Round Trip Review

Posted on

There’s more to Sri Lanka than sun, sea and sand.



The “round trip” is a tourist tradition in Sri Lanka. It is the journey made by every tourist who wants a break from the beach or city. The purpose of a round trip is to discover for yourself some of the wonders of this island.

A round trip can be made with a party of people you don’t know in a travel agent’s coach with a guide, or with friends or alone in a hired car with a chauffeur. Some couples take along their own unofficial guide, a Sri Lankan they’ve met who knows his way around.

Local travel agents operate round trips to all the sights the tourist wants to see, and bookings can be made at fixed prices through hotel travel desks. However, if you want to explore Sri Lanka independently, this is very easy to arrange. The drivers of the hotel cars and taxis based in the tourist areas have set fares for specific round trips, and know just what you want to see, where is the best place to stay, and where to shop.

When you engage a car for yourself, negotiate the price before you set out. Some drivers might want an advance during the journey to pay for fuel. When you pay the final fee at the end of your round trip, don’t forget to deduct the money you’ve advanced. Be prepared to pay an allowance, usually Rsl00, to the driver for each night of your trip. He will look after his own accommodation and meals, so you don’t have to worry about him. He will get his own lunch, too, when you stop at rest houses on the way.

Since the driver will quickly become a friend, you can rely on his advice on where to have lunch and on what special sights (such as an elephant orphanage, a spice garden, a turtle hatchery) to see during your trip.

If you are staying at a beach resort, or even holed up in a city hotel with nothing to do, a morning or afternoon drive around Colombo can be a pleasant way to see the city’s sights.



An elephant circus is held every afternoon at the zoo.

From the time of Moorish traders, Colombo has been an important port on the Indian Ocean route linking east and west. The Portuguese and Dutch fortified the port city to protect its strategic location. Today, no moats and battlements remain but theheart of Colombo’s commercial district is still referred to as “Fort.”

Fort 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 the General Post Office opposite it 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 searching 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 where the star attraction is the regalia of the last king of Kandy. The Independence Commemoration Hall is open-sided in the style of a royal Kandyan pavilion. It is close to the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) where this year’s Ska] Congress is to be inaugurated.

Across the street from the BMICH is a gigantic figure of the Buddha, a replica of an

ancient sculpture located at Aukana 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. A particularly picturesque temple lies on the Beira Lake, close to the Fort area.



Nuwara Eliya post office and clock tower vestiges of the old temple.

The most impressive Buddhist temple near Colombo is in the northern suburb of Kelaniya. Meticulously drawn frescoes describe the ransacking of the temple by the Portuguese, and its restoration.

The Zoo is at Dehiwela, just south of Colombo’s city limits. It has a fascinating collection of animals, birds and reptiles, in lush tropical surroundings. There is an elephant circus held every afternoon. Further south is the suburb of Mount Lavinia, famous for its beach in olden days and still a favourite of many.

The road southwards from Mount Lavinia to Galle leads to the perfect beaches of

the southwest coast. The reefs extending from the town of Beruwela (about 56km from Colombo) onwards ensure safe swimming in emerald waters. At Bentota (64km from Colombo) there is a National Tourist Resort with fine hotels and beachside guest houses ideal for a short or long stay.
Further south, at Hikkaduwa, the reefs come close to the shore and are a delight for snorkellers and divers.

About 115km from Colombo, the seaport of Galle offers you a well-preserved Dutch fort with broad 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 Dutch church, the first Protestant one to be built in Sri Lanka. 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 238km from Colombo, is a region famous for its animal sanctuaries, particularly Yala. There you can see elephant, leopard, wild boar, peafowl and crocodile.

You can continue the round trip by heading from Hambantota through the plains up to the hill country of Ella and so on to Nuwara Eliya. Approximately 180km from Colombo, Nuwara Eliya is a hill top holiday retreat. A haven for British colonials m the hot weather, Nuwara Eliya still retains vestiges of the old empire. Keep an eye open for Tudor-style holiday homes hidden behind elegant boxwoods and firs. In the centre of the 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.

