

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Treasure island

As Sri Lanka celebrates 70 years of independence, **Laura Millar** visits this compelling mix of temples, tea plantations and tuk-tuks

Kids playing cricket on a long stretch of grass by the Indian Ocean; palm trees waving in front of a British-looking Anglican church; a tall, thin communications tower with a lotus-shaped top – all these, and more, are whizzing past me at the grand old rate of about... 20mph, as I take in the giddy sights of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, from the back of a tuk-tuk. The country's most prevalent form of transportation, these cute little conveyances are, basically, scooters with attitude: converted, three-wheeled Vespas or Piaggos, with a van-like casing and a retractable roof.

I'm in an even more souped-up version, complete with stereo system in the back, and a man dressed in a pith helmet, colonial jacket, shorts, and dazzlingly white knee-high socks, behind the wheel. This is because I'm on a "tuk-tuk safari", taking me and three friends on a

whistle-stop tour of Sri Lanka's biggest city to the sounds of pumping dance music, as we weave through some frankly hair-raising traffic. Colombo, on the west of the island, is usually more of a stopping-off point en route to somewhere else, whether it's to the beach-lined southern coast, or onwards to even more exotic climes, particularly the Maldives. But, as I was to discover, there is plenty here to keep you for at least a couple of days, which I was doing before heading to the coast myself.

For a country torn apart by civil war for over 25 years – one which only ended less than a decade ago, in May 2009 – it's doing a good job of getting back on its feet. Tourism is on the rise, and construction is booming all over

It's time to revel in the fact that I'm on this utterly ravishing island



View of the Shangri-La's Hambantota Resort, main; the Seema Malaka temple in Colombo, above

the city, such as the aforementioned Lotus Tower – which, when finished, will apparently be, at 1,120ft, the tallest structure in South Asia – apartment blocks, skyscrapers and luxury hotels.

These last include the one I'm staying in, the stylish Shangri-La.

It's from here we set off on our tuk-tuk tour, where the exuberant guides make their first stop at one of the city's most beautiful Buddhist temples. Gangaramaya is over 300 years old, and is one of the most important in Colombo, with an eclectic mix of Sri Lankan, Thai, Indian, and Chinese architecture. There are beautifully

hand-painted wooden ceilings with intricate flower designs, multi-limbed Hindu statues in two separate shrines, and an ancient Bodhi tree, its tangle of roots and branches writhing and twisting around each other. It feels inclusive and peaceful, our visit coinciding with a holy day, so we are surrounded by worshippers wearing white.

After zipping around colourful street markets, past the striking red-and-white patterned Jami Ul-Alfar mosque, and encountering crowds of school children who gawp in awe at our musical mode of transport, our final destination is the multi-pillared Independence Memorial Hall, built on the site of the ceremony which marked the liberation of Sri Lanka – then known as Ceylon – from British rule on 4 February, 1948, subsequently becoming a Republic in 1972. Sri Lanka changed hands many times over the centuries, passing from the Portuguese in the 17th century, followed by the Dutch and the British, all of which periods of colonialism left their mark both culturally and architecturally.

One of the most fascinating places

to see these influences is around what's known as Colombo Fort, although there are no longer any physical remnants of the fort itself, which was originally built by the Portuguese to house their military, as well as to store precious spices, such as cinnamon. It's now a heritage area spilling over with elegant buildings constructed by the Dutch and the British. At the end of nearby Chatham Street – many local street names are resolutely English-sounding – is an iconic lighthouse topped with a clocktower, which used to signal ships into the port.

A short walkaway is a cluster of fascinating, wedding-cake-like buildings including the bright, white President's House and the old GPO, and an imposing maroon and cream edifice still marked with its original name, Cargills, dating back to when it opened in 1906 as a bustling department store, selling everything from feather dusters to driving goggles. One of the most significant buildings, however, is the Old Dutch Hospital, which has been carefully converted into a lively retail and restaurant area, without sacrificing the original, 17th century brickwork. I spend my last night in Colombo happily chowing down at one of its most famous eateries, the Ministry of Crab, which specialises in crustaceans of every size, from small (well, 500g) to "Crabzilla" (anything over 2kg), served with a tasty array of sauces.

The next day I head for the southern coast. A new, superfast highway is under construction which will connect Colombo and Hambantota, my destination, in around two hours; but until that's open, the drive can take between four and five. However, the beachfront scenery, particularly once you get to the sleepy seaside town of Galle, is well worth it. We stop here to stretch our legs and stroll around the fortified, Unesco heritage city, founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century. You can still walk through its imposing entrance gate, which sports the British coat of arms from when they took over the fort in 1796, and along the top of the grass-covered remains of the thick, brick walls. The town's picturesque streets are lined with boutiques, cafés and jewellers (Sri Lanka is rich

in gemstones, from sapphires to tourmalines), and we stop to sample a hopper, the traditional, delicate, pancake-like dish made from rice and coconut milk batter, eaten with curry.

