

Jewel in the ocean: Sri Lanka

With long pristine beaches, verdant expanses of lofty rolling hills, and rushing waterfalls on every turn on the snaking roads, Sri Lanka should definitely be on the bucket list of next destinations. Especially as the government aims to double tourism numbers to four million in 2020, ensuring a welcoming host, it is only more attractive as Lonely Planet declared it the No. 1 travel destination in 2019! Lucky then, we visited this land of mostly unspoiled and unblemished vistas in December 2019.

KANDY

Colombo, the country's capital is said to be crowded, and we gave it a miss, ending up in Kandy directly from the airport. A small hill town, it has beautiful views of little hamlets on verdant slopes. On the day cut short by unexpected rainfall, as well as fatigue, we did not explore Kandy much—only visiting the lake by Temple of the Tooth Relic—and retired for the day. Next day, early in the soft morning sunshine, we headed out to go to Sigiriya.

On the way, we stopped at a village experience, as a typical touristy thing to do, but it made for a nice peaceful experience. The package offered a bullock



cart ride for the entire group of 8, a traditional lunch, and a short boat ride. The bullock cart ride, although once a common feature of Bengal, was still a novelty as it was the first time for many of us. The bulls, called Raju and Bhai, were huge, powerful beasts, and pulled the fully loaded cart with surprising ease. The lunch, cooked by a simple village lady, was delicious – plain rice, spicy sambhar, pumpkin curry and thinly sliced fried fish freshly caught from the river, served on banana leaves over flat wicker baskets. I am sure the cook has never seen a group of people simply inhale that amount of food for one meal. But it wasn't completely our fault, it was simply too delicious to stop for decorum!

The reserved tour bus took its time to get to Sigiriya, giving the sun a chance to tone down its ferocity. Also known as Sinhaagiri or Lion Rock, Sigiriya is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Legend has it built by the Maya Danava of Mahabharata fame, as per the wishes of King Ravana's father. Historically, the area around the rock has been inhabited since the 3rd century BCE, but the true marvel are the remains of a fortress capital of King



Kashyapa, said to have been built in the 5th century C.E. The location of choice? Atop a lone standing rock-plateau, towering 660 feet above its surroundings, and replete with intricately built rooms, and beautiful frescoes painted on the rock face and caves leading to the summit. Suitable for the relatively fit, it is a steep climb, but totally worth the effort.

NUWARA ELIYA

The next day we headed off the coolest spots and main tea producing area in Sri Lanka, at the altitudes ranging around 1,868 m (6,128 ft)— Nuwara Eliya. Sometimes translated as the city of light, it is overlooked by country's

tallest mountain Pidurutalagala. The best place to enjoy the various types of teas, obviously, enhanced by the chilly nights, it is also home to some lush strawberry gardens. A brilliant treat was eating fresh strawberries dunked in thick fresh cream, right outside the garden. Of the menu celebrating strawberries in every way, no one can have just one. Centred around Lake Gregory, this is a peaceful hill town. It comes alive with festivities during the Sinhalese New Year festival in April.

We had planned to visit the Horton Plains National Park from here, but heavy rains in the week prior had blocked off the roads. The plains, locally known as Maha Eliya Plains, have revealed tools from the Balangod culture, more than 38000 years old, and now have montane forests home to many endemic species of flora and fauna, and the headwaters of major Sri Lankan rivers like the Mahaweli, Kelani, and Walawe.

On the way out of Nuwara Eliya, we visited the Hakgala Botanical Gardens. It is a vast area of tastefully curated gardens, established in the latter half of the 18th century, with various themed and flower gardens, lovely natural hilly streams, and artsy wooden bridges.

ELLA

Usually tourists prefer to take the famous train from Kandy to Ella for the beautiful views, and the famed 9-arches stone bridge, but our oversight in planning meant tickets were sold out. So we went by the same bus, and hopping around from shop to shop on the only street of the Ella, got an early dinner and checked in to our BnB.

CONTINUED TO PAGE 12

◆ HOROSCOPE ◆



ARIES (MAR. 21-APR. 20)

Join a gym if possible. Health issues will hamper your schedule. Be patient with your partner. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



TAURUS (APR. 21-MAY 21)

Avoid unfavourable situations. Family members may bring along trouble. Don't let your partner force you. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.



GEMINI (MAY 22-JUN. 21)

Keep your money safe. Learn from those with experience. Do something nice for your partner. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



CANCER (JUN. 22-JUL. 22)

Do something for yourself. Surround yourself with people who provide knowledge. Don't get too sentimental. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



LEO (JUL. 23-AUG. 22)

Pursue good ideas for instant success. Get a handle on your personal problems. Learn to let go. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



VIRGO (AUG. 23-SEP. 23)

Go with the flow. Beware of untrustworthy people. Interaction with colleagues will only be upsetting. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.



LIBRA (SEP. 24-OCT. 23)

Keep your emotions in check. Try not to overspend on loved ones. Act quickly on opportunities. Your lucky day this week will be Thursday.



SCORPIO (OCT. 24-NOV. 21)

Don't be too critical about things. Show your dedication to your partner. Get together with friends. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



SAGITTARIUS (NOV. 22-DEC. 21)

Health issues can slow you down. Invite people over. Be prepared to neutralise any threats. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.



CAPRICORN (DEC. 22-JAN. 20)

Exotic travel destinations are what you need now. You're in need of love. Don't bother getting even. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.



AQUARIUS (JAN. 21-FEB. 19)

Spend time with your lover this week. Change is much-needed. Trips will be very enjoyable. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.



PISCES (FEB. 20-MAR. 20)

Listen to other people's complaints. Don't be a pest this week. Make plans to mix business with pleasure. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.