

DESTINATION

# Island tales

WITH ITS RICH MYTHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONNOTATIONS, SRI LANKA IS A DREAM COME TRUE FOR THE CULTURAL CONNOISSEUR, DISCOVERS **RAMYA SRINIVASAN**

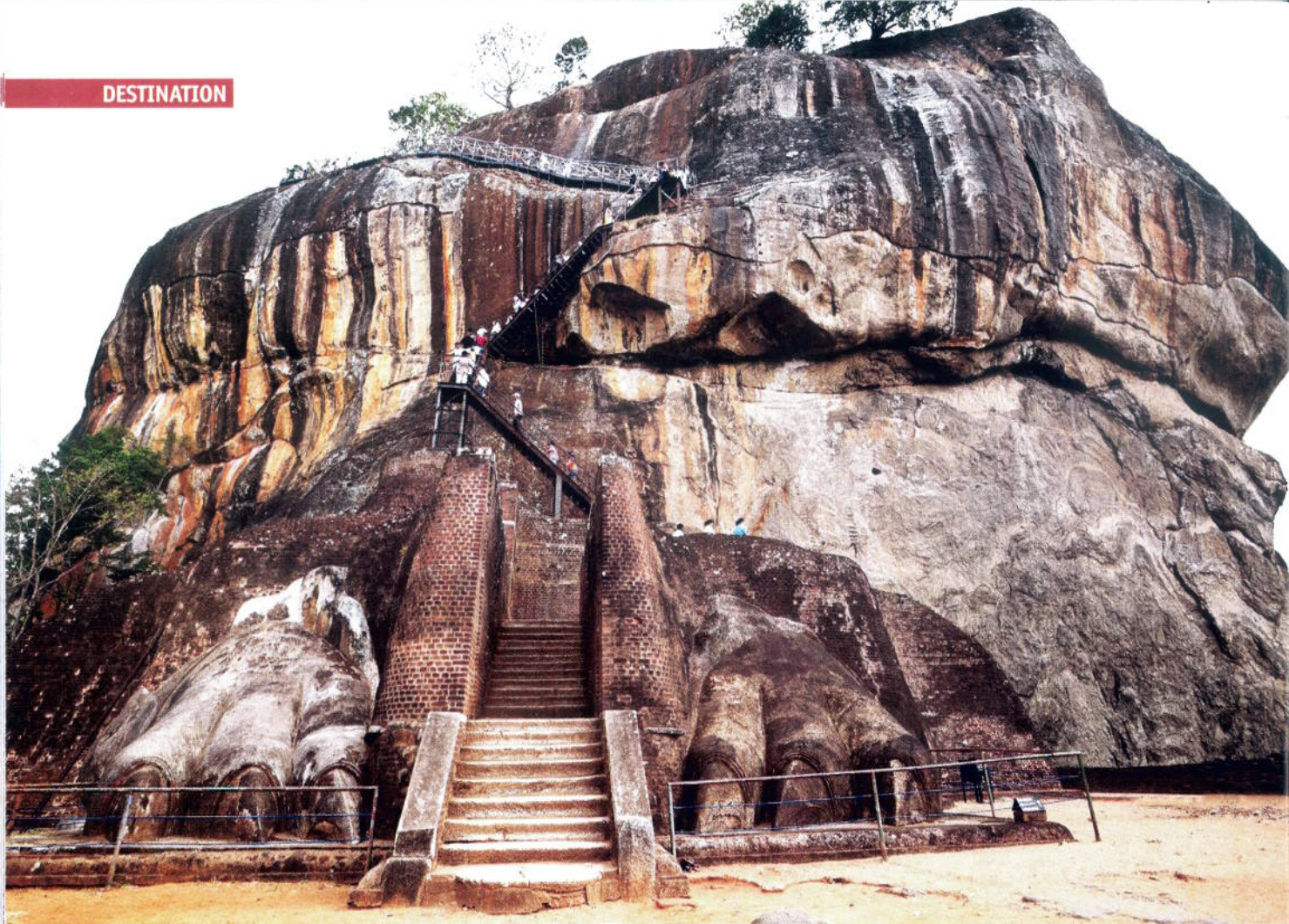


**A**yubowan reads the greeting at the Colombo airport, welcoming you to the island nation in the traditional Sinhalese way. As you loiter along the aisles of the airport, past the duty-free shops, an imposing Buddha statue sits beatifically, giving you an inkling of the cultural richness that is about to unfold. Driving

away from the airport, the country surprises you with its striking resemblance to India. Take in the huge publicity hoardings of *Chennai Express* and *Madras Cafe* and the signboards in Tamil and you may be excused for thinking you are in Chennai. But give it some time and the distinct character of the city grows on you.

