



Welcome to Sri Lanka

"Working to develop schools in rural communities was extremely rewarding, then spending time watching elephants from my treehouse was totally exhilarating and a dream come true."

A country of immense natural beauty, from its tropical forests to the palm-studded beaches, Sri Lanka is a unique tropical paradise with a rich cultural heritage, and is widely referred to as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean".

With friendly people and a gentle pace of life, the country offers a wide array of activities and attractions, from relaxing in the metropolises of Colombo and Kandy, to admiring any one of seven cultural heritage sites, checking out the remains of ancient civilisations and enjoying spiced seafood and, of course, many cups of Ceylon tea!

Know your History

Pre-History

It is thought that the island was originally colonised by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who lived in caves around 40,000 years ago. The discovery of crops dating back to around 15,000 B.C. suggests the people may have also been engaged in agriculture. Cinnamon, which is native to Sri Lanka, was used in ancient Egypt as early as 1500 B.C., implying that trade links were already in place. Evidence of two settlements founded around 900 B.C. has been discovered, and it seems that these grew from small, 0.15 km² areas into larger "towns" within a couple of centuries.

Ramayana

The literary epic Ramayana, written between 10 and 5 B.C. has had a huge cultural influence on India and Southeast Asia, and describes how Rama invaded the island to save his beloved wife Sita from Ravana, the King of Sri Lanka. Aside from this great chronicle, historical recordings are found in the form of stone writings and leaf writings.

Colonial

Prior to the colonial period, the Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils battled for control of the island, controlling the south and the north, respectively. The colonial period that ran from 1517 to 1948 encompasses a Portuguese era, a Dutch era and British rule. The Portuguese founded a fort at the coastal city of Colombo and their control spread, so the Sinhalese (the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka today) moved their capital inland to Kandy. The Portuguese were unpopular with the

Buddhists, so when the Dutch invaded in 1638, the King of Kandy appealed to them for help. In 1656 Colombo fell, and the Dutch ruled the entire island apart from Kandy.

1800s

During the Napoleonic Wars, the British occupied the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, which they called Ceylon, and in 1802 the island became a crown colony. Three bloody Kandyan Wars ended Sri Lanka's independence and preserved the Kandyan monarchy as a British dependency in 1818. Over the following decades the British developed tea, coffee and rubber plantations, where the still popular Ceylon tea originated.

1900s

In 1948, Ceylon became a self-governing dominion of the Commonwealth of Nations. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1956, and championed Sinhalese nationalism, but was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959. His wife became the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960, and the name "Ceylon" was changed to "Sri Lanka" in 1972.

Tamils

The country's Tamil minority started a civil war led by rebel groups, the largest of which was the "Tamil Tigers", who fought for a separate nation from the mid-80s. In spite of attempted cease-fires, violence has been continuous since, with displacement of countless civilians, and the leader of the Tigers was killed by the Sri Lankan air force in 2007.

Boxing Day Tsunami – Present Day

Sri Lanka was one of the countries worst-ravaged by the 26th December 2004 tsunami, which claimed the lives of around 40,000 of the country's inhabitants, with over a million left homeless. Huge amounts of funding and effort are still being poured into the rehabilitation of the country.

Money Talks

Since independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan economy has been affected by natural disasters, insurrections and the 1983-2009 civil war. The political parties that ruled the country from independence did not implement any national plans or policies on the economy, and instead veering between left-wing and right-wing economic practices, leaving the economy weak. In 2001, Sri Lanka faced bankruptcy, with a debt reaching 101% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), and this was only averted after a hasty ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government brokered substantial foreign loans. After 2004, in response to the after-effects of the Boxing Day tsunami, the government focused on mass production of goods for domestic consumption – rice, grain and other agricultural products.

Sri Lanka's main economic sectors are: tourism, tea export, apparel, textiles, rice production and other agricultural produce. Overseas employment, predominantly from the Middle East, is also a huge factor towards foreign exchange.

