

SRI LANKA

THREE

Between its natural and cultural riches, the Emerald Isle can be a lot to take in. **Saumya Ancheri** tells you the best ways to do everything you want.

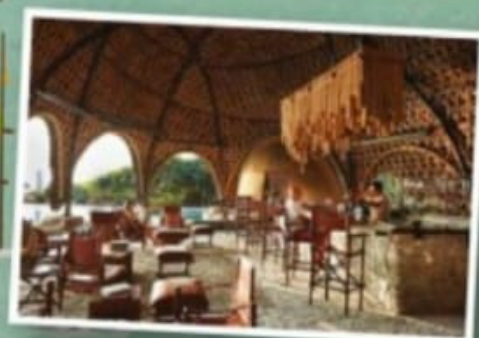
WAYS



Conceived by the Fernando family, Sri Lankan tea producers & founders of Dilmah Ceylon Tea, Resplendent Ceylon's collection of small, luxury resorts offer the discriminating traveller a remarkable circuit across Sri Lanka, with a range of authentic experiences, while contributing towards local communities & the environment through the MJF Foundation & Dilmah Conservation. This "best of Sri Lanka" circuit features distinctively original resorts, connected by a thread of peerless service. They are the sole Sri Lankan members of Relais & Chateaux, the global fellowship of individually owned & operated luxury hotels and restaurants.



The Resplendent Sri Lanka Journey
Tea, Sea & Safari





ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

A nine-day journey spanning millennia-old forts and modernist hotels

Some of the prettiest views of Sri Lanka's misty hills and golden beaches come from royal fortresses and chic hotels. Ruins of ancient civilisations jut over thick forest, massive forts loom over roiling seas. And dotting both city and countryside are the elegant, iconic hotels, public buildings and private homes created by much-loved 20th-century architect Geoffrey Bawa.

There's no better place to begin an architecture trail than **Heritage Kandalama** (heritancehotels.com; doubles from LKR25,625 or ₹10,900), a four-hour ride from Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport. It's considered the finest of all the landmark hotels that Bawa designed from the 1960s onwards. Built in the early 1990s on a rocky outcrop, the hotel has 152 rooms and suites from which you can drink in views of the Kandalama reservoir and the fifth-century Sigiriya 'Lion Rock' fortress. The panorama makes it well worth lingering over a meal at one of the hotel's five eateries. Make time for its neighbouring UNESCO World Heritage sites. Begin with **King Kashyapa I's rock fortress at Sigiriya**, built after he seized the throne by entombing his father alive in a wall. The layout is majestic; the entry used to be through the maw of a sculpted lion, but now, only the paws remain. And the Mirror Wall is believed to have been so polished that the king could see his reflection as he passed by. Look out for the frescoes and the bathing pools for his harem. Go on to the colossal remains

of the old capitals of **Polonnaruwa** and **Anuradhapura**, packed with archaeological treasures, and the Buddhist caves of **Dambulla** and **Mihintale**, all within a two-hour drive. The golden Buddha outside the 340m-high rock temple of Dambulla can, in fact, be spotted from Heritage Kandalama. In the 1st century BC, these caves were King Walagamba's refuge for 14 years; he developed the temple complex here after exile.

The central highlands of **Haputale**, a five-hour drive away, enclose the restored planter's bungalow of **Thotalagala** (thotalagala.com; doubles from LKR1,20,115 or ₹51,030). Sitting on nearly 8,000 hectares of tea plantation, it neighbours master tea planter Sir Thomas Lipton's Dambatenne estate. Visit **Lipton's bungalow and factory** the next day, and trek or drive up to **Lipton's Seat** to share his favourite view of the misty hills. Excellent hiking awaits in **Horton Plains National Park**. Or stay in at Thotalagala's grand seven-suite bungalow, with its sweeping views, hearty plantation fare and immersive glimpse into life on a working estate.

The Last House (thelasthouse.com; doubles from LKR35,100 or ₹14,920) in Tangalle, a four-hour drive away, is so named as it was Bawa's final creation, designed in 1997. The six-bedroom property is testament to Bawa's gift for flowing layouts where the indoors seamlessly open out to earth and sky—here, to views of the lagoon and beach. Step out the next day and head to the

Clockwise from left: a room at Thotalagala; plants at Paradise Road—The Villa Bentota; an owl sculpture by Laki Senanayake at Heritage Kandalama; the façade of Paradise Road—The Villa Bentota; a view of Heritage Kandalama. Previous page: surfers off Mirissa Beach

GETAWAY

over sundowners at rooftop bar Bommu. Freshly caught seafood is a highlight at the hotel: think seer fish ceviche with coconut foam, barramundi with Maldivian fish dashi and tequila-infused crabmeat in a glass of tomato shorba-style gazpacho. Chow down on superb egg-hoppers accompanied by meat curries and spicy sambals for breakfast at the all-day diner, and later in the day, sink your teeth into a comforting and hearty Philly cheesesteak at the Shoreline Beach Club, with electronica and the sounds of the gushing pool providing the soundtrack to go with your meal. And end your day with a beautiful dinner experience under the stars. PS: The hotel is a great base for beach-hopping or staying in to unwind at the spa and secluded shore.

