

SRI LANKA & THE MALDIVES

with Jonathan Hodgson

17 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Colombo - Transfer to Negombo

Arrival at Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport and transfer to Negombo (30 min) - Welcome to Sri Lanka!

Negombo, once a key hub for the cinnamon trade during the Dutch era, has experienced its fair share of foreign influence throughout history. From the 16th to the 20th century, the town saw its governance shift between the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, each leaving behind a unique imprint. This colonial heritage is still evident today in the town's architecture, which continues to shape the distinctive atmosphere of this charming seaside destination.

Overnight in Negombo.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Negombo Area Touring

Today we start the day with a visit to the vibrant Negombo Fish Market, a bustling hub of activity near the tranquil Negombo Lagoon. As we wander through the market, we'll witness local fishermen unloading their fresh catches, from fish to prawns, in a lively and authentic atmosphere. The sights, sounds, and smells of the market offer a fascinating glimpse into Sri Lanka's maritime culture, and it's a great place to pick up some local insights and maybe even try some fresh seafood.

From the market, we'll head to the historic Dutch Fort, which dates back to around 1678. Although the fort is likely to be closed to visitors due to its condition, we can still take a peek at its exterior and learn about its rich history. As we explore the surrounding area, we'll get a chance to see some of the remaining colonial buildings that are still in use today, offering a glimpse into Negombo's rich cultural heritage.

In the afternoon, we'll take a relaxing boat ride through the Dutch canals at the Muthurajawela Nature Reserve, a thriving saline wetland and bird haven. This unique ecosystem was once a rice-growing area, but after saltwater flooding, nature reclaimed the land, and it's now home to an incredible array of wildlife. As we glide through the canals, we'll spot a variety of bird species, including some colourful residents, and maybe even catch a glimpse of monkeys and crocodiles. The water lilies and other aquatic plants add to the serene atmosphere, making this a perfect spot to unwind and connect with nature.

After our boat ride, we'll head back to Negombo.

Overnight in Negombo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Negombo - Anuradhapura

After breakfast, we set off on our journey to Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka. As we drive through the countryside, we'll take in the scenic views of the rolling hills, verdant forests, and rustic villages that dot the landscape. Along the way, we might stop at a coconut plantation, where we can learn about the production process and see firsthand how these versatile trees are cultivated. We'll get a chance to sample some fresh coconuts and maybe even try some local products made from coconut oil or fibre.

As we continue our drive, the scenery will unfold, revealing the rural charm of Sri Lanka. We'll pass through small towns and villages, catching glimpses of daily life and perhaps even seeing some of the local artisans at work. After a few hours of driving, we'll arrive in Anuradhapura in the afternoon, ready to explore this historic city.

While in the area, we plan to visit the Dambulla Cave Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a remarkable complex of five caves adorned with vibrant Buddhist murals and over 150 Buddha statues. Carved into a towering rock, it offers a captivating insight into Sri Lanka's rich spiritual and artistic heritage.

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Upon arrival, we might have some time to fit in some sightseeing, depending on our schedule. Anuradhapura is a city steeped in history and culture, with numerous ancient ruins, temples, and dagabas (stupas) to explore. We'll take our time to wander through the streets, soaking up the atmosphere and getting a feel for this ancient city. It's a great opportunity to get a head start on our exploration of Anuradhapura and make the most of our time here.

Overnight in Anuradhapura.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Anuradhapura Touring

This morning, we embark on an exploration of the remarkable sights of Anuradhapura, a city steeped in history and spirituality. Established by King Pandukhabaya in 380 BC, Anuradhapura served as the royal capital for over 1,600 years, witnessing the reign of 119 successive Sinhalese kings until the capital was moved to Polonnaruwa in AD 993. As we wander through the ancient city, we'll visit some of Sri Lanka's most famous and tallest dagabas (stupas), including the iconic Ruwanwelisaya and the Jetavanaramaya, which was one of the tallest structures in the ancient world.

We'll also explore the remains of palaces, temples, and monasteries, gaining insight into the daily life and spiritual practices of the ancient Sri Lankans. As we stroll through the ruins, we'll come across ceremonial baths, intricately carved stone pillars, and other archaeological treasures that showcase the advanced craftsmanship and engineering skills of the ancient civilization.

