

ASIA · BEACHES · WILDLIFE · HISTORY · SACRED SITES · HIKING · FOOD



Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka packs ancient royal capitals, misty tea country, leopard-filled national parks and palm-backed beaches into an island smaller than Ireland. Sigiriya's rock fortress and Kandy's Temple of the Tooth anchor the cultural heartland, and the train through the hill country is one of Asia's great rail journeys. The two coasts have opposite monsoons, so somewhere is always in season.

i Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Sri Lanka and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 21 September 2026.

CAPITAL Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte	CURRENCY Sri Lankan rupee (LKR) £1 ≈ LKR 443	LANGUAGE Sinhala, Tamil English	BEST TIME Dec–Mar (west/south), May–Sep (east)
DAILY BUDGET £30–£160 ££ Moderate	PLUGS Type D, G, M 230V · UK plugs fit	FLIGHT FROM LONDON 11h direct ~£600–£1,100 return	TIME ZONE UTC+5:30 standard time

Sri Lanka's classic circuit runs as a loop from Colombo or the airport near Negombo: north to the Cultural Triangle of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla and Sigiriya; south to Kandy; then by train through the tea estates around Nuwara Eliya and Ella; and down to Yala or Udawalawe for wildlife before ending on the south-west coast around Galle, Mirissa and Tangalle. Two weeks covers it comfortably. The Tamil north around Jaffna and the east-coast beaches of Trincomalee and Arugam Bay make a different, quieter trip, best between May and September.

Sri Lanka is excellent value for food, transport and guesthouses, but foreigner entrance fees at the big archaeological sites and national parks are high and add up quickly. Most visitors hire a car with a driver for at least part of the trip, which is affordable and saves time on slow, winding roads; distances look short on the map but take longer than expected. Families, couples and first-time Asia travellers all find it easy going. What surprises many people is the food: home-cooked rice and curry, with half a dozen small dishes, is often the highlight.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

HISTORY

Sigiriya

King Kasyapa built his 5th-century palace on top of this sheer 180-metre rock; climb past the frescoed maidens and the giant lion's paws to the summit ruins. Go at opening time, or climb nearby Pidurangala for the view of Sigiriya itself.
- 2

SACRED SITE

Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

Kandy's golden-roofed temple houses Sri Lanka's most revered relic, a tooth of the Buddha. Visit during an evening puja, when drums sound and pilgrims bring lotus flowers, and wear clothing that covers shoulders and knees.

3

NATURE

Hill-country railway to Ella

The train from Kandy to Ella climbs through tea estates, waterfalls and cloud forest, ending near the stone Nine Arch Bridge. Reserved seats sell out quickly, but unreserved carriages offer a fallback for the flexible.

4

ARCHITECTURE

Galle Fort

The Dutch-built ramparts of this UNESCO-listed fort enclose streets of colonial villas, churches, boutique hotels and cafés. Walk the walls at sunset, when locals gather and cricket games spill across the grass.

5

WILDLIFE

Yala National Park

Sri Lanka's most visited park has one of the world's highest densities of leopards, plus elephants, sloth bears and crocodiles in its scrub and lagoons. Book a dawn jeep safari; Block 1 usually closes for several weeks around September.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Colombo

≈ 2.3 million people

A sprawling, fast-changing commercial capital best treated as a day or two: Galle Face Green at sunset, the Pettah markets, Gangaramaya Temple and excellent restaurants and cafés.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Negombo

≈ 138,000 people

A beach and fishing town close to the international airport, handy for first and last nights; its lagoon, fish market and Dutch-era canal are worth a wander.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Kandy

≈ 125,000 people

The last royal capital, set around a lake in the hills, with the Temple of the Tooth, the Peradeniya botanic gardens and a popular boarding point for the scenic train to Ella.

Colombo's figure covers its urban district, which takes in Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, Moratuwa and the administrative capital, Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte; Kandy's includes its suburbs. Estimates vary.

