

GLOBAL ROAMING

SEVEN DAYS IN SRI LANKA

AS SRI LANKA OPENS A NEW CHAPTER AFTER EMERGING FROM A PERIOD OF CONFLICT,
WE TAKE A SOJOURN FROM COLOMBO TO KANDY AND DISCOVER A COUNTRY IN
THE MIDST OF REVIVAL, BLENDING ITS COLONIAL PAST AND GLEAMING FUTURE –
AND ALWAYS WITHIN ARM'S REACH OF AN INCREDIBLE MEAL.

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MONDAY

You can buy a washing machine at Colombo airport. This may not be the deciding factor for those contemplating a trip to Sri Lanka, but it will likely be the first of many things that will strike you about the teardrop-shaped island.

The washing machine is emblematic of the whole country: it has rinsed away the blood of a terrible civil war. Everywhere is strikingly clean. There is less litter than in India. All schoolgirls are dressed in near-blinding white, as are pilgrims at temples and shrines. Selling soap powder here must be a profitable business.

Wandering the meticulously restored Dutch fort and shabbier port area in Colombo, the heat-shimmering streets offer a striking contrast between the colonial past and signs of a sleeker future: the waterfront bund punctuated with cranes signalling that the five-star hotel chains are moving in, investment from China and Russia powering a turbo-charged makeover. Only the roads remain diabolical: their construction cannot keep up with progress.

One part of the city resists the tug of time: the market district of Pettah. To find its throbbing heart, follow the relentless tide of humanity, or your nose, guided by wafts of turmeric, tamarind, fenugreek, durian, and jackfruit. Everything smells ripe.

Among the familiar heaps of dappled eggplant and satiny husks of pink garlic, are many unfamiliar vegetables; such as the long cucumbers covered in a fine, white mould. These are snake gourds (known as *murungas*), not to be confused with their sibling, the bitter gourd, and come from the very versatile drumstick tree (bonus: the roots taste of horseradish).

Fresh cashews are in season, and sold toasted until slightly burned to enhance their creamy flavour. Rambutans have arrived, their soft, spiny rind dangling like lanterns from stalls. Produce from up country and around the world collides here, heaped high (including, would you believe, imported Australian orange lentils? They can't grow enough; such is the popularity of dhal).

Weary of dodging trucks and towering handcarts a tuk tuk is the best escape. At the Gallery Cafe, the vibe of the city's most cosmopolitan oases could not be more chilled. Housed in the former office of Sri Lanka's most famous architect Geoffrey Bawa, the courtyard is a magnet for the city's well-heeled. Its owner, savvy interior designer Shanth Fernando, created the country's most well-known homewares label, Paradise Road. It's hard to go past the menu's hero dish: black pork curry, a rich, sticky mess of dark, roasted spices amplified by one of Sri Lanka's secret weapons: *goroka*, an unlovely fruit that, when dried, delivers a unique sourness indispensable to many local dishes.



Previous page: schoolgirls at Galle Face Green, a waterfront park in Colombo, order snacks. This page: choosing a Christmas tree in Colombo (although the dominant religion in Sri Lanka is Buddhism, a small eight percent of the population are Christian). Inset: king coconuts are sold for drinking; schoolgirls play in the water at Galle Face Green.



A colourful array of fruits and vegetables are available at Manning Market in Pettah. Left to right: outdoor dining at the Gallery Cafe; Manning Market is a hive of activity; a serve of prawn vadaï (savoury fritters).

TUESDAY

“Stop!” shouts Marieke Brugman, our fearless leader and operator of Marieke’s Art of Living tours, testing the lightning reflexes of Indika, our unflappable driver. So far, he has navigated hairpin bends, potholes, unsealed roads, muddy corrugations and swarms of tuk tuks without turning a hair.

We pull up at one of many stalls selling large, smooth-skinned and bright-orange king coconuts – big as baseballs. A woman slashes the top off one with a broad knife. Its clear, sweet water bears no resemblance to anything sold in a can. It’s like the difference between tap water and drinking straight from a mountain stream. It’s so quenching you can feel it hydrating every cell, virtually plumping up your skin. The elixir is reputedly full of electrolytes and a cure-all for digestive ailments, according to the health philosophy of Ayurveda, which is so widespread here it is considered mainstream. As refreshed as if we had bathed in a rock pool, we press on across the baking plain to the World Heritage-listed site of Sigiriya.

