

Season of the South



Stilt fishermen

Relics of ancient civilisations, important religious sites, cultural centres, extraordinary colonial and contemporary architecture, flourishing agriculture, wildlife sanctuaries, lush tropical scenery, fishing harbours, hidden coves and popular beaches - Sri Lanka's south coast A2 has more attractions for its size than anywhere else on the island.

Words Royston Ellis **Photographs** Isuru Upeksha and Vishwa Tharmagulasingham



Galle Fort lighthouse beside the ramparts of the fort

Now is the season when the south is at its best: the seas are calmer, the beaches broader and the climate more comfortable than at any other time of the year. Visitors are drawn to the many hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and cafes along the 160km stretch of A2 between Galle to Yala in great numbers today, but then that's nothing new: the south of Sri Lanka has always attracted tourists, beginning with travellers from China in the 5th century.

The Muslim Chinese explorer, Zheng He visited Galle in 1405 and liked the south so much that he returned several times. On his second visit in 1407 he visited Dondra Head and erected upright stone slabs that paid respect to Buddha, Shiva and Allah in Tamil, Chinese and Persian script.

In the 19th century, under the British, Galle harbour served as the gateway to Sri Lanka as steamships plying the route between England and Australia brought visitors to the Island before Colombo became the main port. They stayed in hostelries in Galle Fort, which retains its historical ambience today, protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Galle is a good place to begin discovering the south, since it is easily reached by rail or road from Colombo. The fort is fun—and free—to explore. Stroll the

ramparts and cobbled streets, pop into the National Maritime Museum, peep beyond columned verandas through open doorways to mysterious inner courtyards, shop at arts and crafts stores, and admire colonial and Art Deco architecture.

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In complete contrast to the stolid grey granite walls of the fort, just 10 minutes further along the A2 road is the raffish resort of Unawatuna. This bay, with its sandy beach (now restored after having slipped away due to tidal changes) was developed in the 1980s almost without anyone noticing, as independent travellers discovered it and stayed with accommodating local families. It has expanded since then but still retains its laidback sun-and-fun atmosphere.

A short drive south at Koggala, it's a surprise to be confronted with a gleaming blue Sri Lankan Air Force plane parked permanently by the sea at the end of the Koggala airstrip. Nearby on the beach is a public swimming pool blasted into the rocks by British airmen stationed here in the 1940s. Flushed twice daily by the tides, it's a popular place for bathing.

A refreshing sea breeze blows away the cobwebs sometimes associated with museums at the Wickramasinghe Folk Museum. You'll find an amazing collection of village artefacts on display in a house that dates back nearly 200 years, including pottery, kitchenware, puppets, masks and items associated with the popular Sinhalese writer Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976).

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The drive to Weligama is famous for the sight of the fishermen who perch upon sticks in the shallows dangling rods into the water in the hope of a catch. Less well known, about one kilometre inland at Walliwala, is a nine metre-high rock wall carved with a statue of Kusta Raja, a Buddhist prince who was cured of leprosy and is said to have planted the Island's first coconut grove. Hidden from the main road, the sandy bay of Mirissa has become the haunt of youthful beach

revellers and surfers, and is popular for whale watching cruises from its harbour.

Next comes the bustling town of Matara, the terminus of the railway line and the end of the Southern Expressway. In the midst of this burgeoning town's development rests the bijou Star Fort, a Dutch-built redoubt. Another ancient building, looking like something from medieval England with its tiled, pitched roof, three tiny conical towers and gabled entrance, once housed the town's market.

Nothing remains of the ancient Hindu temple complex at Dondra Head, just south of here, the original building having been razed by the Portuguese. The modern temple you'll find there today is still a place of pilgrimage. At the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka stands the Dondra Head Lighthouse, 196 steps spiralling up to the light that overlooks the vast ocean stretching all the way to Antarctica.

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After the 179km marker, a sign points the way inland to the Wewurukannala Maha Vihara, a colourful temple with a seated Buddha statue that's reputed to be the largest in Sri Lanka. Back on the A2 at Kudawella, visitors hike across a cliff top to view the Blow Hole, a fissure in the overhanging rocks through which the sea spouts when the tide is high.

The approach to Tangalle is picturesque, with glimpses of gaily coloured fishing boats bobbing at anchor in sheltered coves. A diversion 16km inland leads to Mulkirigala, a gaunt, grey, natural rock monolith soaring 106 metres in the air up out of the jungle. A cave retreat of Buddhist monks possibly dating back to 130 BC, its importance stems from the chance discovery there of the code that unlocked the secrets of the Mahavamsa historical chronicle.

Outside Hambantota, beyond the salt pans that line the road, there is an agricultural centre, a botanical garden and a permanent film set, all of which are open to visitors. New highways lead to the south's international airport at Mattala and to the recently built inland harbour, with its conference centre and sleek modern buildings.

The bird sanctuaries at Bundala, 16km from Hambantota, and Wirawila, a further 18km inland on the road to Tissamaharama, provide a suitably nature-focused finish to this coastal itinerary. Tissa, as it is familiarly known, was the capital of the southern kingdom of Ruhunu from 3 BC. Its spectacular lakes are now home to several hotels that make an ideal base for trips to the Yala National Park. For many visitors, a jeep safari to spot leopards, elephants and crocodiles in their natural habitat will be the highlight of discovering the south this holiday season.