When to go to Sri Lanka

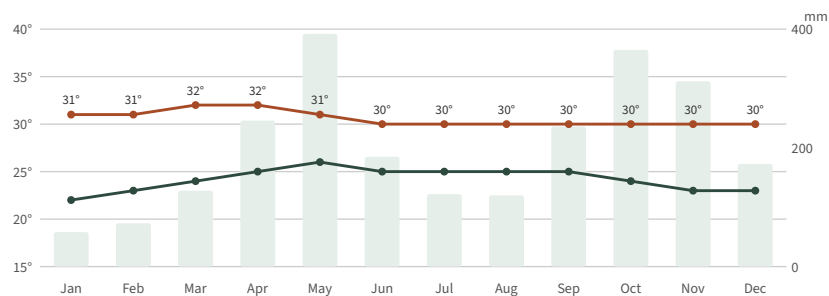
Best time: **Dec–Mar (west/south), May–Sep (east).**



■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Colombo

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Apr	Sinhala and Tamil New Year On 13–14 April families mark the sun's move into Aries with auspicious rituals, milk rice, sweets and village games; many businesses close for several days.
May	Vesak The May full moon marks the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death; towns hang glowing lanterns and illuminated pandals, and free food stalls called dansal serve passers-by.
Jul–Aug	Esala Perahera, Kandy For ten nights before the Esala full moon in July or August, whip-crackers, fire dancers, drummers and dozens of decorated elephants parade through Kandy escorting a casket representing the tooth relic.

How much does Sri Lanka cost?

SHOESTRING £30 per person / day ≈ LKR 13,294 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £70 per person / day ≈ LKR 31,019 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £160 per person / day ≈ LKR 70,901 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Rice and curry The everyday national meal: a mound of rice with several small curries of dhal, vegetables, fish or meat, plus coconut sambol and crisp papadums.	Hoppers Bowl-shaped pancakes of fermented rice flour and coconut milk, crisp at the edges; order an egg hopper and eat it with curry and fiery lunu miris relish.	Kottu roti Chopped flatbread stir-fried on a griddle with vegetables, egg and meat, the clatter of the cooks' blades announcing every street-food stall after dark.
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Getting around

Trains are cheap and scenic, especially on the hill-country line, but slow; book reserved seats ahead. Government and private buses go everywhere for very little, though drivers are fast and seats scarce. Tuk-tuks handle short hops: use the PickMe or Uber apps in Colombo and Kandy, or agree the fare first. Many visitors hire a car with a driver for a week or more, which is good value and saves time.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



230V — UK plugs fit

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance: **011 2691111** or **1990**
Fire and Rescue: **111**
Police: **118/119**
Emergency Police Mobile Squad: **011 5717171**
Tourist Police: **011 2421052**
Source: FCDO “Getting help”

DIALLING CODE

+94

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the left

TIPPING

Restaurants often add a 10% service charge; leave a little extra for good service. Drivers and guides expect a daily tip, and temple shoe-minders a few rupees.

ETIQUETTE

Remove shoes and hats at temples, cover shoulders and knees, and never pose for photos with your back to a Buddha statue. Buddha tattoos can cause serious offence.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Bandaranaike International Airport (CMB), Colombo

Visas & entry for Sri Lanka

Shown for a British passport.

Apply online before you go (travel authorisation)

To enter Sri Lanka, you need to apply for an 'Electronic Travel Authorization' (ETA) which is a form of visa.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Chikungunya

Cholera

Dengue

Hepatitis B

Japanese encephalitis

Measles

Rabies

Tuberculosis

Typhoid

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

No malaria risk

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Sri Lanka

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Sun 25 Oct 2026

Vap Full Moon Poya Day

Sun 8 Nov 2026

Diwali

Tue 24 Nov 2026	Il Full Moon Poya Day
Wed 23 Dec 2026	Unduvap Full Moon Poya Day
Fri 25 Dec 2026	Christmas Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Sinhala

ENGLISH	SINHALA	SAY IT
Hello	ආයුබෝවන්	AH-yu-bo-wan
Thank you	ස්තූතියි	STOO-tee-yi
Please	කරුණාකර	ka-ru-NAA-ka-ra
Excuse me	සමාවෙන	sa-MAA-wen-na
How much is this?	මේක කීයද?	MAY-ka KEE-ya-da?

Know before you go

- Plan your route around the monsoons: the south-west coast and hill country are driest from December to March, the east coast from May to September.
- Reserved seats on the Kandy–Ella train, especially observation cars, can sell out weeks ahead; book online or through your guesthouse as soon as bookings open.
- Budget for steep foreigner entry fees at Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and the national parks, which are priced in US dollars and can dominate a day's spending.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.