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Sri Lanka: Ancient Temples & Tea Trails

Travel Style - Guided Walking Tour

This small-group Guided Walking Adventure offers an authentic travel experience, one that takes you away from the crowds and deep into the fabric of local life. On it, you'll enjoy 24/7 expert guides, premium accommodations, delicious meals, effortless transportation, and local wine or beer with dinner. Rest assured that every trip detail has been anticipated so you're free to enjoy an adventure that exceeds your expectations.



In ancient Serendip, the stuff of happy accidents and unimaginable discoveries has inspired fables and folklore for centuries. Today's Sri Lanka remains a seductive land of serendipity. In a beguiling destination few Westerners have experienced, walk among some of the most breathtaking landscapes on Earth, from sylvan forests dotted with terraced fields and lotus ponds to misty undulating hills carpeted with hand-harvested tea bushes. Marvel at Buddhist and Hindu monuments carved into cave-strewn hillsides, and a monolithic fort rising from dry plains. Stroll among the haunting ruins of some of history's most vibrant and thriving ancient societies. And follow cobbled lanes into a rich past where spice was king, luring European traders whose legacies live on in grand colonial cities. You explore the most mesmerizing corners of Old Ceylon—Sigiriya, Ritigala, Kandy, Tea Country, and Galle—by historic train, float plane, and by well-worn paths still traversed by saffron-robed monks and patient tea pickers.

Tour Only Itinerary - 2019

Day 1

Join your Country Walkers *Sri Lanka: Ancient Temples & Tea Trails* tour

Transfer to the Cultural Triangle (approximate 5-hour drive). Dambulla Cave Temples; 1 mile, easy to moderate

After introductions, head inland on a scenic drive to Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle, where the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura, Kandy, and Polonnaruwa meet. En route, stop to stretch your legs and enjoy lunch in a café. Shortly before reaching Sigiriya, explore the Dambulla Cave Temples, your first introduction to this fascinating area and its many mountain temples. You ascend a pathway 350 feet, then peer into these exquisitely painted chambers, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Dating to the 1st century BC, these temples were the gift of an exiled king who sought refuge here with the monks. In



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gratitude for their kindness, he later transformed their austere homes into glorious sanctuaries. Walk through the five caves adorned with vibrant Buddhist and Hindu imagery.

Late afternoon arrive to Sigiriya and the lovely Aliya Resort & Spa, your home for the next two nights. Nestled among lush greenery of paddy fields and ancient trees, this hotel offers a sneak peek at our days' adventures ahead with stunning views of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress. Relax in your deluxe chalet or take a dip in the gigantic eternity swimming pool before a welcome drink and dinner. Sri Lankan cuisine takes many cues from the Indian kitchen, as you might discover for yourself over chicken or dhal curry served with a freshly prepared chutney or *sambol* (local relish) of lime, coconut, chile powder, and ground Maldiva fish. A refreshing sorbet made from local fruits might top off your meal.

Accommodation: Aliya Resort & Spa, Sigiriya

Set in a lush oasis of rolling fields and ancient trees with stunning views of Sigiriya "Lion Temple," this unique hotel offers spacious, deluxe chalets (each with four bedrooms) adorned with creative artwork inspired by the *Aliya*, or elephant. An indulgent, oversized swimming pool and expansive decks invite relaxation.

Day 2

Ritigala Jungle Monastery

2.5 miles, moderate

This morning enjoy breakfast *al fresco* on your hotel's deck, perhaps sampling *thosai*, flat pancakes of rice and lentil flour and local fruits, many of which are grown on the Resort's premises. Today's adventure begins with exploring one of Sri Lanka's most renowned sites, surprisingly undiscovered by most travelers. Getting to our destination is part of the adventure, after a 30 minute transfer – climb aboard 4x4 safari style trucks for a short climb to the base of the Ritigala Mountain. Caves high in the mountains were once home to monks sworn to a life of austerity. Follow their spiritual path high into the dense forest that still envelops much of this archaeological site, exploring the series of stairways and trails that link the Monastery's main sites.

After a well-earned lunch at a local restaurant, return to the hotel for some free time to relax or, time permitting, perhaps join your guide for an optional visit to Pidurangala, home to both an ancient site and a reclining Buddha carved into the mountainside.

This evening, enjoy a traditional rice and curry dinner Sri Lanka style, as you dine under the stars at the hotel's pool-side restaurant.

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relaxation.

