

Under cover: a monk takes shade in Kandy. Opposite, clockwise from top left, leaning palm tree on the south coast; cycling through old Galle Fort; floating waterlilies; elephant in Uda Walawe National Park



# instant calmer

She wants exotic. He wants easy. Can **Liz Edwards** and her husband find holiday harmony amid Sri Lanka's colonial mansions, ornate temples and tea fields of green?





**L**ike all the best marital disputes, this one has been brewing a while. And I confess I may have started it. I've wanted to return to the subcontinent for years, hankering after G&Ts on colonial verandas; elephants and sari-bright birds; colourful temples; spicy fresh fish on the beach. But one woman's 'hanker' is another man's 'nag', especially if that man refuses to picture anything other than million-mile journeys, mozzies and Imodium. So I park India (for now; losing the battle doesn't mean losing the war) and instead set my sights on Sri Lanka, the teardrop of an island dripping daintily off its southeast coast. A manageable size and malaria-free, without the Delhi-belly reputation *and* back on its feet post-tsunami and civil war, it answers my husband's concerns and my daydreams. An easy two-week loop out of Colombo will give us the subcontinent for softies. If only all our rows could be resolved this happily.

Les is still sceptical, so I know our first hotel will have to ease us in gently. Maniumpathy is just the place for it. A colonial mansion in a boutique-and-embassy suburb of the capital, Colombo, it's an eight-bedroom haven of parquet floors, smiling staff and leafy courtyard pool. But I don't feel we've quite arrived until we leave its gates and step, Doctor Foster-like, right up to our middles into the exhilarating early-evening squawk of tuk-tuks; the sizzle and tang of roadside cooking; unfamiliar bird calls; buses belching diesel fumes and movie music. I check Les for signs of alarm. No, we're good. Phew.

Softly, softly, though: it helps that half an hour later, we can dive back into Maniumpathy's serenity – just in time for dinner. Pradeep, the butler, tells us that at home, Sri Lankans will always have rice and at least three curries. Here, beneath the humming ceiling-fans, we feast on a few more – green bean curry; fresh, tabouleh-ish *gotu kola* salad; chicken with lemongrass; curried prawns; *dhal*; potatoes and spinach; a spiced pineapple dish – each with its own distinct flavour. Pradeep encourages us to add the chilli-hot coconut *sambol* that, we'll discover, locals use as liberally as Brits do ketchup. Breakfast brings further excitement, in the shape of milder fish curries and hoppers – bowl-shaped, coconutty rice-flour pancakes with an egg cracked into the middle. It looks as if Sri Lanka might take the traditional route to my man's heart.

Luckily for someone who's promised their spouse an easy ride, in Sri Lanka it's normal, and cheaper than you might think, to hire a private chauffeur-guide. So we don't have to worry about bus timetables, train routes or even getting further than Maniumpathy's front door – lovely Sudharshan is there to whisk us away to Kandy, 100km east in the hills. I worried that we'd miss all the colour and life of public transport, sealed away in our bubble. But as our air-conditioned minivan overtakes the first ornately decorated bus – packed with elbows, schoolbags and shopping – the rose-tinting fades. I get legroom; Les gets cricket chat. And we can stop where we like: in Kajugama, to buy cashews from a man with longer hair on his ears than his head; in Kadugannawa, for grandstand mountain views and 25p corncocks cooked roadside.

'This had better not be like the time you insisted on that Cambodian street food that made us sick for days,' Les grumbles. 'On our honeymoon.' >

#### STAY CHARGED

Don't bother buying a converter plug for Sri Lanka's unusual sockets before you go. Most hotels have adaptors you can borrow, or they're £1-£2 on the street – just make sure you buy one with a third pin or it won't work in all sockets



Sweetness and light: left, Kandy Lake. Right, traditional wadai fritters; terraced tea fields

## We cool off among holiday-mood locals and prowling macaques by a 90m-tall waterfall, picnicking on spicy fish buns as boys slide into the rock pools

And no, it's not. Sudharshan sees to that.

