

PACK LIGHTLY

A WHOLE COUNTRY YOU CAN CIRCLE IN THREE WEEKS

Sri Lanka

Which coast for which month, how to ride the hill train, and the safari park that actually delivers a leopard.

p. 22 The Kandy to Ella train: which side, which seat, which segment

p. 31 The two-monsoon rule: pick the coast that is dry right now

p. 39 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

50 PAGES

LKR PRICES

ETA VISA

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photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Sri Lanka trip, what it costs, what to sort first



Sri Lanka is the rare country you can actually finish. It is one island the size of Ireland, and the classic loop runs the cultural triangle, the hill country, the south coast and a safari park in two to three weeks without a single internal flight. The catch is the weather: two monsoons split the island, so the trip is less about when you go than which coast you point at. This guide is built around that loop, what each leg costs, which famous sights earn the ticket, and the handful of things to book before you fly. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

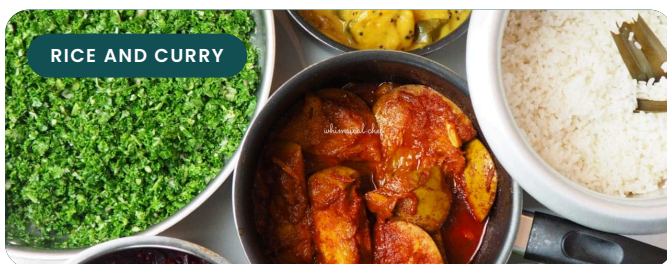
A clockwise loop from Colombo: up to the cultural triangle, down through Kandy and the tea hills by train, along the south coast, and a safari at the end. Two to three weeks, no flights, all by train, bus and tuk-tuk.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 30 USD a day, mid-range around 70. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is itemised on page 39.

Sort before you fly

An ETA visa, an eSIM the moment you land, and rupees in cash for guesthouses and tuk-tuks. Page 36 lists the four bookings that reward going early.



HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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Your trip on one page

14 days • 30 to 180 USD/day • best Jan-Mar for the loop

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. Sri Lanka is one compact island, and the classic loop runs clockwise from Colombo through the cultural triangle, down the hill country by train, along the south coast, and finishes with a safari, all in two weeks with no internal flights. Budget from the bars below, not from resort rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else is cheaper and easier to arrange once you land.

THE ROUTE



BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		30 USD
Standard		70 USD
Comfort		180 USD

BOOK FIRST

- 01** International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02** Reserved hill-train seats, 4 weeks out **12Go**
- 03** eSIM, install before departure **Sailly**

BEST MONTHS FOR THE LOOP (WEST, SOUTH, HILLS)



Sri Lanka at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data vs South Asia average

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure

55

Safety

70

Budget friendly

80

Nature

80

Food and drinks

75

Culture

80

Budget travel

30 USD/day

Mid-range

70 USD/day

Luxury

180 USD/day

NATURE

CULTURE

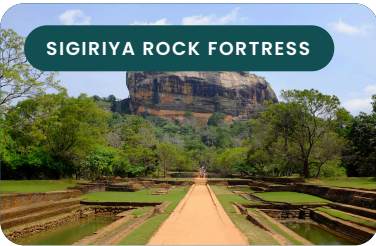
BEACH

ADVENTURE

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

WHERE SRI LANKA BEATS THE REGION

Against the South Asia baseline, Sri Lanka stands out on value (80 vs 60) and on how easy and friendly it is to travel. It scores a notch below the regional average on raw nature (80 vs 85, India and Nepal pull that line up) and on safety perception (70 vs 74), though the day-to-day reality on the loop is calmer than the number suggests. The real edge is compactness: the same variety in a fraction of the distance.



01

The country

What Sri Lanka is, what it is not, who goes, and the five regions you actually need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One island, five regions, four readers

07

What Sri Lanka is

22M people · 5 regions · an island you circle in two weeks

An island republic of 22 million people off the southern tip of India, shaped like a teardrop and small enough to drive end to end in a long day. After a civil war that ended in 2009 and an economic crisis that peaked in 2022, the country has steadied, and travel is back to easy. The pull is the variety packed into a short distance: ancient capitals and rock fortresses in the dry-zone centre, tea estates and a famous mountain railway in the cool hills, surf and whales along the south coast, and the highest density of leopards on earth in Yala. Two things shape every plan. One is the loop itself, which most people run clockwise without a single flight. The other is the weather, because two monsoons hit opposite coasts at opposite times, so the only real question is which side of the island is dry the week you arrive. This guide shows you the version that works in 2026.

CAPITAL

Colombo

Kotte is administrative

POPULATION

22M

Buddhist + Hindu + Muslim

CURRENCY

LKR

1 USD = ~300 rupees

BEST MONTHS

Jan-Mar

Jul-Aug for the east

FIVE REGIONS, FIVE CHARACTERS



SIGIRIYA ROCK FORTRESS

Cultural triangle: Sigiriya, Dambulla, the ancient cities

dry-zone centre · hot, dry most of the year

The historic core: the Sigiriya rock fortress, Dambulla cave temples, and the ruined royal capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Base in Sigiriya or Dambulla.



TEA ESTATE, HILL COUNTRY

Hill country: Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ella

cool highlands · tea estates · the train

Kandy and the Temple of the Tooth, tea-estate towns, and the famous Kandy to Ella railway. Cool nights, mist, and the green that fills the postcards.



GALLE FORT

South coast: Galle, Mirissa, Weligama

beaches + surf + whales · dry Dec-Apr

The Dutch fort at Galle, surf towns at Weligama and Hiriketiya, whale watching off Mirissa, and easy sand all the way to Tangalle.



ARUGAM BAY

East coast and the north: Arugam Bay, Trincomalee, Jaffna

dry May-Sep · the second-trip half

When the southwest is wet, the east is dry: Arugam Bay surf, Trincomalee beaches, and a Tamil-Hindu north around Jaffna that few first trips reach.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time loop

14 days, mid-range, the clockwise triangle-hills-south run by train and car.

Surf and slow travel

3 to 4 weeks chasing the dry coast: south in winter, Arugam Bay in summer.

Solo backpacker

30 USD a day, guesthouses and trains, the whole island in three weeks.

Couple or family

2-week trip, private driver for the inland legs, a beach week to finish.

02

Where to go

One island, five regions, two weather calendars. Pick your coast before you pick your dates: the south in July and the east in July are two different trips.

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The cultural triangle

the dry-zone centre • 3 to 4 nights • base in Sigiriya or Dambulla



The triangle between Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy holds two thousand years of Sinhalese kingdoms: ruined capitals, giant carved Buddhas, and the rock fortress of Sigiriya rising sheer out of the jungle. It is hot, flat dry-zone country, and it stays dry when the coasts are wet, so it works almost year-round. Most trips start here, straight up from the airport, before the hills.

Three to four nights covers it without rushing. Base in Sigiriya or Dambulla and run day-trips out: the rock at dawn, the cave temples mid-morning, and one of the two ancient cities. Anuradhapura is older and more spread out, best by bike; Polonnaruwa is more compact and the easier half-day. Pick one unless ruins are your reason for coming.

Sigiriya Rock

The lion-rock fortress with frescoes and water gardens. The headline; climb it first thing.

Dambulla caves

Five cave temples of painted ceilings and 150-plus Buddhas, on a hill above the road.

Polonnaruwa

A compact medieval capital of stupas and rock-cut Buddhas; cycle it in a half-day.

Anuradhapura

The oldest capital, sacred bodhi tree and giant dagobas, spread wide; rent a bike.



Climb Sigiriya at opening, 7am, before the heat and the tour buses. By 9am the staircases are a slow-moving queue in full sun.



The combined cultural-triangle ticket rarely pays off for short trips. Buy single-site entries unless you are doing three or more ancient sites.

