

One of Colombo's most iconic buildings is the Galle Face Hotel



# Jewel of the Indian Ocean

There is so much to discover in Sri Lanka, says **Steve Williams**

I was going to start this story by making a reference to how Sri Lanka is “nestled in verdant greenery” but I won’t. That’s a clichéd start for a travel story and Sri Lanka is anything but a clichéd destination.

Set in the Indian Ocean southeast of India, the island nation boasts stunning beaches, sprawling rainforests, ancient temples, eight Unesco World Heritage sites, 15 national parks, 350 waterfalls and over 200,000ha of tea estates. It certainly personifies one of its tourist slogans — “a land like no other”. At just 430km long and 225km wide, it is a surprisingly small country but with

so much packed into it.

After flying into Colombo’s Bandaranaike International Airport, the first thing that caught my eye while walking to the baggage claim area was the shops — they don’t offer the usual alcohol, perfume and cigarettes, but rather, fridges and massive flat-screen TVs. Unusual. The second was a BlackBerry advertisement featuring Tony Greig, the English cricket captain of the 1970s. This was an introduction to Sri Lanka’s passion for the game, which would become evident throughout the trip.

Like Singapore, remnants of Sri Lanka’s British colonial past, such as the old Parliament Build-

ing, are quite obvious in Colombo. There are many examples of fine Dutch and Portuguese architecture as well. One of Colombo’s most iconic buildings is the Galle Face Hotel. Built in 1864, the hotel is slightly older than Singapore’s Raffles Hotel and has a similar, stately feel. The Galle Face is absolute waterfront, (as Raffles was, before the land near it was reclaimed). It is a stunning setting and a pleasant way to spend a few hours. I slowly downed a few drinks on the lawn terrace as a jazz band played, while watching the sun sink into the Indian Ocean, as curious crows and squirrels scamp-

ered by. I know where I’ll be staying on my next visit.

In the huge grassy area in front of the hotel, I watched some young men playing cricket. They asked me to join them, which was good fun though slightly intimidating, as I hadn’t touched a bat in a long time. I observed an interesting mix of people walking along the ocean promenade — families, couples sneaking a kiss, entrepreneurial types selling everything from snacks and drinks to inflatable toys; there was even a pony being taken for a walk. A few games of cricket were being played on the sand, watched over by a cannon pointing out to sea — a relic of another time.

We headed south from Colombo to Galle through a picturesque coastline that boasts pure sand, emerald-coloured ocean and the ubiquitous palm trees. Simply beautiful. The road hugs the coastline like a sun-baking black snake, with the railway line squeezed in between the bitumen and the beach. With Sri Lanka’s much-written-about scenery, a train trip would be best. Its roads are quite good, though single lanes, myriad tuk-tuks, creatively driven buses, trucks, cars, the odd horse-drawn conveyance and ambling elephant mean even driving a short distance could take a lot longer than you think. A new freeway has opened between Colombo and Galle, significantly slashing travel

time, but it bypasses interesting small villages and that gorgeous ocean view.

Taking the coastal road south, we drove through many areas devastated by the 2004 tsunami — more than 35,000 people were killed in Sri Lanka in that tragedy. It was quite eerie to be shown just how far the water reached then.

A must-stop location en route to Galle is the Kosgoda Sea Turtle Conservation Project, established in 1978. Turtle eggs are collected by volunteers or sold to the centre by fishermen, provided refuge and monitored until they hatch, before being released into the ocean. It’s a basic operation; small fenced compounds protect the eggs and the baby turtles are moved to cement tanks once they hatch. The centre was demolished by the tsunami, but was back in operation just three months later. The centre claims it has released more 3.5 million turtles since 1978.

## Strolling along

The southwestern coast of Sri Lanka is surprisingly undeveloped. I noticed only a few hotels, which is a good thing. Hopefully, it will remain that way — seemingly endless coastline without towering hotel blocks obliterating the horizon.

Unfortunately, our tight itinerary didn’t allow me to spend as much time in Galle as I would have liked. The imposing 52ha



A game of cricket played near Galle Face Hotel. The sport is very popular with Sri Lankans.



The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy is revered by Sri Lanka's Buddhist community as it houses a tooth of the Buddha



A fresco in the fascinating ancient city of Sigiriya

fort (first built by the Dutch in 1588 and defended by 16 bastions) is not quite as scenic as the walled city of Dubrovnik in Croatia, although it is quite rightly a Unesco World Heritage site. Wandering through the streets of the former capital reveals a smorgasbord of architectural styles, the magnificent Dutch Reformed Church, cafes, hotels and villas, as well as a few buildings in need of restoration. A stroll along the walls looking out to the Indian Ocean takes in Sri Lanka's oldest lighthouse.