A room at Wild Coast
Tented Lodge

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EAT AND WORK IT OFF

A 12-day journey featuring food, tea, forests and oceans

Waking up to a steaming egg-hopper—a bowl-shaped pancake with an egg cracked in the batter and served with tangy sambols—is one of the simple yet deep pleasures of being in Serendib. It is second only to the joy of knowing that between Sri Lanka's rugged coasts and lush hill country, this is a holiday where you can indulge and have a good time working it off, too.

While the famous **Ministry of Crab** (ministryofcrab.com), housed in a gorgeous heritage building in **Colombo**, is an obvious bet for any seafood lover, you should also not miss the top-notch cashew curry, stringhoppers of red or white flour and seafood buffet at **Curry Leaf** at the ocean-facing **Hilton Colombo** (www3.hilton.com; doubles from LKR22,430 or ₹9,530). The hotel has six great eateries, but if you're in a large group, head to **Graze Kitchen**, which features live counters for Sri Lankan (think country pork curry, lamprais and kothu roti), Japanese, Italian, Turkish, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian and Chinese cuisines. Conveniently, it also has a separate kids' menu, so picky little eaters will be well taken care of.

Rise early to view Negombo's famous fish auction at **Lellama market**, an hour away. Shack up at the 55-key **Jetwing Lagoon** (jetwinghotels.com; doubles from LKR21,620 or ₹9,190), which was built in 1965 by Geoffrey Bawa. It is bordered by lagoon and ocean—so you can lounge in the outdoor pool mirroring the lagoon or hit the hotel's dedicated water sports centre—think canoeing, jet skiing, windsurfing—followed by a rejuvenating session at the ayurveda spa. The six signature dining experiences can be set up at a variety of venues on the property—poolside, over the lagoon or in the garden, for example. Plus there's a healthy menu offering ayurveda-based and vegan dishes.

Kandy, home to a multitude of cultural riches, is just short of a four-hour drive away. Start your visit by hitting the formerly royal **Peradeniya Botanic Gardens** and **Sri Dalada Maligawa** (sridaladamaligawa.lk), the Buddhist Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Settle in for two nights at the **Santani Wellness Resort & Spa** (santani.lk; doubles from LKR76,830 or ₹32,710), a 90-minute ride, for an endless loop of massages, yoga and delicious food (everything from juices

to vegan, raw and traditional local fare). The property can also plan a variety of trips to nearby spots. Hike to Hulu River and further, to the Kukul Oya waterfalls, both of which are great picnic spots and offer gorgeous vistas. You could also head out to the hanging bridge of Narampanawa, a walk that will take you past small tea plantations and paddy fields. Back at Santani, chalets with mountain or garden views are designed to tread lightly on the land and on its residents—including no TVs. There is wi-fi, though, so you won't feel completely cut off from the world.

Stay awake for the waterfall and valley views on the four-hour drive to tea country in **Nuwara Eliya**, called Little England for its colonial feel. Bed down at **Heritage Tea Factory** (heritancehotels.com; doubles from LKR35,235 or ₹14,970). The 54-key hotel offers sessions with a trained tea-taster, tea plucking on the organic estate and a visit to the factory to witness how the beverage is created. Order a traditional high tea, take picnic hampers into the forest and dine at the hotel's restaurant in a former railway carriage. Hike up to **Lipton's Seat** to view the gorgeously lush terraced tea estates catalysed by Sir Thomas Lipton. And make sure you don't leave without hiking to the spectacular drop at World's End in **Horton Plains National Park**. This is the Instagram-worthy view that everyone wants, #nofilterneeded.

Drive down from the moorland and cloudforest to the scrubland and riverine forest of **Udawalawe National Park**. Check into the 79-room **Grand Udawalawe Safari Resort** (udawalawesafari.com; doubles from LKR22,430 or ₹9,530) for the next two nights, for languorous naps, poolside lunches and safaris to spot elephants, leopards, deer as well as sloth bears.

