

Seduced by SRI LANKA

Ancient UNESCO cities. Local Ayurvedic treatments.
Epic train rides. Authentic Sri Lanka appeals to curious
travellers – and visitors with big hearts are needed.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV



Tea plantation in the highlands of Sri Lanka



STEFAN TOMIC/ISTOCK

Gleefully hanging out the open train door, gripping the grab bars tightly, we watch Sri Lanka's emerald tea plantations fly by. We have "first-class" seats. But peering out glass windows in an air-conditioned carriage can't match the thrill of fresh mountain air whooshing in through the open doorway. Some travellers sit on the floor, dangling their legs out, as we clackety-clack our way through the mist-streaked hills ribboned with rows of tea plants.

EARLIER IN THE MORNING, we'd boarded the blue train in Kandy for the seven-hour journey – considered one of the world's most beautiful train rides – to the mountain village of Ella. After three days of hiking and touring tea plantations in Ella, we'll meet our driver again to continue our circle tour of Sri Lanka.

This teardrop of an island is proving to be one of the most fascinating countries we've visited. Not overwhelmed by tourists, it's one of the few places left in the world that offers a wealth of authentic experiences, and it's so diverse that it ticks off most items on a traveller's wish list. A bustling capital city (Colombo) with museums and colorful markets? Check. Sacred Buddhist temples, cave paintings and ancient UNESCO-listed monuments? Indeed. Palm-lined beaches? Oh yes – and then there are the epic train rides and colonial hill towns like Ella.



GEORGE MICALOV

Since the end of its civil war ten years ago, Sri Lanka – named the best country in the world to visit in 2019 by *Lonely Planet* – has welcomed tourists with open arms. Tragically, that ten-year peace was jolted by a series of bombings in Colombo over Easter, and dozens of suspects were arrested. Travel advisories have since been lifted,

however, and British travellers (which make up the second largest market of tourists) are no longer warned against travelling to Sri Lanka. To help woo tourists back, Sri Lanka is now offering free visas until February 1, 2020 to Canadians and citizens from nearly 50 other countries.

We find the people to be warm, friendly and proud of their country – everyone we meet asks: "How do you like Sri Lanka?" We're also pleasantly surprised Sri Lanka is so litter-free. Most hotels have embraced a green ethos. In our rooms, we find flasks of filtered water and glasses instead of plastic bottles.

After shaking off jet lag in Colombo, our first destination is Anuradhapura. A treasure trove of 2,000-year-old temples, the ancient city is one of five UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country's "Cultural Triangle."

Our base is the lovely Ulagalla. Set among rice paddies and lush jungle, the eco-friendly resort features 26 thatch-roof chalets built from local biodegradable materials (fire-resistant durra or rice-straw was used in the walls and ceilings). To preserve the environment, not a single tree was cut down, and over 1,000 more trees have been planted on the property. An onsite solar farm also produces half the hotel's energy. There's no stinting on luxury though – each chalet has its own pool.

A highlight is bicycling one sunset in Anuradhapura through fields of monastery ruins. We end up at the enormous Ruwanwelisaya stupa, where Buddhist worshippers in white saris lay lotus flower offerings. Incense wafts through the hot air and the lyrical sound of chanting monks is hypnotic. It's so peaceful, we hesitate to leave. But candlelight dining back at Ulagalla is too good to miss. Salad greens come from its organic garden and the delicately-spiced Sri Lankan curries are a treat for the taste buds.

This page:

Riding the scenic blue train from Kandy to Ella.