Up in the island's cool, green centre, Kandy is Sri Lanka's second city and cultural bastion. Its big draw is the lakeside Temple of the Tooth, although the tooth in question (Buddha's, supposedly) is rarely glimpsed. Even the golden casket holding it can only be seen three times a day; as we arrive for the 6.30pm showing, we get all the dusk atmosphere. Crows caw insistently; huge fruit bats cruise high in the sky; devotees juggle lotus-flower offerings as they slip off their shoes. Through a brightly painted entrance tunnel, we join the queue to see that casket. But crowd-control monks usher us along so briskly, I get a better look at the tubby donation-collecting monk than the glittering treasure behind him.

After another day of Kandy's eye-candy – its fabulous botanical gardens, its colonial cemetery – we're ready to be whisked off again. Most people carry on north for the Cultural Triangle's ancient monuments, but we settle on the softies' route southeast, towards the tea estates. The island is so lush, the greenery seems barely contained. But the Brits had a good try when they planted tea here 150 years ago. The crushed-velvet plantations stretch on and on, neat rows spiked with eucalyptus and mimosa, planted to cast shade on the bushes – not the women, who work long hours plucking 15kg of emerald leaf-tips a day.

'Second class? No air-con?' Les isn't seeing the romance in my suggestion of a train ride to Bandarawela, our next stop – not even softie style, with luggage and driver waiting at the other end.

'It's only two hours,' I say. 'You've spent longer reading on the loo before. And this will be much prettier.'

So Sudharshan drops us at Nanu Oya station and I get my public-transport fix after all. In truth, though, I pay little attention to our fellow passengers. Because... wow. We whistle through thick forest and bucolic scenes in the Horton Plains National Park, then emerge onto a ridge that delivers knockout views for passengers on both sides of the carriage. We spot little houses and a *stupa* gleaming bright white in the hazy sunshine; peaks and dips and russet-coloured roads chiselled into wooded slopes far below. It's like one of those swooping aerial shots film companies usually hire helicopters for. After Haputale station, we zoom in, the track running by tea bushes and

dense banana groves. Ten trains a day pass through, but people walking trackside still oblige by waving cheerily.

And then there at Bandarawela is Sudharshan, waiting to deliver us to the nearby Dutch House. If ever there were the perfect G&T spot, it's this gabled, colonial-style villa with gleaming lawn, a chequerboard veranda and a butler who calls me m'darm. That evening, we clink glasses over fluffy *wadai* (lentil fritters) and a shepherd's delight sunset, soundtracked by muezzin calls and the *Für Elise* jingle of a passing snack van.

But now this is all a little too *much* comfort for my Goldilocks husband.

'Isn't it a bit lord-of-the-manor colonialist? We haven't even broken a sweat yet.'

So we restore moral comfort the next day with a walk. People visit this part of the island for the stunning steep-gradient scenery, the cooler climate and the tea, and we take advantage of all three on our route around hamlets and estates near Ella, and a scramble up to Little Adam's Peak for epic, large-scale panoramas. We cool off among holiday-mood locals and prowling macaques by a 90m-tall waterfall, picnicking on spicy fish buns as boys slide, yelling, into the rock pools, and burst into boisterous drum-led song. The family next to us crack out the soap and have a sudsy bath in the cascade. Not so lord-of-the-manor now, even if we are sitting on a, ahem, pristine picnic rug that Sudharshan's thoughtfully provided.