Sigiriya is a bulbous volcanic plug visible for miles around and the perfect vantage point for an ambitious ruler, King Kashyapa. Part fortress, part pleasure palace, its vast grounds include the drawcard of the Cobra Hood Cave, a natural gallery for exquisite frescoes of gorgeous bare-breasted maidens.

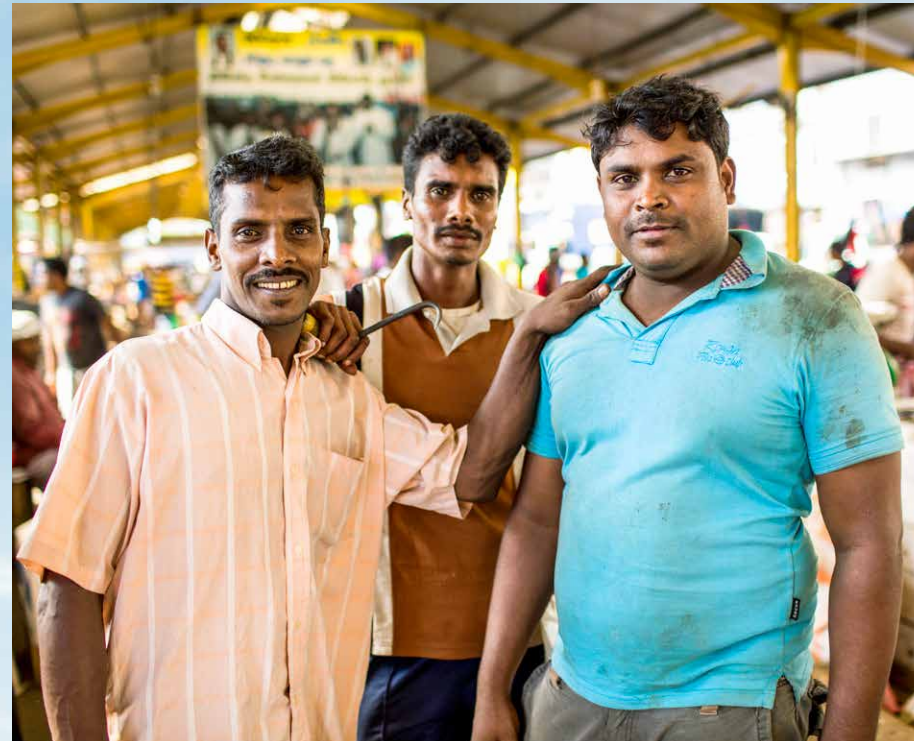
To glimpse the almond eyes and bejewelled bodies of these royal favourites requires effort: you climb and then climb more steps carved into rock and finally a peculiar wrought iron staircase that feels like it would be more appropriate for scaling the Eiffel Tower. But it’s worth it. Parched by pushing on to the summit of Lion Rock for the panoramic view, the only thought that keeps me going is the prospect of another long drink of coconut water. Maybe I could shower in it?

WEDNESDAY

According to *Running in the Family* Michael Ondaatje’s [novelist and writer of *The English Patient*] seductive memoir of growing up here, there are seven types of cinnamon, but *Cinnamomum verum* (or true cinnamon) from Sri Lanka is considered the best in the world, recognised by its paler colour and finer, less dense and crumblier texture. Writing about it in the 1600s, one Dutch captain remarked: “When one is downwind of the island, one can smell cinnamon eight leagues out to sea.”

Taking a small tinny out on Koggala Lake, on the island’s south coast (famous for its stilt fishermen), we visit a tiny island planted with cinnamon groves to watch a peeler from the Salagama caste (a caste typically associated with cinnamon cultivation) demonstrate a skill passed down through generations: seated cross-

Construction workers enjoy a sunset at Galle Face Green in Colombo. Left to right: a shop advertises sweet meats; teasel gourds are small bitter melons; market vendors in Pettah; the Galle Fort Hotel.



