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A love letter to *Sri Lanka*

From picture-perfect beaches to epic tea plantations and even Africa-worthy safaris, Sri Lanka has *everything* you need for an indulgent honeymoon



Vibrant, colourful and alive, Colombo's Pettah district is a must-visit

STOP ONE

Fly into Colombo

FLIGHT TIME:

11 HOURS FROM LONDON

THE DESTINATION: Colombo may be the first stop in Sri Lanka for most travellers, but don't just pass through the country's former capital: this city is a crucial stop in its own right. Head to the historic Fort area for your first taste of the country's grand Dutch colonial past, before making a beeline for Pettah, Colombo's oldest district, to take in the packed market stalls. And be sure to take a stroll in Viharamahadevi Park, with its landscaped gardens, Buddhist statues and the occasional elephant, left by a local temple to munch happily on palm trees.

STAY AT: The Wallawwa, a beautifully restored 200-year-old manor house nestled on the city's outskirts, just a 20-minute drive from Bandaranaike International Airport. Spread across one floor amid tranquil two-acre tropical gardens, every nook is bursting with colonial charm: think dark wooden beams set against white-washed



The Wallawwa

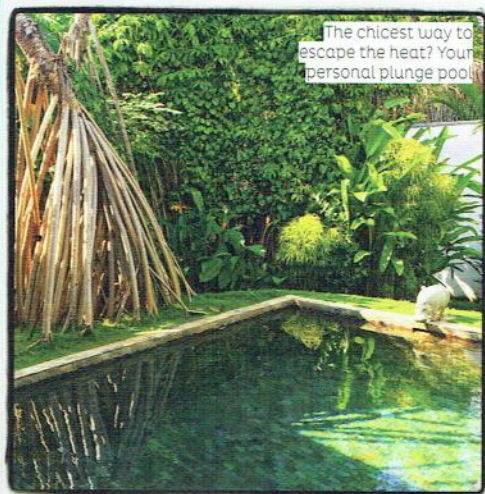
walls and colourful local fabrics. Romantic four-poster, muslin-draped beds and elegant terrazzo-tiled bathrooms are standard in all 17 rooms, but for an extra-special first night book into The Mountbatten Suite, which comes with its own private terrace and plunge pool complete with super-cute stone hippo (left), not to mention a *huge* bath (it took us a full 25 minutes to fill it).

There's also a small library, communal turquoise pool circled by sunloungers that begs to be Instagrammed, and impressive fruit, herb and vegetable fields that supply the hotel's kitchens, should you be in need of a stroll. Come nightfall, head to the frangipani-surrounded Veranda restaurant for your introduction to Sri Lankan curries – the coconut and mustard seer fish one is divine. And unlike Indian cooking, curries

here are made with coconut milk rather than oil, meaning you'll still have plenty of room for a homemade mango ice cream...

● thewallawwa.com

TRAVELLER TIP: Although tourists can hire cars in Sri Lanka, most book a driver for their entire stay. Chauffeurs – many of whom also double as tour guides – can often be cheaper (especially if you keep them for a week or more) and – to our mind – safer: the roads in Sri Lanka are chaotic (read: totally insane). Expect to pay around £50 a day – this includes all your costs and your driver's accommodation. We had the fab Srilou, whose clients have included various celebrities, British aristocracy and (as we read in the guestbook he asks all clients to sign), a very happy Martha Lane Fox.



The chicest way to escape the heat? Your personal plunge pool



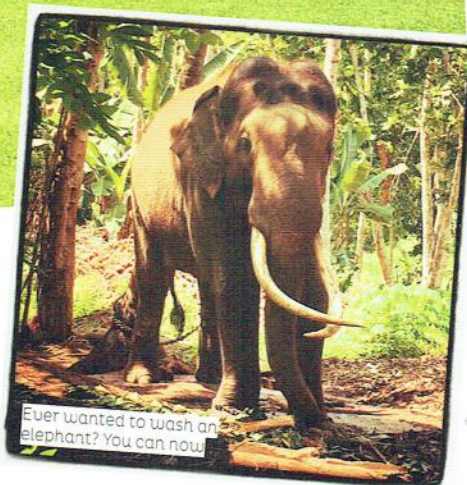
The Kandy House

STOP TWO Head north-east to Kandy

THE DRIVE (3 HOURS): The route to the city of Kandy – Sri Lanka's last kingdom and now its cultural centre – is nothing short of spectacular. The noise of Colombo's suburbs slowly gives way to tiny villages, dust roads lined with tropical fruit stalls, and acres of rice paddies filled with sun-dappled water and snoozing water buffalos. And then you are in hill country, where the highways become ever steeper, the bends all the more terror-inducing – and the mountain-backed views even more incredible. Here rubber and tea plantations can be glimpsed through the clouds, the smell of cinnamon lingers on the breeze and you'll spot giant monitor lizards (and even the occasional family of monkeys) lingering roadside.

