Sri Lanka

Pre Tour Information

Sri Lanka: The Gem of the Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka, known as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," is a captivating island nation brimming with natural beauty, rich history, and cultural diversity. This tropical paradise boasts an impressive range of landscapes: lush rainforests, scenic tea plantations, and golden beaches fringe its coasts. Ancient sites like Sigiriya Rock Fortress and the sacred city of Anuradhapura reveal a history that dates back over 2,500 years, while vibrant festivals, intricate temples, and colonial-era architecture showcase its cultural heritage.

Sri Lanka is famed for its wildlife, with national parks like Yala and Udawalawe offering sightings of elephants, leopards, and countless bird species. Adventure seekers can hike the misty mountains of Ella, surf along the beaches of Arugam Bay, or dive into the crystal-clear waters around Trincomalee. The island's renowned tea country in the Central Highlands provides a serene escape, where visitors can tour historic estates and sample world-famous Ceylon tea.

With its welcoming people, diverse cuisine, and wealth of unique experiences, Sri Lanka is a destination that offers an immersive journey into both nature and culture, making it ideal for travellers seeking variety and beauty.

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What to Expect When Visiting Sri Lanka for the First Time

Sri Lanka is a country that engages all the senses—fragrant spices in the air, the distant roar of the ocean, the sight of elephants wandering along rural roads, and the heat of a perfectly spiced curry setting your taste buds on fire. From lush tea plantations to ancient temples and palm-fringed beaches, this island is a tropical paradise with an untamed edge.

But paradise comes with its quirks. Tuk-tuk drivers can be persistent, monkeys have a knack for stealing your snacks, and road travel often feels like a live-action video game. Trains run on their own mysterious schedule, power cuts are common, and spicy toothpaste might just be the first surprise of the day. Sri Lanka doesn't always run smoothly, but that's part of its charm.

If you come expecting perfection, you might struggle. But if you embrace the beautiful chaos, slow down to match the island's rhythm, and approach every unexpected moment with a sense of adventure, Sri Lanka will reward you with an unforgettable experience. Here's what you should know before you go.

The Rickshaw Mafia - Tuk-tuk drivers in Sri Lanka are often called the "mafia," and for good reason. Negotiating fares can feel like a battle, with the infamous "foreigner tax" doubling rates, fees invented for parking, or detours to gem shops thrown in. Some even insist on taking you to a "better" hotel to help out their friends. Drivers cluster near stations and tourist spots, where scams are common, but ride-sharing apps like PickMe offer a scam-free alternative with upfront pricing.

Spicy Surprises - Sri Lankan curries are not for the faint-hearted—or faint-tongued. Chilli is king here, and even seasoned spice lovers might find themselves reaching for a tissue (or a fire extinguisher). Don't expect creamy, comforting Indian-style curries; these are often watery, fiercely spiced, and unapologetically fiery. Anything edible is fair game for a curry: mango, banana, jackfruit, fish, egg—you name it, they've curried it. Consider it a culinary adventure—one bite at a time.

Horns, Herds, and Hold-Ups - Driving in Sri Lanka is an adventure in itself. Honking is a language here—it's not aggressive but a constant "I'm here!" warning to everyone else on the road. The chorus of beeps, combined with chaotic traffic where lanes seem optional and buses charge through like they're in a demolition derby, can feel overwhelming. Add wandering cows, inexplicable traffic jams, and narrow winding roads, and even short journeys can stretch into epic ones. Patience is key—just sit back and embrace the beautiful chaos.

The Art of Saying No - Street vendors and beggars can be remarkably determined, often turning a simple "no" into the start of an unrelenting sales pitch. This stems from economic hardships caused by past conflicts, natural disasters, and political challenges. While most Sri Lankans are honest and hardworking, those approaching you in tourist areas or transport hubs are often looking for a quick sale—or a sneaky fee. Assume any unsolicited interaction comes with a price tag. Use "Epah" (I don't want) to politely or firmly refuse, depending on your tone. Genuine beggars appreciate tiny sums (5-10 rupees), but supporting local businesses and tipping generously is a better way to help.

Embrace the Chaos - Sri Lanka's infrastructure can be a wild ride. Roads are rough, urban areas often feel unfinished, and power cuts are a regular occurrence—even in cities where Wi-Fi might only work when it feels like it. Packing a power bank can be a lifesaver here. And timing? Forget it. Trains are late, plans are fluid, and life moves at its own relaxed pace. Go with the flow, and you'll find the charm in Sri Lanka's beautifully unpredictable rhythm!

Monkeys & Lizards - Monkeys are everywhere, and they're bold! They'll steal snacks, sunglasses, or anything shiny if you leave it unattended. Hotel balconies, temple grounds, or even roadside stalls are their playgrounds. Keep your belongings close, or risk a monkey's idea of "souvenir shopping."

Spicy Toothpaste - Your hotel or homestay might provide toothpaste that tastes like cloves or cinnamon—and it's a spicy shock first thing in the morning. Local toiletries often have natural, Ayurvedic ingredients, so be prepared for earthy scents and unique textures. Also, Geckos are common in homes and guesthouses, and you'll often hear them chirping or whistling at night. They're harmless and even helpful—they keep pesky insects in check!

Back from the brink - Sri Lanka is a destination that offers raw, unfiltered charm. Its tourism industry is still finding its footing after years of challenges, which means the experience feels refreshingly authentic and not over-commercialised. The island's stunning beaches, ancient temples, lush tea plantations, and vibrant wildlife make Sri Lanka an unforgettable adventure.

General Travel Information

Local Emergency

- Fire and rescue services: Call 110.
- Medical emergencies: Call 110. In Colombo, you can also call (+94 11) 269 1111.
- Police: Call 118 or 119 or go to your local police station.
- Tourist police: Call (+94 11) 242 1052 or (+94 11) 242 1451.

Consular & Embassy Assistance

We strongly advise all travellers to take a proactive approach to their safety and well-being by familiarizing themselves with the contact details and address of their local embassy within their destination before embarking on their journey. Knowing how to reach your embassy can provide invaluable support in case of emergencies, unexpected situations, or the need for consular assistance. This essential information ensures that you're well-prepared and equipped to navigate any challenges that might arise during your travels. Your embassy is your lifeline in a foreign land, offering guidance, assistance, and a sense of security while you explore new horizons.

Staying in Touch

Before departing your home country check with your phone supplier to see if it is compatible with the mobile phone networks in the countries that you are travelling to, and how much will it cost to use it abroad. In some of the more rural reaches of Sri Lanka, cell phone coverage is not possible.

Mobile Phones: Sri Lanka has extensive 4G coverage in urban areas, though rural zones may be limited. You can purchase a local SIM card upon arrival, with Dialog, Mobitel, and Airtel as the main providers. Dialog, with the broadest coverage, is a reliable choice for most travellers. SIM cards are available at Colombo Airport or local shops, with packages including data, SMS, and call options. Ensure your phone is unlocked before you arrive, and expect to pay around 1400 LKR ($4 USD) for a basic plan. Public Wi-Fi is also available in hotels and cafes.

Wi-Fi: Wi-Fi is widely available in most urban areas, especially in hotels, cafes, and restaurants. Larger cities like Colombo, Kandy, and Galle typically offer reliable connections in public spaces. Many accommodations include free Wi-Fi, though speeds and reliability can vary significantly. For more stable connections, some places offer paid upgrades. Providers such as SLT (Sri Lanka Telecom) and Dialog are common, and their networks generally support good speeds in urban centres. In rural areas and smaller towns, Wi-Fi availability can be limited.