GO DEEPER

The base town in the [Sigiriya rundown](#), the medieval capital in the [Polonnaruwa guide](#), and the oldest one in the [Anuradhapura write-up](#).

Sigiriya and Dambulla, up close

the two unmissable sites • and the cheaper rock next door



Sigiriya is the set piece: a 200-metre granite plug a fifth-century king turned into a palace, reached by staircases past the famous fresco gallery and the lion-paw gateway. The entry fee is steep by local standards, around 30 USD, and the climb is hot, but it earns it. The catch is the crowds and the price, which is why the rock opposite is the local secret.

Pidurangala, the neighbouring rock, costs a fraction and gives you the best view there is: a clear sightline straight at Sigiriya rising from the jungle, which you cannot get while standing on Sigiriya itself. Climb Pidurangala for sunrise, then do Sigiriya proper if the budget allows. Dambulla, fifteen minutes south, rounds out the day with its painted cave temples.

Sigiriya Rock Fortress

Frescoes, mirror wall, lion gate, water gardens. The big-ticket climb, best at opening.

Pidurangala Rock

The cheap rock opposite with the postcard view of Sigiriya. A scramble at the top.

Dambulla Cave Temple

Five caves of painted ceilings and dozens of Buddhas, a short climb above the highway.



For the iconic shot of Sigiriya, you climb Pidurangala, not Sigiriya. From the top of Sigiriya you cannot see the rock you are standing on.



Cover shoulders and knees for Dambulla; it is an active temple. Socks help on the sun-baked stone at the entrance.

READ ON

The climb in the [Sigiriya Rock Fortress page](#), the view rock in the [Pidurangala write-up](#), and the caves in the [Dambulla Cave Temple page](#).

Kandy, the hill capital

the gateway to the hills · 2 nights · the Temple of the Tooth



Kandy is the cultural heart of the highlands, the last kingdom to fall to the British and the home of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, the most important Buddhist site in the country. The town sits around a lake in a ring of green hills, cooler than the lowlands, and it is the natural pivot between the cultural triangle and the tea country. It is also where the hill train begins.

Two nights is the sweet spot. Time your temple visit for a puja ceremony, when drummers play and the inner shrine opens. Beyond the temple there is the lake walk, the hilltop Buddha at Bahirawakanda, and the botanical gardens at Peradeniya, the best in the country. The nightly Kandyan dance show is touristy but a genuine local art form, worth one evening.



Visit the Temple of the Tooth during a puja (roughly 5.30am, 9.30am, 6.30pm). The shrine opens and the drumming is the experience.



Reserve the Kandy to Ella train seats here or online weeks ahead. Walk-up first and second class sell out in high season.

Temple of the Tooth

The relic shrine, the holiest site in Sri Lanka; go during a puja, dress modestly.

Peradeniya gardens

The royal botanical gardens, giant fig avenues and an orchid house; an easy half-day.

Kandy Lake walk

A flat loop around the lake at dusk, with the Bahirawakanda Buddha lit above.

Kandyan dance show

Drums, fire-walking, and acrobatic dance; touristy but a real tradition, one evening.

MORE ON THE SITE Picks in the [Kandy city page](#), the relic shrine in the [Temple of the Tooth page](#), and the gardens in the [Peradeniya write-up](#).

Nuwara Eliya and Ella

the tea hills • 1 to 3 nights each • cool and green



Nuwara Eliya sits at 1,900 metres, a colonial hill station the British built to feel like home: cottages, a racecourse, a golf club, and tea estates rolling away in every direction. It is the coldest place in the country, genuinely chilly at night, and the heart of the Ceylon tea industry. Tour a working estate and factory, then ride the train on to Ella through what many call the most beautiful rail stretch in Asia.

Ella is the backpacker hub of the hills: a small town of cafes and guesthouses surrounded by walkable peaks, waterfalls, and the famous Nine Arch Bridge. Climb Little Adam's Peak at dawn, walk out to the bridge for a passing train, and chase the tea-estate viewpoint at Lipton's Seat near Haputale. It is the easiest, most social stop on the loop, and the one people overstay.



Nuwara Eliya gets cold: pack a fleece and long trousers for the highlands. Guesthouses rarely have heating, only extra blankets.



Check the train timetable for the Nine Arch Bridge and stand back for the photo. The famous shot is a train crossing, not an empty bridge.

Nine Arch Bridge

The colonial viaduct in the jungle; time a passing train for the signature shot.

Little Adam's Peak

An easy hour up for a 360 over Ella Gap; the gentle alternative to the big peak.

Lipton's Seat, Haputale

Sir Thomas Lipton's lookout over his estates; go at dawn before the cloud rolls in.

A tea-estate tour

Pluck-to-pack at a working factory, with a tasting; the better souvenir than the gift shop.

KEEP READING

The hill town in the [Ella write-up](#), the viaduct in the [Nine Arch Bridge page](#), and the tea lookout in the [Lipton's Seat write-up](#).

The regions, mapped to what you want

five regions, one island • pick the row, read across

Sri Lanka packs five distinct trips into one short island, and the two monsoons mean two of them are never in season at the same time. The matrix below replaces a page of prose: decide what you want from the trip, then read across the row to the region that delivers it. Each region also has its own base towns and a dry window noted in chapter five.

REGION	BASE	BEACH	CULTURE	NATURE	QUIET
Cultural triangle	Sigiriya	●○○	●●●	●●○	●●○
Hill country	Ella	○○○	●●○	●●●	●●○
South coast	Mirissa	●●●	●●○	●●○	●○○
East coast	Arugam Bay	●●●	●○○	●●○	●●○
North (Jaffna)	Jaffna	●○○	●●○	●○○	●●●

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)

assessment: pack-lightly Sri Lanka cluster, 2026-06



South and east coasts never share a dry season. In winter the loop runs south; in summer it flips to Arugam Bay and Trincomalee.



First trip, two weeks: triangle, hills and south. Add the east or the north only with three weeks or a second visit.

THE LONG
VERSION

The landscapes ranked in the [best places rundown](#), and the rated coast in the [beaches ranking](#).

Galle and the south coast

the heritage town • 1 to 2 nights • driest Dec-Apr



Galle Fort is the prettiest town on the coast and the anchor of the south: a walled Dutch trading port of cobbled lanes, colonial villas, boutique cafes and a sea-wall you walk at sunset. It is small, you can loop the ramparts in an hour, and it makes the natural base for the western end of the south coast. Stay a night inside the walls for the fort after the day-trippers leave.

From Galle the beach towns run east in a near-continuous strip: Unawatuna for calm swimming, Hikkaduwa for reef and party, and the surf and whale towns further on. The whole stretch is dry and warm from December to April, exactly when the hills and the cultural triangle are also dry, which is why the classic loop is a winter trip. In the southwest monsoon, May to September, this coast turns rough and grey.

 Sleep inside the fort walls, not on the new-town side. The fort empties of tour buses by dusk and the lanes are yours.

 The coastal train from Colombo to Galle hugs the sea. Sit on the right, southbound, for the ocean the whole way down.

Galle Fort ramparts
The sea-wall loop past the lighthouse; walk it at golden hour, free and unhurried.

Unawatuna Beach
A sheltered crescent for easy swimming, ten minutes from Galle; busy but calm water.

Jungle Beach
A quieter cove past the Peace Pagoda; snorkel-able on a flat day, a short walk in.

Hikkaduwa
Reef snorkelling, sea turtles, and the coast's livelier nightlife, west of Galle.

ON THE WEBSITE Picks in the [Galle breakdown](#), the walled town in the [Galle Fort page](#), and the calm bay in the [Unawatuna Beach write-up](#).

