

SIGHTS SET ON SRI LANKA

It was rated 2019's top country for travel by Lonely Planet, so does this island nation live up to the accolade?

WORDS KIRSTIE BEDFORD



Above
Monkeys at MulKirigala Rock Temple.

Below
Sunset at Galle Fort.



Thankfully there are plenty of distractions on the way up, including naturally formed caves with 350-year-old paintings and huge reclining Buddhist statues. You may even meet a monk in practice. Monkeys bound overhead, but there are hardly any other tourists there – we meet only one other family. Arriving at the top makes the exhausting climb worthwhile, with breathtaking views over Tangalle.

On the surface Sri Lanka seems to have something for everyone: sparkling beaches, wildlife encounters, ancient temples and incredible cuisine. Plus, AirAsia is now flying to the capital Colombo via Kuala Lumpur from Avalon Airport, which has opened the doors for more Australians to visit. So what is it really like and why should it top your travel list for 2020?

CLOSE TO CULTURE

It was recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site and is one of the largest remaining forts built by Europeans in Asia. No wonder Galle Fort is one of the country's must-see attractions.

The seaside town of Galle is about two hours south of Colombo and is nothing short of charming, with stylish hotels, cafes and boutiques located all along a stunning coast. Walk along the remains of the fort, go shopping or use this quaint town as a pretty base to explore Sri Lanka's south.

A little further along you'll find MulKirigala Rock Temple, a working monastery with a steep climb to the top.

You'll travel by tuk tuk to the local markets to choose ingredients, then head back to the resort for a cooking lesson in the outdoor kitchen.

CALL OF THE CURRY

At Anantara Kalutara Resort, an hour from Colombo on Sri Lanka's southwest coast, there's the opportunity to chance your cooking chops with a local chef at Spice Spoons. You'll travel by tuk tuk to the nearby markets to choose ingredients, then head back to the resort for a cooking lesson in the outdoor kitchen. Once you're done, the dishes are plated up and lunch is served.

For something different you can dine in a treehouse among the property's rice paddies at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort on the country's southern coast. A local fisherman will row up the inlet next to the garden below you and offer a basket of fish from which you choose. It's then cooked in the kitchen of a nearby mudbrick house using herbs and vegetables

you and the chef have already picked onsite. The result is served with organic wine while you sit perched in your elevated private dining room.

No visit to Sri Lanka is complete without seeing where the world's morning beverages are produced. Handunugoda Tea Estate gives its visitors a great insight into how the precious leaves are grown and processed, but the location itself, in the hills above Ahangama, a two-hour drive south of Colombo, is spectacular too. Our guide tells us about virgin white tea, which was first grown in China more than 4,000 years ago. According to legend, the emperor only wanted to drink tea leaves cut by virgins using golden scissors. While that particular tradition no longer exists, the harvesting process ensures the buds, which are the only part used, never come into contact with human skin.



Right
Collect your own fresh produce when you take part in one of Anantara Kalutara Resort's cooking classes.

Below
Local chefs will help you whip up a Sri Lankan feast.

Below right
Tasty ingredients at Spice Spoons.





Near Tangalle you can choose between point breaks, beach breaks and big waves.

Left
Learn to hang 10 when you join a surf lesson with Tropic Surf.

Below
Elephants and water buffalo at Udawalawe National Park.

Right
Early morning yoga is a great way to start the day.



ROAD TO WELLNESS

Everyone wants to come away from a holiday feeling better than when they left, and at Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort you can get involved in a wellness evolution.

Traditional holistic medicine that aims to balance the needs of the mind, body and spirit.

Ayurveda is a system of traditional holistic medicine that aims to balance the needs of the mind, body and spirit for a long, healthy life.

Sixth-generation ayurvedic specialist Dr Preethika Gamage will assess your medical history, analyse your body type, then create a personalised program for you. In the days that follow you'll be offered treatments – meditative shirodhara (warm oil poured gently over the 'third eye' to release stress) or udwarthanam (a scrub using herbal power to increase circulation) – to suit your needs. There's meditation at sunrise and yoga pre-breakfast, both accompanied by the sound of the waves, swaying palm trees and chirping birds.

A trip to Sri Lanka will undoubtedly soothe your senses and it's not hard to see why people increasingly come here knowing they'll go home feeling fulfilled – regardless of what it is they're seeking.

OUT AND ABOUT

Sri Lanka is known for its great surf and near Tangalle you can choose between point breaks, beach breaks and big waves. Head out with Tropic Surf's Steve Taylor, an Aussie who moved here for a change of pace. He'll certainly put you through your paces and, whether you're a beginner or an avid surfer, he'll show you the best spots.

The 38,000-hectare Udawalawe National Park is one of the best places in Sri Lanka for a wildlife encounter, with water buffalo, sambar deer, mongoose and plenty of other species roaming its grasslands and marshes. But what most people come to see are the 500 wild Asian elephants, who often roam in herds of up to a hundred. It's a popular place and can get busy, so plan to be there at dawn or dusk for the best chance to see the animals unencumbered. The park is about four hours from Colombo or a 90-minute drive from Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort.



AirAsia has twice-daily flights from Avalon Airport to Kuala Lumpur. From KL, the airline connects to 150 destinations, including Colombo.
airasia.com
avalonairport.com.au