Electrical Voltage & Plug Adaptors

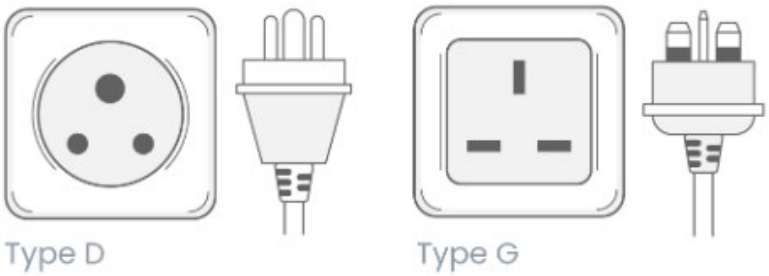
The voltage in Sri Lanka is 220-240 Volts and the two-prong round pin plugs are the most common socket/plug combination.

Adaptors

The shape of plugs will vary from country to country, and sometimes even within a country depending on when that building was built. To plug something from your country of origin into a local socket you'll need an adaptor that fits between the plug and the socket. Because there are many different types of plugs in this region, it may be easier to purchase an all-in-one, universal adaptor/converter combo. Versatile and lightweight, these can

usually be found at your local electronics goods store. If you forget to bring an adaptor, you might also find them for sale at the airport when you are departing.

The outlets and plugs used in Sri Lanka are D & G. Take a look at the pictures below to see what each plug and socket type looks like:



Responsible Tourism

We believe strongly in low-impact or rather positive-impact tourism. Broadly speaking this means that we aim to minimise the negative aspects of tourism on the local cultures and environments that we visit and highlight the positive aspects. Please visit our website for further details and suggestions on how you can be a responsible traveller. https://www.crooked-compass.com/responsible-tourism/

Facts & Figures

Geography & Location

Sri Lanka is a teardrop-shaped island nation in the Indian Ocean, located just south of India. It covers approximately 65,610 square kilometres, with a diverse landscape that includes tropical beaches, lush rainforests, rolling tea plantations, and mountainous highlands. The country is separated from India by the Palk Strait and lies close to the equator, giving it a warm, tropical climate year-round.

Population & Cities

Sri Lanka has a population of around 22 million people. The capital city is Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, which serves as the administrative capital, while Colombo is the largest city and the country's commercial hub. Other notable cities include Kandy (a cultural and religious centre in the central highlands), Galle (a historic coastal city with Dutch colonial architecture), and Jaffna (the vibrant northern city with Tamil influences).

Government & Economy

Sri Lanka is a democratic socialist republic with a president as the head of state and government. The economy is driven by agriculture, tourism, textiles, and tea exports, with Sri Lanka being one of the world's largest producers of Ceylon tea. In recent years, tourism has played an increasingly important role in the country's economy, drawing visitors to its beaches, wildlife, and ancient cultural sites.

Language

In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil are the official languages, while English is widely spoken in urban areas, hotels, and tourist sites. Many locals, especially younger people, speak conversational English, but in rural areas, English speakers may be scarce. Learning a few basic phrases in Sinhala or Tamil, like "Ayubowan" (hello/welcome) and "Bohoma Istuti" (thank you), is appreciated by lcoals. Signs are often in all three languages, though rural signage may be limited. Although Sinhala and Tamil are languages from different sources, both share some common characteristics and obviously have influence on each other's linguistic evolution as well.

Useful Phrases (Sinhala)

Hello: ආයුබෝවන් (āyubōvan)
Thank you: ස්තුතියි (sthūthiyi)
Yes: ඔව් (ow)
No: නැහැ (næhæ)
Please: කරුණාකර (karuṇākara)
Excuse me / Sorry: සමාවෙන්න (samāvenna)
How are you?: ඔයාට කොහොමද? (oyāta kohomada?)
I don't understand: මට තේරෙන්නේ නැහැ (mata therenne næhæ)
Where is...?: කොහෙද...? (koheda...?)
How much is this?: මේක කොච්චරද? (meka kochchara da?)

Useful Phrases (Tamil)

Hello: வணக்கம் (vaṇakkam)
Thank you: நன்றி (nanri)
Yes: ஆமாம் (āmām)
No: இல்லை (illai)
Please: தயவு செய்து (tayavu seydu)
Excuse me / Sorry: மன்னிக்கவும் (maṉṉikkavum)
How are you?: நீங்கள் எப்படி இருக்கிறீர்கள்? (nīṅkaḷ eppaṭi irukkiṟīrkaḷ?)
I don't understand: எனக்கு புரியவில்லை (eṉakku puriyavillai)
Where is...?: எங்கு...? (eṅku...?)
How much is this?: இது எவ்வளவு? (idu evvaḷavu?)

Remember that while these phrases can be helpful, the local language and culture may vary across different regions of Sri Lanka. It's always a good idea to be respectful and open to learning more about the local customs and expressions.

Time Zone

Sri Lanka operates on Sri Lanka Standard Time (SLST), which is GMT+5:30, putting it 5.5 hours behind Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) and 4.5 hours behind during Australian daylight saving. Sri Lanka does not observe daylight saving, so the time difference will remain constant throughout the year.

Religion

Sri Lanka is a deeply religious country, with Buddhism being the dominant faith, followed by around 70% of the population. Other major religions include Hinduism (12.6%), Islam (9.7%), and Christianity (7.4%). Religious festivals and rituals are an integral part of daily life, and visitors will notice numerous temples, mosques, and churches throughout the country.

National Holidays

In Sri Lanka, national holidays significantly affect travel plans, with key dates seeing closures and disruptions. The island celebrates a wide range of holidays, including Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian observances. Every full moon day, or *Poya Day*, is a public holiday, bringing business closures and limited alcohol availability, including at some hotels and restaurants. Banks, government offices, and many shops shut down during major festivals such as Sinhala and Tamil New Year (April 13–14) and Vesak (celebrating Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, usually in May). December 25 (Christmas) and April 14 (Good Friday) impact services as well, especially in Colombo.

Also, expect reduced transport availability during *Poya* days, as bus and train services may run less frequently.

Medical Information

Vaccinations

Please refer to a travel vaccination specialist for the most up-to-date advice about vaccinations for your destination(s). We encourage you to check with your healthcare provider and take their advice based on your current state of health.

Please follow the link to check the TravelVax website:
https://www.travelvax.com.au/

Medical Supplies

This is one adventure where you don't want to forget your medications; it may be hard to get them in the remote reaches of Sri Lanka.

- Pack medications in your carry-on bag to avoid loss and to have them handy. Ensure any liquids or gels are less than 100ml.
- Keep medicines in their original, labelled containers for a quicker security screen at the airport and a better experience if you get stopped by customs while overseas.
- Bring copies of your prescriptions, written using the generic drug name rather than a brand name to be prepared for any unforeseen loss of your medications.
- Carry a letter from your doctor explaining the medications you are using and that they are for personal use.
- Consider bringing a filled prescription antibiotic for gastrointestinal illness, electrolytes and motion sickness medicine if you are susceptible.

Crooked Compass highly recommends that you travel with your first aid kit.

