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Sri steps to heaven

Rainforest, unspoilt beaches, gorgeous hotels offering exceptional rates, Sri Lanka has it all - except visitors. Go now, says resident Rory Spowers, before it changes

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Luxe for less ... Tea Trails in Sri Lanka

Like many of my generation, I have had the good fortune to exploit the benefits of cheap travel. Deeply bitten by the bug, I spent much of my time as a student and beyond in Africa, India and parts of south-east Asia, entranced by the exotic experiences of life on the road.

During these forays, I met and spoke with many people who had been travelling for years: travel writers, business people, expedition leaders and that tribe of peripatetic global nomads that seem to exist in a state of constant motion. Repeatedly I would ask them the same question: "What is the most beautiful country in the world that you have visited?" Almost without exception, I received the same answer: "Sri Lanka."

I was able to verify this when I first went to Sri Lanka in 1997. So powerful was the attraction of the country that I moved there with my wife and two children in March 2004. For many people I knew, this was seen as yet further proof of my eccentricity. Despite having been at peace for a year, Sri Lanka was hardly viewed as the most stable place in the world to relocate to.

Nine months later, the tsunami struck, adding further weight to my friends' belief that our move had been a serious error of judgment. However, despite the challenges of the past three years and the resumption of the conflict in the north, I have few regrets. Sri Lanka continues to be a gem, a largely unspoilt island with some of the finest and most varied landscape on the globe.

Few places in the world can boast such diversity - culturally, geographically, biologically. With some pockets of rainforest containing more species than anywhere else on the planet, bar the Amazon, Sri Lanka's importance as a "biodiversity hotspot" is now well recognised.

There's also a mixture of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and indigenous cultures, along with well-populated game parks, one of the finest botanical gardens in the world and a coastline of sandy golden coves and great surf. To make it even more enticing, it has some of the most intimate, eccentric and enchanting boutique hotels that you will find anywhere.

Through some sort of perverse irony, part of what has preserved this charm over the past few decades, in contrast to the rapid over-development that tourism has brought to, say, India or Thailand, is the ongoing internal conflict. One day, however, that will change. And when it does, inevitably, the experience will start to change. In many ways, there has never been a better time to visit Sri Lanka than now. Few people are going, hotels are offering exceptional rates and, by sticking to certain areas, your safety is ensured.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to absorbing the country's diversity in a short time is getting about. The roads are either busy and slow due to the volume of traffic, or empty and slow due to the numerous twists and turns that take you in and out of the hill country. The golden rule is not to attempt too much. Being frazzled by too many bumpy rides will ruin your holiday.

Ideally, the following circuit would be done over three weeks. Cutting it down to two, you will need to be selective. Anything less and I would advise you to stay put in one area, such as the beach, rainforest and cultural experience you can have in and around Galle in the south.

One way to start your trip, without launching directly into a three- or four-hour slog on the main roads, is to head straight for **Casa Colombo** (casacolombo.com, US\$195), a new boutique hotel heading south on the Galle road, about a one-hour drive from the airport. This stunning 200-year-old Moorish mansion has been totally refurbished, offering 12 outlandish suites that push the concept of retro-chic into a new dimension.

Just walking into the hotel creates something of an altered state, like being on the set of a psychedelic Austin Powers movie. Everything - from the 18ft fan blades in the restaurant to the pink-tiled pool and copper-plated bathtubs - has been designed by the 30-year-old proprietor, Lalin Jinasena. Innovation runs throughout, from the gazpacho martinis to the spectacular mural of meditating rishis seated on clouds in the main restaurant.

The rooms are all vast, all contain individual features and come complete with the full array of hi-tech toys: plasma screens, fully loaded iPods, Nakamichi sound systems, wifi and Apple Mac laptops. The place would be an anomaly in Vegas, or South Beach Miami, let alone Colombo.

If this all sounds too brash for your taste, you may be more inclined to head for the more refined sophistication of **Lunuganga** (lunuganga.net, \$260), the country estate of Sri Lanka's most famous architect, Geoffrey Bawa, situated halfway down the coast to Galle near Bentota.

Now part of the Geoffrey Dobbs portfolio of unique properties, which includes **Taprobane Island** (taprobaneisland.com, \$1,000 per night for the five-bedroom villa) in Weligama Bay and the Sun House and Dutch House hotels in Galle, Lunuganga is only open to guests from December to April. It is, however, the most spectacular of the lot, an eccentric fusion of the classical, baroque and modernist. Wandering around the extensive gardens, where the rampant tropical growth is allowed to creep over stone steps and balustrades, transports one into the final scenes from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

With the third Sri Lanka v England Test match looming from December 18-22, and the second Galle Literary Festival from January 16-20, the hotels of Galle Fort, the nearby beaches and surrounding hinterland are all preparing for an unrivalled influx of guests. At the same time, many are still offering cheap deals in the coming weeks and months, so seize the opportunity while it lasts.

Amangalla (amangalla.com, \$318), the fabulously stylish Aman chain's refurbishment of the legendary New Oriental Hotel in Galle Fort, is offering

an unprecedented 50% off rack rates until October 2008. The hotel has also just added an Ayurvedic dimension to the serenely sybaritic spa, the first pairing of this traditional system of health care with the Aman formula.