Mirissa, Weligama and Tangalle

surf, whales and the quiet end • 3 to 5 nights along the strip



East of Galle the coast turns into the heart of the south: Weligama is where you learn to surf, a wide forgiving beach break with board hire and lessons on the sand. Mirissa next door is the whale-watching capital, with blue whales passing offshore from December to April, plus the much-photographed Coconut Tree Hill and a busy little nightlife strip. Hiriketiya, the cove further east, is the cooler, slower surf town that the south-coast regulars decamp to.

Keep going and the coast empties out. Tangalle has long, near-private beaches and a calmer, more grown-up pace, the place to end a trip rather than start it. Whale tours leave Mirissa early, around 6.30am; pick an operator that keeps its distance from the animals, because the cheap boats crowd and chase. The surf is gentle and beginner-friendly all along this stretch in the winter season.



Choose a whale operator that keeps distance and limits boats around the animals. The cheapest tours race and crowd; it stresses the whales and ruins the sighting.



Weligama is the gentlest learn-to-surf beach in the country. Beyond it, Hiriketiya suits those past the white-water stage.

Mirissa whale watching

Blue and sperm whales offshore Dec-Apr; an early boat with a low-impact operator.

Weligama surf

The beginner break: wide sand, board hire, lessons. Where most people catch their first wave.

Hiriketiya

A horseshoe cove of cafes and a better wave; the south coast's slow-travel favourite.

Tangalle

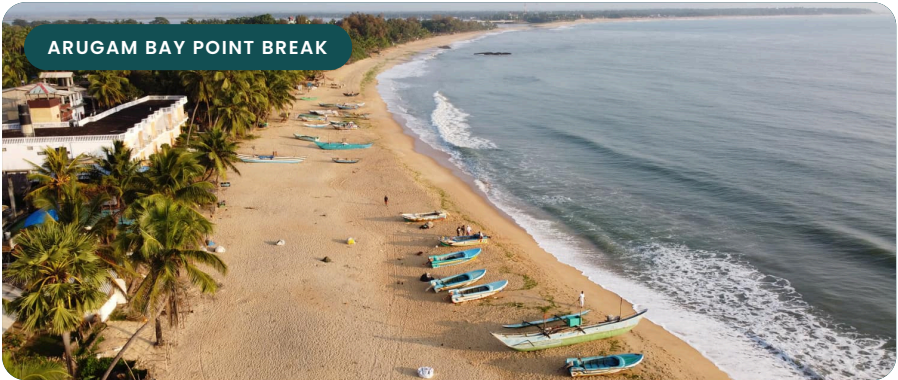
Long, empty beaches and a quiet, grown-up pace; the place to finish, not begin.

MORE DETAIL

The whale town in the [Mirissa rundown](#), the boat trip in the [whale watching page](#), and the surf hub in the [Weligama write-up](#).

The east coast: Arugam Bay and Trincomalee

the summer half of the island • dry May-Sep



When the southwest monsoon shuts the south coast, the east opens up. Arugam Bay is the country's best surf, a long right-hand point break that runs from April through September, plus a laid-back single-street town of surf camps and yoga. It is far from the loop, a long drive from the hills or a haul up the coast, but for surfers it is the whole reason to time a trip for summer.

North of there, Trincomalee has the calm, clear-water beaches the south cannot match in summer: Nilaveli and Uppuveli for swimming, and Pigeon Island just offshore for the best snorkelling in the country, reef sharks and all. Trinco also has a working harbour and a Hindu temple on a clifftop. The east is the dry-season alternative, the second-trip half, or the smart pivot if you arrive in July and August.

Arugam Bay point
The long right-hand point break, May to Sep; a surf town of camps, cafes and yoga.

Nilaveli, Trincomalee
Wide, clear-water beaches for easy summer swimming when the south is closed.

Pigeon Island
A marine park off Nilaveli with the country's best reef snorkel; go calm and early.



Arugam Bay surf season is May to September, the opposite of the south. Come in winter and the point is flat and the town half-shut.



Pigeon Island off Trincomalee has the best snorkelling on the island. Go on a calm morning and skip the feeding; the reef is fragile.

WORTH A READ
The surf town in the [Arugam Bay guide](#), the eastern port in the [Trincomalee write-up](#), and the reef in the [Pigeon Island page](#).

The north: Jaffna and the Tamil island

the different country up top · for second trips and slow travellers



NALLUR KOVIL, JAFFNA

Jaffna and the far north are a different Sri Lanka: Tamil and Hindu rather than Sinhalese and Buddhist, with bright kovil temples, a distinct chilli-heavy cuisine, and a landscape of palmyra palms and lagoons. The region was the heart of the civil war and was off-limits for decades; it reopened slowly, and it still sees few foreign visitors, which is exactly its appeal. The fast train from Colombo now runs the length of the island to get there.

Base in Jaffna town for the Nallur Kandaswamy temple, the Dutch fort, and the food, then take the causeway and a short ferry out to the offshore islands. Delft Island has wild ponies, coral-block walls and a baobab tree; Nainativu holds an important temple shared by Hindus and Buddhists. It is a two to three-day detour at minimum and rewards travellers who want the part of the island most tours skip.

Nallur Kovil

Jaffna's grand gold-towered Hindu temple; time it for an evening puja.

Delft Island

Wild ponies, coral-block walls and a baobab, by causeway and ferry from Jaffna.

Jaffna Fort + food

The Dutch fort by the lagoon, then a Jaffna crab curry; the north's two flavours.



The intercity express from Colombo to Jaffna takes about six hours and is the easy way north. Book a reserved seat; it runs full.



Jaffna food leans hotter and more coconut-and-chilli than the south. The crab curry is the dish to seek out.

SEE ALSO Picks in the [Jaffna page](#), the offshore island in the [Delft Island write-up](#), and the wider region in the [islands rundown](#).

Where the crowds thin out

for trips of two weeks plus • one place no friend mentioned



If your trip runs two weeks or longer, you have room for one stop that the loop skips. None of these are secret to locals, but they sit just off the obvious clockwise circuit, so the tour crowds never reach them. They are the version of the island most first visits miss because the standard route is so efficient.

The Knuckles mountain range east of Kandy is the country's best multi-day trekking, misty cloud forest and village homestays without a turnstile. Sinharaja, in the southwest, is the last big tract of primary rainforest, a birding and leech-walking world of its own. For a wild coast, Kalpitiya on the northwest is kitesurfing and dolphin pods, and Adam's Peak is the pilgrim climb done by headtorch to reach the summit at sunrise.

Knuckles Range

Cloud-forest trekking and homestays east of Kandy; the best multi-day walking.

Sinharaja rainforest

The last primary rainforest, a UNESCO reserve of endemic birds and leeches.

Adam's Peak

The sacred night climb to a sunrise summit, Dec-May; a pilgrim trail of steps.



Adam's Peak is a night climb, December to May, to reach the summit for dawn. Outside that window the path is wet, leech-ridden and often closed.



Knuckles and Sinharaja mean leeches in the wet. Salt, leech socks and tucked-in trousers are the whole defence; they are harmless but persistent.

DIG IN

The trek in the [Knuckles Range write-up](#), the rainforest in the [Sinharaja write-up](#), and the climb in the [Adam's Peak page](#).

Skip this, or do it right

four sights that disappoint • and the better version of each

Not everything famous is worth your day. Four stops swallow time and money on the standard loop and reward you with less than the hype promises. None are outright traps, but each has a smarter version, and knowing which is which is half the value of planning ahead.

OVERRATED

Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage

The famous "orphanage" is a crowded paid show, with chained elephants and a packed river bath.

- **Why skip** welfare concerns, bull-hooks, and a staged bathing crush
- **Do instead** the Elephant Transit Home at Udawalawe, which rehabilitates and releases
- **Or** see wild elephants on a real safari at Udawalawe or Minneriya

OVERPRICED

Sigiriya, ticket only

The 30 USD entry stings, and at midday it is a hot, slow queue up the staircases.

