



**Winter sun: the cool Canaries guide**  
Plus Where to go in Sri Lanka

# Weekend

**Travel**  
Starts on  
page 37

**You look fine but you're...**

**Irritable**

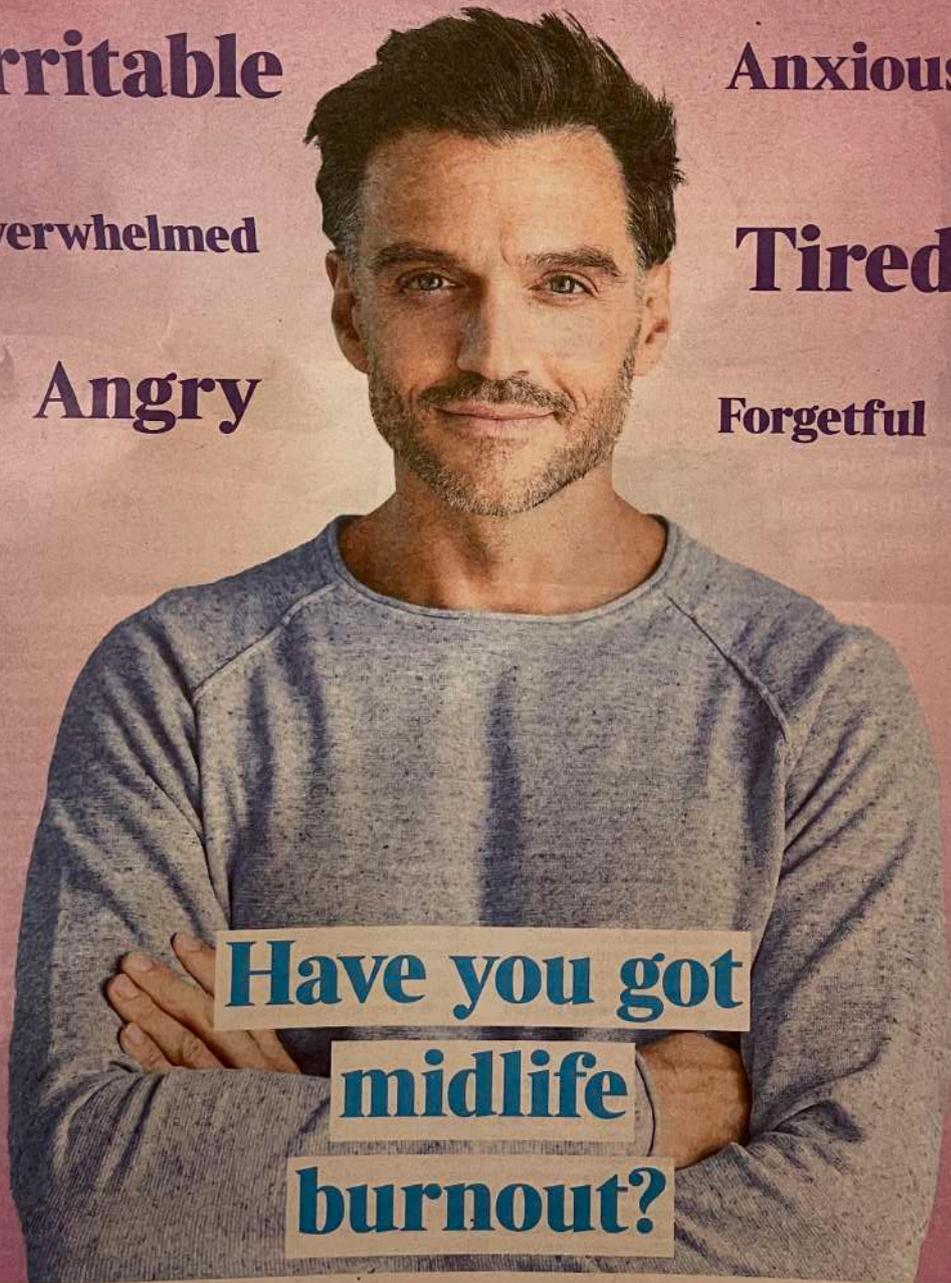
**Anxious**

**Overwhelmed**

**Tired**

**Angry**

**Forgetful**



**Have you got  
midlife  
burnout?**

**On your  
bike!**

How to be a  
better cyclist  
Plus 15 great  
routes



**How much  
sugar is in  
your wine?**



# Travel

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**'The hotel's star attraction is a 25m outdoor pool, which steams away at 27C'**