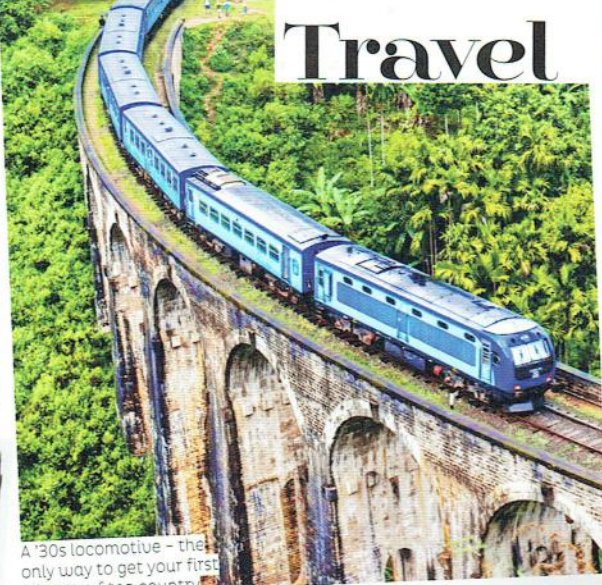
THE PIT STOP: The Millennium Elephant Foundation in Kegalle (millenniumelephantfoundation.com), about a two-hour drive from Colombo. While seeing elephants is on everyone's Sri Lankan bucket list, doing so ethically can be a little harder. The MEF has just eight elephants, all of which are 'rented' from the logging industry or their owners. To fund the foundation's upkeep, visitors can pay to feed, walk beside and even – for an extra-amazing experience – wash an elephant of their choice (warning: bring extra clothes: you *will* get very wet).

THE DESTINATION: Although most tourists come for the *Kandy Esala Perahera*, a 10-day festival in July or August each year, leading up to the *Nikini poya* (the full moon), Kandy has loads to offer throughout the rest of the year to keep things interesting. The main attraction is the Temple of The Sacred Tooth Relic, the country's most important Buddhist spot, which houses one of Buddha's teeth. Take a guided tour in the evening and you'll jostle among pilgrims for a glimpse (although the tooth itself can't be seen, only the incredible elaborate golden casket it's



kept in). A stone's throw from the temple are several theatres (OK, they're more like school halls) where you can be treated to performances of traditional Sri Lankan dancing and fire walking. For a relaxing drink, head into the hills above Kandy (it's only a 10-minute drive) and check out Helga's Folly (helgasfolly.com), a madcap hotel still looked after by the city's most infamous resident, Helga De Silva. Packed with antiques and local art, it looks more like a chic ghost train than a boutique hotel – Sir Laurence Olivier, Paula Yates and even Gandhi have stayed here and *loved* it.

STAY AT: The Kandy House, a 200-year-old former private palazzo buried in three acres of gorgeous forested hillside on the outskirts of the city. Many hotels lay claim to ramping up the romance factor, but few manage as well as this seductive boutique hotel, with its cooling white arches, pillared verandas and striking central courtyard dotted with antique Moorish furniture (not to mention the occasional sun-seeking lizard suddenly startled into action). But it's the infinity pool that makes your stay here extra special; set away from the main hotel building and hidden among coconut trees and dense foliage, it's not uncommon to find yourself the only swimmer, especially in the early morning or late afternoon. Here you can practise your backstroke in utter peace, the silence broken only by the lyrical chanting from a nearby temple. The restaurant is exceptional too – be sure to sample the twice weekly curry feasts (skip lunch – you'll be trying at least 10). ● thekandyhouse.com



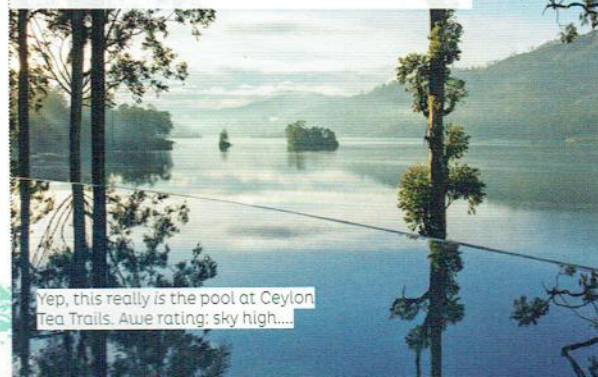
A '30s locomotive – the only way to get your first glimpse of tea country