- **Why reconsider** the climb is great, the crowd and price are not
- **Do instead** Pidurangala next door for the view of Sigiriya, a fraction of the cost
- **Or** climb Sigiriya itself but only at 7am opening

UNDERWHELMING

Colombo as a destination

The capital is a transit point, not a sight. A full day here is a day off the loop.

- **Why skip** traffic, little to see, far from everything else
- **Do instead** use it as an airport stopover: Galle Face Green, a curry, a night
- **Or** head straight to Sigiriya from the airport and save the day

WATCH OUT

Yala in peak season

Block 1 at Yala can be a traffic jam of jeeps around a single leopard sighting.

- **Why reconsider** the crowds undercut the wildlife, and ethics suffer
- **Do instead** Yala at dawn opening, or quieter Wilpattu for the same leopards
- **Or** Udawalawe if elephants, not leopards, are the goal

THE FULL PICTURE

The release centre in the [Elephant Transit Home page](#), and the cheaper rock in the [Pidurangala write-up](#).

03

What to do

The two things Sri Lanka does better than anywhere: the hill train and the leopard safari. Plus surf, temples, tea and whales, and where to sleep in each region.

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What Sri Lanka asks of your days	21
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What Sri Lanka asks you to do with your days

one great train • one great safari • everything else is bonus



Two experiences define a Sri Lanka trip and neither is a sight you tick off. The first is the hill train from Kandy to Ella, hours of tea-estate green out an open door, routinely called one of the great rail journeys on earth. The second is a dawn safari for leopards and elephants in the southern parks. Build the trip around those two, and slot the rest, surf, temples, tea, whales, in around them.

After the headline pair, the island rewards slow days more than busy ones. A morning climbing a rock or a peak, an afternoon on a beach or in a tea factory, a temple at dusk. The food is the constant thread: a rice and curry spread is a dozen little dishes and the meal you will remember. Pick one threshold activity, the train or the safari, and let the calendar breathe around it.



If you do one thing, do the Ella-bound train. The Nuwara Eliya to Ella segment is the most beautiful and only takes a few hours.



A safari is a dawn or dusk activity, not a midday one. Animals move in the cool hours; the heat of the day is dead time.

03

The hill train

Kandy to Ella through the tea estates; the one unmissable ride, detailed next page.

A dawn safari

Leopards at Yala, elephants at Udawalawe; the second headline, the page after.

Learn to surf

Weligama in winter, Arugam Bay in summer; the gentlest first waves in Asia.

A rice and curry feast

A dozen small dishes around rice; the everyday meal that turns into the memory.

GO DEEPER Traditions and etiquette in the [culture page](#), the menu in the [food and drinks rundown](#), and the species in the [wildlife breakdown](#).

The Kandy to Ella hill train

one of the great rail journeys • which side, which seat, which segment



The blue train climbing from Kandy through Nanu Oya and Nuwara Eliya to Ella is the single most loved thing in the country: seven hours of tea terraces, waterfalls, pine forest and the open carriage doors that everyone leans out of for the photo. It is cheap, it is local, and it crosses the Nine Arch Bridge near the end. The catch is that the reserved seats sell out, and the experience changes a lot depending on the class and the seat you get.

Reserved first and second class can be booked up to 30 days ahead and go fast in season; unreserved third class is a gamble on a seat but the most atmospheric, doors wide open and locals sharing snacks. For the views, sit on the right travelling toward Ella for the first half, then either side works. You do not need the full route: the Nuwara Eliya (Nanu Oya) to Ella segment is the prettiest and runs about four hours.



Book reserved seats 30 days ahead through 12Go or the station. The famous "open door" view is best from unreserved third class, if you can get on.



Short on time? Ride only Nanu Oya to Ella, the best four hours. Going toward Ella, sit on the right for the first half.

THE BOOKING

Reserved vs unreserved

1st and 2nd class reserved (book ahead, guaranteed seat) or 3rd class unreserved (cheap, open doors, no seat promise).

THE SEAT

Which side to sit

Toward Ella, the right side has the best of the valley views for the first half. Stand by a door for the bridge.

THE SEGMENT

Nanu Oya to Ella

The four most beautiful hours: tea estates, the Demodara loop, and the Nine Arch Bridge near Ella.

THE COST

A few dollars

2nd class reserved is a couple of dollars; 1st class observation a little more. The cheapest great train ride anywhere.

READ ON

Book reserved seats through [12Go](#), then read the Ella stop in the [Ella breakdown](#) and the bridge in the [Nine Arch Bridge page](#).

Safari: which park for what

Leopards, elephants, and the ethical operator question



Sri Lanka is the best place on earth to see a wild leopard, and the parks are close enough to the loop to fold in at the end. Yala has the highest leopard density anywhere, but it is also the busiest, with jeeps clustering on a sighting in peak months. Udawalawe is the elephant park, almost guaranteed herds in open grassland, calmer and more reliable. Wilpattu, in the northwest, is the quieter alternative for leopards, with fewer jeeps and a wilder feel.

The rules that make or break a safari: go at dawn opening or dusk, never midday; pick a small-group jeep with a guide who keeps distance and does not chase or crowd; and skip any "elephant ride" or captive attraction. A half-day jeep with park fees runs roughly 50 to 80 USD per person shared. Tissamaharama is the base for Yala, Udawalawe town for Udawalawe. One park is plenty for most trips.

FOR LEOPARDS

Yala (Block 1)

Highest leopard density on earth, but the busiest. Dawn only; base in Tissamaharama.

FOR ELEPHANTS

Udawalawe

Near-guaranteed herds in open grassland, calmer and more reliable than Yala.

FOR QUIET

Wilpattu

Leopards with far fewer jeeps, in the northwest; the wilder, slower option.



Pick a jeep operator that keeps distance and stays on track. The ethical ones do not chase animals or pile onto a sighting; ask before you book.



Take the dawn slot, gate-open. Animals move in the cool hours, the light is best, and you beat the convoy of late jeeps.

MORE ON THE SITE

The leopard park in the [Yala Safari page](#), the elephant one in the [Udawalawe rundown](#), and the wider list in the [national parks rundown](#).

Surf, temples, tea, and the table

the rest of the calendar • and the five dishes to order first

Beyond the train and the safari, the days fill with water, faith and food. Surf is gentle and cheap, Weligama in winter and Arugam Bay in summer. The temples layer Buddhist, Hindu and colonial: the Tooth at Kandy, the cave paintings at Dambulla, the kovils of the north. Tea is the soft activity, an estate tour and a tasting in the hills. The constant under all of it is the food, so order these five early and the rest of the menu makes sense.



RICE AND CURRY

Rice and curry bath saha kariya

USD 1-3 • everywhere

The national meal: rice ringed by a dozen small curries, sambols and a poppadom. Every house cooks it differently. A homestay version beats any restaurant.



KOTTU ROTI

Kottu roti kottu roti

USD 1-3 • everywhere

Chopped flatbread stir-fried with egg, veg and curry on a hot griddle, announced by the rhythmic clang of the blades. The street-food sound of the island.



EGG HOPPER

Hoppers appa

USD 1-2 • breakfast

A bowl-shaped fermented-rice pancake, crisp at the edge, soft in the middle. The egg hopper, with a yolk cooked into the centre, is the breakfast to order.



LAMPRAIS

Lamprais lamprais

USD 2-4 • Dutch-Burgher

Rice, meat curry, frikkadel and sambol baked in a banana leaf, a Dutch-Burgher heirloom dish. Best from an old-school bakery, eaten still warm from the parcel.



Wash it down with king coconut (thambili) by day and a glass of arrack, the local coconut spirit, with soda at night.