Further along the coast, near the surfer town of Weligama, our driver stops to show us one of the country's most iconic sights: the stilt fishermen. Though the tradition is dying out, for a small fee you can still photograph the canny ones who have worked out how to make it earn them money from tourists. For decades, the fishermen have built rustic-looking wooden constructions tied together with twine, to fish in the shallow waters of the ocean, and perch on them for hours; it's an arresting image, and harder than it looks, as one beckons me to try it for myself. Suffice to say, I wasn't going to be having fish for dinner that day...

Finally, after passing through a string of laid-back surf villages, and along palm-tree fringed beaches, we reach Hambantota, home to another Shangri-La resort. This one is far more geared towards relaxation, sitting along a wide stretch of coastline, and with its own golf course, three swimming pools, and a spa. You could, of course, take a tour to one of the beautiful nearby national parks, such as Udawalawe or Yala, in the hope of spotting leopards, elephants, monkeys or buffalo; or stop off at a tea plantation, like Handunugoda, to see how it's handpicked and processed as it has been for centuries. And I will – but first it's time to stop, take in Sri Lanka's wild beauty, and simply revel in the fact that I'm on this utterly ravishing island. ■

Sri Lankan Airlines fly indirect from Edinburgh to Colombo from approximately £735 return. Visit www.srilankan.com for more information. Double rooms at Shangri-La hotel Colombo start from around £135 per night (shangri-la.com/colombo); doubles rooms at Shangri-La Hambantota start from around £219 per night (shangri-la.com/hambantota). To arrange a tuk tuk safari, visit tuktuksafarisrilanka.com.

For more information about the country, visit srilanka.travel.



Explore Colombo by tuk-tuk, the country's most prevalent form of transport

SHORT HAUL



Lighting up a bit of history

From exploring ancient sites to feasts of local dishes, **Fiona Pringle** finds Serbia fascinating

Stooping down, bent nearly double I felt my way along a pitch black underground tunnel silently cursing my lack of head torch forethought.

Little did I know such equipment would be an essential item for a cultural zip around Serbia's central and eastern regions.

But then there is a lot about the heart of the former Yugoslavia that is surprising.

Viminacium, a vast archaeological site of a former major Roman city and military camp, 90km east of Belgrade, is as good as place as any to start.

Built in the 1st century AD, and at the time home to 40,000 people, the 450 hectare site contains remains of temples, streets, Roman baths and hippodromes and what's more, visitors can stay here. Tourists and amateur archaeologists can eat, sleep and dig alongside the pros for as little as £25 a head.

And if that isn't an experience enough you can pop in and visit Vika. The 60-year-old hairless mammoth was discovered in her entirety in 2009, having been wedged deep in silt and sand for over one million years. She is the main attraction of the, as yet basic, prehistoric "Mamut Park", built on the Viminacium site, which

experts hope to expand over the next few years.

And what is encouraging, and entirely refreshing, about Serbia's approach to tourism, is the ability for visitors to actively engage with the attractions and history strewn throughout the landscape.

Visitors are encouraged to wander through the precious archaeological discoveries, crawl through ancient tunnels and wander over the original tiled floors at partially excavated

Serbia encourages visitors to actively engage with the attractions and history

ruins such as Felix Romuliana – an ancient Roman complex close to the Bulgarian border.

There are also opportunities to experience the bafflingly under-sold "first city of Europe".

Lepenski Vir is a Mesolithic archaeological site just two hours from Belgrade.

However, the downside to Serbia's unique approach to tourism, in comparison to Croatia and Montenegro, the tourist hotspots it borders, is the relative difficulty in

getting from place to place.

Public transport is yet to catch up with the increase in tourism and hiring a car is the best and surest way to explore the country beyond Belgrade and its outskirts.

Hugging the Danube as you depart the gridlock of Belgrade's jammed thoroughfares, the road takes you to Viminacium, before a recommended pitstop at the fairytale Golubac Fortress.

Cresting a rocky outcrop precariously hanging over the Danube, the medieval fortress is being painstakingly restored and will be a must see tourist destination from this year.

Travelling further east towards Kladovo takes you through the Derdap National Park and by Lepinski Vir. We stayed in the small town at the popular Hotel Aquastar.

Venturing south in search of a taste of traditional Serbia we found a tiny hamlet almost completely enveloped by overgrown greenery.