Jenny Coad reviews Villa Cöpenhagen in Denmark

Winter sun



Dondra Head Lighthouse, southern Sri Lanka

## Sri Lanka at its most glorious

The beaches, temples, and tea country are as enticing as ever — go now and you'll have them to yourself, says Emma Thomson

**T**he sacred city of Kandy courses with life. Monkeys tightrope along telephone cables, the trees around Kandy Lake are feathered with hordes of egrets, and the Temple of the Tooth — said to house the Buddha's left canine — thrums with the sound of drums pounded every evening for puja (worship). A few streets over, our group and a handful of independent travellers enter a village hall for a performance of regional dances. Such things can feel contrived, but not this time. One dancer drops his spinning plates, another forgets his tambourine, and the drummers bump into each other as they exit backwards into the wings. After an uncertain couple of years,

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Monkeys in Kandy

Happily, travellers are now returning because among our favourite long-haul destinations, Sri Lanka is one of the easiest to visit, with no quarantine required on arrival. It's an ideal time to see the sights without the crowds and give the country's economy a much-needed boost at the same time. I had come to sample a classic tour of the country, looping up from Colombo via the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, before dipping south to the holy town of Kandy, into the tea-terraced hills around Nuwara Eliya and Ella, then down into the southern province to visit Yala National Park for leopards and finishing in the seaside

## 38 Travel

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To reach the top, visitors must pass between the Lion's Feet — all that remains of an enormous stone sculpture that once guarded the entrance to the citadel — and ascend steep iron stairs. "Usually, there are queues to go up, but it's still very quiet," says our guide Richard Pieres. Pre-pandemic, Sigiriya received about 1,500 visitors a day, but when we visit there are just over 100.

In the water gardens, at the base of the rock, I meet Adikari. He has worked as a freelance guide at the site for 22 years, offering historical background and a helping hand to travellers who struggle with the stairs. "Life has been hard. The price of rice jumped from 6 rupees per kilo to 65. For nine months altogether, no factories were open for other work. Sometimes we ate, sometimes not. December was better — there were more tourists," he says.

Reaching the flat top, I wander across terraced brick foundations — the last vestiges of this citadel in the sky — and past a bathing pool, still filled with water, to the rock's edge. From here, the whole world opens up. Rocks give way to trees, then rice paddies, then a shimmering lake and, in the far distance, layer upon layer of hills silhouetted in the hazy, lazy heat.

