



Spice Island

VegNews Travel Editor
Aurelia d'Andrea escapes to magical
Sri Lanka, where spirituality, spicy
food, and epic sunsets await.



Food: Aurelia d'Andrea

Touching down in the Sri Lankan city of Colombo, it's hard to believe you've just landed in the capital of one of the world's most dynamic countries. Dwarfed by a thick forest of banana trees and towering coconut palms, Bandaranaike International Airport feels tiny and welcoming, and despite Sri Lanka's proximity to India, the vibe is much more Maui than Delhi. Only when you spot the signs written in the distinct curlicue Sinhalese script does it register that you are, indeed, in the heart of South Asia. Is this paradise? First impressions suggest that it just might be.

Surprisingly, Sri Lanka is still off the beaten path for even veteran adventurers. Though the civil war that ravaged the country for more than two decades officially ended in 2009, the tourism industry has yet to fully make up for lost time. For visitors who pine for lush landscapes unspoiled by American-style fast-food outlets and big-box chains, that's

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a very good thing. Large swaths of palm-fringed coastline are gloriously free of high-rise hotels, and lavish inland forests still retain their wild character, sheltering a diversity of animal species including elephants, leopards, and monkeys.

A broad-reaching and extremely affordable network of buses and trains makes getting around Sri Lanka easy; the hard part is figuring out where to explore first. But one thing is for sure: wherever you go, you won't go hungry. The majority of Sri Lanka's 21 million people are Buddhist, though waves of immigration and colonization have diversified the population to include Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. This pastiche of cultures translates to a vibrant and unique cuisine that leans heavily toward plant foods. Curries tend to be more delicate than their counterparts in other Asian cuisines, which allows the flavors of the vegetables to shine, and the sheer variety of fresh fruit lends even more credence to the idea that Sri Lanka is a modern day Garden of Eden.

Unless you're craving a tropical urban experience, plot your escape from Colombo and head out to experience Sri Lanka's verdant and inviting corners where unfettered wildlife, ancient Buddhist relics, and adventures in eating await.

I want Kandy

Kandy, the country's cultural and spiritual capital, sits high in the central foothills, 72 miles and a world away from Colombo. Built around a pretty lake teeming with birdlife and Godzilla-like water monitors, the city of 125,000 is a feast for the eyes. A Seated Buddha statue perched on one hillside presides over the city center and surrounding neighborhoods, which appear to be cocooned beneath a canopy of trees alight with Technicolor blooms. Peer closely, and you'll even see toque macaques gallivanting and socializing in the branches.

Exploring Kandy on foot is utterly feasible, and the obvious place to begin



The Elephant Experience

Skip the "orphanages" and other elephant-oriented tourist traps with questionable ethics; instead, splurge on a guided visit to one of Sri Lanka's national parks to see elephants in the wild. Udawalawe—76,000 acres of marshland, forests, and open savanna—lies just three hours from the southern coast and is one of the best parks for viewing crocodiles, jackals, and elephants. Expect to pay a \$15 park entry fee, plus a supplemental fee for your guide. Consider it an investment in memory-making, as seeing majestic animals in their natural habitats is priceless.

is at the lively Central Market. Part indoor bazaar, part open-air marketplace, this is the place to get familiar with locally grown fruit and vegetables. Roam the stalls piled high with pineapples and hanging bananas of every shape and hue, and take the vendors up on their offers to taste the intriguing wood apples, plump mangoes, and papayas that sell for less than 50 cents a pound.

From here, it's a 12-minute walk to Sri Dalada Maligawa, a sprawling temple complex that houses, as legend has it, one of Lord Buddha's teeth. There's a \$10 fee to enter the main temple (though the tooth itself is not on display to the public), but the picturesque grounds, with their various shrines and shade-giving bodhi trees festooned with colorful Buddhist flags, are free to wander.

Dalada Vidaya, a busy street brimming with banks, cafés, and colonial-era hotels, is also where you'll find a good selection of "bake shops," informal lunch and snack spots that are ideal for sampling

the local specialty, *hoppers*. Made from rice and coconut, these surprisingly simple bowl-shaped vegan pancakes are served with a fiery salsa, and cost next to nothing. Vegetable *roti* are similar to Indian samosas, and deep-fried *bonda* are what falafel would be if they were made with potato. Don't overthink all the options; just order two of everything and enjoy the experience.

Just beachy

Sri Lankan beach towns come in varying shades of delightful; some, like Weligama, attract would-be Kelly Slatters with their surf schools and gently rolling waves, while others, like Hikkaduwa, have their proximity to Colombo to thank for their popularity. For something in between, there's Unawatuna. Positioned along a wide arc of sandy beach 80 miles and a three-hour train ride south of the capital, this chill village makes a great home base for discovering the lovely southern coast.

A five-minute tuk-tuk ride from

Snacking, Sri Lanka Style

Snacks are available everywhere in Sri Lanka, from street stalls to train station cafés. Keep your eyes peeled for these plant-based treats, which will set you back about 30 rupees each (20¢).