A busy local rice-and-curry shop at lunch is the safe, cheap bet. The buffet turns over fast, which is the food-safety system.

KEEP READING The full menu in the [food and drinks rundown](#), the breaks in the [surf spots guide](#), and the faiths in the [religious landmarks page](#).

Where to stay: triangle and hills

prices per night, double room • guesthouses beat hotels here

Two rules cover most of the loop. First: family-run guesthouses and homestays are the heart of Sri Lankan travel, often cheaper and warmer than hotels, and the home-cooked rice and curry is half the reason to stay. Second: in the cultural triangle base in Sigiriya or Dambulla for the day-trips, and in the hills sleep in Ella for the social scene or near the tea estates for the quiet.

Sigiriya / Dambulla

guesthouse 12 USD mid 35 USD comfort 90 USD

Base here for the rock, the caves and one ancient city, all within a short tuk-tuk. [Check what a room costs around Sigiriya](#) before you commit; the backpacker beds sit on [Hostelworld](#).

Ella (hill country)

guesthouse 10 USD mid 30 USD comfort 80 USD

Stay in Ella town for the cafes and the social scene, or up the valley for a tea-estate view and silence. [See what Ella is charging tonight](#); dorms cluster on [Hostelworld](#).

Mid-range and up across the centre and the hills, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH BOOKING AHEAD

01	Sigiriya and Dambulla day-tour with a guide	GetYourGuide
02	Kandy city and Temple of the Tooth tour	GetYourGuide
03	Ella, Little Adam's Peak and Nine Arch hikes	GetYourGuide

Tours via GetYourGuide, an affiliate partner. Prices and availability shown live when you tap through.

Where to stay: the south coast

prices per night, double room • location beats stars

The same rules apply on the coast. In Galle sleep inside the fort walls for the evening atmosphere, even at a small premium. Along the beach strip, base in Mirissa or Weligama for surf and whales and the social scene, or push east to Tangalle if you want quiet sand and an early night. Book the first two nights, then decide the rest on the ground.

Galle (inside the fort)

guesthouse 15 USD mid 45 USD comfort 120 USD

Sleep within the ramparts for the lanes after the day-trippers leave, or out by Unawatuna for a beach base. [Pull up live Galle Fort prices](#); cheaper beds run through [Hostelworld](#).

Mirissa (surf and whales)

guesthouse 12 USD mid 35 USD comfort 100 USD

Mirissa for the whale boats and the nightlife, Weligama next door for the gentlest surf. [The live map around Mirissa](#) and [Hostelworld](#) fill the gaps.

Beach hotels and boutique stays across the south, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH BOOKING AHEAD

- | | | |
|----|---|------------------------------|
| 01 | Mirissa whale watching, low-impact operator | GetYourGuide |
| 02 | Galle Fort walking and history tour | GetYourGuide |
| 03 | Yala dawn safari from Tissamaharama | GetYourGuide |

Tours via [GetYourGuide](#), an affiliate partner. Prices and availability shown live when you tap through.

04

Routes and itineraries

One island, one classic loop, and the question that decides everything: clockwise or anticlockwise, and which coast for the month you are coming.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Pick your loop: 6 ready routes	28
The 14-day classic, day by day	29
The loop as a map	30

Pick your loop in one look

six ready routes • clockwise winter, eastward summer

The island runs one classic loop and a handful of variations on it. Clockwise (triangle, hills, south) is the winter trip, December to April. In the summer monsoon you flip the second half to the dry east coast. Find the row that matches your length and style; the day-by-day for the 14-day classic is on the next page.

SOLO • 7D • BACKPACKER

Triangle and hills, the short loop

USD 250 • guesthouses + trains

- Sigiriya 2: rock + caves
- Kandy 2: temple + train
- Ella 2: bridge + peak

ANY • 14D • MID

The classic clockwise loop

USD 950 • the trip this guide maps

- Sigiriya 3 • Kandy 2
- Train to Ella 3
- South coast 3 + Yala 2

COUPLE • 14D • COMFORT

Loop with a private driver

USD 3,500 for 2 • boutique stays

- Driver for inland legs
- Train only Kandy to Ella
- Beach finish at Tangalle

SURFER • 21D • BACKPACKER

Summer, the eastward flip

USD 1,100 • surf camps

- Triangle + hills first
- Arugam Bay 7: the point
- Trincomalee 3: reef + rest

FAMILY • 14D • MID

Light loop, beach-heavy finish

USD 3,200 • family of 4

- Sigiriya 2 + Kandy 2
- Train to Ella 2
- Unawatuna 5: calm sea

SLOW • 28D • MID

The whole island, including the north

USD 2,000 • everything

- Full clockwise loop
- Add Jaffna and the north
- Knuckles or Sinharaja trek

THE LONG VERSION

The [7-day route](#), the [14-day classic](#), and the [28-day full island](#), each mapped stop by stop.

The 14-day classic, day by day

clockwise · triangle, hills, south coast, safari · no flights

The full clockwise loop, refined. Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Reserve the Kandy to Ella train seats (day 6) a few weeks ahead through [12Go](#); everything else can be decided on the day. A private driver for the inland legs is the comfort upgrade.

1

Land, head to Sigiriya

CMB • 3.5h car

Skip Colombo. Drive straight up to Sigiriya, settle into a guesthouse, and rest for the dawn climb.

The loop as a map

the clockwise circuit • trains for the hills, car and bus for the rest

2

Sigiriya + Dambulla

Pidurangala for sunrise, Sigiriya rock after, Dambulla caves before the heat. The classic loop traces a clockwise single around the southern half of the island. The hill stretch from Kandy to Ella is the train; the rest is private car, intercity bus or tuk-tuk for the short hops. Reserve the train seats a few weeks ahead through [12Go](#); everything else can be arranged on the day, and a hired driver for the inland legs is cheaper split between two or more.

3

An ancient city

Polonnaruwa

Cycle the ruins of Polonnaruwa in the morning, an optional Minneriya

4

Down to Kandy

3h car

ing lake walk and the

5

Kandy temple + gardens

on foot

iya gardens after lunch.

6

The hill train to Ella

train • 6-7h

ed seats; sit right toward

7

Ella, slow day

hikes

for a passing train, cafes the



car / tuk-tuk

intercity bus

hill train

[Plan the legs on 12Go](#)

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS		
Airport to Sigiriya private car • 3.5h ~45 USD	Sigiriya to Kandy car or bus • 3h ~30 USD	Kandy to Ella hill train • 6-7h ~3 USD
Ella to the south coast car • 4h ~50 USD	Galle to Tissamaharama car or bus • 3h ~35 USD	Tangalle to Colombo car • 4h ~55 USD

fares: 12Go and local driver snapshot, 2026 • indicative, car fares split between passengers

13-

Beach, then home

Tangalle • CMB

A last quiet beach day at Tangalle, then the drive back to Colombo for the flight home.

05

When to go

Two monsoons, one signature timing trick. There is no bad month in Sri Lanka, only the wrong coast for the month. Plus festivals and what a day costs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Which coast is dry right now	32
Weather, crowds, price	33
Festivals worth planning around	34
What a day costs	39

Which coast is dry right now

the two-monsoon rule · the signature Sri Lanka timing trick

This is the one insight that changes a Sri Lanka trip. Two monsoons hit opposite sides of the island at opposite times, so there is no bad month, only the wrong coast for the month. The southwest monsoon (Yala) soaks the west, south and hills from May to September. The northeast monsoon (Maha) soaks the east and north from October to January. The cultural triangle in the dry-zone centre stays workable nearly year-round. Read the row for your month, then point your trip at the green column.