The afternoon we were in Galle, the Sri Lankan cricket team was taking on England in a test match, and many fans enjoyed a free bird's eyeview down into the stadium from the ramparts of the fort. As an Australian, I was delighted that Sri Lanka demolished England, and there were quite a few despondent, sunburnt English types wandering around seeking a lager to cry into. A couple of them started up an impromptu game in the shadow of the iconic clock tower, maybe to show their team how to bat.

Next stop was the ancient city

of Sigiriya, another Unesco World Heritage-listed site. As you gaze up at the 370m-high Lion Rock — the centrepiece of Sigiriya — in front of you, the obvious question is how they managed to build a seven-storey palace there in the fifth century AD? Today, Sigiriya comprises the remnants of the city wall, water gardens, fountains that are still working, moats and ramparts of the former city and fortress, which are spread 3km across a forested plain to the east and west of Lion Rock, as well as the foundations of the palace on the summit.

The area has been inhabited since the third century BC, although Sigiriya gained "fame" owing to a power struggle between two princes. Kasyapa murdered his father and then usurped the throne from his brother, the heir. Fearing retribution, he moved the capital to Sigiriya, ordered the city to be built, and in one of history's ultimate acts of paranoia, had his palace built on the summit of the rock. That would be quite an achievement today even with the help of tower cranes, let alone in the fifth century.

It was hot, blisteringly hot, and I would suggest climbing Lion Rock early in the morning or late afternoon, definitely not at 1pm. There are stairs cut into the rock, and metal ladders and staircases, including a spiral staircase that leads to the magnificent "Maidens of the Clouds" frescoes of 21 bare-breasted damsels. The ascent is not too bad, rather like a very brisk cardio workout. Make sure you wear sensible shoes, take bottled water and stop for breaks along the way.

The views are worth it. It reminded me of the climb up to the Great Wall of China, but with vertigo thrown in. A few barefooted kids scampered past me on the scorching metal ladders. There is a plateau about three quarters of the way up, good for a pit stop, which back in the old days featured a massive lion statue. To enter the palace, one had to walk through the mouth of the lion. All that remains is the imposing lion's paws carved into the rock. There is also a "hornet shelter" on the plateau — warning signs about possible hornet attacks are posted here, though they don't go into what you're supposed to do if you are halfway up a metal staircase.

The summit of Lion Rock is breathtaking. The foundations of the palace give an idea of the size and scale of the structure — around 1.6ha. It seems more of a resort than a fortress, with numerous rooftop swimming pools carved out of rock for the concubines. The views are spectacular, and when you are standing on top of Lion Rock it is hard to get your head around the fact that it was the site of a seven-storey palace.

#### **Pachyderm and other delights**

There is so much to experience in Sri Lanka — certainly too much



The Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage is run by the Sri Lankan government for elephants that have been orphaned by poachers or lost their herd

to document in these few pages. Other highlights of my travels included a visit to the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage set in the hill country between Colombo and Kandy. The orphanage was established in 1975 and is run by the Sri Lankan government for elephants that have been orphaned by poachers or lost their herd. We watched the elephants swim in the nearby river, before being led to the orphanage.

Another impressive archaeological site is the ancient city of Polonnaruwa in the north central province. Dating back to the 12th century, it has a fascinating collection of ornate palace buildings, temples and other religious monuments. It is a sprawling and stair-free complex set in a forested area with a similar feel to some of the temples in Cambodia's Angkor Archaeological Park. Give yourself plenty of time to explore — we arrived late afternoon, and the sun was filtering through the trees, allowing for some photogenic

moments.

Speaking of temples, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy is definitely worth a visit. Built in the 17th and 18th centuries, the temple is revered by Sri Lanka's Buddhist community as it houses a tooth of the Buddha. A collection of ornate buildings, halls and shrines are surrounded by an impressive deep moat, and overlook picturesque Kandy Lake.

At the end of the trip, I realised I'd only scratched the surface of Sri Lanka — and I didn't even have a cup of tea. Another visit is being planned as I write. **E**

*Steve Williams enjoys discovering and telling stories*

Singapore Airlines flies daily into Colombo. This trip was made possible with the generous sponsorship of the partners of Sri Lanka Tourism for land transfers and accommodations, and Singapore Airlines for air travel.

## Sri Lanka Expo 2012

The Sri Lanka Expo 2012 international trade fair and exhibition was held from March 28 to 31 at the Sirimavo Bandaranaike Memorial Exhibition Center, BMICH, in Colombo.

The Sri Lanka Export Development Board organised the national event with the support of public and private sector institutions, to provide opportunities for the display and promotion of quality export products on a single platform. More than 300 Sri Lankan exporters participated, offering a wide range of traditional and non-traditional products and services.

The main objectives of the expo were to promote Sri Lanka's trade, investment and tourism, to reposition the country as a lucrative business, investment and tourism destination in Asia and to instil buyer confidence in its products and services.

In his opening address, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, said, "Despite, the World Trade Organization forecasting only 5.8% world export growth for 2011, Sri Lanka's export sector showed strong resilience by registering a highly commendable growth rate of 22.37%, in comparison to 2010."