As you enter the main streets housing the Sri Lankan parliament, the European-styled buildings with their grandeur stand out. The sultry air blowing in from the coastline only elevates the experience as you drive past, marvelling at the magnificence of the architecture, a reminder of the island's colonial past.





(Top) The majestic Lion's Rock at Sigiriya; frescoes on the Rock are a major draw

Colombo is ideal for a shopaholic, and given the LKR-INR currency conversion you are sure to bag some good deals. There are bustling local markets, fashion houses and upscale malls like Odel; to borrow an oft-quoted maxim, the customer is the king here, and is spoilt for choice. The retail store salesmen helped us pick up saris and gave us tips on wearing the sari the sensual Sri Lankan way, commonly known as Kandyan style, with just a slight baring of the midriff and pinning up of the pleated *pallu*. We were told that the draping begins with the pleating of the *pallu*, which is then hung over the left shoulder, almost in touching distance of the ground, with the rest wound around the body. After a heavy round of shopping, stocking up on some saris and cashews, and window-shopping for gemstones and porcelain, we settled into the hotel for the night. The next morning, it was time to drive

north to Sigiriya to explore the earthiness of Sri Lanka.

The traffic in Sri Lanka is well-regulated. Once, to our dismay, our cab was stopped by the police as we waited with bated breath to learn what went wrong. We were surprised to know that our driver had been penalised for going past the mid-crossing in the road by a few inches. In fact, such is the Lankans' respect for law that drivers trudge along at a relaxed pace with absolutely no honking. Not once during the week-long trip did we observe squabbles between drivers or hear any honking. On the other hand, this respect for traffic rules can also make your drives much longer. It took us about four hours to cover the 170 km to Sigiriya from Colombo, at almost 40 km per hour. The narrow rustic roads of Sri Lanka are akin to those in the Kerala backwater pockets and have to be negotiated cautiously.



As we wound our way to Sigiriya, from miles away we could see the magnificent rock fortress, known as the Lion's Rock, extending into the skyline. One of the most popular destinations in the area, it's a UNESCO site with a bloody history. The story goes that King Kashyapa (477-495 AD), son of Dhatusena, engineered the assassination of his father and claimed the throne that rightfully belonged to his brother Mogallana. He moved the capital to Sigiriya, and created an impregnable palace of exceptional splendour. Nothing much of the impressive vestiges remain today but for the ancient colourful frescoes



## The Golden Temple in Sigiriya had once served as a Buddhist monastery. This cave monastery with mural paintings of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas is easily one of the best preserved monuments in Sri Lanka

on the rocks, drawn with natural pigments. The beautiful, curvaceous 'Maidens of the Clouds', seen engaged in domestic activities like arranging flowers, serving each other fruit and playing music, are pure bliss for an artist's eyes and a major draw. On top of the 200-m-high rock sits the ruined fortress. The entrance, Lion's Gate, is sandwiched between two rock structures resembling lion paws, thereby fetching its name. It is a good idea to wear comfortable shoes and to carry fluids for the trek to the top. It is also advisable to beat the sun and start early in the day. The steps until the lion's paws are wide enough, allowing you to rest on them if you so desire. But the final stretch with the narrow spiralling steps can prove tiresome, and is to be undertaken only if you are fit. We were kept on our toes with a restless queue of tourists, consisting mainly of foreigners, eager to reach the top. Atop the summit, observing the ruins of the king's palace, the terraced gardens with canals and fountains, the rich heritage of the rock hit us all of a sudden.

Quite close by is the Pidurangala rock temple, hosting the reclining Buddha in a shallow cave. It's a much calmer and quieter destination than Lion's Rock, as not many tourists flock here. Catching the panoramic view of the mountain ranges from here, there is a sense of oneness experienced with nature, especially because of the stillness around.