Next day, we take the obligatory tea-factory tour ('actually quite interesting', concedes Les), before dropping back down into the warmer, palm-treed southern lowlands, what Les calls 'the wild'. Sudharshan relinquishes the steering wheel as we all board a Jeep for a late-afternoon drive in Uda Walawe National Park. Anywhere else, we'd be gobsmacked by the sight of a hawk eagle in its wild tamarind tree, the flitting green bee eaters, the peacocks, golden jackal, wallowing water buffalo and mudder crocs. But they're reduced to support act; we're here for the elephants. And soon we find a dozen near a stream, foraging by scuffing up the ground like sulky kids. The herd amble closer, agonisingly slowly, until they're within eyeballing distance. Les and I are at last in agreement about something: it's magical. Ours is the last truck to leave the park that evening. >

### ESTATE VISITS

Many tea factories offer tours. Uva Halpewatte, near Ella, has fab views from its top floor. Or try the lowland Handunugoda estate near Galle. It produces a virgin white tea, which, at £12/10g, is one of the world's priciest

Pulling strings: Kite-flying on Galle Face Green

# Sri Lanka

One of Sri Lanka's selling points for me was the variety we'd be able to fit in. Still, it's time to ease the pace and the next few days will be beach-based – via (sorry Les) Mulikirigala's Buddhist rock temples, the south's answer to the Cultural Triangle's iconic Sigiriya stone fortress. They're lovely, but 564 steps at noon nearly finish us off. As we return on trembly knees to ground level, a pod falls from a tamarind tree and bonks me on the head.

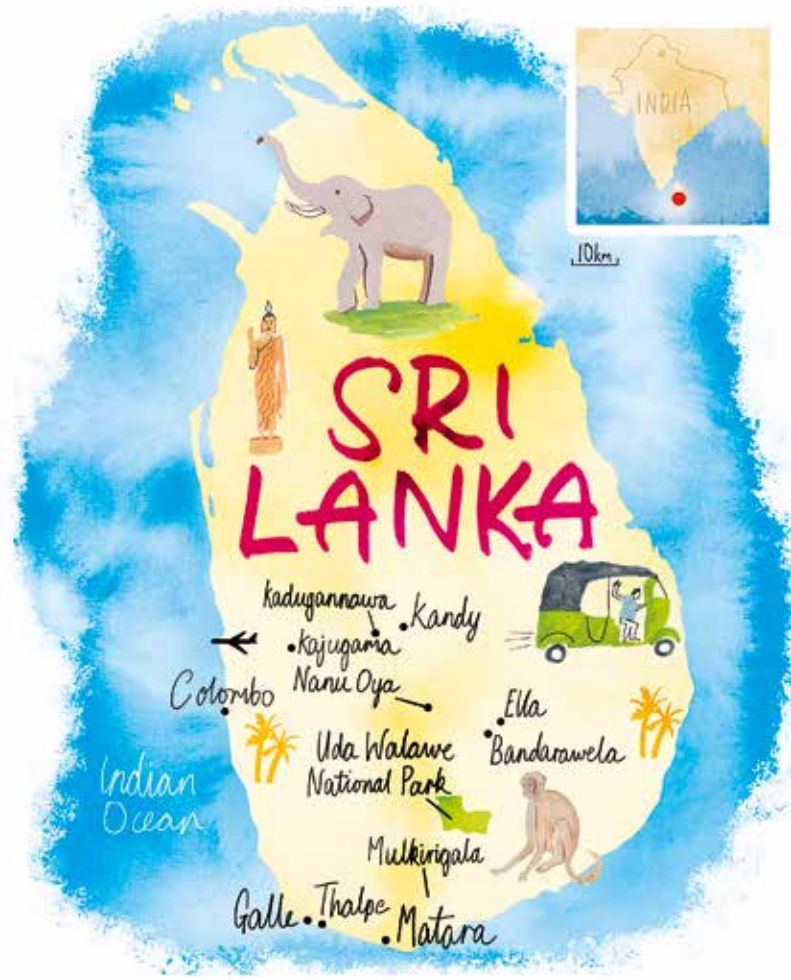
'Karma,' says Les.