After catching the briefest glimpse of the holy relic, we return to the serenity of our sanctuary at Kandy House in the hill country former capital. Up here, the air is markedly less humid.

Built in 1804 for a former chief minister, the house remains an enclave of colonial elegance, its charm due in part to its generous low verandahs and lush garden. Dinner ends with meekiri served with palm treacle (*kitul*), which has the same rich, caramel flavour as Canadian maple syrup. It's a wickedly addictive combination, despite the urine.

SATURDAY

I don't mind being woken by peacocks. Even though their cries are persistent and mournful: "Leo, Leo, Leo," they seem to call. Here, they are almost as common as pigeons. They fly blithely through scrub, jungle, rice paddies, tea plantations, never snagging or sullying their plumed finery. As clean as Colombo schoolgirls.

But I would prefer to be woken by a leopard (is that the Leo the peacocks are calling to?). It could happen here at Yala National Park, where sightings are not uncommon thanks to the high population density of this elusive cat.

Our tracker tells us the elephant herds have swelled, their migration patterns no longer arrested by the civil war that cut the country in two, preventing them from returning to favourite feeding and breeding grounds. We are lucky enough to see a male tusker, uncommon among the Sri Lanka species. We get close enough to hear the females tearing grass, their trunks swinging with rhythmic dexterity while the juveniles bump and wallow in the mud of a nearby lake.

Shown to my room at nearby Cinnamon Wild lodge, I am reminded firmly several times not to leave my quarters after dark unescorted. "Have you ever seen a leopard here?" I ask my walking-to-dinner companion. "Yes, madam," comes the reply, "most recently outside room 33."

SUNDAY

Oozing boho charm, Galle Fort is no longer the romantically shabby fortress of a bygone era; it seems every house inside the fort walls is being renovated and sold for a fortune. In 2004, the ancient ramparts made of coral and granite kept the worst of the tsunami at bay, and the Amangalla hotel, which had just opened that week after extensive renovation, stayed true to its military efficiency: keeping its doors open, staff served up hundreds of meals to aid workers and stranded foreigners.





A woman sells Sri Lankan cooking essentials at Colombo's Maradana Market. Inset from top: the eggplant moju from the Amangalla Hotel in Galle, recipe page 114; the pedestrian walkway of the Cargills & Millers building in Colombo's Fort district.

Just outside the walls, the town's hallowed cricket ground fared less well until Shane Warne stepped up to fundraise for its repair, restoring it to the town's pride and joy.

At the eccentric Historical Museum in Galle Fort, an elderly lacemaker, part of a dying tradition, shuttles small bobbins on a tiny pillow to make a collar of famous Portuguese-style lace: a legacy of colonial times and a skill passed down from mother to daughter. It takes a skilled worker about a week to make a metre of this fine cotton cobwebbing. She tells me with a toothless smile that Cate Blanchett wore a similar piece in the film *Elizabeth*.

The bijou fortress is also home to dozens of jewellers. Some still cast in gold and silver using the soft tissue of a cuttlefish bone as a mould. Many display local moonstones: the cloudy gems look like someone has spilled coconut milk into opals.

Rumour has it there are precious stone deposits under the camellia bushes at Handunugoda Tea Estate, a white tea plantation where the world's highest antioxidant white tea variety is cultivated exclusively for Parisian tea traders Mariage Frères.

Adding to its mystique, the tea, as costly as fine wine, is harvested without ever being touched by human hand; its tips trimmed with gold scissors (though these are no longer wielded by virgins, as ancient Chinese practice once demanded). Unlike cinnamon, which tradition forbids them from peeling, women are the country's tea pickers, doing back-breaking, poorly paid work (though white tea-pickers are paid extra). Drinking a spoonful of the costly pale brew regarded as an anti-ageing elixir, I decide to place my faith in coconut water.

Postscript: Months after my return home I unfold a cache of papers I brought back from my trip. Immediately, the unmistakable aroma of cinnamon escapes like a sigh. It hovers, potent with memory, intense, sweet, with a hint of pepper that tickles the back of the throat. I inhale deeply.



BLACK PORK CURRY

Serves 6 • Prep 15 mins • Cooking 3 hrs 20 mins

While at the Gallery Cafe this black pork curry is soured using Sri Lanka's native goroka fruit, we've used tamarind concentrate, as it is far easier to find here in Australia.