Dambulla cave temple, also known as the Golden Temple, was our next stop. A towering golden Buddha greets you at the entrance before you embark on a climb to the ancient cave temple, which once served as a Buddhist monastery. We were intimidated by the huge colony of monkeys eyeing our food and street hawkers chasing

after us to sell gemstone chains. The five caves, some natural and others manmade, host a multitude of Buddha statues and paintings in different sizes and postures. This cave monastery with mural paintings of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas is easily one of the best preserved monuments in Sri Lanka. Drawn in earthy ochre and red colours on the rock are scenes of the Buddha's birth, his encounter with Mara, and his first sermon, among others. The Cave of the Divine King hosts a gilded, reclining Buddha, with his favourite disciple Ananda at his feet. In yet another cave, we found a Buddha statue with a cobra hood over his head, like the Hindu god Vishnu.

Similar to the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka offers a variety of terrain and landscapes and diverse weather conditions. After the urban experience in Colombo and the cultural trip to Sigiriya, we travelled 90 km south to Kandy, located at an altitude of 1,500 sq ft above sea level, which features a mix of scenic and cultural abundance. At the Tooth Relic Temple adjoining Kandy Lake, we found a bunch of schoolchildren ambling in the garden. But, all of a sudden, without any warning, it began pouring, and we had to rush for cover. Surprisingly, in less than two minutes the rains came to a halt, as if someone had switched the magic button off. The temple is lit with candles and lamps and echoes with the chants of devotees. Legend goes that the left canine tooth of Lord Buddha was retrieved from the funeral pyre and it was believed in Sri Lanka that whoever possessed this sacred relic also acquired the right to govern the country. Owing to the legend, many kings from the southern part of India fought over the relic along with Sri Lankan kings. Finally, hidden in the hair of Princess Hemamali, it was brought to Sri Lanka.

The temple walls here are adorned with paintings depicting the history of the relic and how it found its way to the island nation. During the annual procession, *Perahera*, a parade of about 100 elephants carry a replica of the relic, a grandiose representation of which can be found in the form of a painting on the temple walls. The relic, encased in seven golden caskets, engraved with gemstones, and arranged in the form of a *stupa*, is open for public view only at stipulated times throughout the day.

Almost 40 km away to the east is the Pinnawala elephant orphanage. Sitting in a restaurant facing the river here, you can enjoy your lunch while watching elephants being bathed and fed. A word of caution: food is overpriced and service average. This place is strictly for elephant aficionados only, for there are limited activities and it's questionable whether the place is worth the drive. If you have visited elephant camps in India, like the Dubare elephant camp in Coorg, for instance, you may find this relatively disappointing.

If you have ample time in Kandy, the Kandyan cultural dance show is a must-see. The one-hour spectacle features close to 10 forms of traditional dances, with dancers in colourful costumes swinging to drumbeats. While some dances resemble Indian dance forms like Mohiniyattam and Bharatanatyam, the music has the distinct feel of a chant. The cultural display ends with fire-dancing and fire-eating. Watching the performers walking on the rectangular spread of fire on the floor and swaying fire on their tongues gave us the goose bumps! We wrapped up the night by loitering lazily along Kandy Lake and watching the Buddha statue atop the hillock shining bright in the dark skies.





There are two ways to discover Sri Lanka: a cultural tour covering heritage sites like Sigiriya, Kandy and Anuradhapura or a beach tour. Indeed, this is a country to relish a little at a time and keep returning to

A trip to Sri Lanka cannot be complete without experiencing the idyllic beauty and heavenly tea of Nuwara Eliya. Located 80 km south of Kandy, Nuwara Eliya combines the scenic landscapes of Ooty and the green tea estate plantation richness of Munar. As we rolled through the hairpin bends battling nausea, the chillness of the wind pierced through the car windows.

On the way, the Ramboda waterfall presented a breathtaking sight with silver strands of water splashing forcefully on the rocks below. The weather here is in sharp contrast to the rest of the country and we survived the chilly nights only because of a room heater. At an elevation of 6,100 sq ft, Nuwara Eliya hosts many other waterfalls, including the Lover's Leap waterfall, which is tucked away in a non-motorable area. We also spent some time at the beautiful Gregory Lake. But, harsh winds, clubbed with intermittent rain, put paid to our dreams of a boat ride on the lake.

