

Sri Lanka

Pearl of the Indian Ocean

A small, teardrop-shaped island off the south east coast of India has a wealth of history, interest and surprises to offer any visitor. Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, is also known as 'The Pearl of the Orient' which gives an indication of its beauty.

With a tropical climate, Sri Lanka is good to visit all year round. Along the coast and low-lying areas the average temperature is 27°C, and often much hotter. But in the hills the temperature is more spring-like and can drop to around 14°C. December to March are the driest months but also the time when most European tourists head for Sri Lanka. May to August is the monsoon season but it doesn't rain every day and there is much to tempt you during this time. These out of season months are much cheaper; everything is less crowded and during July and August there are fascinating festivals to behold.

The main attraction is a ten day festival in the ancient royal city of Kandy, situated in the hills. This attractive city is home to the famous Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and Kandy Esala Perahera is a spectacular event honouring this special place and many highly decorated elephants go on parade.

Certain areas of Sri Lanka are out of bounds due to ongoing hostility from the Tamil Tigers. The north and east of the country are particularly dangerous and travel to these areas is discouraged. However, the rest of the island is safe and peaceful but you should make your travel arrangements through reputable agencies. The best way to travel around is to hire a car and driver for your stay. This is a very cheap option and takes the driving off your hands.

Motorised rickshaws are another classic and exciting way of getting around. Agree a price beforehand and enjoy the views of people working the rice paddy fields with water buffalo, go to a rubber plantation and discover where the spices in your kitchen originate by visiting a spice farm.

Apart from the gorgeous beaches lined with coconut palms, the island has an abundance of historical and natural attractions including seven World Heritage Sites. Go to the ruined medieval city of Polonnaruwa to see some massive carved stone statues of Buddha. Spend some time in Kandy to visit the outstanding temples and palaces set amongst beautiful colonial architecture surrounding a lake.



When visiting Buddhist temples your body must be fully covered so shorts, bare backs and shoulders are prohibited and shoes and hats should be also be removed.

An enormous golden Buddha overlooks Kandy the city itself is a good base from which to visit other attractions including tea plantations. As the second largest tea exporter in the world Sri Lanka produces tea that puts our tea-bag culture to shame.

Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage is also worth a visit; this is where abandoned wild elephants are cared for and trained to become working animals. Every morning a procession of elephants is led down to the nearby river for their daily bath.

A must-do trip is to visit the ancient rock fortress of Sigiriya, the 'Lion Rock'. This 370 metre rock, jutting out of the flat surrounding plain is both a natural and a man-made wonder. The rock has been carved into a rough semblance of a lion and you can still see the remains of the fortress at the top. The climb is fairly hard, but made easier by the recent addition of stairs. Halfway up the rock, in a protected corridor, are remarkably well preserved ancient paintings of semi-naked 'heavenly maidens'.

If shopping is your hobby, then Sri Lanka has a great way of relieving you of your money: it is the home of some of the finest gemstones in the world! An amazing experience is a trip to a government-run jewellery shop where you can choose unset stones from a treasure chest full of jewels. You pay for the stone by its weight and type, and then the on-site designer will design a piece of jewellery just for you. It will be made and delivered to your hotel within days. Sri Lanka is a twelve hour flight away from Britain, but it is well worth the time spent getting there. The people are some of the friendliest in the world, costs are low, the scenery is breathtaking and the attractions are unrivalled.