Day 3

Sigiriya Rock Fortress and Kandy

1 mile, easy or 2 miles, moderate to challenging (with 1,200 steps). Transfer to Kandy (4 hours). Udawattakele Royal Forest; 3 miles, easy (time permitting)

Today's full day of adventure begins before dawn. You set off early to visit one of Sri Lanka's most famous sites—the Sigiriya Rock Fortress, rising like a monolith from the flat, dry plains. Also known as the “Lion Rock” for the shape of its massive gateway, it was built for King Kashyapa as a defense from his enemies. Perched atop a colossal rock 656 feet above the countryside, this UNESCO World Heritage site is a marvel to explore. You have your choice of walks here, as well. At the rock's base, wander the pathways through a rainforest and the Royal Gardens, a picturesque blend of water, boulder, and terraced landscapes. If you're up for the challenge—and, unafraid of heights—climb the 1,200 steps to the fortress: navigate the steps, platforms, and circular stairs that cling to the rock face, passing impressive frescoes of seductive maidens and the smoothly glazed Mirror Wall. At the “lion's mouth,” a final set of stairs delivers you to palace remains spread over a wide plateau. Here, above the world enjoy a light breakfast with views worthy of a king.

Return to your hotel for a quick shower and time to refresh before a late morning transfer to Kandy, Sri Lanka's second largest city. Pause for lunch amidst the mountains of Sri Lanka's breathtaking spice country, where cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, and pepper are harvested. Upon arrival in Kandy, the former capital of the island nation, visit the Udawattekele Forest for a pleasant 2-mile walk (time permitting). This lush pocket of Kandy has variously been a pleasure garden and a wartime retreat for the royal family. Today it is a verdant refuge where more than 80 species of birds and 32 types of butterflies take wing. A series of easy loop trails traverse this important bio-reserve. Select the one that suits you, watching for birds and mammals like the barking deer and toque monkey.

Late this afternoon, you arrive at your 5-star hotel, nestled in the hills above Kandy. After time to settle in, gather in the Far Pavilion Restaurant for a multi-course meal.

Accommodation: Earl's Regency Hotel, Kandy

Tucked away in the hills above the city of Kandy, the Earl's Regency Hotel provides a relaxed tropical setting. Its beautifully manicured swimming pool was shaped to fit the natural rock contours that surround it. Your spacious deluxe room features a private balcony that overlooks lush green environs and a unique local character. If you wish, indulge yourself in a treatment at Ayu Spa, perhaps a soothing massage, facial, or body scrub.

Day 4

Three Temples Walk. Temple of the Tooth



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4 miles, easy to moderate

Enjoy an active day of walking through rice fields and a small village nestled in the jungle outside Kandy and visiting the city's revered Temple of the Tooth. After breakfast, transfer approximately 45 -minutes by coach to the outskirts of Kandy. Explore a rarely visited temple and a small primary school before following quiet roads and trails through a village and across rice fields. Along the way stop to chat with local villagers and learn about the various spices and fruits they harvest such as pepper, nutmeg, cocoa, jack fruit, and mango. A short but steep climb on a series of steps culminates at the final temple which you visit before returning to Kandy for lunch at a local café.

After relaxing at your hotel, return to Kandy, where the Temple of the Tooth stands as one of Buddhism's most important sites. Thousands of white-clad pilgrims from all over the world come here to meditate and give *puja*, or sacred offerings, over what is believed to be a tooth that belonged to Buddha, smuggled into the country in 310 AD. For dinner, walk a short distance to a favorite restaurant for a lively meal.

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Day 5

Tea Country

Train ride from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya. Tea Country Trek; 2-3 miles, easy to moderate

Early risers may wish to watch the sun come up over mist-covered hills from the hotel terrace. After breakfast, embark on a thrilling train journey, ascending from Kandy into the lush tea country in the central highlands. Sri Lanka's trains have not changed much since colonial days, making this one of the most authentic and nostalgic cultural experiences of your adventure. You slowly traverse dense forests as scenic hillsides unfold around you until, by journey's end, the high mountains are shrouded in tea. This is Tea Country, a breathtaking world of terraced fields, soaring peaks, deep-cut ravines, and cascading waterfalls. You have two days to immerse yourself in this magical place, with ample opportunities for invigorating walks amidst splendid scenery.

This afternoon embark on a short walk among the tea fields. Follow pathways used by the tea pickers, looping through lush groves of Sri Lanka's purest tea plants and admiring magnificent unspoiled mountain vistas rising up around you. You occasionally pause to witness some pickers as they pluck leaves by hand, critical to ensuring clean teas untouched by machinery, and toss them in their heaving baskets. Your rewarding walk ends at the Heritage Tea Factory, a restored tea plantation made into a unique hotel set high in the hills.



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This evening, savor a multi-course meal at your hotel's restaurant, once the sifting room of the old tea factory. Sample creative dishes infused with local tea – such as smoked chicken with tea vinaigrette and perhaps green-tea infused ice cream for dessert. Candle light and live music add to the ambiance.