A short walk down Church Street, the **Galle Fort Hotel** (galleforhotel.com, \$200) has just won a prestigious Unesco award for the sensitive and elegant restoration of this classic Dutch villa, and its Asian fusion menu continues to win praise.

Across from the cricket ground and up the hill, the **Sun House** (thesunhouse.com, \$190) and **Dutch House** (thedutchhouse.com, \$380) hotels retain a relaxed charm, presided over by the inimitable manageress, Henri Tatham. During the Test, the Sun House is offering a complimentary shuttle service to and from the ground, along with lavish breakfasts, rose lunches and afternoon teas. The recently added Dick's Bar makes a mean passion fruit margarita and there is frequent live entertainment in the courtyard.

It's easy to visit Galle and never leave the coast, but those who do never regret it. Just a few kilometres inland, the landscape shifts to low country tea estates, pockets of rainforest and terraces of luminous emerald rice paddies.

At **Kahanda Kanda** (kahandakanda.com, \$190), George Cooper's sprawling James Bond hideaway perched on a ridge north of Koggala Lake, Thai food has been added to the menu and a new bar installed in the Living Pavilion. KK, as it is known locally, is the quintessence of elegant tropical living and no visit to the Galle area is complete without at least dropping by for lunch.

A little further to the north, about a 30-minute drive up the Udugama Road at Nakiyadeniya, is my own project, the **Samakanda Bioversity** (samakanda.org, \$100 per night, \$350 per week), an ecological retreat developed on the site of a 60-acre abandoned tea estate.

We have two fully refurbished bungalows for rent and offer a variety of activities, from hiking and mountain biking on the rainforest trails to picking your own organic salads or cooking up a storm in our two wood-fired clay pizza ovens. Those feeling conscious of their carbon footprints are invited to join our carbon mitigation programme, providing solar panels for the local community. For an adrenaline fix, seek out Alex Barratt to join mountain bike trips from either KK or Samakanda back down to the coast. Check his website (gallefunk.com) to see what's going on in the Galle area.

Those with time to spare can complete a circuit of the island's interior by heading down the coast, past the secluded sandy coves around Tangalle, through the pilgrimage centre of Kataragama, to the **Galapita Eco-lodge** (galapita.com, \$80pp full board) at Buttala. The new villa here has added a new aspect at this spectacular rambling mud village spread across the sculpted rocks of the Menik Ganga gorge.

A new Ayurvedic spa is now complete and, along with panning for precious stones and "tubing" down the rapids, Galapita makes a perfect base for exploring the nearby Yala national park, famed for its elephants, leopards and crocodiles.

Winding into the hills, head for one of the four **Tea Trails** (teatrails.com, \$178pp all inclusive) bungalows scattered through the Bogawantalawa valley. Renovated to a high standard, with immaculate service and fine food, the Tea Trails experience is the ideal contrast to the arid dry zone and the bustle of Galle. Hiking and mountain biking trails take in the glorious views of the tea country, and nursing a drink beside a log fire in the evening makes a welcome change from the heat.

To complete the tour, head for the **Kandy House** (thekandyhouse.com, \$165), another tasteful renovation of a beautiful 200-year-old manor house on the outskirts of Kandy. A visit to the Peradeniya botanical gardens is almost mandatory, since few could not marvel at the grandeur of the trees it contains.

Those with a third week to spare should ease away the aches and pains of travel by spending their last few days at the **Ulpotha** retreat (ulpotha.com, £650pp per week full board and yoga), a Garden of Eden that provides a living microcosm of traditional Sri Lankan life. Swim in the vast fresh-water bathing tank, feast on the finest local curries, dabble in some yoga, get fixed by the Ayurvedic doctor and massaged by the resident therapists. This is tropical indulgence with an earthy and ecological balance, the perfect digestif to a sumptuous island treat before flying back to normality.

Despite the ongoing troubles, Sri Lanka still offers an idyllic experience of the exotic. Far from festering into tropical decay, the places that offer such a unique taste of the island keep improving, adding new elements and staying at the forefront of luxury boutique travel.

If the logistics of such a trip appear too daunting, enlist the help of Sri Lanka in Style, the bespoke travel service that will tailor a tour that fits your needs, your budget and your time frame, offering an intimate and personalised service that will tick the appropriate boxes. But, as I said before, my advice is this: go sooner rather than later. When the dynamics start to change, some of the magic might also start to diffuse.

• Unless otherwise stated prices are lead-in rack rates (low season) for a double room including breakfast and taxes. All hotels can be booked through Sri Lanka in Style (0094 112 396 666, srilankainstyle.com).

Rory Spowers is the author of *A Year in Green Tea and Tuk Tuks - My Unlikely Adventure Creating an Organic Farm in Sri Lanka* (HarperElement, £8.99).

Way to go

Getting there

Sri Lankan Airlines (020-8538 2001, srilankan.aero) flies Heathrow-Colombo for £610.80 return inc tax.

Further information

0845 8806 333, srilankatourism.org.uk.

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