STOP THREE Hop on a train to tea country

THE JOURNEY – PERADENIYA JUNCTION TO HATTON (2 HOURS):

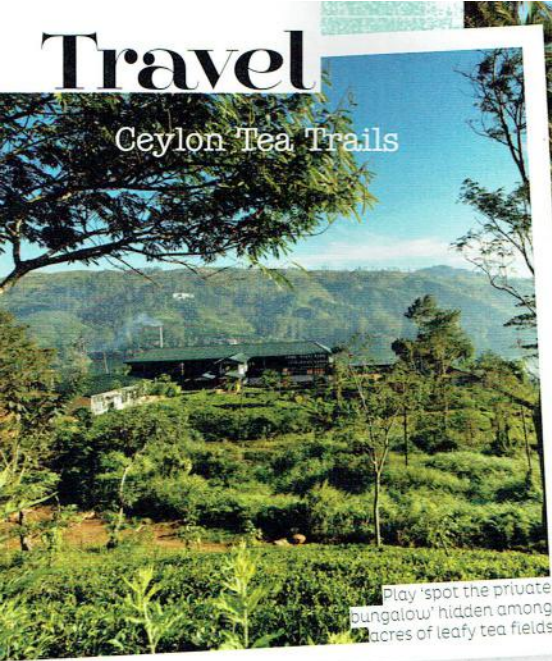
Although it takes around the same time to drive into tea country (turns out that the only thing reliable about the railways here is their unreliability), don't miss the chance to experience one of the most famous – and beautiful – train trips in the world. This is the best way to be introduced to tea country: hanging out of the window of a '30s train carriage, watching mountain terraces and forests fly by, before catching your first glimpse of misty mountains, their sides covered in row-upon-row of bright green tea plantations and the occasional glint of a rainbow shining through a scattered rain shower. Travel tip: send your driver ahead with your luggage – you'll need someone to meet you at the station and then navigate the somewhat treacherous mountain paths to your hotel. You really won't want to risk this journey in the back of a tuk-tuk...

STAY AT: The very special Ceylon Tea Trails, a collection of five restored plantation bungalows, each on their own working tea estate scattered 2,000 acres around the serene Castlereagh Lake. While they all have their own distinctive vibe and character, our favourite is the newest, the Dunkeld, with its sweeping vistas of the montane forests and the turquoise waters of the lake below. The bungalow has just four suites and a smaller 'owner's' cottage in the grounds, and – along with its dark wood flooring, →



Yep, this really is the pool at Ceylon Tea Trails. Awe rating: sky high....

Ceylon Tea Trails

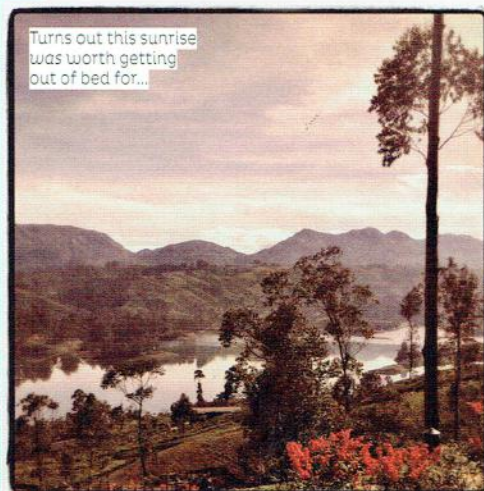


Play 'spot the private bungalow' hidden among acres of leafy tea fields

roaring log fires and claw-footed baths (not to mention your own butler, on hand with a gin and tonic before you even know you want one) – you'll feel like you're less in a hotel and more in a luxe private members' club. And did we mention *that* pool, with its 360-degree views over Bogawantalawa Valley? Staying here may be all about the relaxation, but we found ourselves sacking off the lie-in to get up at dawn, cup of the finest tea in hand, to watch the sun rise, sitting in a bubbling Jacuzzi. Truly magical.