Neighbouring **Yala National Park** (yalasrilanka.lk) draws more safari vehicles for it has one of the highest leopard densities in the world. En route, halt at **Kataragama**, a jungle shrine revered by Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Over the next two nights at **Wild Coast Tented Lodge** (resplendentceylon.com; doubles from LKR1,12,105 or ₹47,640), a Relais & Châteaux property that borders Yala National Park, get pampered in luxe tents fitted with teak floors and handmade copper bathtubs, tuck into

From top: the restaurant at Santani Wellness Resort & Spa; elephants at Udawalawe National Park; the spa at Cape Weligama



GETAWAY

Mulkirigala Buddhist rock temple. Water babies could go snorkelling and whale watching with **Mirissa Water Sports.** And do visit the marine turtle conservation project in the fishing village of **Rekawa.**

Less than two hours away, near Galle, stands **Jetwing Lighthouse** (jetwinghotels.com; doubles from LKR27,225 or ₹11,570), Bawa's stylish 63-key hilltop hotel with ocean views. The hotel offers excellent wildlife tours, or you could divvy time between its two pools and spa. At the hotel's entrance is its most famous feature: a staircase swirling with the sculptural tableau of the Sinhalese Battle of Randeniya against the Portuguese, made by renowned artist and Bawa's longtime collaborator, Laki Senanayake. En route, stop by **Ruhuna University in Matara:** Bawa laid the main campus between two hills overlooking the ocean. Continue the trail in 16th-century **Galle Fort,** a UNESCO World Heritage site with beautifully restored buildings like The Fort Printers hotel.

A 90-minute drive away, **Paradise Road—The Villa Bentota** (paradiseroadhotels.com; doubles from LKR25,520 or ₹10,860) beckons—a hotel that Bawa converted from a villa in the 1970s. The 15-room beachside property matches his clean lines with artsy interiors by the current owner, Udayshanth Fernando of chic lifestyle store Paradise Road. The on-site gift shop sells locally crafted homeware and souvenirs, as well as the crockery and tableware used at the hotel. Bentota is water sporting heaven, but first make a beeline for **Lunuganga Estate** (geoffreybawa.com), the architect's country home since 1947. After a short-lived career at the bar, he realised his calling as an architect while landscaping these gardens. The estate's neighbour is the house of renowned textile designer Ena de Silva. An early commission, the house is a fine example of Bawa's gift at marrying contemporary design with traditional building techniques and materials. When its original Colombo site was due for

demolition, each of its components, down to the terracotta tiles and river stones in its urban courtyard, was individually numbered and moved here.

Keep a day for Colombo's more modern charms. Visit the **Sri Lankan Parliament Building** in Kotte, and the **Seema Malaka** Buddhist ordination temple, both tranquil lakeside creations by Bawa. Pay homage at **Number 11** (geoffreybawa.com), Bawa's former home, and dine at **Paradise Road The Gallery Café** (paradiseroad.lk), his former office. Do an **art hop** between **Hempel Galleries** (hempelgalleries.com), the **Saskia Fernando Gallery** (saskiafernandogallery.com) and **Barefoot Gallery** (barefootceylon.com). Spend your final night at the **Taj Samudra** (taj.tajhotels.com; doubles from LKR25,625 or ₹10,890), with a lovely afternoon tea. It's also great for families, with kiddie activities like cooking classes with a chef. Dining options include Mughlai fare at Navratna, Japanese at YUMI and crabs at Crab Factory.

A staff member at Jetwing Lighthouse's spa

haute cuisine and gear up for safari drives and trips to **Ravana Falls**. May–August is best to spot leopards and sloth bears.

The ocean beckons at **Cape Weligama** (resplendentceylon.com; doubles from LKR60,540 or ₹25,720), a Relais & Châteaux stay with 39 suites and villas, an infinity pool reflecting the sea, and fresh produce at its five restaurants and bar. The focus is on seasonal and sustainable fare, whether at the cliffside Tableau or at Ocean Terrace. At Cape Club, order a traditional Ceylon high tea—it was opened by Dilmah Tea's leisure arm Resplendent Ceylon, after all. The tea menu is extensive, and accompanied by scones with clotted cream and jam, egg and cress sandwiches and Battenburg cakes:

return for sunset cocktails and a nightcap under the stars. Unwind with a massage on your private veranda or sign up for the five-hour Cape Ayurveda experience that includes lunch, a massage and a herbal bath.

Spend the next morning in the company of the gentle giants of the sea off the coast of **Mirissa**: November–April is ideal to sight blue whales, sperm whales and dolphins. Stroll through the heritage precinct of **Galle Fort**, with its quirky shops, lovely restaurants and cricket grounds, or go surfing in **Hikkaduwa**. Check into the 172-key **Amari Galle** (amari.com; doubles from LKR21,770 or ₹9,270), where every room has ocean views, and finger



A seafood dish at
Ministry of Crab