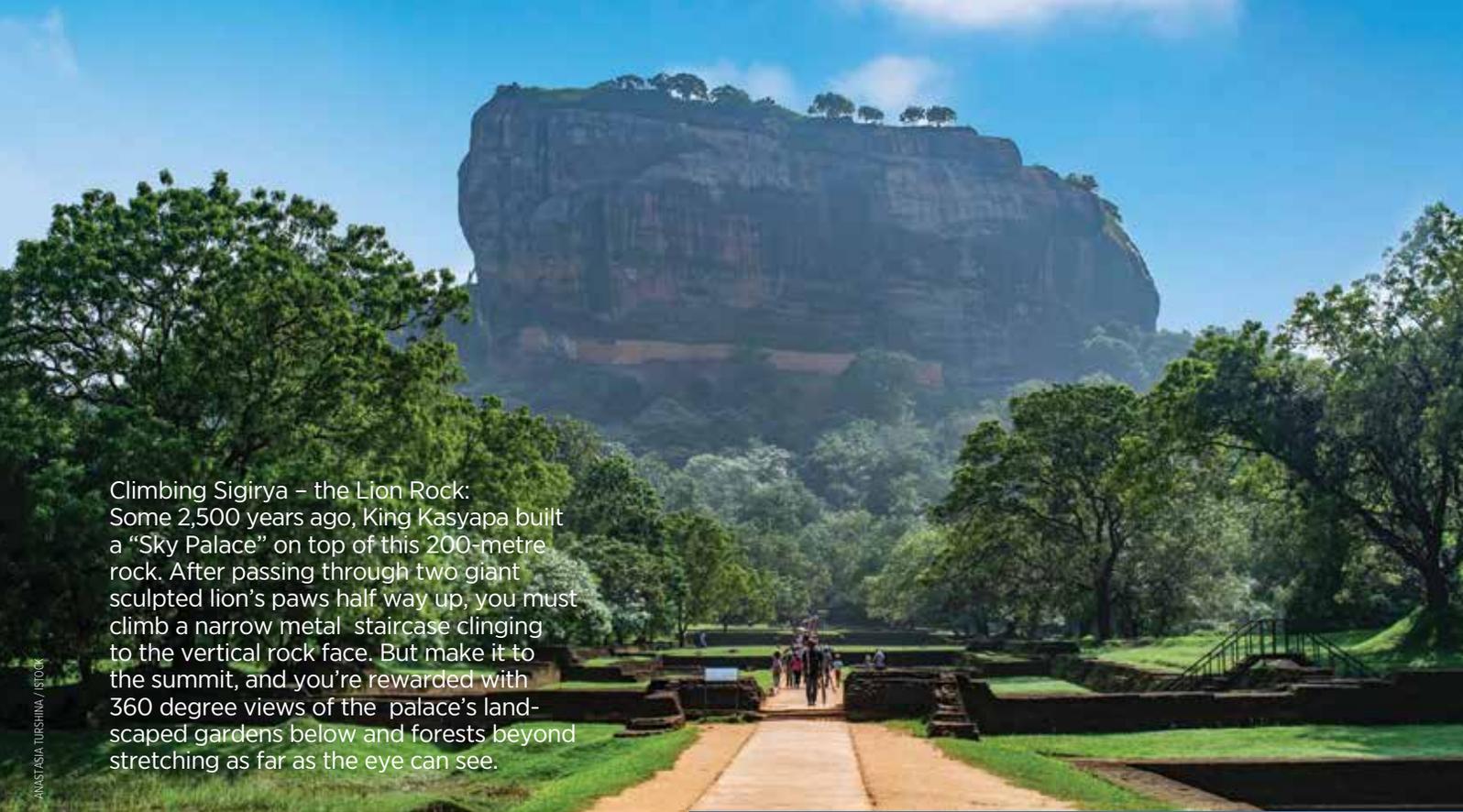
A tea picker from one of the tea plantations shows off her harvest.

Facing page:

The impressive Lion Rock.

Buddhist monks walk towards the Ruwanwelisaya stupa at Anuradhapura.

Monkeys climb the giant Buddha at Anuradhapura.

