
Your complete guide to Galle fort

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Beach bum? Culture vulture? Intrepid adventurer? On Sri Lanka's south coast, you can be all three. by :Jeremy Lazell If you've read this far, chances are you love a beach holiday. Deck-chairs and daiquiris, suntans and seaweed wraps, they're your thing. Not mine. Two or three days is heaven, but a whole week? I don't care how Padi the dive school is or how Espa the treatment rooms are, I want more than a burnt nose and happy chakras. Beaches and pools, fine, but I also need sights, sounds, smells - and I'm not talking Piz Buin factor 30. I'll take the tan, but give me some travel while I'm there, please. Step forward southern Sri Lanka, and the 70-mile stretch between Galle and Tangalle. It's not all gorgeous, with some bits - even Taprobane Island, Sri Lanka's answer to Branson's Necker, and darling of a thousand glossy travel magazines - too close to the road to pass my muster.

Here and there, though, in pockets of private, palm-fringed paradise, it has everything you could want from a beach escape. "Lusciously magnificent" is how Virginia Woolf's husband, Leonard, described it a century ago, when he was district administrator: "trembling on the verge of vulgarity". You can get all that in the Maldives or Mauritius, though, so why Sri Lanka's south? Two words, travel fans, and they're not piña colada. They're Galle fort. Surrounded by ancient sea walls at the southern tip of Galle town, with about 500 houses, a lighthouse, a mosque, a pair of ancient churches and the ghosts of nearly 700 years of Arab traders and European invaders, it's a dusty, heart-stopping antique, the sort of treasure you find hidden in your grandmother's attic next to Zanzibar and Darjeeling. And no, I didn't fly 11 hours for a history lesson, either, but this isn't just the best preserved colonial sea fort in Asia, it's the best preserved colonial sea fort in Asia and the proud possessor of an Aman resort, as well as a brand-new boutique hotel, just up the road, that'll make you want to sell your children to slavers and emigrate. And what an airport transfer. Okay, it's three hours by road, but it's three hours not waiting for a connecting flight. Honestly, I couldn't get enough of it when I drove down last month. Fishing boats and funerals, Buddhas and banyan trees - it's not so much an airport transfer as a promo clip for the Sri Lankan tourist board. Hell, it even has "toddy tappers", who climb the roadside palm trees to gather sap for use in the local hooch. A few miles down the coast, there are still fishermen. Marco Polo never had it so good. Yet no matter how lovely the beaches, tourists here are thin on the ground. The Tamil Tigers don't help (see box, right). The tsunami? It wrecked villages all along this coastline, but the beaches are now great, likewise the boutique hotels that have popped up since. My advice? Make hay: new hotels don't offer discounts for ever. What I'm not saying, though, is spend your whole week in Galle fort. It's magical, but an out-and-out winter-sun escape it is not: yes, it's got beaches below the ramparts, but they're way too public for this correspondent's Speedos. Instead, stay a couple of nights somewhere in the fort, wander the lanes, browse the antiques shops, soak up the sunsets, then swap guidebook for holiday novel and kick back in one of the gorgeous resorts along the coast. Now that's what I call a beach holiday. Galle fort: the smart guide Where to stay: formerly the New Oriental Hotel, Amangalla (00 800 2255 2626, www.amanresorts.com ; doubles £395, room-only) is the place if you're rolling in rupees, with deep, dark teak and jackwood floors, rattan planter's chairs - it's an elegant old memsahib, with spa and pool the only nods to modernity. For colonial chic on the cheap, the Galle Fort Hotel (00 94 91-223 2870, www.galleforthotel.com) - owned and run by an Aussie film producer, with stage-set looks to match - has boutique doubles from £115, B&B. Next to the mosque is the best budget hotel I've seen: family-run Mama's Galle Fort Hotel (222 6415, www.mamas-galle-fort.com), has excellent traditional food, a great rooftop cafe and two airy doubles; from £20, B&B. The fort is not a stand-alone winter-sun escape. Two nights is perfect, then hit the beach. Rupee millionaires should head 90 minutes east to Tangalle, where Amanwella (00 800 2255 2626, www.amanresorts.com ; doubles £467, room-only) has serene teaky suites, a 150ft infinity pool, a perfect beach and utterly sensuous alfresco candlelit dinners. Twenty minutes west of Galle, Aditya (00 94 91-226 7708, www.aditya-resort.com ; doubles from £200, room-only), is a sea-breeze-sifted boutique hotel with driftwood furniture and Balinese art-work - a Moorish mansion-on-sea. The five Sagara suites have plunge pools, day beds and Indian Ocean views.

More affordable still, the Lighthouse (222 3744, www.slh.com/lighthouse ; doubles from £74, B&B) is an architectural masterpiece on a rocky promontory just east of Galle. Good beaches, but its proximity to a road keeps it cheap. Getting there: SriLankan Airlines (020 8538 2001, www.srilankan.lk/uk) flies from Heathrow to Colombo; from £713. For regional departures, Emirates (0844 800 2777, www.emirates.com/uk) is a good option, especially with the opening next month of its swanky dedicated terminal in Dubai. Returns to Colombo via Dubai from seven UK airports start at £722. Buses and trains run frequently from Colombo to Galle (2-3 hours; £1). The best packages: tour operators get discounted rates on top-end hotels - you'll save money booking everything independently, but not much, and certainly not enough to justify the headache, especially if you're booking more than one hotel with transfers. With Audley Travel (01993 838000, www.audleytravel.com), two nights, room-only, at Amangalla and five, B&B, at Aditya start at £2,040pp. Swap Aditya for Amanwella and you're looking at £2,995pp. Both prices include flights and transfers. TransIndus (020 8566 2729, www.transindus.com) has two nights at the Galle Fort Hotel and five at the Lighthouse from £1,594pp, B&B, including flights and private transfers. Where do I throw the beach towel? Aditya is good, but the best beach I've seen in Sri Lanka is Amanwella's, a secluded crescent of custard sand and teetering palms with a kaleidoscope of shells littering the beach. To drink? Coconut daiquiris at Amanwella are just-right salt and sweet, but sunset planter's punch in Amangalla's second-floor lounge takes some beating. Beyond the beach: 90 minutes north of Galle, Uda Walawe National Park is a great half-day trip, with my 90-minute game drive turning up 30 elephants and 15 raptors, as well as monkeys and jackals. Mind you, Galle fort is distraction enough. With antiques shops, cricket matches below the ramparts and a 17th-century Dutch Reformed Church, it's timeless, thrilling. It'll be

tough to go back to the beach. Jeremy Lazell travelled as a guest of Audley Travel and Emirates (Courtesy :
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