The currency is the Sri Lankan rupee (LKR). Credit cards can be used to get cash out of ATMs but rarely are they accepted in shops. Traveller's cheques should not be relied upon.

Get Culture Savvy

Sri Lanka has been going through a makeover these past few centuries. Due to economic growth and competition in developed countries, businesses have taken themselves overseas to developing nations in an attempt to instigate a positive global presence and gain a competitive advantage. This has caused a ripple effect in countries like Sri Lanka, spreading Western culture. Previously, the British, Portuguese and Dutch colonisations influenced the culture, and a vast majority of small communities were influenced by their own handed-down traditions. Now, fast food brands and major clothing labels are found in most big cities.

Celebrations

Traditionally a centre of Buddhism, the country is now multi-religious and multi-ethnic. The grand Buddhist festival of Esala is an annual event taking place in July or August where a spectacle of fire dances and heavily decorated elephants can be enjoyed. Another exciting festival is the traditional New Year celebration, in which both the Sinhalese and Tamils partake. The end of a year is determined by the lunar calendar, and the celebrations take place on the 13th or 14th of April each year (as opposed to the conventional 1st January) with the festive period lasting around a week.

Food

Sri Lankan food draws its influence from India, with aspects of its colonial past and trends from its foreign traders. Rice is a staple food, and spicy curries are popular for lunches and dinners. Meals of curry and rice are only meat- or fish-based, but include vegetable- and fruit curries. A typical meal is formed of a "main curry" of fish, chicken or mutton alongside other curries made with vegetables and lentils, with side dishes of pickles, chutneys and sambols that are often very hot. The most famous sambol is the coconut sambol – made from ground coconut with chillies, dried Maldivian fish and lime juice, ground to a paste and eaten with rice to add zest to a meal and improve appetite.

Sri Lankans also eat hoppers – a type of bread made from rice batter on a stone griddle, which looks much like a pancake, that is popular for breakfast or lunch – and kiribath, meaning "milk rice". Mallung is much like sambols; made from chopped leaves mixed with grated coconut and red onions.

Coconut milk is present in most Sri Lankan dishes, which gives the food its unique flavours. A popular alcoholic drink is Today or Attack, which are both made from palm tree sap. In many urban areas, fast food has started to be the preferred cuisine, but it is still rejected by many – particularly the more traditional elder members of the communities.

Other dishes are inspired from their colonial predecessors. Dutch-influenced lamprais is rice boiled in stock with a special curry, alongside frikkadels (meatballs), wrapped in a banana leaf and baked. Dutch and Portuguese sweets are still a favourite, and the British brought with them roast beef and roast chicken.

Spice

Sri Lanka is world-renowned for its spices. Traders from all over the world came to Sri Lanka in the 15th and 16th Centuries and brought with them their native dishes, which has resulted in today's diverse cooking styles and techniques. Spices are used liberally and without exact recipes – each curry is unique. It also varies according to the geography. Sri Lankan food is considered the spiciest, as

many varieties of chillies are a popular addition (amu miris, kochchi miris and capsicum – maalu miris – to name but a few). For the more sensitive Western palette it is generally assumed that the tourists will request lower chilli content. In public and for occasions, the chilli content is less, whilst in the home it varies according to preference.

Tea

Sri Lankans are known to drink a lot of tea – at least three cups a day. Sri Lanka is one of the largest and best producers of tea in the world, with the British royal family being known to drink Ceylon tea. Tea is served whenever a guest comes into a home, and is served not only at breakfast but at festivals and gatherings.

Music

Buddhism and the Portuguese colonisation have been the two biggest influences on Sri Lankan music over the course of history. Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka after Buddha visited the country in 300 B.C., and the Portuguese appeared in the 15th Century. The Portuguese brought with them cantiga ballads, ukuleles and guitars as well as African slaves who further contributed to the musical roots of the island. The slaves were known as kaffrinha and their dance music was called baila.