Medical Care

Medical services and care in Colombo are below Australian standards. Outside of Colombo, facilities are extremely limited, especially for mental health and emergency services. Private hospitals will ask you to pay a deposit or prove you have insurance coverage before treating you. Public general hospitals are free for Sri Lankan nationals. Foreigners will need to pay for any treatments received at public general hospitals. Facilities are limited for scuba-diving injuries. Sri Lanka's only operational decompression chamber is at the Sri Lanka Navy Base in Trincomalee. If you become seriously ill or injured, you'll need to be evacuated to a place with better facilities. Medical evacuation can be very expensive.

Allergies & Dietary Requirements

Special dietary requests are required to be notified to us at the time of booking. Although we will use reasonable endeavours to accommodate requests, we cannot guarantee requests will be met by suppliers. It is your responsibility to check that meals and beverages do not contain any allergens.

Catering to allergies and dietary requirements in Sri Lanka can be challenging, particularly outside major tourist areas. While larger hotels and restaurants may offer vegetarian and vegan options, gluten-free and dairy-free alternatives are less common. Rice and coconut-based dishes, like rice and curry or coconut sambal, can suit some dietary needs, but cross-contamination is a risk as kitchens may not have strict allergy protocols. Service providers like Jetwing Hotels and Cinnamon Hotels are generally more familiar with dietary requests, but it’s

wise to inform them in advance. Travellers with severe allergies should consider bringing suitable snacks and medications as precautions.

Water

Tap water is generally not safe for drinking. It's recommended to rely on bottled water, which is widely available in shops and hotels. Ensure the seal is intact when purchasing bottled water to avoid tampering. Most hotels provide a few bottles of drinking water daily, but you may need extra if you're out often. Alternatively, bring a reusable bottle with a filter for convenience. Ice in drinks is usually safe in established restaurants, but it's best to avoid it in rural areas where water quality may vary.

Altitude Sickness

If on your travels, you ascend altitudes higher than 2000m, you may feel some effects of altitude. Even if you've been to high elevations previously, you could have a different reaction each time. For most people, the symptoms are mild and will pass in a day or so.

You should take it easy, avoid smoking and alcohol, and drink plenty of fluids. Some people take altitude sickness medication, starting when they arrive or one day before. Don't take sleeping medications, as they suppress respiration. The most common symptoms are lightheadedness, shortness of breath, headache, nausea, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite. If these are bothersome, you should start to take medication. Even though you may experience a decreased appetite, force yourself to eat soups and some basic foods.

If these 'normal' altitude symptoms become unmanageable, you must inform your Trip Leader. Please let the leader know if you experience any of the following: serious difficulty breathing, mental confusion, a severe and unremitting headache, continued difficulty breathing after a period of rest, or poor physical coordination.

TIP: Even if your risk is medium to low, it may be worthwhile to bring a medication with you so that you have it on hand for immediate use if needed. No one wants to buy medication they don't need, but on the other hand, no one wants to interrupt their trip for a doctor's visit.

Altitude in Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka's geography features coastal plains and a mountainous central region. Altitudes range from sea level up to 2,524 metres at Pidurutalagala, the island's highest peak. The central highlands, home to towns like Nuwara Eliya, Ella, and Horton Plains, often exceed 2,000 metres and are known for their cool climate, tea plantations, and misty landscapes. This region offers refreshing relief from the tropical heat, with temperatures dropping notably at higher elevations. Many visitors are drawn to these scenic areas for hiking, waterfalls, and panoramic viewpoints, making them a unique contrast to Sri Lanka's lowland beaches and plains.

Safety & Security

Reasonable Precautions

- Travellers are advised to exercise good sense, take some reasonable precautions and avoid irresponsible behaviour like carrying too much cash and displaying valuables like cameras, phones and expensive jewellery
- Always exercise caution
- Do not take unnecessary valuables with you
- A money belt or something similar, worn close to your body is the best way to carry passports, airline tickets and money
- DO NOT leave any valuables in ANY hotel room, please use SAFETY DEPOSIT BOXES - items are left at the individuals' risk
- Pickpockets operate everywhere, particularly in tourist areas and crowded markets, you must always exercise care
- Be aware that anything left unsupervised may be liable to theft

Travel Advisories

Please use the link below to check the smart traveller website and register your travel:
http://smartraveller.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx

LGBTQIA+

All travellers face risks overseas. Risks can be higher for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people in some destinations. It's your responsibility to get the facts first and take steps to reduce your risks. We encourage you to please read this article. https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/before-you-go/who-you-are/LGBTI

Drug and Alcohol Policy

Under no circumstances are any illegal drugs allowed on any part of the trip. Anyone discovered in possession of any such drugs will be asked to leave the tour immediately without question or refund. Remote communities and some cultures are deemed as ‘dry’ meaning that no alcoholic drinks may be purchased or consumed. Please be respectful of this.

Entry Requirements

Visas

You must obtain the appropriate visas before embarking on your trip. Country entry regulations can change daily, your travel agent can provide you with visa information. Please consult your relevant embassy for all details such as opening hours or costs. Certain visas cannot be obtained on arrival and during the peak months it may take longer than normal to get them. Please allow extra time to do this. Crooked Compass encourages the use of a visa specialist service such as CIBT Visas to ensure you have the correct and up-to-date information surrounding visa requirements for your destination(s).

Visa and other entry and exit conditions (such as currency, customs and quarantine regulations) can change at short notice.

EACH CLIENT IS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR OBTAINING ALL NECESSARY VISAS BEFORE JOINING A TOUR.

Note: Please bring at least four passport-size photos, two for visa (if you can obtain a visa on arrival) and two for trekking permits (if you are going on a trek).

Crooked Compass does not accept responsibility for changes in regulations or requirements for visas.
The information provided is given in good faith.

Insurance

Travel insurance is compulsory for all Crooked Compass itineraries. All clients MUST be insured to cover personal accident, medical expenses, cancellation, curtailment, repatriation etc. It is also vital in remote areas to ensure your insurance covers helicopter evacuation in case of a severe emergency. Also, please be aware that many activities such as trekking, bungee jumping or white-water rafting may not be covered by your insurance policy. If you plan on doing any of these types of activities please purchase additional insurance. We recommend that you also have a photocopy of this document, which you keep separate from the original.

Passports

- Must be in good condition
- Must be valid for at least 6 months after your scheduled return
- Must have 4 blank pages
- By law, you must carry your passport at all times when travelling in Sri Lanka

We recommend you carry colour photocopies of key documents including the photo page of your passport plus any applicable visas, air itinerary, credit cards, and an alternative form of ID. Add emergency phone numbers like your credit card company and the number for your travel insurance plan. Store copies separate from the originals.

Money

Local Currency

Currency: Sri Lankan Rupee
Currency code: LKR
Central Bank: Central Bank of Sri Lanka
Currency symbol: රු or Rs
Currency subunit: Cents (1 Rupee = 100 cents)
Nicknames: None widely used
Banknotes: Rs. 20, Rs. 50, Rs. 100, Rs. 500, Rs. 1000, Rs. 5000
Coins: 25 cents, 50 cents, Rs. 1, Rs. 2, Rs. 5, Rs. 10

The official currency of Sri Lanka is the Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR), which is divided into 100 cents. Issued by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, the rupee has been in use since 1872, replacing the British pound previously used during the colonial era.

The most frequently used rupee banknotes are Rs. 20, Rs. 50, Rs. 100, Rs. 500, Rs. 1000, and Rs. 5000. Coins are also in circulation, in denominations of 10, 25, and 50 cents, as well as Rs. 1, Rs. 2, Rs. 5, and Rs. 10. Banknotes also include Rs. 10, Rs. 200, and Rs. 2000, though these are less commonly used.