YOUR MONTH	WEST, SOUTH, HILLS	EAST COAST	NORTH (JAFFNA)	RUN THIS LOOP
Dec to Mar	●●●	●○○	●●○	classic clockwise loop
Apr	●●○	●●○	●●○	the sweet shoulder, anywhere
May to Sep	●○○	●●●	●●○	flip to the east coast
Oct to Nov	●●○	●○○	○○○	inter-monsoon, watch the rain

● filled dots = drier and better (3 = prime season)

two-monsoon model · best-travel-time dataset, 2026



January to March is the single best window: the whole popular loop, west, south and hills, is dry and the safari parks are at their best.



Even in monsoon, the rain is often an afternoon downpour, not all-day grey. The wrong coast still has good mornings.

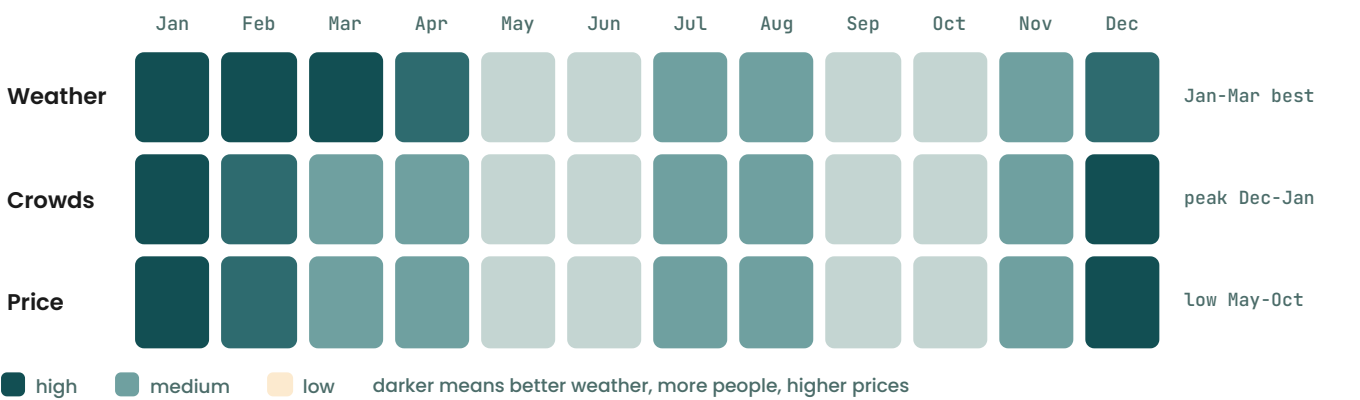
ON THE WEBSITE

The month-by-month logic in the [best time to visit page](#), and the wider geography in the [map and location page](#).

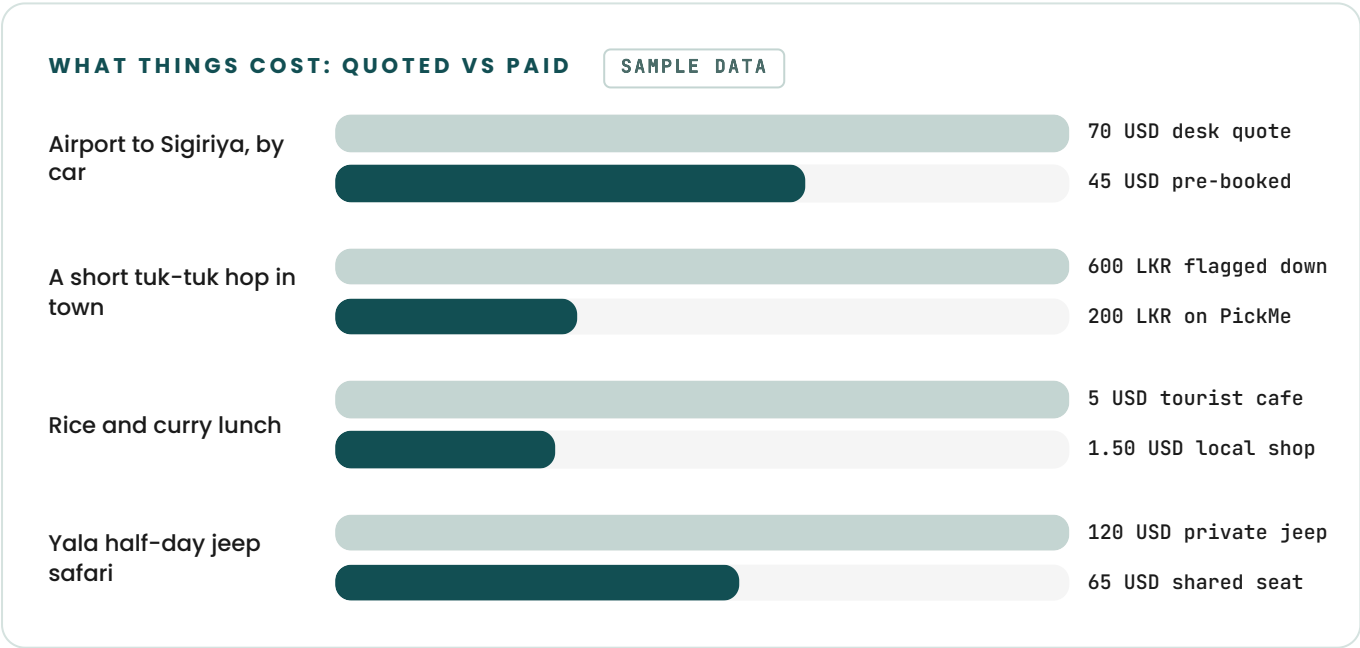
Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar for the classic loop · west, south and hills

This calendar reads the popular loop, the west, south and hills. The east runs the opposite pattern, so flip it in your head for an Arugam Bay or Trincomalee trip. The prime window for the loop is December through March, peaking around the Christmas and February holidays when prices and crowds spike. April is a fine, quieter shoulder; May through September is the southwest monsoon, when the coast turns rough and rooms go cheap.



source: best-travel-time dataset · loop coasts, captured 2026



Festivals worth planning around

three to chase, three to plan around

Sri Lankan festivals run in both directions: the top row is worth building a trip around, the bottom row mostly raises your hotel bill or closes the shops. Most follow the lunar calendar, and the full-moon Poya day each month is a public holiday when alcohol sales stop islandwide. Check the dates for your travel year before you book.

JUL / AUG

Esala Perahera, Kandy

The grandest procession in the country: ten nights of fire dancers, drummers and lavishly dressed elephants around the Temple of the Tooth. Book Kandy months ahead.

APR

Sinhala and Tamil New Year

The whole island celebrates the harvest new year with games, sweets and family rituals. A warm time to travel, though transport and shops slow for a few days.

JUL / AUG

Kataragama Festival

A multi-faith pilgrimage in the deep south with fire-walking and acts of devotion. Pairs naturally with a Yala safari from nearby Tissamaharama.

MONTHLY FULL MOON

Poya day

Each full moon is a Buddhist holiday. Temples fill, alcohol sales stop islandwide, and some businesses close. Stock up the night before if you want a drink.

LATE DEC / JAN

Peak holiday season

Christmas and New Year fill the south coast and spike prices. Great weather, but book beach stays and the hill train weeks in advance.

NOV

Deepavali

The Hindu festival of lights, biggest in the Tamil north and east and in Colombo's Hindu quarter. A short, bright holiday rather than a trip-stopper.



Esala Perahera dates move with the moon and fill Kandy completely. If you want it, lock the hotel before anything else.



Plan around Poya: no alcohol is sold on full-moon days, and some sights and shops shorten hours. Buy the night before.

MORE DETAIL Exact dates per year in the [public holidays calendar](#), and the monthly weather logic in the [best time to visit write-up](#).