One of the highlights of our visit will be the sacred Bo-tree, a descendant of the very tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment over 2,500 years ago. This sacred tree is a symbol of peace and spiritual growth, and it's a powerful experience to sit in its shade and reflect on the significance of this site.

We finish our day with "Nachchaduwa Sunset Safari," a serene-yet- thrilling experience, as we glide through scenic landscapes, with the sun casting its golden glow over the peaceful lake. Encountering diverse wildlife in their natural habitat, the safari provides a perfect blend of nature's beauty and tranquility.

Overnight in Anuradhapura.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Anuradhapura - Aukana Buddh - Dambulla

After breakfast, we check out of our hotel and begin our drive to Dambulla, a journey that takes us through the scenic countryside of Sri Lanka. Along the way, we'll make a stop to visit the magnificent Aukana Buddha, a 12-meter (39-foot) statue that is believed to have been sculpted in the 5th century AD. The statue's name, "Aukana," means "sun-eating," which refers to its alignment with the dawn, creating a striking visual effect as the sun rises. We'll take a moment to admire the statue's serene expression and intricate details, and appreciate the skill and craftsmanship that went into creating this ancient masterpiece.

The drive from Aukana to Dambulla takes approximately 1 hour, passing through rolling hills and rural landscapes. As we arrive in Dambulla, we'll have the opportunity to explore the lively local market, a bustling bazaar filled with an array of fresh fruits and vegetables. The market is a hub of activity, with vendors selling their produce to be shipped to Colombo for sale the following day. We'll get a glimpse into the daily lives of the local people and maybe even pick up some fresh produce or local handicrafts.

We'll then visit Minneriya National Park, a haven for nature lovers, known for its impressive gatherings of elephants. The park's rich landscapes, from forested areas to serene wetlands, provide an immersive wildlife experience, where you can observe these magnificent creatures in a pristine, untouched environment.

After checking into our hotel, we'll embark on a tour of Dambulla's main attraction, the Royal Rock Temple complex. This ancient site is spread across five caves, featuring an impressive array of statues and paintings that date back to the 1st century BC. We'll explore the caves, marveling at the intricate artwork and learning about the rich history and cultural significance of the site. The Hindu statues, which were added later, are thought to date back to the 12th century AD, while the most recent paintings were created in the late 18th century. The Dambulla Caves are a unique historical site, showcasing a fascinating blend of cultural influences from various eras, and we'll gain a deeper understanding of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage.

Overnight in Dambulla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Dambulla: Sigiriya & Polonnaruwa

In the morning, when the weather is cooler, we'll make our way to Sigiriya, a towering rock that many consider one of the ancient wonders of the world. The complex is set on the steep slopes and summit of a granite peak, rising 370 meters (1,220 feet) above the surrounding landscape. This is Sri Lanka's earliest surviving royal palace, featuring several chambers and meticulously designed water gardens, the oldest of their kind in Asia. The Mirror Wall, exposed to the elements for over fifteen centuries, still retains some of its original sheen, giving it its name. You'll also see the famous 5th-century "Sigiriya frescoes," located in a depression on the rock about 100 meters above the ground. This exceptional archaeological site, unmatched in South Asia, is a UNESCO World.

Next, you'll drive to Polonnaruwa to explore the well-preserved ruins of the ancient capital of the Sinhalese kings from the 11th to the 13th century. You'll visit the excavations, including temples, dagobas, the royal palace, and the royal library. One of the most notable sights is the impressive irrigation system built by King Parakrama Bahu the Great (1153-1186), featuring interconnected artificial tanks and channels. After the visit, we'll return to Dambulla for the night.

Overnight in Dambulla.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Dambulla - Matale - Kandy

Today we'll embark on a scenic drive to Matale, where we'll visit a spice garden and immerse ourselves in the rich aromas and flavours of Sri Lankan spices. A knowledgeable local guide will take us on a tour of the garden, introducing us to a diverse array of plants, including custard apples, jackfruit, cocoa, cardamom, pineapples, lemongrass, and more. We'll learn about the various uses of these plants, from cooking and medicine to cosmetics and fragrances.