Only Sri Lankan residents may bring Sri Lankan rupees into the country, with restrictions on the amount. Non-residents, however, can bring foreign currencies like US dollars, Australian dollars, euros, and others, though large amounts may require declaration. Sri Lankan Rupees can only be purchased within Sri Lanka, as it is not an internationally traded currency. On arrival at Colombo Airport, it is recommended to exchange some foreign currency at one of the 24-hour banks located just before the Arrival Hall. Currency exchange services are also available at exchange bureaus, banks, local ATMs (notify your bank before you travel), and many hotels.

Budgeting around $15-30 USD per day can cover personal expenses, souvenirs, outings, and drinks. Remember to change any leftover rupees before departure, as exporting more than Rs. 5,000 is not allowed, and Sri Lankan rupees are rarely accepted for exchange outside Sri Lanka.

Be aware that some countries are more expensive than others and that if you are travelling through several your expenses will vary enormously. Similarly, there will be some days when you spend nothing at all and others when you exceed your budget.

It is often a good idea to have a small amount of the currency of the country you are visiting prior to arrival. This will cover you for any initial expenses at or from the airport.

Cash

Cash is essential for everyday transactions, especially in rural areas and for small purchases. Although larger hotels and urban stores may accept other payment forms, many restaurants, markets, and transport services rely on cash. The Sri Lankan Rupee is the only accepted currency, and you'll find denominations in coins and notes. Always carry smaller bills, as change for large notes is often unavailable, particularly in local shops, tuk-tuks, and smaller vendors.

ATMs

ATMs are limited mainly to major towns. Most ATMs in Sri Lanka accept Visa, MasterCard, Cirrus, and Maestro, allowing convenient international access. Keep in mind that transaction fees and daily withdrawal limits may apply, so check with your card provider before your journey. Visa, Cirrus, Maestro and MasterCard are all accepted.

Banks

Banks in Sri Lanka generally open from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on weekdays, though hours can vary slightly by branch. Most banks are closed on weekends and public holidays. In Colombo and larger towns, you'll find major banks with English-speaking staff, which can be helpful for international visitors. Services typically include foreign currency exchange and other basic banking needs. Prepare for possible queues, especially around lunchtime and on Fridays.

Credit cards

Credit cards are accepted in all international-class hotels as well as many shopping malls and stores. However do not plan on using credit cards to pay the entrance fees to many of the attractions such as Minneriya National Park, for purchases made at roadside boutiques or small shops, even in Colombo. Visa and American Express are the most commonly used and accepted credit cards in Sri Lanka, while Master and Diners Club cards are also accepted.

Notify Card Providers

Many credit card companies and banks have fraud alert departments that will freeze your card if they see suspicious charges - such as charges or withdrawals from another country. To avoid an accidental security block, it is a good idea to notify your credit card company and/or bank you will be using your cards abroad.

GST & Service Charges

A Goods and Services Tax (GST) is often included in the prices of goods and services, though the rate can vary. Restaurants, hotels, and other service providers may also add a service charge, typically around 10%, which is usually noted on the bill. As a traveller, you won't need to pay extra taxes at checkout if these charges are already listed. However, be aware that some higher-end establishments may add further charges, so it's worth confirming before payment.

Tipping

Tipping is part of the culture in Sri Lanka and it is expected. You sould tip in the local currency, the Sri Lankan Rupee.

Tips are appreciated by many service providers, and a modest amount is generally expected on top of agreed fees, especially in the tourism sector. Here's a guide to tipping in Sri Lanka:

- **Hotels and Restaurants**: Many hotels and restaurants include a 10% service charge on the bill. If a service charge is added, additional tips aren't expected but are always welcome. If not, a tip of 10% is customary if service meets your expectations.
- **Hotel Staff**: For staff such as bellhops and room attendants, Rs. 100-200 per service is appropriate.
- **Temples and Monasteries**: If guided by a resident monk or priest, a donation of Rs. 100-200 placed in the donation box is polite.
- **Safari Staff**: On game drives, Rs. 500 per wildlife spotter and jeep driver, and Rs. 1000 for the naturalist per drive, is common. For safari camp staff, about Rs. 2000 total (around US$10-15) is appreciated.
- **Bartender**: no tip expected or round up the bill
- **Hotel Porter**: 50-100 rupees ($0.30-$0.55) per bag
- **Hotel housekeeper**: 100 rupees ($0.55) per night
- **Spa, massage**: 10% of the bill

- **Taxi**: round up the fare Tour guide: 10% of the tour cost
- Tipping in Sri Lanka also includes the **unofficial guides** (usually bored teenagers or local hangers on) who will materialise to show you around temples. Some of these unofficial guides can be very knowledgeable and also quite adept. They will probably expect a tip for their troubles. Again, a dollar or two is almost certainly sufficient. Anyone else who assists you will without a doubt welcome some kind of tip, though of course it is impossible to generalise and visitors will have to make (sometimes difficult) decisions about whether to offer a tip or not while travelling in Sri Lanka.

A note about tipping your guide and driver: We realise that tipping is a sensitive subject for all travellers. While tips are widely accepted, we would like to stress that this is at your own personal discretion. While everyone is recommended to tip based on services rendered, our clients often ask we provide some basic guidelines. Our suggestion is USD10 per day for your tour guide and USD3-5 per day for your driver (payable in local currency). If hiking, a good idea is to allow around USD10 per day for porters.

Everyday Expenses

Item	Approximate Price (LKR)
Bottle of Water (500ml)	50 - 80
Cup of Coffee	300 - 800
Local Beer (500ml)	400 - 700
Street Food (e.g., Roti)	100 - 250
Meal in Mid-range Restaurant	1,000 - 2,000
Meal in High-end Restaurant	3,000 - 6,000
Taxi Ride (5 km)	300 - 500
One-hour Massage	4,000 - 8,000
Souvenir (e.g., Small Handicraft)	500 - 1,500
Movie Ticket	400 - 800
Sales Tax (VAT)	18%

Money Requested on Tour

Whilst every precaution is taken to ensure all services as per your itinerary are pre-paid before your arrival, in areas where tourism is still being developed, you may on occasion be asked for additional funds for incidentals such as fuel and water. Under no circumstances are you to part with cash to any crew or local person claiming to work for Crooked Compass. Should you be requested to provide such funds, please contact the emergency contact number immediately for support. Crooked Compass is unable to take responsibility without prior authorisation from head office for monies handed over to crew or local persons.

Airports and Border Crossings

Airports

Sri Lanka's main airports are Bandaranaike International Airport (CMB) near Colombo and Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport (HRI) in Hambantota. Bandaranaike, the country's busiest airport, handles most international flights and is approximately 30 kilometres north of Colombo. The airport has basic amenities, though travellers may experience delays and long queues during peak hours. Mattala Airport, less frequently used and located in the south, mainly serves limited regional flights and chartered services. While both airports provide duty-free shopping and currency exchange, options are limited, especially at Mattala. Plan ahead for transport, as public transit options from the airports are minimal.

Departure Tax

Departure taxes for Sri Lanka should be included in your international flight ticket.

