



Sri Lanka's *Shangri-La*

There's no better place to escape the stresses of the world than Tangalle, a shoreside paradise in the pearl of the Indian Ocean

Words by: Yi-Hwa Hanna

Picture this scene: a pristine stretch of powder-soft sand flanked by coconut trees, their fraying green leaves bending low with the weight of the exotic fruit they bear. There isn't a footprint in sight, a languid ocean breeze whispers past and the only sound you can hear is the azure waves gently lapping against the shore. This idyllic paradise is more than just a deserted island fantasy — it can be found in Tangalle in southern Sri Lanka.

While it is tempting to let yourself be lulled into a trance-like state of relaxation and simply lounge around on the beach, perhaps swing in a hammock and drink in the spectacular sunsets that cause the sky to burst into a kaleidoscope of red, pink, amber and gold, it would be tragic to miss out on the wealth of other sights the area has to offer.

Despite enduring the tsunami and a lengthy, now-concluded, civil war, the beautiful teardrop-shaped tropical island is still positively bursting with natural beauty. Visiting Sri Lanka can feel like stepping back into a bygone era. Vintage cars sputter past alongside whizzing, honking tuk-tuks and the occasional ambling cow. Ancient cities exist alongside colonial towns, while beautiful beaches and raw jungles give way to misty mountains, verdant tea plantations and a number of national parks; the second largest of which is Yala National Park. While Yala is the most visited in the country, if you'd like to skip the 2.5 hour



drive it takes to get there from Tangalle, Bundala National Park is a closer jaunt at only 1.5 hours away and is also teeming with freely roaming wildlife. The wetland sanctuary is a UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve and is home to thousands of birds, fish and reptiles, as well as a number of elephants, leopards, wild boars, giant squirrels, crocodiles, deer, mongoose and monkeys, to name but a few — keep your eyes peeled or you may miss something, be it a tiny frog no larger than your thumbnail or a brightly coloured iguana nestled amidst the vegetation.

Tangalle itself boasts a rather unique wildlife experience — at Rekawa Beach, from April to September, various species of turtles make their way onto the shore after nightfall to lay their eggs. While it may be a tedious wait (not to mention dark), it can be an incomparably exciting experience if you glimpse this life-giving act.

If you're more into culture than creatures, fear not; the Hambantota district, which Tangalle is nestled in, has more than its fair share of cultural treasures to offer. The Mulkirigala Rock Temple is just a half-hour journey away from Tangalle's beautiful beaches and is one of the area's most coveted attractions. The awe-inspiring monastery and some of its relics date back to the 2nd century BC. Its seven stupas (dome-shaped shrines) were, however, built and developed by several different kings throughout history. It is a bit of a hike to get up to the summit's sacred rock though (533 steps to be exact) and if that doesn't have you gasping, the breathtaking view of the surrounding palm forest from the top certainly will. You will have the opportunity to stop and catch your breath at the four different terraces along the way, where seven temples are built into the rock. The numerous statues, the intricate ancient paintings along the rock walls and roofs of the temples and the Bodhi trees located throughout the different levels attract a number of local spiritual devotees. Merchants often frequent the area as well, offering local refreshments such as thirst-quenching wood apple juice or hot local herbal tea.

Dikwella, in the Matara district, is another must-visit. Natural reefs and excellent surfing opportunities are a key attraction for water-sport aficionados and the colossal spiritual statue at Wevurukannala breaks a record for its sheer size. Naturally, more stairs are involved in trying to reach it so be ready for another steep climb. The ancient temple in nearby Dondra Head, situated in the southernmost point of the country, is also a much-loved site.

For a day long excursion, head to Kudawella. This small coastal fishing village's main attraction is the Hummanaya Blow Hole, a natural underwater fountain where seawater rushing through a submerged cavern bursts up in a roaring jet of up to 25 metres. Stop in a local restaurant for fresh seafood, or one of Sri Lanka's famous, fiery hot, fragrant curries and cool down with some fresh local fruit for dessert.

Sri Lanka is a shopper's haven and the south is no exception. Souvenir shops sell a variety of local handicrafts and while the coastal region may mean these often involve shells and other marine-related



Above: Sri Lanka abounds with wildlife and Yala National Park, which is a 2.5 hour drive from Tangalle, is home to around 215 species of birds, 44 species of mammals (including the Sri Lankan Elephant) and 46 species of reptiles.

items, Sri Lanka's typical commercial pleasures are still to be indulged in, from silks, gems and jewellery to tea, spices and herbal remedies.

The country is also lauded for its Ayurvedic healing practices, which are usually worked into relaxing spa experiences such as massages, facials or steam baths. Try it out at the Amanwella resort, where the indulgence is taken a step further as treatments can be carried out in guests' private suites, or in the lush gardens of its coconut groves. The stylish, modern and luxurious resort is an ideal spot in which to base yourself in Tangalle. Both the stunning pool and its beach and terrace restaurants overlook the adjacent sugary-white beaches and the ocean and its terracotta roofs and stone walls blend in with the natural environment. As you lie back sipping a fruity concoction under the shade of a frangipani tree, while the charming staff cater to your every whim, it's hard not to believe you've discovered your own little slice of utopia. **END**

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