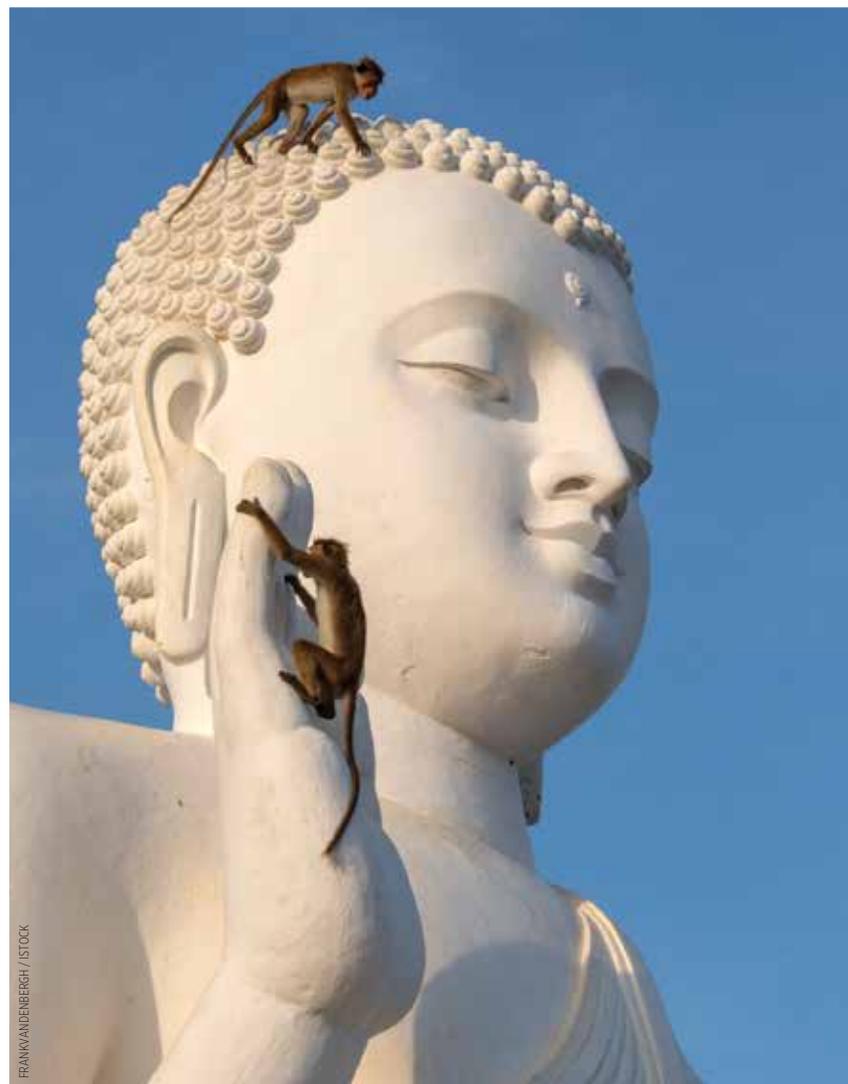


Climbing Sigirya – the Lion Rock:
Some 2,500 years ago, King Kasyapa built a “Sky Palace” on top of this 200-metre rock. After passing through two giant sculpted lion’s paws half way up, you must climb a narrow metal staircase clinging to the vertical rock face. But make it to the summit, and you’re rewarded with 360 degree views of the palace’s landscaped gardens below and forests beyond stretching as far as the eye can see.

ANASTASIA TURSHINA / ISTOCK



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GEORGE MICALOV

Temple Guardian at the Temple of the Tooth which houses a tooth of the Buddha, Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist relic. Dellawella Beach near Galle

In the Cultural Triangle, we also climb Sigirya – the Lion Rock. Some 2,500 years ago, King Kasyapa built a “Sky Palace” on top of this 200-metre rock pinnacle. After passing through two giant sculpted lion’s paws half way up, you must climb a narrow metal staircase clinging to the vertical rock face. But make it to the summit, and you’re rewarded with 360 degree views of the palace’s landscaped gardens below and forests beyond stretching as far as the eye can see.

Later, our driver Athula suggests we try an Ayurvedic treatment at a local spa. “It’s the best in Sri Lanka – better than any 5-star hotel, and cheaper too!” he enthusiastically cajoles.

Most visitors, like us, see the country independently with a licensed driver guide. He chauffeurs you around on your trip (typically two weeks) in a private car. Hotels usually offer free driver accommodation. Affordable even for travellers on a budget, it’s a win-win for everyone. Tourist jobs are given to knowledgeable locals eager to show off their country. And visitors are protected from the risk of rental car accidents on unfamiliar roads. We rely on Athula for other things too – where the “western” loos are, which hill climb up to a temple is in the shade, where to buy wine for sipping on our hotel balcony...