AND THE REST... While you could spend your stay savouring cake-laden afternoon teas on the terrace, or yet another cocktail on your lounge (Tea Trails is all-inclusive, so there really are no limits to your gluttony), don't forget to venture out and take a look at the plantation itself. There are daily trips to the estate's factories, where you can discover how the tea is plucked and made (plus taste and then purchase some of the finest blends for yourself), as well as getting up close and personal to colourful sari-clad tea pickers for postcard-worthy photographs. There's also kayaking, croquet, white water-rafting and mountain biking should the need to get active overtake you.

● resplendentceylon.com/ceylonteatrails



Turns out this sunrise was worth getting out of bed for...



Amanwella's spectacular palm-fronted Beach Club

STOP FOUR

Drive to Tangalle

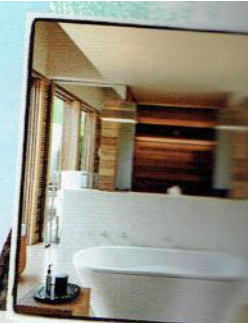
THE JOURNEY (5 HOURS): Somewhat stomach-churning. There are no tarmacked roads, only winding, bumpy mountain paths with sheer drops on one side. You're also descending from about 4,000ft above sea level to 5ft in two hours, and while there's no altitude sickness, you may feel light-headed. Luckily it's worth it for *these* views of tea-draped Bogawantalawa Valley.

THE PIT STOP: Udawalawe National Park – with its bright orange sands, low scrub and skeletal, dead trees, you might think that you've somehow been transported to Africa. Famous for its herds of elephants (there are over 600 here, rivalling even some of the best African savannahs), you'll also find wild buffalo, deer and crocodiles to spot, while the eagle-eyed might see leopards, flying squirrels and porcupines. Arrange a tour with your hotel, or pick one of the 4WDs waiting by the gates – the cost (about £19 for three hours) includes a park guide.

THE DESTINATION: The southern coastal town of Tangalle. Although this is a major beach destination, don't come here expecting a party scene – this place is all about getting back to nature. Once you've explored the enticing beaches, there are also paddy fields and ancient rock temples to see (Mulkirigala, 30 minutes inland, is particularly beautiful).

STAY AT: The serene Amanwella, next to its own 800m length of white sand. Looking more like a stylish New York museum than a luxurious beach hotel, each of the 27 slick suites (more are due to be unveiled this year) feature dark wood furnishings and elegant taupes, plus your personal plunge pool. When you're not lounging on your terrace, spotting monkeys swinging from the trees in the adjoining coconut grove, you'll want to be next to the enormous infinity pool, or in the restaurant sampling the Sri Lankan delicacy hoppers; pancakes made of rice and coconut milk topped with a fried egg, spicy curry and relishes. And for something extra special, book the Beach Club just a few minutes' walk away for a dinner just for two – you'll watch the sun set as you try seafood that's very likely been caught only hours before. ● aman.com/resorts/amanwella

Amanwella



STOP FIVE

Soak in the scenery around Galle

THE JOURNEY (3 HOURS): An ocean-front drive along some of the best beaches you'll find anywhere. Think endless stretches of silky sand, framed by tall palm trees, and dense coconut groves. Bright fishing boats painted yellow, red green bob on the surf, while traditional stilt fishermen sit perched above the crashing turquoise waves.

THE PIT STOP: Mirissa, one of the best spots in the world to watch blue whales. Warning: you'll need to set that alarm clock to 'early' – most boats set off at about 5.30am – and it's worth paying a little extra so you don't find yourself squashed on to a packed vessel pressed against 70 other tourists.

THE DESTINATION: Galle, an 18th-century walled town made up of grand Dutch colonial houses, chic boutique shops and a Unesco-protected fort. Shopping isn't always great in this country, but here you'll find exceptional boutiques, antique shops and tea specialists.

STAY AT: Kahanda Kanda, an exceptional boutique hotel buried in the jungle next to a tea plantation a 15-minute drive outside the city walls. British owner George Cooper has filled all eight, individually styled rooms with cute touches – fabric wall hangings, vintage crockery and turn-of-the-century paintings. Each also comes with its own super-sized balcony, where you can spend an hour or two watching bear monkeys, iguanas and wild peacocks calling to each other in the trees. The restaurant, next to a picturesque pool, is also special: the menu, which changes each night, includes spicy curries, and just-plucked-from-the-sea dishes such as grilled mahi mahi. ● kahandakanda.com

Greaves India (greavesindia.com/ 020 7487 9111) offers 11 nights in Sri Lanka from £3,350 per person. Includes flights with Sri Lankan Airlines, all accommodation with mentioned hotels, plus a stay at Fort Bazaar in Galle, and a chauffeur

Kahanda Kanda