06

Practical

Visa, money, trains and tuk-tuks, eSIM, health, packing. The boring parts you read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order	36
Money, trains and tuk-tuks	37
Bed, bag, signal	38
What a day costs	39
Health and the ETA visa	40

Book in this order

four things before you fly • everything else on the ground

Sri Lanka punishes over-planning: guesthouses, buses and most tours are cheaper and easier once you are in the country. Four things genuinely reward booking ahead, and they have a natural order. Note that the ETA visa is mandatory and best done early on the official portal, not a reseller, and the hill-train seats sell out in season.

8 wk
before

International flights

Fares to Colombo bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for high season. Most routes connect through the Gulf or India, so compare across hubs.

Compare fares
on Aviasales

4 wk
before

ETA visa + insurance

Apply for the Electronic Travel Authorization on the official portal, then buy travel insurance with strong medical and evacuation cover. Confirm your exact passport rule first.

Check entry
rules per
passport

3 wk
before

Hill-train seats + first nights

Reserve the Kandy to Ella train (1st or 2nd class) and book your first two hotel nights. The rest of the beds can wait until you are there.

Reserve train
seats on 12Go

1 wk
before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on landing. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps, PickMe and uploads. The welcome text lands before your bags do.

Set up a Saily
eSIM



Passport rule: at least six months validity beyond arrival. Apply for the ETA on the official government site only, never a lookalike reseller.



Tell your bank the dates or bring a second card, and always choose to be charged in rupees, not your home currency, at the ATM.

Money, trains and tuk-tuks

cash-heavy · trains for the hills, PickMe for the towns

Cash runs the everyday economy: guesthouses, tuk-tuks, market food and bus fares are all rupees in hand. Cards work at bigger hotels, supermarkets and city restaurants. Use bank ATMs, withdraw a few days at a time to limit fees, and always pick rupees when a terminal offers your home currency. The transport system is its own logic, mapped below.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Guesthouse / hotel double	USD 12	USD 40	USD 120
Rice and curry / restaurant	USD 2	USD 8	USD 25
King coconut / lion lager	USD 0.40	USD 1.50	USD 5
Tuk-tuk across a town (PickMe)	USD 1	USD 2	USD 4
Hill-train seat, reserved	USD 2	USD 3	USD 8

verified 2026-05 · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Trains for the scenic hill stretch and the long flat runs (cheap, slow, beautiful); intercity buses for everything trains do not reach (cheaper still, more crowded); tuk-tuks for the short hops, booked through the PickMe app so the fare is metered and you skip the haggle. For the inland legs of the loop, a hired car with driver is the comfort choice, cheaper split between two or more, and removes the bus-and-transfer friction entirely.



Install PickMe, the local ride app, for tuk-tuks and cars. The metered fare is a fraction of the tourist price you get flagging one down.



Private airlines and Sri Lanka Railways are named without links where no partner exists; book trains at the station or through 12Go.

WORTH A READ

The notes and exchange traps in the [currency rundown](#), the road and IDP details in the [traffic breakdown](#), and the full cost model in the [budget breakdown](#).

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing for humidity and temples · eSIM

BED

For mid-range and up, [Booking.com](#) wins on free cancellation while plans move; for dorms and the social scene, [Hostelworld](#) has the backpacker stock. Whatever you book, a family guesthouse with home-cooked rice and curry is the experience worth seeking out.

BAG: THE TWO-WEEK CARRY-ON LIST

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Light, quick-dry clothes for the humid lowlands and coast | ☐ Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes, plasters |
| ☐ A fleece and long trousers for the cold hill nights | ☐ 30% DEET and SPF 50; reef-safe sunscreen for snorkelling |
| ☐ A sarong or scarf to cover shoulders and knees at temples | ☐ Type D/G plug adapter and a 20,000 mAh power bank |
| ☐ Sandals plus one pair for climbing rocks and peaks | ☐ Two payment cards in separate pockets, plus some USD cash |
| ☐ Leech socks if you plan to trek Knuckles or Sinharaja | ☐ Passport copies in three places: phone, print, email |

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on landing. A 5 GB plan covers a week from a few dollars; 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps, PickMe and uploads.

[Set up a Saily eSIM](#)

SEE ALSO

The full season list in the [packing list](#), what to wear where in the [dress code rundown](#), and the data options in the [SIM and eSIM page](#).

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the drink at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday on the loop, in US dollars.

A DAY IN SRI LANKA	A DAY IN SRI LANKA	A DAY IN SRI LANKA
* backpacker *	* standard *	* comfort *
guesthouse, shared9.00	boutique double, half25.00	luxury double, half100.00
egg hopper breakfast1.20	cafe breakfast4.00	hotel breakfastincl.
rice and curry lunch2.00	restaurant lunch6.00	restaurant lunch14.00
kottu dinner2.50	dinner with drinks12.00	dinner, good table26.00
train + tuk-tuk4.00	PickMe rides6.00	private car + driver40.00
temple or site entry5.00	shared safari or tour12.00	private safari orincl.
king coconut + tea1.00	coffee + arrack5.00	guideabove
two lion lagers3.00		cocktails x216.00
TOTAL / DAY~30 USD	TOTAL / DAY~70 USD	TOTAL / DAY~180 USD
budget-calculator data · 2026-05	budget-calculator data · 2026-05	budget-calculator data · 2026-05

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

 The gap between tiers is the room and the driver, not the food. Eating well costs the same at every level; the bed and the car are where the budget climbs.

 Carry cash in rupees for the small lines: tuk-tuks, guesthouses, site entries and market food. Cards only reach as far as the bigger hotels.

Health and the ETA visa

six weeks out for shots • the visa is online and simple

Sri Lanka is a low-drama health destination: the main risks are stomach upsets, sun, mosquitoes and the roads. Private hospitals in Colombo, Kandy and the bigger towns are competent and used to travellers, and pharmacies are everywhere. The visa is the one piece of paperwork, and it is straightforward if you use the official portal.

HEALTH: THE SIX-STEP LIST

- ☐ **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, flu) are current.
- ☐ **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for street-food trips. Hep A is a two-shot series, so start early.
- ☐ **Risk-based only:** Japanese Encephalitis for long rural stays; rabies pre-exposure if you will be near animals.
- ☐ **Mosquitoes:** dengue is the real one, present year-round and worse in the wet. Daytime DEET is the whole defence; there is no pill.
- ☐ **Water:** drink bottled or filtered, skip ice in cheap places, and peel your own fruit. Stomach upsets are the common complaint.
- ☐ **Insurance:** strong medical cover with evacuation, plus scooter and surf if you plan either.

THE ETA VISA

Most nationalities need an Electronic Travel Authorization before arrival. For US passports it is a 50 USD double-entry e-visa valid 30 days, with the same broad rules for most Western travellers; verify your exact passport before you book. Apply only on the official government portal, which replaced the old eta.gov.lk site, never a reseller charging a markup. Your passport needs six months validity beyond arrival.



Reseller sites mimic the official ETA portal and add a fee. Check the URL is the government domain before you pay; the price is fixed.



The roads are the real hazard, not crime. Wear a helmet on a scooter, carry an IDP, and treat night driving with respect.

DIG IN The shot schedule in the [vaccinations breakdown](#), the entry rules in the [visa guide](#), and hospital picks in the [hospitals page](#).

07

Safe and smart

The scams worth knowing, the real dangers (the sea and the road, not crime), the etiquette that is load-bearing, and a few words of Sinhala and Tamil.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Scams, sea, surf and leeches	42
Etiquette and solo travel	43
Emergency numbers + phrases	44

Scams, sea, surf and leeches

petty grifts in tourist zones • the genuine hazards are natural

Sri Lanka is a safe place to travel and violent crime against visitors is rare. What you actually meet is a small set of grifts in the tourist hubs, plus the real dangers, which are the sea, the roads and, in the wet hills, the leeches. None are reasons not to go. Knowing them turns most into a non-event.