As we continue our journey, we'll pass through picturesque countryside, with rolling hills, paddy fields, palm groves, and coconut plantations unfolding before our eyes. The scenery is tranquil and serene, offering a glimpse into rural Sri Lankan life.

After a drive of about 90 minutes and 92 km (58 miles), we'll arrive in Kandy, the historic royal city nestled 500 m (1,640 feet) above sea level amidst lush green hills. We'll take a scenic drive around the tranquil Kandy Lake, admiring the city's picturesque surroundings and catching glimpses of the former palace of the last Sinhalese king, now a temple that houses the sacred tooth relic of Buddha.

We'll also visit the National Museum, which showcases the city's rich cultural heritage and history. As the evening unfolds, we'll visit the Temple of the Sacred Tooth, a revered site that is home to the sacred relic. If we're lucky, we might even catch a lively dance performance featuring traditional Kandyan, up-country, and devil dances. The vibrant music and energetic performances will leave us with a lasting impression of Sri Lanka's rich cultural traditions..

Overnight in Kandy.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Kandy Area Touring

After breakfast, we'll make our way to the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, a sanctuary for over 60 orphaned and injured elephants. Here, we'll witness the gentle giants being fed, bathed, and cared for in a natural setting. The orphanage provides a unique opportunity to learn about the conservation efforts that help protect these magnificent animals.

In the afternoon, we'll explore the stunning Botanical Garden at Peradeniya, one of the most famous in the world. Dating back to 1371, the garden was originally established under King Vikrama Bahu III's reign. The British expanded it in 1821, and during WWII, it served as the headquarters of Earl Mountbatten, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Southeast Asia. As you wander through the garden,

you'll be surrounded by a vast collection of orchids, towering palms, exotic spice trees, and vibrant tropical flowers, truly a paradise for nature lovers.

Overnight in Kandy.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kandy - Train to Nanu Oya - Nuwara Eliya

Today we'll embark on a scenic train journey from Kandy to Nanu Oya, traversing some of Sri Lanka's most breathtaking landscapes. As the train winds its way through the countryside, we'll watch as the elevation increases steadily, reaching 1500 meters (4,920 feet) as we enter the 'Hill Country.' This region is renowned for its lush, green tea plantations, which stretch as far as the eye can see, covering the hillsides in a soft, emerald blanket.

As we travel through the tea country, we'll catch glimpses of rice fields and village gardens, where locals tend to their vegetable plantations. The scenery is constantly changing, offering a glimpse into rural Sri Lankan life.

Upon arrival at Nanu Oya, we'll transfer to Nuwara Eliya, a charming hill station town nestled at 2070 meters (6,790 feet) above sea level. This picturesque town is situated beside a serene lake and surrounded by mountains blanketed in tea plantations. With its colonial architecture and tranquil atmosphere, Nuwara Eliya is a haven of relaxation.

We'll explore the town's charming features, including the pink-brick post office and the renowned 18-hole golf course, considered one of the finest in Asia. We'll also see the well-stocked trout streams, which are a reminder of the town's colonial past. As the day comes to a close, we'll overnight in Nuwara Eliya, surrounded by the natural beauty of the hills and the soothing atmosphere of this mountain retreat. We end our day with a renowned high tea experience at the Hill Club in Nuwara Eliya, where classic elegance meets breathtaking views. Savour a selection of premium teas, delectable finger sandwiches, and freshly-baked scones in a charming, colonial-inspired setting, offering a taste of timeless luxury.

Overnight in Nuwara Eliya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Nuwara Eliya Area Touring

This morning, we set out on a breathtaking adventure to World's End, where the crisp mountain air and stunning views will leave us in awe. We'll start our day early, around 6 am, making our way to Horton Plains National Park, which stretches above 2000 metres. As we walk through the park, we'll be surrounded by nature's beauty, with vibrant birdlife flitting through the trees. Keep an eye out for yellow-eared bulbuls, fan-tailed warblers, and dusky-blue flycatchers, which might just cross our path.

The highlight of our adventure awaits us at World's End, where we'll stand at the edge of the escarpment and gaze out over an 880-metre drop – almost 3,000 feet down. The sheer scale of the landscape will take our breath away, and with good weather, we'll be treated to stunning views of Sri Lanka's second and third highest peaks, Kirigalpotta and Totapola, standing tall in the distance. The walk to World's End is about 3 km (2 miles) and is relatively easy, making it accessible to most.