Drumming is very much a part of the music of Buddhist and Hindu temples in Sri Lanka, and the traditional drumming music includes the hypnotic Kandyan drums.

Art & Crafts

In most instances, Sri Lankan art stems from religious beliefs, best represented in paintings, sculpture and architecture. Most of this inspiration comes from the long-lasting Buddhist culture, and the countless regional and local traditions that have been absorbed and incorporated.

The more famous aspects of Sri Lankan art are the cave and temple paintings, such as the frescoes in Sigiriya and religious paintings in temples in Dambulla and the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy.

Wooden handicrafts and clay pottery are found around the hill country, influenced by long native traditions. Portuguese-inspired lacework and Indonesian-inspired Batik has also become prominent.

Learn the Lingo

Two major languages are used in Sri Lanka; Sinhala by the Sinhalese majority, and Tamil by the Tamils. English is also generally understood at tourist destinations. Knowing just a few basic phrases can vastly deepen your experience of a culture and understanding of local people. A phrasebook is usually a good investment, but here are just a few Sinhalan phrases to get you started:

Pronunciation

a as the u in cup

aa as in father

e as in met

i as in bit

o as in hot

u as in put

ai as eye
au as in how

ENGLISH	SINHALA	ENGLISH	SINHALA
Basic Words / Phrases		Numbers	
Hello	hello	1	eka
Bye	aayu-bowan	2	deka
Yes	owu	3	tuna
No	naeh	4	hatara
Please	karuna kara	5	paha
Thank you	stuh-tee	6	haya
Excuse me	sama venna	7	hata
Sorry	kana gaatui	8	a-teh
How much is it?	ehekka keeyada?	9	navaya
What is your name?	oyaaghe nama mokka'da?	10	dahaya
My name is...	maaghe nama...		

Lay of the Land

The island of Sri Lanka lies 31 km off the southern tip of India, and consists mainly of flat to rolling coastal plains, with the south-central part of the country being more mountainous. It has been repeatedly connected to India between interglacial periods, most recently until around 7,000 years ago by a 140 km wide land bridge.

What's the Weather like?

Sri Lanka enjoys a tropical climate, with an average annual temperature of 29°C. January is the coolest month, and the highlands are generally cooler than the flatter areas. Precipitation is influenced by the monsoonal winds, and most of the island experiences relatively low rainfall, excluding the south-western wet zone, where up to 5,000 mm falls per year. December to March is the driest period on the south and west coasts, and in the hills, whereas on the east coast May through to September is the driest spell.

Biodiversity

In spite of its small size, and thanks to its diverse topography and climate, Sri Lanka is one of the world's 25 biodiversity hot spots, with many species endemic to the island (e.g. 140 amphibian species), 75% of which are found in the wet zone forests. Other habitat types found in the country include dry thorny forest, dry monsoon forest, montane cloud forest, grassland and wetland.

Due to massive population pressure, today Sri Lanka retains only 1.5% of its original forest. The forests were originally cleared to make way for cinchona (a medicinal drug) and coffee plantations, then later the production of tea and rubber. However, even the forest fragments that remain today, and now form protected areas, are threatened by encroachment from small-scale farmers and cultivators.

The island also supports an important population of Indian Elephant, which have almost been exterminated from the wet zone, with only 2,500 remaining all together, compared with 12,000 in 1900.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Sri Lanka. Lonely Planet Publications, 10th Edition, 2006. ISBN 9781740599757
- The Rough Guide to Sri Lanka. Rough Guides Ltd., 2nd Edition, 2006. ISBN 9781843536956
- Lonely Planet Sinhala Phrasebook. Lonely Planet Publications, 2nd Edition, 2002. ISBN 9780864425973

Wildlife

- A Photographic Guide to Birds of Sri Lanka. New Holland Publishers Ltd., 2000. ISBN 9781859745113
- A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka. Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 9780198549604

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