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## More to Sri Lanka than golden beaches

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by Edward Stephens, Birmingham Mail SRI Lanka is an island famed for its golden sandy beaches stretching for hundreds of miles, shaded by palm trees and cool crystal-clear waters. But scratch underneath the surface, and there's a wealth of treasures to be found on the interior of the island, making this a hot destination in more ways than one.

The island is home to the relaxing wellness techniques of Ayurveda, and there are plenty of ways to spoil yourself after a hard day searching for ancient treasures. Ayurveda spas are easily found in most hotels, and provide a holistic approach derived from 3,000 years of natural treatments. You'll be steam-cleaned, rubbed with herbal oils and receive spine-tingling head massages after which you can pick your spot on the miles of empty beach and simply watch the sun disappear into the ocean. For the more active, there are plenty of sights along the coastline including the colonial town of Galle. With its impressive fort and huge bastions, the fascinating glimpse of Ceylon of yesteryear within narrow streets, atmospheric old villas and churches is fascinating. For wildlife enthusiasts there is no better place to see the Sri Lankan locals: the elephants. These loveable creatures are easy to find. For the closest experience you should visit the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage for an up, close and personal view of the largest land mammal. Heading inland, there's an array of UNESCO world heritage sites dotted around the island. The dramatic Sigiriya Rock's imposing shadow over the plains of the cultural triangle transports you back to the time of ancient kings. After a thigh-burning climb to its 200metre-high summit lie the 1,500 year-old remains of the royal palace of King Kassapa. Pausing halfway to admire the vivid frescoes, the final effort of the climb takes you through the giant lion's paws protecting the blustery peak as the best vantage point in Sri Lanka unfolds in front of your very eyes. Close by are the ancient cities of Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura, once thriving ancient capitals of Sri Lanka. Polonnaruwa's creeper-clad temples are best explored by bike, taking time to discover every corner of the vast complex. In Anuradhapura you'll find the island's oldest stupa, as well as the Sri Maha Bodhi tree &ndash; grown from a cutting taken from the famous bodhi tree beneath which Buddha attained enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago. With the Dambulla Caves a short drive away, you can easily get lost in Sri Lanka's impressive past. Carpeted in lush rolling jade hills, a couple of scenic hours south of Kandy lie Sri Lanka's famous tea estates. The journey to the hill station of Nuwara Eliya can be done either by train or by road, each providing stunning panoramas of the valleys below. Amid the landscape colonial-era hill stations deliver a glimpse in a bygone era when the British resided here. Nowadays, the influence is as strong as decades ago, with the area fittingly named 'Little England'. With the temperature dropping to a cool 14 degrees, sipping some of the best tea in the world fresh from the gardens is an experience not to be missed. Many tour operators are currently offering great '2 for 1' deals to the island from £799 for two people, including direct flights and seven nights accommodation on an all-inclusive basis. As an additional bonus, holidaymakers are also able to visit some of the island's most popular tourist attractions including the famous Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage and four UNESCO World Heritage sites for half-price. As the locals like to say, there is no better time to discover your 'Small Miracle'. Visit [www.srilanka.travel/2for1](http://www.srilanka.travel/2for1) or call free on 0800 408 2239 for more great deals. Courtesy: [birminghammail.net](http://birminghammail.net)