So we laze oceanside, first in a gorgeous private villa near Matara, then at a funky boutique hotel a short hop west in Thalpe, where we can interrupt the indolence with occasional sorties – our favourite is an afternoon in Galle Fort, the port city's beautifully preserved old Dutch quarter. There are a few venerable monuments within the ramparts but the real appeal is in its old-time atmosphere and low-rise, banyan-shaded, terracotta-roofed charm. We've timed our stroll badly, though. In his family memoir, Sri Lanka-born Michael Ondaatje writes of 'sweat [that] runs with its own tangible life down a body as if a giant egg has been broken onto our shoulders', and that afternoon we feel the force of his words. The heat drives us a bit mad. The antidote? In this timewarp town, it has to be tea in the former governor's residence (now the swish Amangalla hotel), where we attempt discreet sweat-patch drying as elegant sari-ed ladies bring the sarnies and scones.

Finally, we return to Colombo. Les allows himself to be edged out of his comfort zone once more. On a food tour with enthusiastic Colomboite Mark Forbes, we dive into the heaving Pettah trading district for locals-only cafes, to eat mutton roast and fiery Jaffna crab alongside gem traders and barrow boys. We love it, but we're also happy to go along with Sudharshan's gentler suggestion for our last afternoon. As if to remind us what an un-edgy, mellow, optimistic place Sri Lanka is, he takes us kite-flying by the sea. Galle Face Green is the place for it, he says, and the air is alive with a multicoloured flock of tissue-paper triangles. Among a festival crowd, he spreads out a beautiful picnic, and I realise I've done Sri Lanka a disservice – it's less India-lite, more 'new and improved'. Or, rather, a delight in its own right. And – hurrah! – Les agrees with me. For the past fortnight, the going's been easy. Now going will be hard. ■



Sitting pretty: lakeside Seema Malaka temple in Colombo



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

**Sri Lankan Airlines** (srilankan.com) has Heathrow-Colombo returns from £493. **Thomson** (thomson.co.uk) has weekly Gatwick flights from £512. **Emirates** (emirates.com) flies via Dubai from seven UK airports including Manchester, from £419.

### Go packaged

The Sri Lanka experts at **Experience Travel Group** (020 3627 6148, [experiencetravelgroup.com](http://experiencetravelgroup.com)) have impressive local contacts. Packages can be tailor-made; a 14-night trip including Colombo, Kandy, Bandarawela, Uda Walawe and the south coast, with direct flights, private chauffeur-guide and some excursions, starts at £3,183pp, B&B. Asia specialist **Wendy Wu Tours** (0800 144 5299, [wendywutours.co.uk](http://wendywutours.co.uk)) has a 15-day Highlights of Sri Lanka group tour, covering Kandy, Galle, Colombo and Uda Walawe, from £2,990pp, full board, including direct flights. Or try **Audley** (01993 838335, [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)).

### Where to stay

**Colombo: Maniumpathy** (maniumpathy.com) has doubles from £264, B&B. **Uga Residence** (ugaescapes.com); doubles from £128, room only) is another high-end haven. **Galle Face Hotel** (gallefacehotel.com); doubles from £134, room only) is a city stalwart; come for Pimm's at sunset. **Kandy: Villa Rosa** (villarosa-kandy.com); doubles from £114, B&B) has stunning river views. **Bandarawela: Dutch House** (lankavillas.com) sleeps four from £237, half board. **Uda Walawe: Kalu's Hideaway** (kalushideaway.com); doubles from £93, B&B) is handy for the national park. **Matara: Luxury villa Three Sisters** (3sistersinsrilanka.com; from £244, room only; sleeps nine) is right on the beach. **Thalpe: Owl and the Pussycat** (otphotel.com; doubles from £245, B&B) is a cool boutique joint. Colonial **Why House** (whyhousesrilanka.com; doubles from £256, B&B) does fab food.

### Further information

UK citizens need a visa (£29; [eta.gov.lk](http://eta.gov.lk)). Budget for tips; £6-£8 a night for hotels, £8-£16 a day for chauffeur-guides.

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