2 tbs coconut oil
 2.5kg boneless pork belly, cut into 8cm pieces
 7 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 2 onions, finely chopped
 1 tbs chilli powder
 ¼ cup cumin seeds, toasted, ground
 2 tbs coriander seeds, toasted, ground
 1 tbs mustard seeds, toasted, ground
 6 cloves, finely ground
 6 cardamom pods, bruised
 1 cinnamon quill
 2 sprigs curry leaves
 250ml (1 cup) tamarind concentrate*
 60ml (¼ cup) red wine vinegar
 Thai basil leaves and steamed rice, to serve

1 Heat oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Working in batches, season the pork, then cook, turning, for 6 minutes until browned all over. Remove from pan and set aside. Add the garlic and onion and cook, stirring, for 8 minutes or until softened. Add the chilli powder, spices, curry leaves and 2 tsp salt and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the tamarind concentrate, vinegar and 250ml (1 cup) water and bring to a simmer.

2 Return pork to the pan and reduce heat to low. Cover and cook for 2½ hours or until pork is very tender. Remove lid and simmer for 30 minutes or until sauce is slightly reduced. Serve with Thai basil and steamed rice.

* *Tamarind concentrate (liquid form) is concentrated tamarind juice. It is available from Asian food shops. »*

Clockwise from right: a fruit merchant at Manning Market in Pettah; the black pork curry from Colombo's Gallery Cafe is a standout on their menu; a Colombo local.





GLOBAL ROAMING

The beetroot curry is served at the Amangalla Hotel in Galle. Top to bottom: a dried fish seller at the Manning Market in Pettah, Colombo; a food cart at Galle Face Green.



BEETROOT CURRY

Serves 4 • Prep 10 mins • Cooking 35 mins

3 medium beetroots, cut into 2cm pieces
12 curry leaves
¼ onion, finely chopped
2 cinnamon quills
1 garlic clove, chopped
2cm-piece ginger, chopped
2 tsp curry powder
½ long green chilli, finely chopped
2 tsp Maldiv fish* (optional)
½ tsp fenugreek seeds
250ml (1 cup) coconut milk, plus 2 tbs, extra
1 tsp mustard powder
Cooked white rice (optional), to serve

1 Place all ingredients, except extra coconut milk and rice, in a saucepan with ½ tsp salt over medium heat and bring to a simmer.

Cover and reduce heat to medium-low.

2 Cook for 30 minutes until beetroot is tender and most of the liquid has evaporated. Remove from heat and cool slightly. Stir through extra coconut milk and scatter with pepper. Serve with rice, if desired.

* *Maldiv fish is dried fish pieces, available from Sri Lankan and select Indian food shops.*

EGGPLANT MOJU

Serves 4 • Prep 10 mins • Cooking 20 mins

2 medium eggplants, halved lengthwise, cut into 3 pieces
1 tsp ground turmeric
Vegetable oil, for deep-frying
150g raw cashews
6 long green chillies, halved lengthwise
6 Asian red eschalots, thinly sliced
1 tsp mustard powder

80ml (⅓ cup) red wine vinegar
1½ tbs caster sugar
½ tsp ground chilli powder
6 cardamom pods, lightly bruised
3cm-piece ginger, finely grated
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
Coriander leaves, to serve

1 Toss to combine eggplant in a bowl with ½ tsp turmeric and ½ tsp salt flakes. Set aside.

2 Fill a large saucepan or deep-fryer one-third full with oil and heat to 170C. Add cashews and cook for 1 minute or until golden. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towel. Add chillies and cook for 2 minutes or until crisp. Remove and drain. Add eschalots and cook for 2 minutes or until crisp. Remove and drain.

3 Add eggplant in 2 batches and cook, turning, for 7 minutes or until golden and crisp. Remove and drain.

4 Meanwhile, place remaining ingredients and remaining turmeric in a saucepan with ½ tsp salt over medium-low heat. Simmer for 2 minutes or until reduced by one-third. Place in a bowl with the fried vegetables and toss to coat. Serve scattered with coriander. **7F**