Our next stop 5 km to the southeast, the picturesque Seetha Amman temple, set against a clear flowing stream, is close to the Hakgala Botanical Garden, which is supposed to be part of Ravana's fabled Ashoka Vatika. Structured in the traditional southern Indian style, the temple is in Seetha Eliya where Sita was said to be held captive by Ravana. On the nearby rocks, there are certain impressions that are said to be the footprints of Hanuman. A pack of starved monkeys offer a tumultuous welcome to the temple; be ready to donate some food and you will be left alone. Colourful paintings adorn the walls adjoining the roof of the temple depicting the *Ramayana*; Sita's capture by Ravana, Hanuman visiting the heartbroken Sita in Ashoka Vatika, an enraged Hanuman setting fire to Lanka are some of the interesting scenes. The sanctum sanctorum hosts the idols of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. There is also a separate one housing the idol of Hanuman embellished with a garland of betel leaves.

We brought the night to a close by visiting the Grand Indian Restaurant, which had a waiting time of an hour. There was also a signboard hanging outside with the words 'Sorry, we are full for the day', while the aromas of the Indian *thali* reached us right across the street as were awaiting our turn. We were given to understand that Indian food, being similar to Sri Lankan cuisine, is well appreciated by the natives. In fact, the Sri Lankan staple of white rice and curry found its way even to our breakfast table on many days. Though the vegetables used are similar in the Sri Lankan gravy, it is spicier even for the Indian palate. In most street-side restaurants we saw curries heaped on top of a mound of rice, and not served separately. The Sri Lankan *paratha*, which finds favour with tourists, is not the stuffed North Indian variety but is quite similar to the Kerala *paratha*.

Beruwala was a welcome relaxation at the fag end of the tour after a lazy eight-hour drive from Nuwara Eliya.





**Pinnawala elephant orphanage;**  
(Facing page) foot impressions believed  
to be those of Hanuman at Seetha Amman  
temple; Tooth Relic Temple in Kandy

The beach is easier to navigate even without knowing how to swim. There are other noteworthy beaches too like Bentota and Induruwa; the pick is entirely yours.

There are two ways to discover this country: a cultural tour covering heritage sites like Sigiriya, Dambulla, Kandy and Anuradhapura or a beach tour. To get a glimpse of both, you can follow an itinerary like ours, which predominantly wraps up the south-western parts of the country. Indeed, this is a country to relish a little at a time and keep returning to. Another recommended spot is Galle, which was once a Portuguese colony, located in the south; unfortunately, we had to give it a miss. Take time to plan your schedule considering the number of days at hand. Even if you hire an agent to plan your travel, your inputs will be important based on your choice of destinations. *Ayubowan!* ☺

## FACT FILE

### THINGS TO KNOW

- Homestays are reasonably priced, clean and maintained well for budget travellers. You can blend a mix of homestays, hotels and resorts into your itinerary.
- Sri Lankan food is a lot about rice and curry. The curry options for non-vegetarians are delightful. However, vegetarians are bound to have a hard time and it's useful to inform the hotel in advance. In almost every hotel we stayed, the chef accommodated vegetarian food on prior request.
- The entry fee for each location is exorbitant and priced differently for a local (free in most places), a SAARC national and a non-SAARC national. This is something to consider while planning your budget. The food is expensive too.
- Keep an umbrella handy as it can rain suddenly.
- If you have a fixed itinerary, it may be wise to hire a single cab throughout your visit. Hiring a cab

at each city can be tedious and works better for a backpacking, spontaneous traveller.

### GETTING THERE

Flights to Colombo are quite affordable with the ticket price varying from ₹ 3,500 to ₹ 7,000 based on the city you are boarding from and the season.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Homestay Silvikris Villas,**  
**Colombo:** Tel: (00) 94-774984487/  
(00) 94-112812727;  
Email: [silvikrisvillas@aol.com](mailto:silvikrisvillas@aol.com)  
**Hotel Palms, Beruwala:**  
Tel: (00) 94-114334836;  
Email: [ressvh@sltnet.lk](mailto:ressvh@sltnet.lk)  
**Hotel Sigiriya, Sigiriya:**  
Tel: (00) 94-664930500;  
Email: [inquiries@serendibleisure.lk](mailto:inquiries@serendibleisure.lk)  
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