

# Born Sri

Live Sri and beauty surrounds you...

In an age of over-tourism, Sri Lanka has retained an innate authenticity with its natural beauty and cultural delights



Famed for its vivid landscapes and classic ruins, Sri Lanka – the Pearl of the Indian Ocean – also boasts stunning beaches, friendly locals, lush green landscapes and, of course, an abundance of its famous tea. Lying between India and many of the more popular South Asian destinations, this earthly paradise has, for many years, been somewhat overlooked. While many travellers have transited via the island, its 26-year-long civil war saw few bold enough to explore its manifold attractions.

Now, nearly 10 years after peace broke out, this 65,610 sq km island nation is back on the travel agenda of many of the better-informed tourists. While some are lured by its heritage sites, with several of them dating back more than 2,000 years, others find its more contemporary – and lesser-known – attractions harder to resist.

While, over to the North, the country's Cultural Triangle has suffered near-death-by-Instagram, the South has retained much of its mystique. Indeed, a trip from the Central Province to the far(ish) South Coast provides a far more satisfying and singular experience.

Any such venture off the track more beaten should definitely take in Madulkelle, a picturesque tea plantation set close to Kandy, the country's sweet-as-it-sounds former capital. In order to fully explore this delightful setting, it's best to book into the Madulkelle Tea and Eco Lodge. Tucked neatly into the Knuckles Mountain Range, some 1,000 metres above sea level, the easily-vertiginous may find reaching the lodge a little testing. Stick with it though, as the view is breathtaking enough to brook a little discomfort.

With 19 suitably secluded lodges to choose from, a stay at Madulkelle is an experience in its own right. Each green-friendly dwelling boasts an expansive verandah and all the expected bathroom amenities. If you can forgive the slight snugness of the bed, it could almost be five-star luxury.

The setting, of course, is no less luxuriant. As you wake to the sounds of the region's exotic birdlife stirring, you can look out across majestic mountains, verdant valleys and rolling tea plantations, all yours to explore. This, though, is best done in the company of an experienced guide.

Only then can you be sure you'll take in the most tropical trails, drink from crystal-clear streams, swim below postcard-ready waterfalls and navigate your way through some occasionally dense forestry. You might even get up close and personal with a rare white

sambar or a barking deer. When it comes to the local leopards, though, it's perhaps best to keep a little more of a distance.

Following a day of adventures, relaxing with a glass of wine in the lodge complex's Grand Dining Room is all but obligatory. Here, you can hear the tales of sundry other tourists, with some of them even harder to swallow than the – admittedly healthy – organic fare on offer.

Take a few days to fully savour Madulkelle's unique brand of serenity before heading off to your next destination. Trekking southwards once again takes you to Nuwara Eliya, the city at the heart of Sri Lanka's mighty tea industry. During the British colonial era, polo players, cricketers and the hunters oft wended their way through the rolling hillside plantations, with a hint of times imperial still more than apparent at one of the true local landmarks – the Grand Hotel.

Built in 1828 in a style elegant enough to befit the residence of Sir Edward Barnes, the then-governor, this manor house has retained much of its colonial-era look. Its sentimental charms also benefit from the distinctly English-style lawns and gardens that front many of the nearby private residences.

For those keen to track down just where their morning cuppa began its journey, book

## *“While the North has suffered near-death-by-Instagram, the South has retained its mystique”*

a tour of the Pedro Tea Estate. Here you will be expertly guided through the whole tea-making process – from cultivating and grading to dispatching to the world's breakfast tables. Don't forget to also take in the estate's coruscating Lovers Leap Waterfall, though plummeting into its depths is not recommended no matter how enamored you are with the local brew.

For an, arguably, more authentic encounter with the surrounding Hill Country, it's well worth taking the Ella-bound train. Be sure to book your tickets in advance if you want to secure seats with the best views, a privilege that sees you perfectly placed to watch the region's sari-clad tea pickers hard at work.

Upon arriving in Ella – a tiny town some 200km from the capital – take a minute or two to watch the local trains pass majestically over the iconic Nine Arch Bridge. Again a colonial construct, given it is set nearly 3,100 metres above sea level, it is difficult



With lush green landscapes and palm-fringed bays, a trip from the Central Province to the South coast provides a more off-the-beaten-track experience for the discerning traveller



*“The restful town of Tangalle is a world away from the tourism frenzy that grips its near-neighbours”*

to conceive of the hard work that went into dragging so much rock, stone and cement to such an altitude.

After drinking in your fill of the local tea country, it's time to head South yet again – ideally in air-conditioned comfort – as the coast beckons and your sand and sea quota is, as yet, unfilled. Heading for Tangalle, one of the South Coast's less-frequented resorts is probably advisable, particularly during the high season.

With its palm-fringed bay and picturesque coves, this most restful of towns is a world away from the tourism frenzy that all too often grips its near-neighbours. Blessed with one of Sri Lanka's most extensive bays, its maritime charms were once fought over by the Brits and the Dutch. Today, several well-preserved buildings – notably the Dutch Fort, the Rest House and the Court House – remain as clear reminders of the European interlopers of yesteryears.

As well as looking to the past, this is the ideal spot to look to the immediate future, with Sri Lankan dawns and sunsets never better framed than by the seemingly endless sands of the nearby Goyambokka beach. Suitably spiritually refreshed, you can sustain your meditative mood with a spot of whale-watching over at Mirrissa, the South Coast's largest fishing port.