Border Crossings

Sri Lanka, as an island nation, has no land border crossings. Travellers arrive primarily by air or sea, with the vast majority using Bandaranaike International Airport near Colombo. Ports like Colombo and Hambantota occasionally welcome international cruise ships, while Galle and Trincomalee handle limited passenger arrivals, mostly regional. Direct ferries from India have been proposed but are not yet operational. Visas are required for most nationalities, including Australian travellers, and are typically obtained online before arrival.

Internal Flights

Cinnamon Air and FitsAir are the main carriers, offering short flights to popular destinations like Kandy, Jaffna, and Trincomalee. Flights are typically on small aircraft with basic amenities, and schedules can vary based on demand. While domestic flights save time over long drives, they are relatively costly and limited in frequency.

Many of our tours run without changes but please be advised that due to weather and other unforeseen circumstances domestic internal flights may not always run to schedule or on time. Your trip leader will keep you informed of any schedule changes as they happen.

Luggage Allowance

Standard commercial airline baggage restrictions apply for all internal flights within Sri Lanka. Usually, this is 20kg for economy passengers, which will include checked luggage as well as one piece of carry-on luggage. Excess luggage can be stored in your hotel. Passports are required for travel on domestic flights, and you should arrive at the airport two hours before your scheduled departure time.

Climate

Sri Lanka's climate is tropical, influenced by two monsoons that create distinct wet and dry seasons. The Yala monsoon, from May to August, brings rain to the southwest, while the Maha monsoon, from October to January, affects the north and east. Rainfall is highest in the southwest, reaching up to 4,000 mm annually, and lower in the north and east, where it averages around 1,000 mm.

The inter-monsoonal period in October and November often brings unpredictable rain across the island. The west coast, south coast, and hill country are driest from December to March, while the east coast and ancient cities region see their best weather from April to September. Temperatures are consistently warm along the coast, while hill stations like Kandy and Nuwara Eliya offer cooler, temperate climates. Rainfall can be intense, leading to sudden street flooding, so pack for occasional downpours regardless of the season.

Rainfall tends to be emphatic – streets can become flooded in what seems like only minutes.

Month	Avg High (°C)	Avg Low (°C)	Record High (°C)	Record Low (°C)	Rainfall (mm)	Rainy Days (days)
January	28	21	31	16	124.0	12.4
February	30	21	31	15	144.8	12.5
March	31	22	34	16	132.7	16.6
April	31	24	34	18	262.2	21.6
May	30	24	33	19	282.9	21.1
June	30	24	33	19	172.0	17.0
July	29	24	32	18	171.5	17.1
August	29	23	32	18	182.0	18.5
September	29	23	32	18	217.1	18.7
October	29	23	31	18	379.7	24.4
November	29	23	30	17	367.5	24.3
xDecember	28	22	30	16	280.1	20.3

Seasonality

Sri Lanka experiences two main monsoon seasons: the southwest monsoon from May to September, bringing rain to the western and southern regions, and the northeast monsoon from December to February, affecting the north and east, while two inter-monsoon periods offer more balanced weather across the island.

Rainy Season: Sri Lanka's rainy seasons vary by region due to two main monsoons.

The southwest monsoon (May to September) affects areas like Colombo, Galle, and the southwest beaches, bringing heavy rainfall and cooler temperatures, around 25-28°C. During this period, you may find drier weather in the north and east, including destinations like Trincomalee and Arugam Bay. ‘

The northeast monsoon (December to February) impacts the north and east with similar temperatures but frequent rain, while the southwest stays relatively dry, ideal for visits.

Dry Season: Sri Lanka's dry seasons align with the two monsoon patterns, offering ideal travel conditions in different regions.

The southwest dry season (December to March) which covers Colombo, Galle, and the southern beaches, has sunny weather and average temperatures of 27-30°C. This period is perfect for coastal activities and sightseeing.

The northeast dry season (May to September). The north and east dry season is the best time to visit areas like Trincomalee, Jaffna, and Arugam Bay. Expect warm days around 30-33°C, ideal for beaches and outdoor activities.

Terrain & Travel

Sri Lanka's terrain varies significantly across the island, which influences travel conditions and times. In the central highlands, the roads twist and turn through steep mountains, making driving times slower and more challenging. Here, the landscape is lush with tea plantations, and the roads are narrow, winding, and often unpaved, especially as you head further into rural areas. In contrast, the coastal regions have smoother roads, though they can become congested due to heavy traffic during tourist seasons, especially in cities like Colombo, Galle, and Negombo.

Major roads such as the Colombo-Kandy and Colombo-Galle highways are in relatively good condition, with clear signage and wider lanes. However, they can still be bumpy in parts, particularly after the rains, which are frequent during the monsoon seasons (May to September in the southwest and December to March in the northeast). Some rural roads leading to popular tourist destinations like Ella or Sigiriya can be in worse condition, often unpaved, with potholes, mud, and rocks.

Sri Lanka's cities are bustling, with mixed traffic that includes tuk-tuks, bicycles, buses, trucks, and motorbikes. This can make travel in urban areas particularly challenging, as vehicles often navigate around each other in a fluid, somewhat unpredictable way. Pedestrians cross the streets anywhere, as pedestrian crossings are scarce.

While Sri Lanka is not as chaotic as some other countries, driving can still be unpredictable due to the sheer volume of traffic and the variety of vehicles sharing the road. Tuk-tuks, in particular, are often used for short distances and can be quick to maneuver through tight spaces, adding to the ebb and flow of city traffic. Large buses, some of which travel at high speeds, can also pose a risk on narrower roads, especially in rural areas where they frequently overtake slower-moving vehicles.

Lanka is home to a large elephant population, and elephants, especially in the central and northern parts of the country, can sometimes wander onto roads, particularly in rural areas. In rural areas, stray dogs, cows, and goats are also common, so expect to slow down or stop when animals appear in the road.

Overall, be prepared for all types of road conditions. What may seem like a short distance could take longer due to narrow, winding roads or delays caused by traffic congestion. Adjust your expectations and be patient—travel in Sri Lanka is part of the experience, and the landscapes and local culture are well worth the journey.

Suggested Packing items

As you will experience a wide range of temperatures and weather conditions, we suggest several layers of clothing. If you like to hand-wash your clothes, look for fabrics that will dry out overnight. You can buy clothing designed especially for travel, with features like wrinkle-resistant fabric or built-in sun protection. Merino clothing is wonderful for layering, keeping you warm and cool, as well as being incredibly multi-purpose. Merino clothing does not sweat or retain odour. Dress on this trip is functional and casual, consisting of basic pants or everyday skirts, shirts, and sportswear. Your dress should be somewhat conservative, to be respectful of the local, traditional culture. A hat is recommended.