Accommodation: Heritance Tea Factory Hotel, Nuwara Eliya

Set high above Nuwara Eliya and nestled in terraced tea plantations, the Heritance Hotel offers dramatic views of the surrounding mountains. This unique hotel was once a tea factory and has been lovingly restored into a deluxe hotel earning a UNESCO Merit Award for its restoration. Entering the hotel is like stepping back in time, many of the building's original features remain including the large bedroom windows once used to control the temperature of the drying tea leaves but now offering sweeping views of the surrounding valley.

Day 6

Horton National Park

World's End and Bakers Falls; 6 miles, easy to moderate with 500 ft elevation gain. Free time in Nuwara Eliya

Today you depart your hotel quite early with a packed breakfast for the journey to Horton Plains and the Horton National Park, the only national park in Sri Lanka which allows hiking. The scenic drive of approximately 2-hours winds through mountain passes and tea plantations before reaching Horton Plains. Nestled below two of Sri Lanka's highest mountains, the "plains" form an undulating plateau of wild grasslands and thick forest often shrouded in mist. Quiet trails and the chance of seeing some of the parks' elusive wildlife makes the early morning departure well worth the effort. While seldom seen, the park is home to leopards and wild boar; you may spot the sambar deer and some of the endemic birds such as the toque macaque or mountain hawk-eagle. As clouds often roll in late morning, it is also ideal to reach the viewpoint early in the day.

The trail passes through open grassland and forest before reaching Mini World's End; a taste of the views to come. The walk continues along ridgeline before culminating at World's End, a dramatic 4,000 feet escarpment with sweeping views of the tea plantation villages in the valley below, and on a clear day, the Indian Ocean to the south. Anyone with a fear of heights can stand well back from the edge and still enjoy the views. A loop trail back through cloud forest brings you past the scenic Bakers Falls named after Sir Samuel Baker, a famous explorer. Lush ferns and rhododendron bushes surround the base of the 66 ft falls, a scenic spot to enjoy your picnic lunch.

En route back to your hotel visit the charming colonial town of Nuwara Eliya, once the country's most popular hill resort for the British due to both its spectacular scenery and the cool mountain climate. Stroll the streets admiring the many bungalows and historic buildings or pop into a café for afternoon tea. Return to your hotel for dinner and your final night in the mountains.



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Day 7

The Fortress town of Galle

Float Plane to Galle. City tour; 1.5 miles, easy. Free time

Savor a final breakfast in Tea Country. Then transfer to a nearby lake for an exciting hour-long flight by sea plane to the peninsular city of Galle, South Asia's best preserved fortress town. This spectacular UNESCO World Heritage site was built by the Portuguese in the 1500s, further fortified by the Dutch as headquarters for the Dutch East India Company, and preserved by the British. Upon arrival, walk to a local eatery for lunch with views of the Indian Ocean. After, join your guide for an enlightening walking tour past Dutch-style houses with tiled roofs, stopping to admire the Groote Kerk, or Dutch Reformed Church, built in 1755; the gleaming white Galle Lighthouse, Sri Lanka's oldest; and some infamous off-the-beaten-path sites. Then, check into our lodging for the night, centrally located in the heart of Galle for easy exploration on your own. Step outside your door and you find numerous shops selling teas, intricate wood carvings, gems, and local handicrafts. Browse for some last minute gifts, or relax at your hotel enjoying tea in the outside courtyard.

This evening you gather with your fellow travelers for a festive farewell dinner.

Accommodation: Fort Bazaar Hotel, Galle

Once occupied by spice, tea, and gem traders, this beautiful colonial mansion has been renovated to its former glory. Now Galle's newest and hippest boutique hotel, this property offers both convenience in the heart of historic Galle and tranquility. The private courtyard and beautifully designed bedrooms with high ceilings, local art, and verandah's invite relaxation.

Day 8

Your Country Walkers *Sri Lanka: Ancient Temples and Tea Trails* tour concludes

Optional stroll along the fort's walls and to the Fish Market; 2-3 miles, easy. Transfer to Negombo

If you wish, rise early to join a pre-breakfast walk to the local fish stalls where fishermen haul in the morning's catch. Then head up onto the fortress ramparts to stroll some of the perimeter of historic Galle. As the city awakens, you might see locals swimming in the Indian Ocean, practicing tai chi, or



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jogging along the wall. Later, linger over breakfast in the courtyard or in the hotel's bustling café as the city passes by. You make the 3-hour drive to Colombo late this morning, and bid farewell to your guides and fellow travel companions.