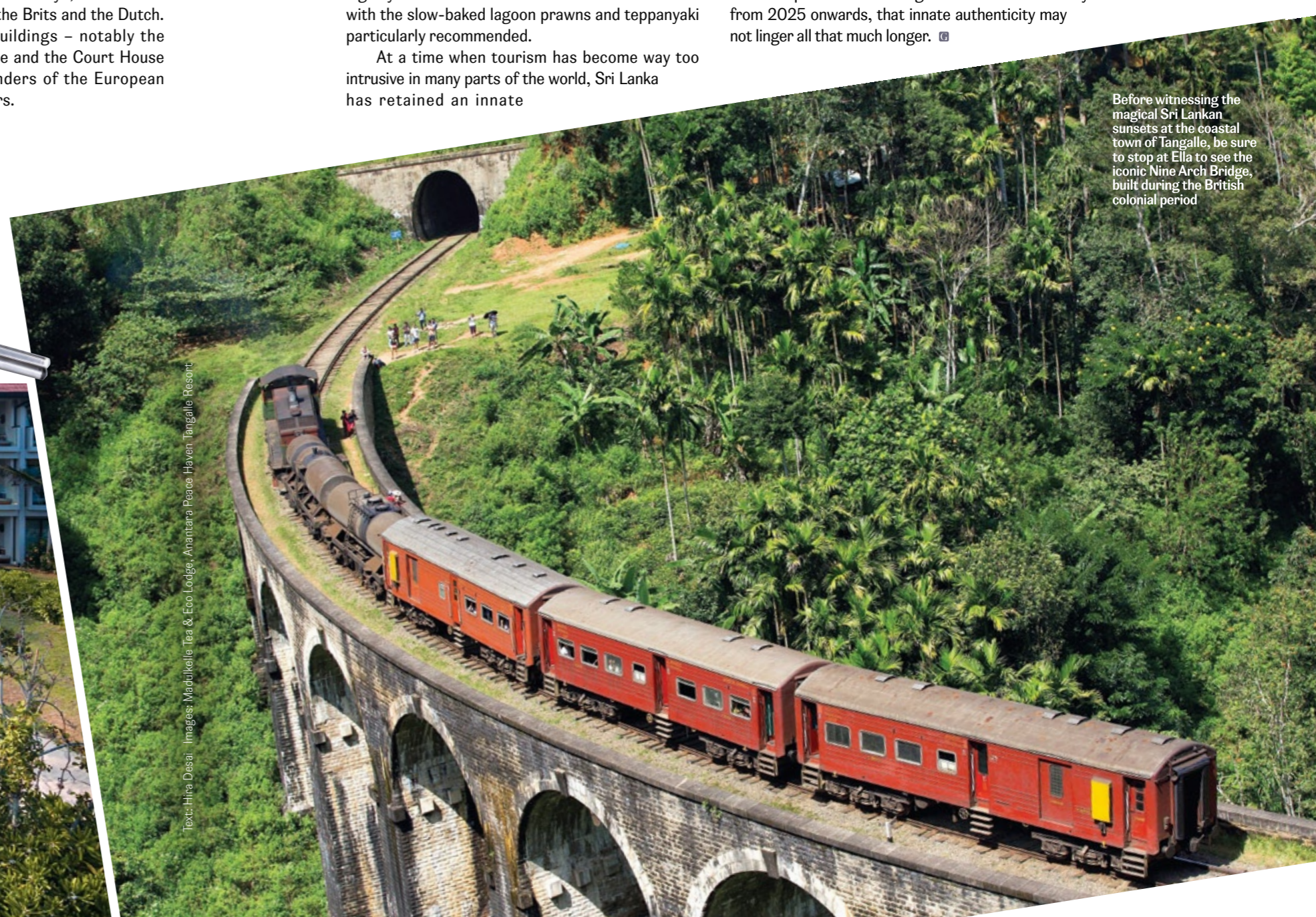
As the day proceeds, take in a tippie or two at Il Mare, one of Tangalle's foremost watering holes. Then retreat to Verala, a beachside restaurant rightly-renowned for its fine Sri Lankan fare – with the slow-baked lagoon prawns and teppanyaki particularly recommended.

At a time when tourism has become way too intrusive in many parts of the world, Sri Lanka has retained an innate

authenticity. Coupled with its natural beauty and cultural delights, this makes the island nation an intriguing option for the more discerning vacationer.

For those whose leisure time is limited, a five-day trip to the Hill Country and the South Coast will deliver a satisfyingly Sri Lankan experience. There are, however, a number of luxury tour operators, including Hong Kong-based Lightfoot Travel, that offer bespoke packages to this not-too-far destination (five-and-a-half hours from Hong Kong and just over seven from Beijing or Shanghai).

A word of advice, though, with the Sri Lanka Tourism Board hopeful of attracting five million tourists a year from 2025 onwards, that innate authenticity may not linger all that much longer. 📍



Before witnessing the magical Sri Lankan sunsets at the coastal town of Tangalle, be sure to stop at Ella to see the iconic Nine Arch Bridge, built during the British colonial period

Text: Hira Desai. Images: Madukelle Tea & Eco Lodge, Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle Resort