Travel Documents & Money:

☐ Passport (with photocopies)
☐ Travel insurance (with photocopies)
☐ Airline tickets (e-ticket number)
☐ Cash in USD or Sri Lankan Rupees (LKR)
☐ Credit Card & ATM Card (See Money Matters section)
☐ Money belt or secure travel pouch

Luggage & Bags:

☐ 1 soft-sided bag (medium size approx. 80–100 litres) – for group tours
☐ Daypack (10–20 litres) – for daily essentials like water, camera, and snacks
☐ Lightweight reusable shopping bag (for markets or day use)

Clothing & Footwear:

☐ Shirts: A mix of short and long-sleeved breathable fabric (cotton/linen)
☐ Pants: Loose-fitting, lightweight trousers (avoid tight jeans for comfort)
☐ Comfortable walking or hiking shoes (sturdy for uneven terrain)
☐ Socks (moisture-wicking recommended)
☐ Wide-brim sun hat or visor
☐ Lightweight scarf or shawl (for religious sites, sun, or dust protection)
☐ Light rain jacket or windbreaker with hood (for unexpected cool weather)
☐ Light cotton or wool sweater (for cooler evenings)
☐ Fleece jacket or heavy sweater (not needed unless travelling to Nuwara Eliya or Ella, where it can be chilly.)
☐ Swimsuit & cover-up
☐ Comfortable sandals or flip-flops (for beach and casual wear—not for sightseeing)
☐ Sunglasses

Health & Personal Care:

☐ Prescription medications (enough for the trip)
☐ Sunscreen & lip balm (high SPF)
☐ Insect repellent
☐ Electrolyte tablets or powder (prevents dehydration from heat)
☐ Reusable water bottle with filter
☐ Personal first-aid kit (pain relievers, Band-Aids, antihistamines, diarrhoea relief, rehydration salts, etc.)

☐ Daily essentials: toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, hairbrush/comb, shaving items, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, etc.
☐ Hand sanitiser & antibacterial wipes
☐ Pocket-size tissues (for toilets without paper)
☐ Wet wipes or facial mist (refreshing after sightseeing in heat)
☐ Dramamine or motion sickness bands

Tech & Gear:
☐ Camera (with spare batteries & SD cards)
☐ Charger for devices & power bank (for areas with limited charging access)
☐ Plug adaptors
☐ Small flashlight or headlamp
☐ Spare eyeglasses/contact lenses

Optional Items
☐ Gifts from home (for hosts or guides)
☐ Small notebook & pen (for journaling or note-taking)
☐ Snacks or energy bars (useful during long travel days)
☐ Small padlocks (for securing luggage)
☐ Earplugs (useful for light sleepers)
☐ Binoculars (for sightseeing or wildlife viewing)
☐ Sewing kit & hand wash laundry soap (e.g., bar of sunlight soap)
☐ Travel journal
☐ Hand fan or battery-operated mini fan

☐ Lightweight cotton/synthetic shorts – Ideal for warm weather, but avoid overly short styles
☐ Sarong
☐ Mosquito net (if travelling to rural areas)
☐ Small umbrella
☐ Tea towel or small cloth
☐ Temple

Keep in mind Sri Lanka has a tropical climate. It's always hot, but hotter still in March and April. Surprisingly, considering the heat, jeans are very popular especially with younger people. Our advice though, would be to pack lightweight clothes in natural fabrics: cotton, linen and silk. Particularly for people who are used to much cooler temperatures and have to acclimatise, these fabrics will be better in the heat and have the added benefit of washing and drying quickly.

Generally, the more conservative your dress, the less unwanted attention you will attract. Light colours work best reflecting the sun. Don’t forget your sun cream, hat and sunglasses. If you have plans to visit the hill country, you may want to pack a warmer jumper or shawl, as temperatures do drop on the high ground.

Keep your swimwear just for the beach or pool and cover up with a sarong or kaftan when walking around. Public nudity - and that includes females being topless - is not only unacceptable, but illegal.

In Sri Lanka more than 70% of the population is Buddhist, so if you are visiting any of the Buddhist temples ensure that your body - including your shoulders - is covered. If you are visiting Buddhist and Hindu shrines, then footwear and hats should also be removed.

Hiking

When hiking in Sri Lanka, especially in the central highlands (such as Ella, Horton Plains, and Knuckles Range), pack for varying terrain and weather. Trails can be steep, muddy, or rocky, so wear durable, waterproof hiking shoes with good grip. Lightweight, breathable clothing is ideal, as temperatures range from cool mornings around 15°C to midday warmth near 25°C. A rain jacket or poncho is essential due to sudden tropical downpours, especially from May to September. Bring insect repellent for mosquitoes and leeches, a hat, and sunscreen for sun protection at higher elevations. Reusable water bottles are recommended, as access to clean water can be limited on trails.

Footwear

You'll be on your feet a lot during the trip and walking over some rough and slippery surfaces. We recommend you wear sturdy walking shoes, light hiking boots, or similar supportive sports shoes that offer good traction. Lightweight hiking boots, or supportive sports shoes with strong traction to handle muddy and rocky paths. Quick-dry footwear is also useful.

Baggage Whilst on Tour

Our baggage allowance policy stipulates that each traveller is allowed to bring no more than 20kg of luggage per person. To ensure smooth logistics and efficient use of space in our vehicles, we recommend opting for a soft-sided bag, as it offers greater flexibility when packing the vehicles. This is particularly important for group tours and larger private groups. It's important to note that some of the accommodations you may be staying in, might not have lifts or porterage services available. Being able to manage your luggage is crucial.

Culture & Etiquette

Sri Lanka's culture is rich and diverse, influenced by its long history and mix of ethnic and religious communities, including Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, and Burgher people. Buddhism is the primary religion, visible in sacred sites and traditions throughout the country, though Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity also have significant influence. Festivals like Vesak (Buddhist festival of lights) and Diwali (Hindu festival of lights) are celebrated nationwide, with colourful decorations, processions, and traditional rituals.

Social Interactions & Hospitality

Sri Lankans are known for their warmth and hospitality. A smile and a respectful greeting go a long way when interacting with locals. A common way to greet someone is with a slight bow of the head and the phrase "Ayubowan" (meaning "may you live long"), though handshakes are also common, especially in business settings. Public displays of affection, such as hugging and kissing, are uncommon, particularly in rural areas.

Sri Lankan society is hierarchical, with age and status playing a significant role. Elders and those in respected positions, such as religious figures or teachers, should be treated with deference. It's polite to use both hands when giving or receiving items (such as money or gifts) as a sign of respect.

Religion & Traditions

Buddhism plays a central role in Sri Lankan culture, influencing daily life, festivals, and customs. Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are also widely practiced, and religious tolerance is strong. Temples and shrines are places of deep reverence, and visitors should always behave respectfully.

When visiting a Buddhist Temple remove your shoes and hat before entering, dress modestly (shoulders and knees covered). Never turn your back to a Buddha statue when taking photos and do not touch monks or offer them money (instead, donations should go to the temple).

Many religious sites, including Hindu temples, also have specific customs, such as ringing bells before entering or not allowing non-Hindus into certain areas. Always observe and follow the local etiquette.

Dressing Respectfully

Please use your discretion and be sensitive to cultural differences in the countries you visit, in particular, visits to religious buildings and when taking photographs. Your tour leader will advise you of any specific customs to observe.

In Sri Lanka, dressing modestly is important to show respect for the country's deeply rooted cultural and religious values, especially in rural areas and at religious sites. When visiting temples, for example, covering your shoulders and knees is essential, as exposed skin is considered disrespectful. Wearing lightweight, breathable clothing that covers these areas allows you to handle the tropical climate comfortably while honouring local customs. Swimwear is acceptable at beach resorts, but cover up when leaving the beach, as revealing clothing outside these areas can be seen as inappropriate

Dining Customs

Typically eat with your right hand, as the left hand is considered unclean. If dining with locals, wait until they begin eating before you start. Use only your fingertips to mix food, then bring it to your mouth without licking fingers. Accept food with your right hand, even in casual settings. Many meals are shared, so try small portions of each dish. Leaving some food on your plate is polite, showing you're satisfied. Drinking alcohol during meals is uncommon, except in tourist spots, so check first if unsure.