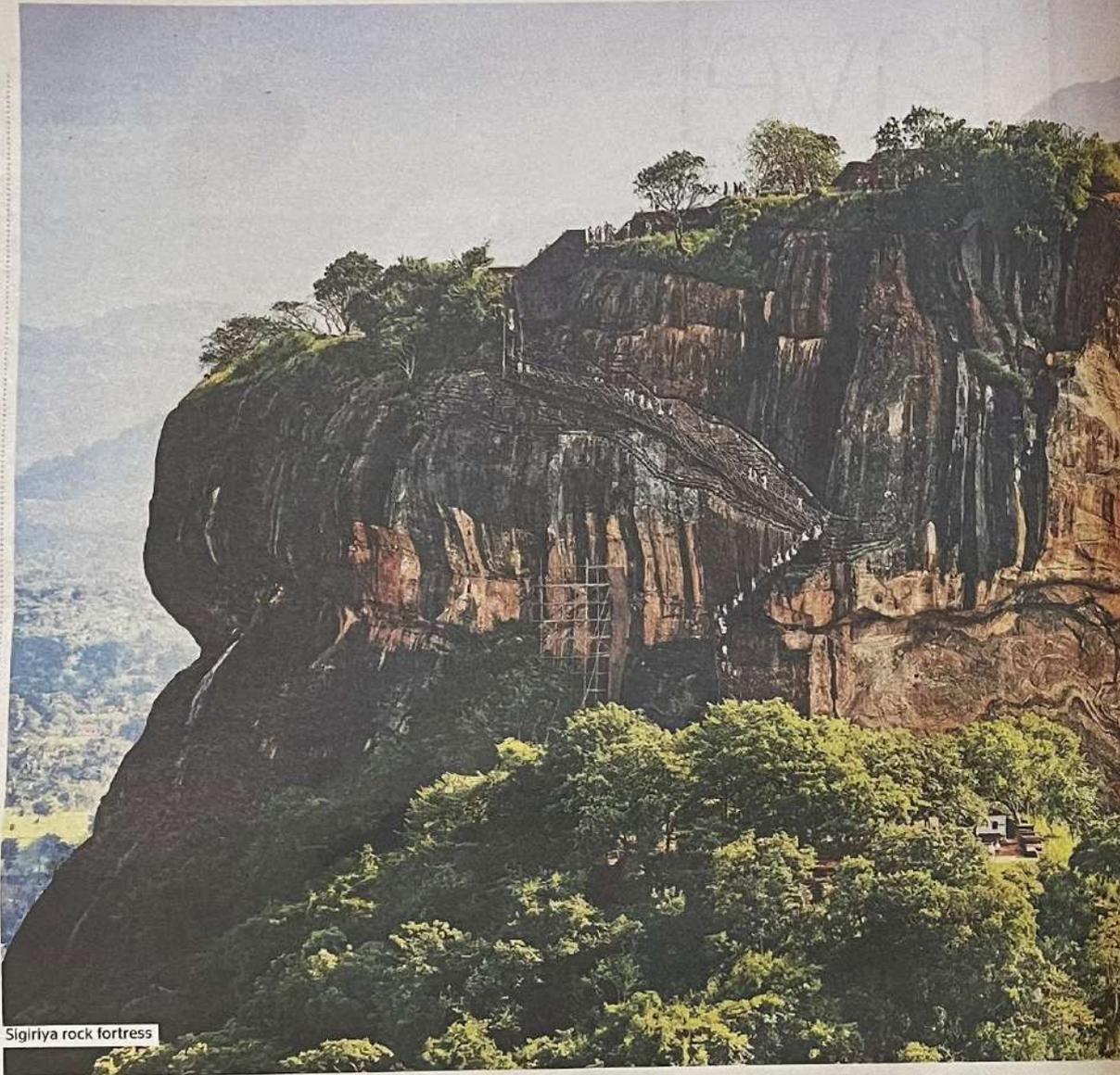
A short drive south of Sigiriya, we reach the Unesco-listed Dambulla Cave Temple. Eight years before the birth of Christ, the island's King Valagamba hid here after being overthrown by invading kings from southern India. When he later reclaimed power, he had the interior of five caves embellished with rock-hewn statues and intricate frescoes in honour of Buddha. Today, they are among the best-preserved cave paintings in southeast Asia.

I slip off my sandals, the stones cool on my soles, and squeeze into the narrow first cave. A 14m-long Buddha reclines on his side, face resting on a rolled-up pillow. Every inch of wall is painted with bodhisattvas (followers of Buddha), their heads all turned toward the statue, palms pressed together in prayer. The Buddha's enormous feet are painted with lotus flowers and still bear shimmers of ancient gold, round about lie offerings of fresh frangipani and jasmine.

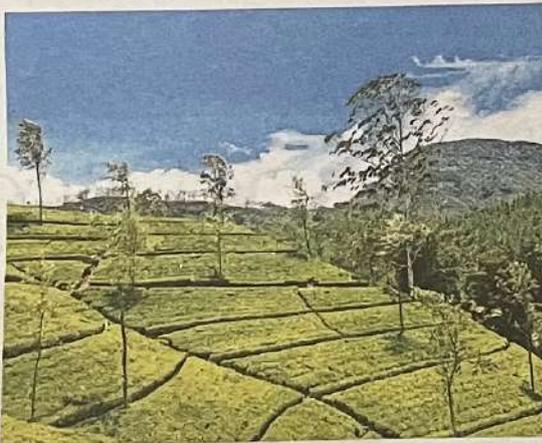
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Outside, a handful of men are hawking moonstone necklaces, wooden fans, postcards and sarongs. One, with a thick crop of black hair greying at the temples, is called Anurra. He has worked as a tout here for 35 years. "Normally, we see 700 people or more a day, during the pandemic it was 30 maximum," he says sadly, pointing to the now 40 or so travellers milling in and out of the caves.

But the lockdowns were not without their upsides, as I found in Yala National Park, in the southeast of the island.



Sigiriya rock fortress



Tea plantations in Nuwara Eliya, central Sri Lanka

Outside Africa, it's one of the best places in the world to see leopards. We trundle through the gates at 6am as sunrise paints the sky pastel pink. Storks stand in the shallows of lakes; still surfaces studded with the crinkled heads and tails of crocodiles. The damp sandy road is pockmarked with tantalising paw prints.

Our guide here, Chanika, has been visiting the park since he was a child, and says he saw the behaviour of the wildlife change during the three months the park

was closed. "Normally, we would only see Sri Lankan black bears in the evenings, but since the end of lockdown we've had regular sightings in the mornings too," he says with a smile. The animals seem more relaxed and the closure has broken the pattern of elephants approaching visitors for food too.

In another lake, water buffaloes wallow up to their necks, their guardian white egrets ever near. Suddenly, the bark of a sambar deer breaks through the bird-song and a flash of feline spots and swinging tail appears from around a gorse bush across the water. Word goes out via mobile phones to other guides and within minutes a roar of 4x4s crush together to get a glimpse of the leopard. It feels chaotic and jarring, despite the fact that, as Chanika tells me, there are only half as many Jeeps here as there would have been pre-pandemic. And it's hard to resent the number of leopard-watchers. Guides can only work during the February-June season, says Chanika. "During lockdown expenses

were high and income was low, we had little support from the government. We need as many visitors as possible."

It hits home again and again as we travel around the country. In the central highlands, our bus snakes around the lush steep terraces en route to a tea factory. A young man in jeans and flip-flops stands by the road holding a bouquet of red roses aloft.

Each time we turn a corner, he scrambles through the undergrowth to meet the bus at the next bend. The third time, we stop. He leans in the door, heaving for breath. Once we've bought a few flowers, he tells us that while he did find work during the pandemic, as a road-roller earning 3,000 rupees (€11) per day, selling his flowers to just three tourist buses will earn him double that.

At our final stop in Galle, the glass-clear waves gently lap against the old Dutch-built bastion walls. There are no signs of the 2004 tsunami that swept Galle off its feet. Men in crisp whites are practising on the new cricket ground and the



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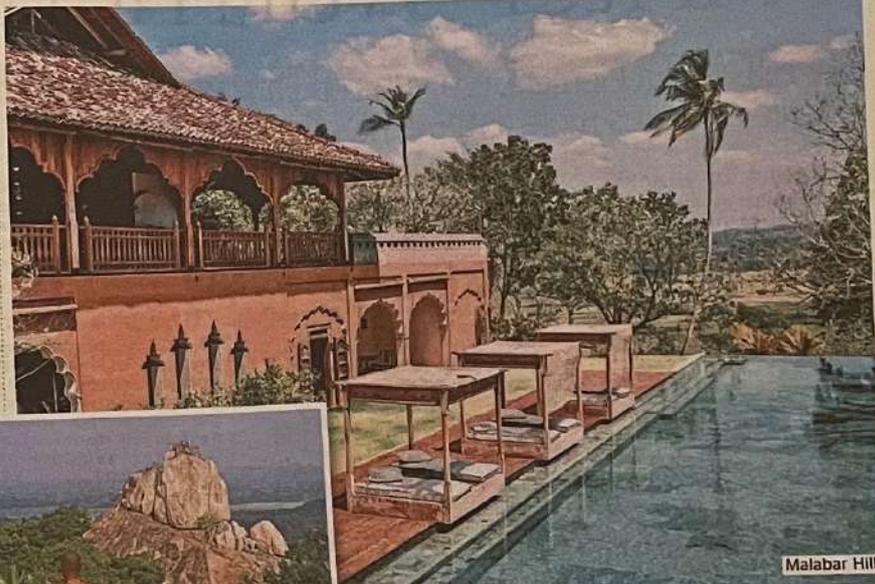
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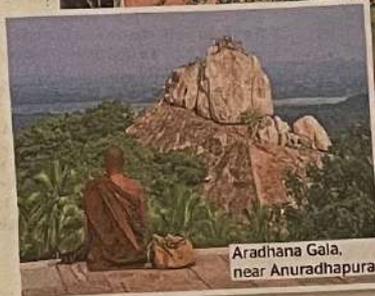
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Malabar Hill



Aradhana Gala, near Anuradhapura

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If you really want to explore Sri Lanka, and can spare the time, some affordable two or three-week stays are available. The west coast's contemporary Taprobana Wadduwa affords the best flexibility. The 27-room hotel and its large, blue-tiled pool lie close to Buddhist temples, turtle-nesting coves and waterfalls, plus Kalutara's lively restaurant scene. You can join classes to make crab curry or try the local "toddy" palm wine, while Galle is a two-hour drive. **Details** Twenty-one nights' B&B from £1,333pp, including flights (mercuryholidays.co.uk)

### Gemstones, temples and tea

Remember Princess Diana's engagement ring? Its focal blue sapphire supposedly comes from Sri Lanka. On this plush private itinerary you'll visit mines and jewellers in the hub of Ratnapura while staying at an aptly opulent hotel. Before that are the tea plantations plus the Cultural Triangle region's cave temples and — seen from a hot-air balloon — the lonely fortress of Sigiriya on a 180m rock pillar. You'll even receive a blessing from the island's chief Buddhist monk. **Details** Twelve nights' half-board from £7,000pp, including flights and activities (srilankabespoke.com)

### Foodie exploration

Uniting Resplendent Ceylon's three small, swanky resorts, this new culinary itinerary starts by teaching about tea production around the Dunkeld Estate's bright green terraces. In Yala National Park leopard safaris are followed by outdoor fine dining that showcases Sri Lankan staples atop seaside dunes. And at Cape Weligama breakfasts combine Sri Lankan snacks such as egg

hoppers and coconut-flavoured pittu rice rolls. You'll also be taken to a seafood market before having tuition in local dishes. **Details** Seven nights' full board from £4,650pp, including flights and all private transfers (redsavannah.com)

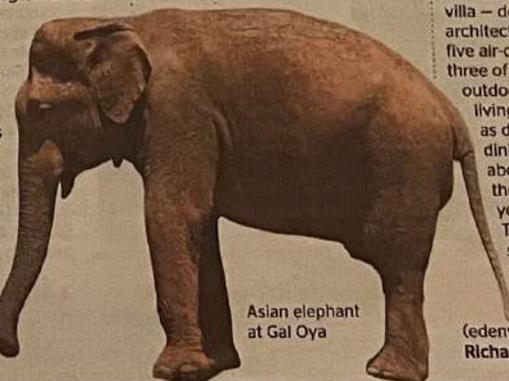
### The empty north

Few holidaymakers frequent Sri Lanka's northern provinces, even though they're open after decades of conflict. Great for second-time visits, this private tour presents wild Wilpattu National Park, its safari drives revealing leopards and elephants, and the flamingo-lined Manar Island. You then travel by train to the leafy Tamil city of Jaffna and its multicoloured Hindu temples. Before finishing at Sigiriya, you'll spend two days relaxing, snorkelling or diving off Nilavelli's pearly white beach. **Details** Fourteen nights' B&B from £3,395pp, including eight further meals, flights and guide (bambootravel.co.uk)

### Villa gathering

Sleeping 14, Claughton House is a great base for large groups of friends or family. As well as a new oceanfront infinity pool, this staffed villa — designed by the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa — contains five air-conditioned bedrooms, three of them king-sized with outdoor showers. An open-sided living area also looks seawards, as do gardens and the poolside dining pavilion. Elevated just above a mile-long surf beach, the south coast location puts you close to Galle fort's shops, Tangalle's safer swimming shore and leopard safaris in Yala National Park. **Details** Seven nights' self-catering for 14 from £6,825 (edenvillas.com). Fly to Colombo

Richard Mellor



Asian elephant at Gal Oya

### Need to know

Emma Thomson was a guest of Cox & Kings, which has a 12-night tour to Sigiriya, Dambulla, Kandy, tea country, Yala and Galle from £1,895pp, B&B, including flights, transfers and guiding (coxandkings.co.uk). Travellers must have proof of a negative PCR test; before travel you must apply for an e-visa (£26; eta.gov.lk) and Sri Lankan-specific Covid health insurance and complete a health declaration form on arrival. See srilanka.travel and gov.lk

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# THE TIMES

WEEKEND

## Sri Lanka at its most glorious

Its beaches, temples and tea country are calling — go now and you'll have them to yourself

Emma Thomson

19 Feb 2022 01:01:00

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[Sri Lanka’s most beautiful beaches](#)

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[Best Sri Lanka tours: 19 incredible ways to see the country](#)

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"We've been the lucky ones," says Jane Collins, a fellow tourist in my group, about being among the first to return to Sri Lanka. "To enjoy the stillness of places without the crowds has been great, and also to feel we can contribute in some small way to people's livelihoods. To other travellers I say, 'Come!'"

Travel at the moment is a never-ending dance — tricky to get every step right, but the rewards are there for the taking.

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Surf, cycling and wildlife — more Sri Lanka trips

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Full-board doubles from £245, including a five-hour cruise (

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Remember Princess Diana's engagement ring? Its focal blue sapphire supposedly comes from Sri Lanka. On this plush private itinerary you'll visit mines and jewellers in the hub of Ratnapura while staying at an aptly opulent hotel. Before that are the tea plantations plus the Cultural Triangle region's cave temples and — seen from a hot-air balloon — the lonely fortress of Sigiriya on a 180m rock pillar. You'll even receive a blessing from the island's chief Buddhist monk.

#### Details

Twelve nights' half-board from £7,000pp, including flights and activities (

[srilanka-bespoke.com](http://srilanka-bespoke.com)

)

### Foodie exploration

Uniting Resplendent Ceylon's three small, swanky resorts, this new culinary itinerary starts by teaching about tea production around the Dunkeld Estate's bright green terraces. In Yala National Park leopard safaris

are followed by outdoor fine dining that showcases Sri Lankan staples from atop seaside dunes. And at Cape Weligama breakfasts combine Sri Lankan snacks such as egg hoppers and coconut-flavoured pittu rice rolls. You'll also be taken to a seafood market before having tuition in local dishes.

#### Details

Seven nights' full board from £4,650pp, including flights and all private transfers (

[redsavannah.com](http://redsavannah.com)

)

#### The empty north

Few holidaymakers frequent Sri Lanka's northern provinces, even though they're open after decades of conflict. Great for second-time visits, this private tour presents wild Wilpattu National Park, its safari drives revealing leopards and elephants, and the flamingo-lined Manar Island. You then travel by train to the leafy Tamil city of Jaffna and its multicoloured Hindu temples. Before finishing at Sigiriya, you'll spend two days relaxing, snorkelling or diving off Nilaveli's pearly white beach.

#### Details

Fourteen nights' B&B from £3,395pp, including eight further meals, flights and guide (

[bambootravel.co.uk](http://bambootravel.co.uk)

)

#### Villa gathering

Sleeping 14, Cloughton House is a great base for large groups of friends or family. As well as a new oceanfront infinity pool, this staffed villa — designed by the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa — contains five air-conditioned bedrooms, three of them king-sized with outdoor showers. An open-sided living area also looks seawards, as do gardens and the poolside dining pavilion. Elevated just above a mile-long surf beach, the south coast location puts you close to Galle fort's shops, Tangalle's safer swimming shore and leopard safaris in Yala National Park.

#### Details

Seven nights' self-catering for 14 from £6,825 (

[edenvillas.com](http://edenvillas.com)

). Fly to Colombo

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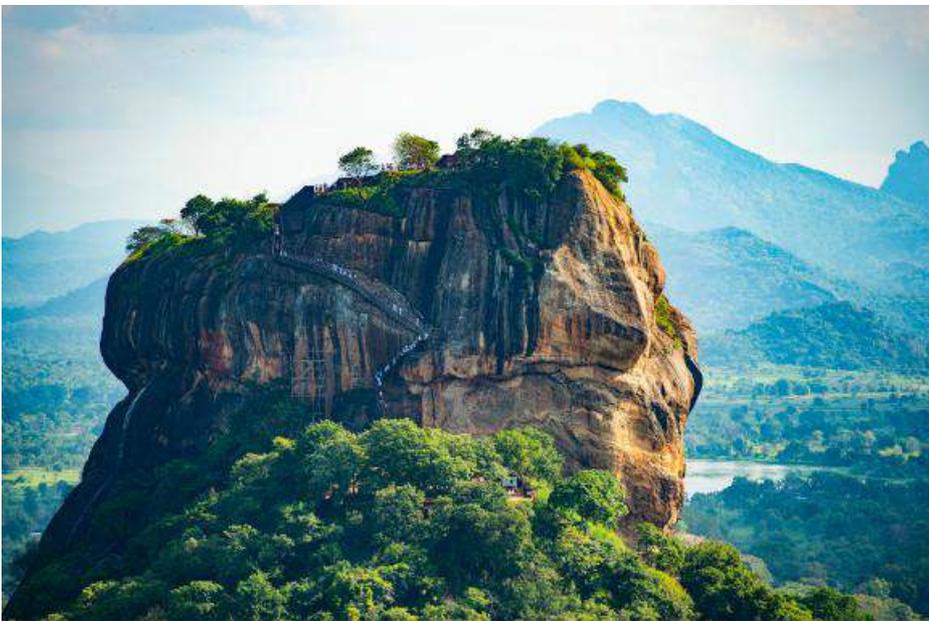


Dondra Head Lighthouse, southern Sri Lanka

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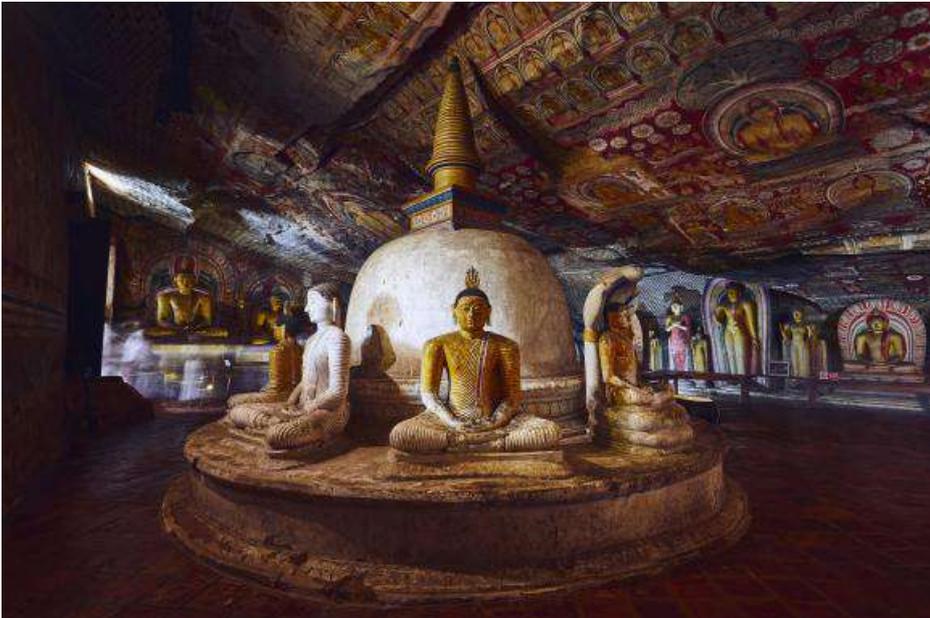
**The Temple of the Tooth, Kandy**  
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**Sigiriya rock fortress**  
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**Monkeys in Kandy**



**Dambulla Cave Temple, near Sigiriya**

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**An elephant at Sigiriya**

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Tea plantations in Nuwara Eliya, central Sri Lanka

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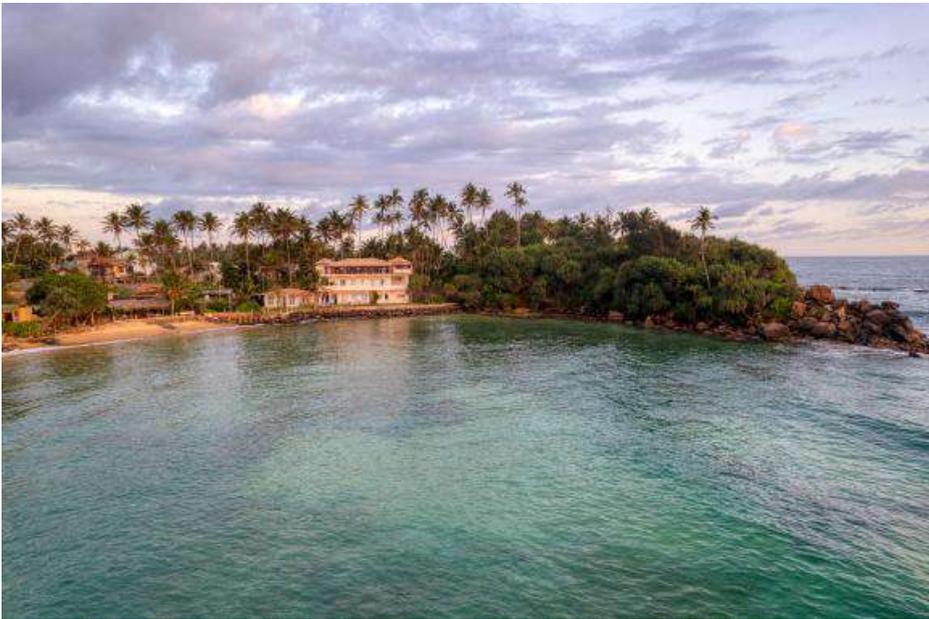
The pool at Malabar Hill



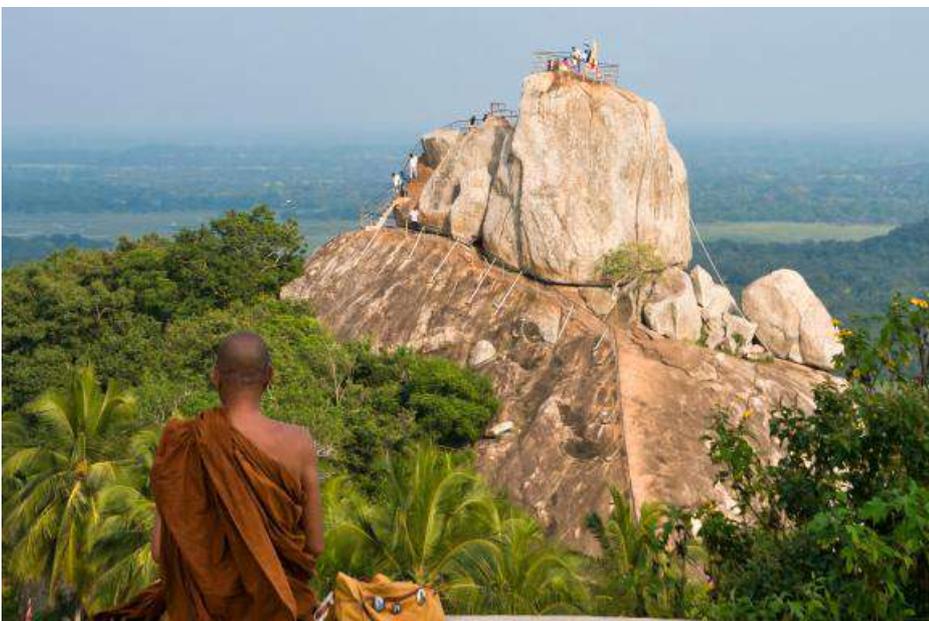
The Yathra eco-houseboat



Wild camping in Gal Oya



Yoga and surfing lessons are available at Illusion Cove



Aradhana Gala rock, near Anuradhapura

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A room at the Taprobana Wadduwa resort



The pool at Lavendar House, Pussellawa



Tea is produced on the Dunkeld Estate



A Hindu temple in Jaffna

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