After completing the hike, we'll head back to Nuwara Eliya, arriving by early afternoon. Later, we'll visit a local tea plantation, where we'll discover the art of tea production and learn how the famous tea leaves are processed and prepared for that perfect, piping hot cup of tea. We'll get a behind-the-scenes look at the tea-making process and maybe even sample some of the local produce. It's the perfect way to round off an exciting day of exploration and adventure.

Overnight in Nuwara Eliya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Nuwara Eliya - Udawalawe National Park - Mirissa - Tangalle

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Today our journey takes us to Tangalle, a charming beach town nestled on the shores of the Indian Ocean. But before we reach the coastline, we'll make a stop at Udawalawe National Park, a wildlife reserve dedicated to preserving a variety of mammals. As we enter the park, we'll be surrounded by its open landscape, characterized by sparse vegetation and grasslands, which makes wildlife spotting relatively easy.

We'll embark on a late afternoon safari, a prime time to spot animals as they become more active. With a knowledgeable guide leading the way, we'll have the chance to encounter a wide range of animals, including foxes, sloths, sambar deer, leopards, wild buffalo, and of course, elephants – the stars of today's adventure. The park is home to an estimated 500 elephants, and we have a good chance to witness an elephant herd up close, observing their social dynamics and natural behaviour.

We'll experience the "Udawalawe Transit Home," a unique and meaningful experience, dedicated to the rehabilitation of orphaned elephants. Set in a serene natural environment, visitors can witness these majestic creatures being cared for, providing a glimpse into Sri Lanka's vital wildlife conservation efforts.

As the sun begins to set, casting a warm glow over the landscape, we'll immerse ourselves in the sights and sounds of the wild. Our guide will help us track down the wildlife, and we'll learn about the park's conservation efforts and the importance of protecting these incredible animals and their habitats.

Overnight in Mirissa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Mirissa: Whale Watching & Time at Leisure

Early in the morning, we'll set off on an exciting whale watching tour off the coast of Mirissa, one of the best places in the world to spot blue whales, sperm whales, and dolphins in their natural environment. As we sail out to sea, we'll be on the lookout for these magnificent creatures, and with a bit of luck, we'll catch a glimpse of them breaching, feeding, or socializing in their ocean habitat.

The experience of being out on the water, surrounded by the sights and sounds of the sea, is truly exhilarating. We'll take in the stunning scenery, from the rocky outcrops and coral reefs to the seabirds soaring overhead. Our knowledgeable guides will share their expertise on the marine life, helping us to better understand and appreciate the incredible creatures we're observing.

Once the tour wraps up, we'll head back to the hotel, where we can relax and unwind after our morning adventure. The rest of the day is free for us to enjoy at leisure, whether that's indulging in the resort amenities, taking a dip in the pool, or simply soaking up the sun on the beach. We might even want to try our hand at some water sports or activities, or take a leisurely stroll along the shoreline.

Overnight in Mirissa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Mirissa - Galle - Madu River - Colombo

This morning we'll start the day by experiencing the fascinating tradition of stilt fishing, a unique method of fishing that's been passed down through generations. We'll watch in awe as the fishermen perch precariously on their stilts, waiting for the perfect moment to scoop up their catch. This memorable sight is a great way to begin our day, and we'll learn about the history and significance of this traditional fishing method.

Next we'll head to Galle, a scenic town known for its impressive Dutch-built fort, a testament to the city's rich colonial past. We'll take a brief tour inside the fort, admiring its architecture and learning about its history. Afterward, we'll have some free time to explore the town, perhaps wandering through its charming streets, visiting local shops, or sampling some of the local cuisine.

As we continue our journey, we'll take a boat ride along the tranquil Madu River, surrounded by mangroves and wildlife. The peaceful atmosphere and stunning scenery make for a relaxing experience, and we might even spot some birds, monkeys, or other creatures along the way. We'll also visit a cinnamon plantation, where we'll learn about the production process and maybe even see some of the spice being harvested or processed.