Visiting Etiquette

When visiting someone's home remember shoes are typically removed at the entrance. Upon entering, greet the host politely and accept any tea or refreshments offered. You may be invited to sit in the living area, where conversation often precedes any meal. If food is served, remember to eat with your right hand. It's customary to bring a small gift as a gesture of respect. Suitable gifts include sweets, fruits, or pastries. Flowers are acceptable but avoid white ones, as they are typically associated with funerals. If the family has children, bringing a small gift for them is thoughtful. Hand over gifts with your right hand or both hands.

Photography

Sri Lanka's landscapes, people, and temples make it a photographer's paradise, but some guidelines should be followed. Always ask before taking photos of locals, especially monks or religious figures. It is considered highly disrespectful to pose with a Buddha statue or to point feet towards one. Some temples and religious sites prohibit photography altogether, and any posted signs should be respected.

Please remember, we are guests in the countries through which we travel and may sometimes inadvertently cause offence by taking photographs or video without first asking permission. It is absolutely forbidden by law to take photos or video at any borders, as they are all active military installations. We encourage you to take photos of the busy lives of the locals, however, please ensure you are respectful to local requests and guidelines surrounding photography and videography.

Etiquette

Do's

- Typical greetings depend on the ethnic group people belong to but as a foreigner you will not be expected to be aware of such differences. However, one can sum up the main styles of greeting in Sri Lanka:
    - The older generation of Sri Lankans will use the '**namaste**' (palms clasped together as if in prayer at chin level with a slight nod of the head).
    - The Sinhalese may say '**ayubowan'** (may you be blessed with a long life)
    - Tamils would say '**vanakkam**' (may you be blessed with a long life)
    - In informal settings you may also hear '**kuhomadu'** (How do you do?). Younger people generally shake hands.
- Greet with a smile and a slight bow: When meeting locals, a gentle nod or slight bow is appreciated. If you're familiar with the Sri Lankan ayubowan (palms together and slight bow), it's a polite greeting.
- Accept items with both hands or the right hand: Whether receiving a business card, food, or a gift, using both hands or the right hand shows respect.
- Use respectful language: Address elders and authority figures with respectful titles such as sir, madam, or uncle/aunty, even if they're strangers, as it shows politeness.
- When addressing people you should always use the appropriate title followed by the surname. Always wait for the other party to move to a first name basis.

Don'ts

- Avoid touching people's heads: The head is considered sacred in Sri Lanka, so avoid patting or touching anyone's head, even children.
- Don't point your feet at people or religious objects: Pointing feet is seen as disrespectful, especially in temples or when seated around others.
- Avoid public displays of affection: Hugging, kissing, and other intimate gestures are uncommon in public and might make locals uncomfortable.
- Refrain from discussing politics or ethnic issues: Topics like the civil war or local politics can be sensitive, so it's best to steer conversations towards neutral subjects unless locals initiate.
- Many Sri Lankan women will refrain from physical contact with a man outside their family so always wait to see if a woman extends her hand.

Daily Life & Essentials

Accommodation

Sri Lanka offers a wide range of accommodation, from luxury beachfront resorts to charming boutique stays, family-run guesthouses, and unique eco-lodges. In major cities like Colombo and Kandy, international hotels provide five-star service, modern amenities, and fine dining, while boutique hotels often showcase colonial architecture and Sri Lanka's warm hospitality.

For a more immersive experience, homestays in villages or tea plantations offer the chance to connect with local families, enjoy home-cooked meals, and learn about daily life in Sri Lanka. In remote areas, eco-lodges and jungle retreats provide a peaceful escape, often designed with sustainability in mind, featuring open-air showers, solar power, and stunning views of nature.

Along the coast, beachfront bungalows and surf camps cater to travellers looking for a laid-back experience, while in national parks, safari camps offer the thrill of sleeping under canvas, with wildlife just beyond your tent. Accommodation standards vary, so while budget guesthouses may be simple with only basic furnishings, they often come with friendly hosts and a warm cup of Ceylon tea.

Some points to note:

- Not all accommodations provide 24-hour hot water. In some guesthouses, hot water may only be available during certain hours.
- Power cuts are not uncommon, especially outside major cities. Many hotels have backup generators, but service may be limited, especially for air conditioning.
- Due to Sri Lanka's tropical climate, mosquitoes are prevalent. Some accommodations provide mosquito nets or coils, but it's wise to bring personal repellent or request additional measures.
- Noise Levels: Road noise and sounds from nearby temples or wildlife can be noticeable. Earplugs can help, especially if your accommodation is close to busy areas or religious sites.
- Some bathrooms may lack separate shower stalls, meaning water could spill across the bathroom floor.
- Many Sri Lankan beds, even in upscale hotels, tend to be firmer than Western standards. If you prefer a softer mattress, consider requesting extra bedding to layer.
- It's common for hotels and guesthouses to have strict 10:00 or 11:00 AM check-out times. Late check-outs often incur additional fees and may not always be available.
- Sri Lankan accommodations may have quiet hours or limit alcohol sales during Buddhist holidays and Poya (full moon) days. Be prepared for potential service adjustments on these days.
- Different Shower Temperatures: In some eco-lodges or remote areas, showers may only offer lukewarm or cool water, which may be surprising if you expect reliably hot water.
- Room Fragrances: Hotels sometimes use strong incense or air fresheners. If you're sensitive to scents, mention this when booking or request a fragrance-free room if possible.

Cuisine

A traveller setting foot on the shores of Sri Lanka will not only be enchanted by the diversity of the country's cultural heritage but also by its cuisine. Sri Lankan food embodies the fiery heat of sun-struck beaches, the refreshing coolness of tropical rainforests, and the piquant flavours of regional specialties. The heart of a country's individuality lies in its cuisine, much like pasta to Italy or sashimi to Japan.

Rice, The Staple of Sri Lankan Meals

The staple food in Sri Lanka is rice, which is typically boiled or steamed and served with an array of curries. A typical Sri Lankan meal consists of a "main curry" (such as fish, beef, chicken, or mutton), accompanied by a variety of vegetable and lentil curries. Side dishes include pickles, chutneys, and *sambols*, fiery condiments made from ground coconut and onions mixed with chillies, dried Maldives fish, and lime juice.

Spicy Sambols and Milder Counterparts

Travellers unaccustomed to spicy food should be cautious with *sambols*, as they are extremely hot and can leave you with a burning tongue and watery eyes. To balance these fiery flavours, there are white curries, which are mild and subtle, as well as *mallung*—a dish of finely shredded leaves mixed with grated coconut, chopped red onions, and lime juice, cooked lightly for a distinctive taste.

Coconut Milk in Curries

Coconut milk is a common ingredient in most curries, whether hot or mild, adding a rich texture to the dishes. Sri Lankan cuisine combines hot and mild dishes, creating a meal that is balanced and full of contrasting flavours.

Sri Lanka's Heritage of Spices
Sri Lanka has long been famous for its spices. During the 15th and 16th centuries, traders from across the world came to the island for its cardamom, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. Over time, these influences merged with local recipes, creating a unique blend that defines Sri Lankan cooking. Dishes often differ in taste depending on who prepares them, as a "pinch of this" and "handful of that" are added according to personal preference.

Regional Variations
Sri Lankan cuisine varies greatly by region. A fish curry from the east coast will have a different flavour profile from one in the south, even when using similar ingredients. The hill country also has a distinct style, influenced by British, Dutch, and Portuguese settlers, resulting in fusion dishes like *Lamprais*, a Dutch-inspired rice dish with curry and meatballs wrapped in a banana leaf and baked.

