
Sri Lanka tops New York Times' Tourist Destinations

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Sri Lanka For a quarter century, Sri Lanka seems to have been plagued by misfortune, including a brutal civil war between the Sinhalese-dominated government and a separatist Tamil group. But the conflict finally ended last May, ushering in a more peaceful era for this teardrop-shaped island off India's coast, rich in natural beauty and cultural splendors.

The island, with a population of just 20 million, feels like one big tropical zoo: elephants roam freely, water buffaloes idle in paddy fields and monkeys swing from trees. And then there's the pristine coastline. The miles of sugary white sand flanked by bamboo groves that were off-limits to most visitors until recently are a happy, if unintended byproduct of the war. Among the most scenic, if difficult stretches to reach, is Nilaveli Beach in the Tamil north. While a few military checkpoints remain, vacationers can lounge on poolside hammocks under palm trees or snorkel in its crystal-clear waters. Or they can order cocktails at the Nilaveli Beach Hotel (www.tangerinehotels.com/nilavelibeach), a collection of recently renovated bungalows with private terraces. An international airport in Matara, on the island's southern shore, is under construction, which will make the gorgeous beaches near the seaside village of Galle easier to get to. Decimated by the tsunami in 2004, the surrounding coastline is now teeming with stylish guesthouses and boutique hotels. Unawatuna, a crescent-shaped beach a few miles south of Galle, may be furthest along. Higher-end hotels there include Thambapanni Retreat (www.thambapanni.biz), which features four-poster beds, yoga and an ayurvedic spa. The Sun House (www.thesunhouse.com), in Galle, looks like a place where the Queen of England might stay, with its mango courtyard and colonial décor. One stylish place tucked within Galle's city walls is the Galle Fort Hotel (www.galleforthotel.com), a refurbished gem merchant's house run by a couple of Aussies. — Lionel Beehner Courtesy:nytimes.com