DANGER 01

The sea, rips and shore breaks

Rip currents and dumping shore breaks are the genuine risk on the south and east coasts, and many beaches have no lifeguard.

The fix: swim only at patrolled, sheltered beaches like Unawatuna, ask locals which days are safe, and never swim alone or after a drink. Respect surf warnings.

SCAM 02

The friendly "closed today" detour

A helpful stranger near a temple or station tells you it is closed or there is a special festival, then steers you to a shop or a pricey tuk-tuk.

The fix: check opening times yourself, decline the escort politely, and walk to the official entrance. Real closures are posted at the gate, not by a passer-by.

SCAM 03

The tuk-tuk meter and gem pitch

A flagged-down tuk-tuk quotes a tourist fare or runs a "no meter" line, or a driver offers a free tour that ends at a gem or spice shop on commission.

The fix: book through the PickMe app for a metered fare, and never buy gems on a driver's recommendation. The "free tour" is a sales funnel.

NATURE

Leeches in the wet hills

Knuckles, Sinharaja and Adam's Peak in the rains are full of land leeches that latch on through socks. Harmless, but unnerving and persistent.

The fix: wear leech socks, tuck trousers in, and carry salt or a salt-soap to flick them off. Do not pull; let them drop and dab the bite.

THE FULL PICTURE

The full safety picture in the [safety breakdown](#), the road rules and IDP details in the [traffic page](#), and the breaks in the [surf spots write-up](#).

Etiquette, and solo travel

the temple rules are load-bearing • solo notes below

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense in a deeply religious country; the rest save you face or hassle. Buddhism is taken seriously here, and a careless photo can become a genuine problem, so the don'ts around Buddha images are not optional.

DO NOT

Pose with your back to a Buddha

Turning your back on a Buddha statue for a selfie is a serious offense and has led to arrests. Never do it.

DO NOT

Get a Buddha tattoo on show

Visible Buddha tattoos can get you refused entry or deported. Cover any you have.

DO

Cover shoulders and knees at temples

A sarong or scarf for both men and women, and shoes and hats off before you enter.

DO

Use your right hand

Give, receive and eat with the right hand; the left is considered unclean.

DO NOT

Drink in public on Poya

Alcohol sales stop on full-moon days; drinking openly then reads as disrespect.

DO

Ask before photographing people

A nod and a smile first, especially monks and people at prayer.

DO

Agree the tuk-tuk fare first

Use PickMe, or settle the price before you get in; never assume a meter.

DO NOT

Touch a monk, if you are a woman

Women should avoid physical contact with monks; pass items via an intermediary or surface.

SOLO AND FEMALE-SOLO NOTES

Sri Lanka is a comfortable solo trip and a popular one, with a strong guesthouse and surf-hostel network that makes meeting people easy. Female travellers report occasional staring and unwanted attention, more on crowded local buses than anywhere else; dressing modestly off the beach, sitting in the women's section on buses where it exists, and using PickMe after dark all help. The hill towns and surf coast are the most relaxed and social bases.

GO DEEPER

Customs and religion in the [culture page](#), the safety detail in the [safety breakdown](#), and what to wear in the [dress code write-up](#).

Emergency numbers and a few words

save the numbers now • Sinhala in the south, Tamil in the north and east

POLICE / EMERGENCY

119

nationwide

AMBULANCE (SUWA SERIYA)

1990

free national service

FIRE

110

nationwide

TOURIST POLICE

011 242 1052

Colombo line

US EMBASSY COLOMBO

+94 11 249 8500

citizen services

YOUR HOTEL

save it tonight

name + address in local script

A FEW WORDS: SINHALA AND TAMIL

ENGLISH	SINHALA (PHONETIC)	TAMIL (PHONETIC)
Hello	ayubowan (ai-bo-wan)	vanakkam (va-na-kam)
Thank you	istuti (is-too-ti)	nandri (nun-dri)
Yes / No	ow / na	aamaam / illai
How much?	kiyada? (kee-ya-da)	evvalavu? (ev-va-la-vu)
Delicious	rasai (ra-sai)	suvai (su-vai)
No spice / not too hot	sera epa (sera e-pa)	kaaram vendaam
Sorry / excuse me	samavenna	mannikkavum
Help!	udav karanna!	udavi!



Save 1990 (the free ambulance) and your hotel's name and address in your phone before the first night out.



These phrases print as a wallet card on the next-but-one page. Sinhala carries the south and centre, Tamil the north and east.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

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Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Sri Lanka data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Sri Lanka: 30 USD/day backpacker, 180 USD/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Best Time to Travel

Loop dry Jan-Mar, east dry Jul-Aug. The two-monsoon split, mapped.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



Visa Checker

Your ETA rule by passport: fee, stay length and entry count.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/visa-checker/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/visa-checker/)



What to Eat and Drink

Rice and curry, hoppers, kottu and arrack, with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

SINHALA / TAMIL • ESSENTIALS

Hello	ayubowan / vanakkam
Thank you	istuti / nandri
Yes / No	ow na / aamaam illai
How much?	kiyada? / evvalavu?
No spice	sera epa / kaaram vendaam
Delicious	rasai / suvai
Help!	udav karanna! / udavi!
Sorry	samavenna / mannikkavum

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY • SRI LANKA

Police / emergency	119
Ambulance (free)	1990
Fire	110
Tourist Police	011 242 1052
US Embassy Colombo	+94 11 249 8500

My hotel: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Sri Lanka hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the guesthouse.



Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Sinhala or Tamil on the back. Tuk-tuk drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, a performance-marketing background and a data-led approach to travel writing. Every number in this guide traces to a dated source, listed below.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Guesthouse and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05, across Sigiriya, Ella, Kandy, Galle and Mirissa.
2. Currency rates: ECB and central-bank reference rates, 2026-05.
3. Visa policy: Sri Lanka's official ETA portal (srilankaevisa.lk), retrieved 2026-05-15. US fee 50 USD, double entry, 30 days.
4. Climate and the two-monsoon model: best-travel-time dataset and 10-year averages, captured 2026.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last checked 2026-05.
6. Pack Lightly Sri Lanka cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [best time](#) · [safety](#).

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored every six months. Budget figures come from the live budget calculator, captured 2026-05, and the day receipts on page 39 are built from those per-category numbers.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: December 2026. Not covered in depth here: diving (its own [guide](#)) and the full island list (the [islands rundown](#)).

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2. **Arugam Bay point break.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CCO.

3. **Egg hopper.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

4. **Galle Fort.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

5. **Galle Fort lighthouse.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, FAL.

6. **Galle Fort ramparts.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

7. **Hill train through tea country.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 4.0.

8. **Knuckles Range trail.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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10. **Lamprais.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

11. **Leopard, Yala.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

12. **Leopard, Yala National Park.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

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16. **Nine Arch Bridge, Ella.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

17. **Open door, Ella-bound train.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 2.0.

18. **Polonnaruwa ancient city.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

19. **Rice and curry.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

20. **Sigiriya from Pidurangala.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

21. **Sigiriya Rock Fortress.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

22. **Tea estate, hill country.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 3.0.

23. **Tea estate, Nuwara Eliya.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY 4.0.

24. **Tea pickers, Nuwara Eliya.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 4.0.

25. **Temple of the Tooth, Kandy.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, FAL.

26. **Tuk-tuk on a tea-estate road.** Wikimedia Commons contributor, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, a tour or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly a commission. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A stay area, a transport platform or a park is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain name still stands. An overrated sight is still called overrated.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales** · **Booking.com** · **12Go Asia** · **Saily** · **Hostelworld** · **Stay22** · **GetYourGuide**



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/sri-lanka.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands December 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.