Traditional Sweets and Desserts
Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of sweets, including *kavun*, an oil cake made with rice flour and treacle, and *moong kavun*, a variant made from green gram paste. Another staple is *kiribath*, rice cooked in milk, served on auspicious occasions. Influences from the Malays brought *wattalapam*, a steamed pudding made with coconut milk, eggs, and jaggery.

Seafood and Exotic Fruits
Being an island, Sri Lanka offers a variety of seafood such as prawns, cuttlefish, crabs, and fish. The island is also home to an abundance of tropical fruits, including mangoes, mangosteens, pineapples, and bananas. Durian, often known as the "honeymoon fruit," is famous for its rich flavour but has a pungent smell that some travellers may find off-putting.

A World of Teas and Unique Beverages
Sri Lanka is known for its tea, cultivated in the high altitudes of the hill country, where the cool, crisp air enhances the flavour. High-grown teas are prized, though lower-altitude teas also have unique appeal. Local beverages like *thambili* (King Coconut) are refreshing, and a variety of freshly squeezed fruit juices, including papaya, pineapple, and pomegranate, are widely available.

Sri Lanka's cuisine is more than just food; it's an experience of the island's vibrant culture and warm hospitality. Sharing a meal with friends or visitors is a valued tradition, and even in the humblest homes, a guest is always invited to partake in a meal. To truly appreciate Sri Lanka's culinary diversity, travellers must experience it firsthand on this beautiful island.

Note: We've carefully chosen the restaurants and local food outlets for your group meals and consider these establishments safe to eat at however be very careful with food sold from vendors on the street, and with uncooked fruit and other foods. Fruit that you peel yourself is usually safe - avoid lettuce and other unpeeled produce.

Shops & Souvenirs

In Sri Lanka, popular souvenirs reflect the island's rich culture and natural beauty. Handloom textiles are widely available, with scarves, sarongs, and table runners showcasing vibrant colours and traditional patterns. Gemstones, particularly sapphires, are a speciality, and the shops in Kandy and Ratnapura offer certified stones, though it's wise to research reputable sellers beforehand.

Tea is a must-buy, with many options from high-grown estates in the hill country; you'll find Ceylon tea in different flavours and grades in Colombo's speciality tea shops or directly from plantation outlets.

Artisans in Galle and Colombo craft intricate wooden masks used in traditional dances, ideal for unique decor. For natural skincare and spices, Ayurvedic shops sell products with local ingredients like sandalwood and cinnamon. Prices in tourist areas can be high, so bargain politely in markets. Shops generally open by 10 am and close around 8 pm, but hours vary.

Please also be very aware that it is your responsibility to transport all artefacts to Sri Lanka on your person for official fumigation and cargo shipping requirements. Never offer your guide or local person money to do this on your behalf unless this is a registered international courier office with insurance and tracking information that can be verified. Further to this, any artefacts purchased on Crooked Compass tours are at your own risk for transportation, damage, insurance and meeting local quarantine laws.

Crooked Compass is not able to take responsibility for the transportation or delivery of any goods organised and purchased on tour by you.

Toilets

Toilet facilities in Sri Lanka vary widely. In hotels, restaurants, and major tourist areas, you'll find modern Western-style toilets with flushing systems, but in rural areas and some public spaces, squat toilets are common. If you're travelling off the beaten path, be prepared for more basic facilities, sometimes with a bucket of water for flushing rather than a flush system.

Many public toilets do not provide toilet paper, so carrying a pack of tissues is a good idea. Hand sanitiser is also useful, as not all restrooms have soap. In some places, particularly at bus stations or local markets, there may be a small fee to use the facilities, so keeping a few small notes or coins handy is recommended.

It's also worth noting that in Sri Lankan homes and some hotels, bidet showers (small hand-held sprays) are commonly used instead of toilet paper. If you're unfamiliar with them, they can take some getting used to, but they're an environmentally friendly alternative.

Squat Toilet

Supermarkets & Convenience Stores

In major cities and tourist towns, well-stocked supermarkets like Cargills Food City, Keells, and Arpico carry everything from fresh produce to household goods, as well as imported products for those missing a taste of home. These supermarkets also have in-house bakeries selling local treats like fish buns and coconut-filled pastries.

For a more traditional shopping experience, local markets and small grocery stores, known as "kades," offer fresh fruits, vegetables, and spices at lower prices. These family-run shops often have a limited selection but provide a glimpse into everyday life in Sri Lanka. If you're visiting a market, expect lively bargaining and a colourful display of tropical fruits like mangosteen, rambutan, and king coconut.

In smaller towns and rural areas, finding a large supermarket can be difficult, so it's best to stock up on essentials when in a bigger city. Convenience stores attached to petrol stations offer snacks, bottled water, and basic toiletries, though prices may be slightly higher.

Final Word

Sri Lanka is a country that lingers in your senses long after you leave—the scent of cinnamon drifting through the markets, the rhythmic clang of kottu roti being prepared at a roadside stall, the golden glow of the sun setting over palm-fringed beaches. It's a place where the warmth of the people is as unforgettable as the landscapes, where history and nature intertwine, and where every journey, whether through misty tea fields or bustling city streets, holds something unexpected.

Travelling in Sri Lanka is about embracing contrasts. One moment, you're sipping the world's finest tea in the cool highlands; the next, you're watching elephants wade through a sun-drenched lagoon. The pace can shift from the slow rhythm of rural villages to the energetic buzz of Colombo's streets. Understanding these contrasts—modern and traditional, laid-back and fast-paced—helps travellers appreciate the beauty of Sri Lanka beyond its picture-perfect beaches.

At Crooked Compass, we believe in travel that goes beyond the surface. The most memorable experiences often come from sharing a meal with a local family, learning the stories behind ancient ruins, or waking up to the sound of the jungle in a remote eco-lodge. Sri Lanka rewards those who travel with curiosity, patience, and an open mind.

As your journey comes to an end, we encourage you to share your experiences, whether through stories, photos, or simply memories carried home. Your insights help future travellers and contribute to a deeper appreciation of this incredible country.

We'd love to hear about your experience! If you enjoyed your journey, please consider leaving a Google review to help fellow travellers discover what makes Jordan and Crooked Compass special. You can share your thoughts here:

👉 Review us here

We also encourage you to share your photos and stories with us on social media so we can follow along on your adventure!

Facebook: @Crookedcompasstravel #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
X: @CrookedCompass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
Instagram: @crooked_compass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass

Ayubowan – may you live long and travel far.

Emergency Contact Procedure Reminder and Information

Ensuring the safety and well-being of our guests is of paramount importance to us at Crooked Compass. We would like to take this opportunity to remind you about our emergency contact procedure and where to find your contact details, as well as provide guidance on what to do in different emergency situations.

Local Crooked Compass 24/7 Assistance Contact can be fou
nd on your detailed itinerary. This is the **first point** of contact for any concerns or queries whilst in destination for all types of assistance.

Emergency Services Page 6 in this document.

Notify Crooked Compass (Non-Urgent)
For any non-urgent enquiries, please contact our office within Australian office hours (Mon – Fri, 9am – 5.30pm AEST) on +61 2 8089 1370 or via email info@crooked-compass.com

Consular Assistance Please familiarize yourself with your local embassy's details before travel.