Aloo Bonda—These round balls or cylindrical-shaped spiced potato logs are coated with crumbs and deep-fried.

Hoppers—These lightly fermented rice- and lentil-flour breads are shaped like a shallow bowl and served with flavorful sauces.

Masala Vada—These flying saucer-shaped croquettes are made with lentils, chickpea flour, and other grains, then deep-fried and served with house sauce.

Roti—These potato-and-veg-filled triangular treats, reminiscent of Indian samosas, are wrapped in a tortilla-like bread and fried.

String Hoppers—These bundles of white- or brown-rice noodles are typically served at breakfast with the local coconut chutney known as “sambol” and a ladle of vegetable curry.



Unawatuna’s tiny train station brings you to Wella Dewalaya Road, where all the local activity takes place. In between the restaurants and juice bars are boutique guest houses tucked into deceptively expansive tropical gardens, many boasting swimming pools and relaxation zones that practically beg you to practice your extreme lounging skills.

No need to set an alarm clock, as the Hanuman langur monkeys galloping across the rooftops will rouse you from slumber. The wake-up call is a blessing in disguise; mornings here are beautifully serene, and an ideal backdrop for long beach walks or a rejuvenating yoga class (both yoga and ayurvedic massages can be booked at the Thaproban Beach House Hotel). For the sake of balance, returning in the evening to enjoy a cocktail at one of the candle-lit seaside bars is a wise idea.

Plant-based meals are on the menu throughout Unawatuna, but at Jina’s Vegan & Vegetarian Restaurant, everything—from curries over rice to pan-fried veggie burgers to coconut milk fruit shakes—is made from scratch and worth the wait. A bookshelf crammed with reading material seems to exist specifically to keep diners occupied while waiting for their meals to arrive.

For a more experiential adventure in plant-based dining, reserve a vegetarian cooking class at family-run restaurant Happy Spice. Before class commences, you’ll accompany chef Chintha to the local markets to procure the raw ingredients, and after, you’ll eat the spoils of your labor. Classes run roughly \$17 per person,

and offer an insightful introduction to Sri Lankan cuisine.

Good Galle

Jutting out toward the aquamarine waters of the Indian Ocean 10 minutes up the coast from Unawatuna is the relaxed village of Galle Fort. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this walkable grid of quiet lanes lined with tidy whitewashed houses was built in the 16th century by Portuguese settlers, and the town still exudes a faintly European air.

Besides its two museums dedicated to maritime history and native artifacts, Galle Fort is a destination for retail therapy. Its many attractive boutiques peddling hippy-chic beachwear and fancy flip-flops wouldn’t look out of place in London, nor would the shops vending precious stone jewelry and locally produced crafts. On Lighthouse Street, Embark lures animal lovers with its “Love A Street Pooch” banners; inside, it’s a souvenir hunter’s dream come true: books, jewelry, pet supplies, handcrafted *objets d’art*, and on-trend clothing in a riot of colors are just some of the goodies you’ll discover. Proceeds benefit Embark’s spay-and-neuter efforts and other animal-oriented outreach projects throughout Sri Lanka.

For a thirst-quenching break, take a table at any café that offers king coconuts on its menu. Unique to Sri Lanka and easily identifiable by its mustard-colored shell, the giant coconut is filled with a delightful water that hydrates and refreshes on a balmy tropical afternoon. To fortify you for more browsing, go local and visit the

Cash is King

Sri Lanka is a cash-based country, and credit cards aren't accepted at most guest houses, museums, or national parks. Fortunately, ATMs are ubiquitous, even in smaller villages. In practical terms, you can expect to pay prices similar to these for essentials you'll want on your trip.

Bananas, mangoes, passion fruit, or papaya at a local market

10–70 rupees/7–20¢ per pound

Snack of hoppers with hot sauce

50 rupees/33¢

Bottled water 65 rupees/45¢

Lunch of curry, roti, chutney, and soup at a traditional restaurant

200 rupees/\$1.30

Deluxe bus from Colombo to Galle

150 rupees/99¢

Second-class train ticket from Colombo to Kandy

280 rupees/\$1.85

stands on Rampart Street for vegetable roti and *vada* (savory doughnuts) with a dollop of spicy sauce, and enjoy them while admiring the heavenly seascapes.

In spite of its old world charm, Galle Fort is surprisingly free of tourists—until you reach the bright white lighthouse standing sentinel over Galle Harbor. Here, a crowd gathers, busily snapping photos of Sri Lanka's oldest light station, rebuilt after it burned to the ground in the 1930s. Beside the towering landmark, on a rocky promontory, local youngsters take turns leaping like acrobats into the sea, drawing gasps and cheers from the crowd. It isn't just a postcard-perfect snapshot of a beautiful place, but a vignette that captures Sri Lanka's essence: resilient, fun, inviting, and full of adventure. In other words, paradise. **VN**

VegNews Travel Editor **Aurelia d'Andrea** is already planning a return trip to Sri Lanka. First stop: Unawatuna.



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