Athula’s spa recommendation turns out to be excellent. The spa is basic, with wooden huts in a garden planted with medicinal trees. But the powerful massages get the kinks out. And the “steam room” – a shack with herbs and mango branches on the floor – is fun and novel.

Without Athula’s insider knowledge, we would never have found this authentic Ayurvedic spa on our own.

Next up? The former royal hill capital of Kandy, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. The drawing card is the Temple of the Tooth. Built in the late 16th century, the temple is believed to hold the sacred relic of the Buddha’s left tooth. It’s humbling to be one with the throngs of worshippers praying within the temple’s intricately crafted interiors. You can’t actually see the tooth though – it’s enshrined in a casket guarded by two giant elephant tusks.

Kandy is where we temporarily say goodbye to our driver so we can experience our heads-out-the-window train ride to the relaxed town of Ella. There we hike mountain trails to glorious viewpoints and sip our way through gallons of tea. Athula then picks us up again for our onward journey to Galle on the southwest coast. Built by the Dutch in 1663, the fortified city is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Our rest stop here is Why House, an English villa-style estate surrounded by tropical gardens. When the heat

wanes, we rouse ourselves from the all-too-inviting pool and hail a tuk-tuk to Galle to stroll its rambling lanes, taking in the restored boutique hotels, art galleries, shops and stylish cafés. Its European vibe is such a contrast from the Buddhist cultural sights we've seen so far! Come sunset, we walk atop the thick ramparts surrounding the seaside city.

We end our trip at the Fortress Resort & Spa, which sits smack against a wave-washed beach. After two weeks of touring, we're ready to do nothing but read in the hotel's hanging bubble loungers on the lawn, swim in its infinity pool and stroll the gold-sand beach that stretches for miles to the west. We'd hoped to see Sri Lanka's iconic stilt fishermen but sadly, stilt fishing is a dying art today, and their wooden perches at the water's edge are empty. Sometimes though, a fisherman will pose for photos for a fee.

If we had more time, we'd visit one of Sri Lanka's 15 national parks. Yala National Park is a sanctuary for some 50+ protected leopards and Minneriya National Park is the place to go to see 200 wild Asian elephants gather to feed and bathe between May and September. Being popular, though, sections of the parks get more day-safari visitors than they can sustain, so staying at a park eco-lodge is the responsible way to visit.

Still, nature surprises us as we are walking the Fortress beach our last afternoon – we come across a wild sea turtle which has crawled up the sand to lay her eggs. From January to April, green sea turtles nest along the beaches of Sri Lanka's southern coast. We watch in amazement as the mother turtle drops her golfball-size eggs. Staff from a nearby turtle sanctuary then gently help her back into her ocean home. We, too, turn around to pack up for home, feeling blessed by all the remarkable sights we've witnessed in this seductive country. ■



Fortress Resort & Spa

PHOTO COURTESY FORTRESS RESORT & SPA



Ulagalla villa

PHOTO COURTESY ULAGALLA



Why House veranda

PHOTO COURTESY WHY HOUSE



Fortress loft

PHOTO COURTESY FORTRESS RESORT & SPA

TRAVEL TO SRI LANKA this winter and you'll be helping small businesses – chauffeur/guides, restaurants, dive shops – recover their livelihoods (and you'll probably get great hotel discounts too). After the bombings, tourist bookings were slashed and are just now trickling back.

- The best time to visit the west and south coasts and central Sri Lanka (covered here) is the cool dry season from December to March.
- We used Red Dot Tours in Sri Lanka for guided chauffeur services. reddottours.com
- A luxurious oasis, the eco-friendly Ulagalla is ideally situated for exploring the Cultural Triangle. ugaescapes.com/ulagalla
- The boutique Why House has individually decorated rooms and is a free tuk-tuk ride away from a great swimming beach. whyhousesrilanka.com
- Book the Fortress Resort & Spa (a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World) on a half-board basis – meals are excellent. fortressresortandspa.com
- For safety concerns, check Government of Canada advisories for Sri Lanka. travel.gc.ca/destinations/sri-lanka
- Book with a travel advisor.