At Sveti Trifun you'll find an atmospheric restaurant with rooms. Served banquet style, on a long communal table in the dark, stone dining room, dinner consists of plate after plate of traditional Serbian dishes.

Served with lashings of "samples" from the Rajac wine cellars, the continuously replenished feast includes classic dishes such as "tobacco crackling" – thin wisps of

Clockwise from main: the Danube seen from Derdap National Park; historic Golubac Fortress; the bones of a mammoth at Mamut Park, Viminacium

aired pork fat, cured meats, hunks of freshly cooked bread and a mountain pork dish cooked confit style.

A must when back in the city is uber-cool Manufaktura slap bang in the middle of the soon-to-be completely pedestrianised heart of Belgrade.

And you can't discuss the thumping heart of the city, the empowering sense of excitement of a country driving towards a prosperous future without sliding a mere decade into the past. The scars of war cut through the physical landscape and are woven through the history and soul of the country but the horrors of the, not-so distant, past should not define a country that has so much to offer. ■

KLM flies from Edinburgh to Belgrade via Brussels (www.klm.com, 020 7660 0293) with prices starting from £500 return. A double room in the City Savoy in Belgrade starts at £69 (www.hotelcitysavoy.com, +3811 324 0200) with a stay in Hotel Aquastar in Kladovo starting from £45 (www.hotelkladovo.rs, +3811 981 0810). Fiona also stayed in Nis at the contemporary Art Loft in the city centre which costs £35 per night (www.artloft.rs, +3811 830 5800).

48 HOURS IN

The East Neuk

Friday, midday

Check into the recently refurbished Ship Inn (doubles from £100, www.shipinn.scot) in Elie, a typically picturesque East Neuk village with characterful stone houses and a choice of sweeping sandy beaches.

1pm

Enjoy lunch at the Ship Inn. The second floor dining room offers views of the Firth of Forth as well as local langoustines.

3pm

Take a stroll east along arguably the most dramatic section of the Fife Coastal Path (www.fifecoastalpath.co.uk), looking out for seabirds and seals, not to mention Newark Castle.

5pm

Enjoy a wee wander around St Monans. Explore the harbour area and all the wee nooks and crannies.

7pm

Craig Millar @ 16 West End (www.16westend.com) is an under the radar culinary star in the increasingly foodie East Neuk. He specialises in superb value cooking that turns creative with Scotland's natural larder. Forth views too.

Saturday, 9am

Head east to Anstruther, the only real town in the East Neuk. Wander around the old stone streets checking out the shops and galleries.

Midday

There are other ace chippies in the East Neuk, but the Anstruther Fish Bar (www.anstrutherfishbar.co.uk) is an institution and deserving of its



plethora of awards. They can name the trawler that caught your fish.

1:30pm

The Scottish Fisheries Museum (www.scottishmuseum.org) delves deep into the industry that brought the East Neuk fame and fortune.

3pm

Break inland to learn the story of a local farmer's daughter – Jane Stewart – turned artisan cheesemonger at the St Andrews Farmhouse Cheese Company (www.standrewscheese.co.uk). Superb café and shop on site.

7pm

The Cellar in Anstruther (www.thecellaranstruther.co.uk) is one of the finest restaurants in Scotland, well deserving of its Michelin star. Billy Boyter is the local boy made good in the kitchen.

Sunday, 9am

Take a gentle stroll along the beach at Elie or browse the town's shops. ■

Robin McKelvie

You really need your own transport to explore the East Neuk; www.visitscotland.com

BARGAIN BREAKS

Lochside escape

Although Ardanaiseig on the banks of Loch Awe is now an exclusive use venue for weddings and other special events, it's reopening as a hotel for just three days and nights between 16-19 February. Take advantage of their Wildly Romantic Valentine's Package, from £155 per person per night, which includes a glass of prosecco on arrival, homemade macarons, full Scottish breakfast and a three course candlelit dinner. **Call 01866 833333 or see www.ardanaiseig.com**

Valentine package

Gleddoch, the four-star hotel, golf

and spa resort in Langbank outside Glasgow, is offering a Valentine's Package. It includes a one-night stay for two, a Valentine's menu dinner plus a full Scottish breakfast, from £179 per couple on 13 and 14 February, or £199 tomorrow night, or on 16 or 17 February. **Call 01475 540 711 or see www.gleddoch.com**

Island adventure

EasyJet Holidays is offering seven nights at the four star Taoro Garden in the Canary Islands on a B&B basis for £355pp including flights from Edinburgh on 7 March. **Call 020 3499 5232 or see www.easyjet.com/holidays**