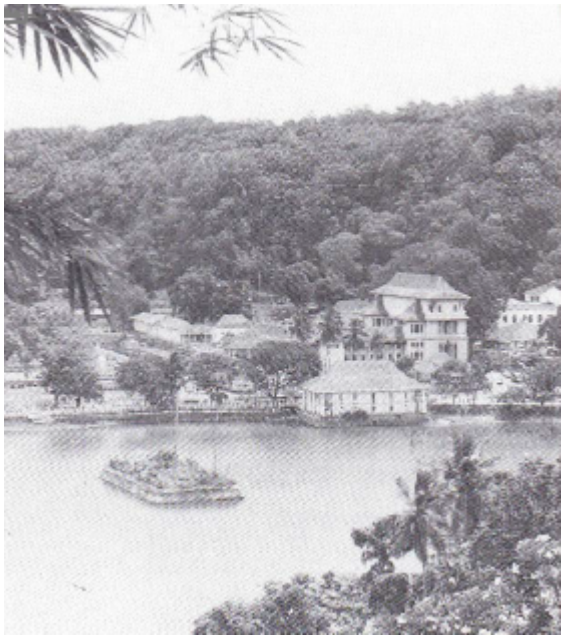
If you desire rougher country, Horton Plains, remote, shrouded Approximately 180km from Colombo, Nuwara Eliya is a hill top holiday retreat. A haven for British colonials m the hot weather, Nuwara Eliya still retains vestiges of the old empire. Keep an eye open for Tudor-style holiday homes hidden behind elegant boxwoods and firs. In the centre of the town, there is a wellmaintained 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. Off the beaten track, Horton Plains is best traversed by jeep or other 4-wheel drive vehicle. It is a birdwatcher’s and botanist’s delight, and 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 metres deep.

One possible route back to Colombo from the hills is through the town of Ratnapura, about 101 km southeast of the capital. Ratnapura, meaning the city of gems, has been famed the world over for centuries for its sapphires, star rubies and cat’s eyes. You can v1s1t the gemming sites where baskets of gravel are lifted up from water-logged pits and washed painstakingly for any signs of precious stones.



The hills of Kandy gently rise above the take.

The most popular destination for a round trip is Kandy, 116km from Colombo. Here the climate is mild with hills gently rising above a central lake. Kandy’s chief attraction is the Temple of the Tooth much venerated for the relic of the Buddha. Every evening a pooja or religious service is held in the temple and is worth attending.

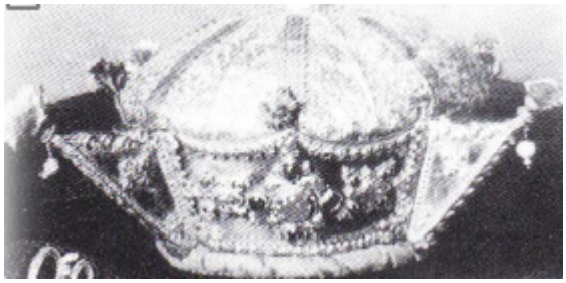
On your way out of Kandy, you will pass the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, a marvellous collection of exotic flowering plants and trees laid out over acres of undulating ground. The orchid house, fernery and a majestic palm-lined avenue are some of the Gardens’ best features. Sri Lanka’s longest river, the Mahaweli (river of great sands), almost loops the Gardens. As you climb higher into the mountains, tropical foliage gives way to hillsides covered with tea.

Most of Sri Lanka’s archaeological wonders, dating back thousands of years, are concentrated in the NorthCentral region where ancient kingdoms flourished. Just under 160km from Colombo, or if you take the Kandy road, about 72km north of the hill capital, lies the town of Dambulla, famous for its rock temple.

About 32km north-east of Datnbulla, 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 180m 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 11th 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 m use today. Polonnaruwa rums are lent a certain poignancy by the jungle which seems to be striving to overcome them completely.

The town of Anuradhapura 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 is the site of some of the world’s tallest stupas.
Also in Anuradhapura, is a 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.

A round trip will lead to many surprises. not even hinted at here. Don·t miss this chance to explore Sri Lanka for yourself.



The star attraction at the Colombo museum is the regalia of the last king of Kandy