Our next stop is the Kosgoda turtle hatchery, where conservation efforts are underway to ensure the survival of these ancient creatures. We'll learn about the important work being done here and see some of the turtles up close. Finally, we'll journey to Colombo, Sri Lanka's vibrant capital, where we'll experience the city's energy, culture, and history. From its bustling markets to its historic landmarks, Colombo is a city that has something for everyone.

Overnight in Colombo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Colombo Sightseeing

Colombo, with a history spanning over 2,000 years, has been a hub for Roman, Arab, and Chinese traders. The city saw Muslim settlement in the 8th century, Portuguese in the 16th, Dutch in the 17th, and the British made it the capital of Ceylon in 1802. Today, Colombo boasts landmarks like the University of Colombo, temples, churches, and mosques.

Our sightseeing begins with a visit to Pettah Market, the old Fort area, the restored Old Dutch Hospital, and the Gangaramaya Temple. We'll also explore the National Museum. Next we'll head to Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, the official capital, where you'll visit the BMICH, the Old Parliament, and Independence Square, commemorating Sri Lanka's 1948 independence. A stroll through Town Hall and Viharamadevi Park offers peaceful green views, while a visit to the Red Mosque showcases architectural splendour. We'll then unwind at Galle Face, a popular seaside promenade, before visiting the serene Seemamalakaya meditation center. Finally we'll take in the view from the Lotus Tower, Sri Lanka's tallest structure.

After a day full of discovery, we'll return to the hotel for our last night in Sri Lanka

Overnight in Colombo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Colombo, Sri Lanka - Fly to Male, Maldives

After an early breakfast, we'll head to Bandaranaike International Airport to catch our flight to the vibrant capital of the Maldives, ready to begin your next adventure.

Upon arrival in Malé, we'll embark on a tour of the capital, starting with a visit to the historic Hukuru Miskiy, also known as the Old Friday Mosque. Built in 1656, this stunning mosque showcases the unique coral stone architecture that is characteristic of Maldivian craftsmanship. We'll take a moment to admire the intricate carvings and ornate details that adorn the mosque's walls and ceilings.

Next we'll visit the Maldives National Museum, where we'll learn about the islands' rich history and cultural heritage. The museum's collection includes artifacts and exhibits that showcase the country's history, from its early days as a Buddhist kingdom to its conversion to Islam and its modern-day independence.

After the museum, we'll head to the lively fish market, where we'll see the fresh catch of the day on display. The market is a bustling hub of activity, with fishermen and vendors selling their wares in a vibrant and colourful atmosphere.

We'll continue our tour by visiting Republic Square, where we'll see the Victory Monument and the Tsunami Monument, each marking significant events in the country's history. These monuments serve as a reminder of the resilience and determination of the Maldivian people.

Finally, we'll cross the Sinamale Bridge to Hulhumale and finish our tour at Sultan Park, a peaceful historical site that offers a glimpse into the country's past.

On completion, check-in at our resort and enjoy the rest of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Male.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Male: Maafush Boat Excursion

A visit to Maafushi, a charming local island in the Maldives, offers a true taste of island life, away from the typical resort experience. Just a short boat ride from Malé, Maafushi presents an authentic glimpse into the daily lives of Maldivians, with its welcoming atmosphere and vibrant community. As we step foot on the island, we'll be greeted by the warm hospitality of the locals and the island's pristine beaches, with their white sand and clear turquoise waters.

We'll spend the day exploring the island and taking part in various activities, such as snorkeling in the Anantara reef and Coral Garden. We'll also visit the nearby islands of Gulhi and Guraidhoo, where we can experience the unique culture and natural beauty of each island.

Maafushi is famous for its affordable guesthouses and local dining spots, where we can savor fresh seafood and delicious Maldivian dishes. We'll indulge in the local cuisine and enjoy the opportunity to interact with the friendly islanders.

This full-day trip to Maafushi offers a rare and enriching experience in the Maldives, perfect for those looking to explore the heart of the islands while still being close to the capital, Malé. We'll have the chance to immerse ourselves in the local culture, enjoy the natural beauty, and create unforgettable memories. The trip includes lunch, and we'll even have the opportunity to capture our underwater experiences with photos and videos. It's an ideal way to experience the authentic Maldives, beyond the resorts.

Overnight in Male.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 17 Departure from Male

Departure from Male.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast