

Sri Lanka as a travel destination

Each of Sri Lanka's many attractions deserves more time than most tour operators allow for on their round trips. But tourism has almost come to a standstill due to the world situation. Russian and Ukrainian tourists have made up the majority of visitors to the country and have also been the main destination for Sri Lanka's tea exports. Above all, the people of Sri Lanka with their warmth deserve it for the country to continue on the list of the most interesting countries.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country and in 2019 it was number one in the popularity list of the internationally renowned travel guide publisher Lonely Planet. Today it is going through a crisis because the respective political leaders of the past decades have made the country increasingly dependent on the competing powers China and India. National bankruptcy has not yet been averted.



The typical Buddhist flags fly around the pagoda of the Golden Temple of Dambulla / © Photo: Georg Berg

After 25 years of civil war, which lasted until 2009 in the Tamil-populated north of the island, the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups are mostly friendly to one another. Buddhism and Hinduism are the two main religions ahead of Christianity and Islam, and their temples set many colorful accents in the attractive landscape.



There are more than 48 Buddha statues in the Dambulla Cave Temples. Naga statues represent Buddha protected by a king cobra during

meditation / © Photo: Georg Berg

Above the city of Dambulla in the central highlands, after an easy hike, we are fascinated by the Buddhist cave temples carved into a granite rock. Numerous gilded sculptures and murals in the Kandy style can be found in the caves, which have been continuously used as a monastery for over 2,000 years. So it is not surprising that UNESCO has included this impressive place in its World Heritage List.



Erected out of gratitude: Next to Buddha's statue is that of Kirti Sri Rajasinha, who revived Buddhism in Sri Lanka as King of Kandy in the 18th century / © Photo: Georg Berg

An offshoot of the tree is venerated in the monastery courtyard, under which the founder of the religion, Buddha, is said to have had his decisive enlightenment 400 years before Christ. Apart from this religious origin, Buddhist practice differs from that in other countries such as Tibet or Thailand. Hira, our guide, pours out many interesting stories in every corner of the temple. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, we cannot classify them in a way that would be appropriate for Buddhist teachings and their patient striving for knowledge. Because on the same day, the wild elephants of the Minneriya National Park are on the program.



There are even indications of wild elephants on one of the few highways in Sri Lanka / © Photo: Georg Berg

The monsoon rains start on time in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has pleasant travel weather all year round. The weather tends to change over the course of each day and after a sunny morning, late afternoon rain is not only welcome to the locals. After all, water is precious and has been collected in mostly man-made reservoirs for centuries.



It is difficult to say whether there are as many jeeps as there are elephants in Minneriya National Park. In any case, we saw more than 100 elephants in the wide plain / © Photo: Georg Berg

As predicted, the pleasantly warm monsoon rain begins punctually at 3:30 p.m. when we board our safari vehicles at the entrance to the Minneriya National Park. We drive alternately through thorny undergrowth or dense forests to where the wild elephants prefer to stay. As early as the 3rd century, the water of the Amban River was dammed to form the almost 20 square kilometer Minneriya reservoir.



Standing in an open jeep, you meet the wild elephants at eye level / © Photo: Georg Berg

Visitors do not keep the pachyderms from their obstinate occupation. Apparently strolling, the elephants cover long distances, eat, take a bath in the Minneriya reservoir or a small waterhole and come quite close to

the safari vehicles. The drivers of the four-wheel drive jeeps only have enormous respect for elephant cows with offspring. Even in the deepest mud, you always have to be ready to go forward.

Sri Lanka's imposing Sigiriya Rock Fortress

The next morning, the sun greets us again and we set off for Sigiriya Rock Fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The roads are narrow and you rarely manage more than 40 kilometers per hour in Sri Lanka.



Narrow streets or even a peacock slowly striding across the asphalt ensure deceleration / © Photo: Georg Berg

If one correctly interprets the historical graffiti lying on the ascent of the megalith, it is arguably one of the world's oldest tourist attractions. Before that we try to find out from a collection of signs what is forbidden or required on the site.



Hmmm? So you are probably not allowed to drive or park on the site. However, there are crocodiles, elephants and monkeys, but they must not be fed under any circumstances ... you could be taken away in handcuffs / © Photo: Georg Berg

The way to the rock fortress on the 200 meter high megalite leads through one of the oldest gardens in Asia. The extensive grounds were laid out under King Kasyapa in the 5th century. After killing his father, King Dhatusena, he was safe here for 2 decades from the revenge of the heir apparent, his half-brother

Moggallana.



The water gardens are located in the flat part of the castle complex / © Photo: Georg Berg

In the flat part, beginning with the water gardens, the path over the boulder and terraced gardens becomes steeper and steeper. After some time you reach a small intermediate plateau, from which the narrow, steep path leads up to the actual castle between two lion paws carved into the rock. At the foot of the steep and impregnable lion rock, a garden landscape stretches. Smaller boulders were harmoniously embedded in the lawn and water areas in their original place by the master builders.



Brick walls nestle gently against the natural rock below the rock fortress of Sigiriya / © Photo: Georg Berg



Wild bees have built their nest at the steepest point of the rock fortress Sigiriya / © Photo: Georg Berg

Once you have reached the highest point in the stream of visitors step by step on the narrow, steep path, you are amazed at the vast extent of the palace ruins. While the gaze enjoys the wonderfully sweeping views in all directions, it is hard to believe that this fort has been the capital of Sri Lanka for only two decades.



Breathtaking view from the Sigiriya Rock Fortress over rice fields and distant mountain ranges / © Photo: Georg Berg

Buddha's Tooth in the Temple of Kandy

The capital of the Central Province in the highlands of Sri Lanka is the country's most important Buddhist pilgrimage site. Once a day, the top floor of the grand temple fills with devotees who have flocked from across the country to catch a glimpse of the Buddha's left canine in Sri Lanka's former capital.



In the spacious entrance area of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, musicians who inherited this art form from their fathers play drums, while upstairs, where photography is not allowed, the faithful jostle in front of the reliquary / © Photo: Georg Berg

An extremely slow rhythm of drums reinforces the deep religious devotion of the devotees who have brought flowers and gifts for the monks in every corner of the temple.



Buddhist believers symbolize their wishes with temple flowers / © Photo: Georg Berg

The best Ceylon tea grows in the highlands of Sri Lanka

The cooler climate and several hours of fog every day allow a mildly aromatic tea of the best quality to thrive on the tea plantations of the central highlands. The pickers are on the move from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. On their backs they carry a sack that can hold 20 kg of the youngest light green leaves that have grown in the last two weeks. These can then be further processed in the tea factory on the same day.



Tea pickers at Nuwara Eliya / © Photo: Georg Berg

The fresh tea leaves first have to wither in the air for 24 hours before they are processed into different types of black tea in several stages.



The fresh tea leaves first have to wither in the air for 24 hours in the tea factory / © Photo: Georg Berg

After six weeks at the latest, the tea is bought by buyers from all over the world at the auction in the capital Colombo.



A hundredweight of the best quality: Grade A Orange Pekoe / © Photo: Georg Berg

Travel on the world's slowest express train

A [breathtaking train journey](#) begins at Nanu Oya station , which takes us 60 kilometers through the mountains of Sri Lanka. Although seats were reserved in the panoramic carriage, I didn't stay seated during the four-hour journey. It's too nice to sit on the floor in the open train door with a view of waterfalls and tea plantations during the journey.



During the train journey, Georg Berg entrusts his camera to a fellow passenger and has him take a picture of him / © Photo: Georg Berg

Soft tourism in harmony with agriculture



The swimming pool offers an unobstructed view of rice fields / © Photo: Georg Berg

The Jetwing Kaduraketha Hotel in the hilly agricultural region south of the central highlands is a good example of the successful coexistence of tourism and local infrastructure.



Ishanda, the resort's environmentalist, shows where we are on his Sri Lankan palm. As an environmentalist employed by the hotel, he also maintains contact with the village community / © Photo: Georg Berg

Accompanied by our personal butler Prabath Madushanh and the environmentalist Ishanda Seneviratna employed by the hotel, we start a two-hour bike tour through the surrounding area. The environment here is understood not only as nature, but above all as well as the social environment. We meet farmers with whom the preparation of the rice fields is discussed and learn how the hotel secures their economic existence. The food processed in the hotel is bought from the independent farmers in the immediate vicinity. In order not to be endangered by possible bad harvests in their existence, they also receive grants for their seeds every year.



"Ayubowan" (may you live long) A farmer's family calls us the typical greeting / © Photo: Georg Berg

Sustainability has many facets

Staying at the Jetwing Kaduruketha hotel complex gradually reveals how pleasant sustainable living can be. The guest rooms are spread out in separate bungalows on the extensive shaded grounds. Through the windows, which are only closed with wooden bars and insect screens, you have direct contact with nature. Without air conditioning you can enjoy the peace and the scent of nature. Bicycles are available to every guest for free.



Every bungalow is a perfect place to rest / © Photo: Georg Berg

Energy is saved here without the guests having to forego amenities. Carefully planned air circulation eliminates the need for air conditioning. Hot water is obtained from solar energy and only LED lamps light up instead of light bulbs. The waste is separated and the biogas used in the plant is produced from compost. In the kitchen, firewood is used for cooking, which is a by-product of cinnamon production. Drinking water and body care products are available in reusable glass bottles.



The design of the rooms is modern and uses typical local material. Lamps are made, for example, from the hoes that are typically used to till the rice fields / © Photo: Georg Berg



Farmer preparing a paddy field / © Photo: Georg Berg



Peacocks can often be seen in Sri Lanka and also on the hotel grounds / © Photo: Georg Berg

An ornithological walk with expert guidance awakens the spirits before breakfast. The staff comes from the surrounding area and meets the guests unobtrusively in excellent English without leaving their own way of life. Small rituals such as the Buddhist blessing of the tourist vehicle take place rather casually.



Buddhist blessing for a safe journey. While the suitcases are being loaded at the back, the hotel manager sprinkles water with flower petals on the front of the vehicle. This should ensure that the next goal is reached safely / © Photo: Georg Berg

[George Berg](#)

July 21, 2022