provides a haven for leopard, elephant, deer and bear. There are also numerous species of waterbirds, both indigenous and migratory species. As the animals are spotted best at dusk or early morning, an overnight stop in the vicinity of Wilpattu is worthwhile. The town of Anuradhapura lies about 25 miles (40 kms) from the reserve. Unlike Polonnaruwa, it is a bustling city with a large population. The area surrounding the ruins, however, is designated sacred and is extremely pleasant and quiet if you wish to explore. Anuradhapura, which enjoyed ascendancy from the 4th -10th centuries, is the site of some of the world's tallest stupas or dagabas. Their tall spires and distinctive spherical shapes are visible for miles around. Also in Anuradhapura, is another precious shrine for Buddhists, the Sri Maha Bodhi. It honours the world's oldest recorded tree, a Bo tree grown from a sapling of the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The tree is surrounded by gilded railings and is visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year.

Also revered by Buddhists in Sri Lanka is the rock temple at Mihintale, about ten miles east of Anuradhapura. Buddhism is said to have been introduced to Sri Lanka by an envoy of the Indian emperor Asoka, who preached first at Mihintale. Dozens of wide, shallow stone steps, lined with Araliya or temple flower, trees lead upto the shrine from which there is also a superb view of the surrounding countryside complete with large irrigation lakes. Don't forget to look for the stone

bed on which the bringer of Buddhism is said to have slept. One side of it is quite unprotected from a sheer drop down to the plains below.

Beaches and Wildlife

It is hardly surprising that, Sri Lanka being surrounded by 1000 miles of coastline, you are never very far from some delightful beach or bay. If you are looking for seaside resorts easily accessible from Colombo, then the southwest coast is the perfect choice. Miles of reef from the town of Beruwela (about 30 miles (49 kms) south of Colombo) onwards ensure safe swimming in emerald waters. You will find hotels every few miles along the shore offering a variety of conveniences. You can even find cabana-type accommodation right on the beach itself. Further south towards Hikkaduwa, the reefs come close to shore and are a delight for snorkellers and divers. You can also hire glass-bottomed boats from which to view the brilliant colours and formations of the living coral.

About 72 miles (113 kms) from Colombo, the seaport of Galle offers you a well-preserved Dutch fort with miles of ramparts along which you can enjoy an evening stroll. Within the fort, a small town still functions with shops, homes and government offices housed in the old buildings. There is also a beautiful old Dutch church, the first Protestant church to be built in the country. Further on, the town of Matara has two small forts which are also interesting to explore.

Beyond the southern-most tip of the island, at Dondra Head, you enter the arid zone with its characteristic scrub jungle and wide open plains. Past the town of Hambantota, almost 150 miles from Colombo, you are in a region famous for its sanctuaries -Bundala, wirawila and of course, Yala the largest in the southeast. At Yala, you can see elephant, leopard, wild boar and peafowl. At the western end of Yala is the Kumana Bird Sanctuary the best in the island for sheer numbers and variety. Depending on how hardy you are, there are more game sanctuaries along the southeastern coast of which Lahugala is famous for its large numbers of elephant herds. The rough ride is well compensated for by a breathtaking shoreline with large, unpopulated beaches and fine swimming at Arugam Bay and Pottuvil nearby.



Section of the interior of the Dambulla Cave Temple.



Ruins of the Medigiriya Dagaba, near Polonnaruwa Photo : Ceylon Tourist Board.



Elephant being bathed in a river.