



offshore
TROPICAL SANCTUARY

Galle

The Dutch city with a Lankan soul

On the curvy southwest edge of the pearl-drop island of Sri Lanka, 130 km from Colombo, sits the country's fourth largest city - Galle - flaunting its irresistible colonial legacy.

words // Punita Malhotra



Vistara flies daily
(except Wednesdays)
between Mumbai
and Colombo, along
with convenient
connections from
other cities.





Galle was once a flourishing port that lured Persians, Arabs, Greeks, Romans, Malays, Indians and Chinese through exotic treasures such as ivory, jewels and cinnamon as far back as 1400 BC. Curious visitors like King Solomon and Ibn Batuta and world invaders, from Portuguese, Dutch to British, all explored the unique treasure chest of Galle for its endless gems of precious heritage. There's

enough lushness in the green countryside to soothe the senses along the impeccably laid-out Colombo-Galle expressway, so the pleasant 2-hour cruise appears to end abruptly with a first glimpse of Galle's main road. The sharp contrast stuns. It's an endless coastline fringed with soft sand, tilting palms, frothy waves, fishmongers displaying wares and slow clattering *tuk tuks*.

THE DUTCH TOUCH

For those keen to dive into the culture canvas immediately, the colonial-era Galle Fort offers a perfect introduction. First steps through the threshold of the grim, unscathed brick ramparts and one is transported into medieval Europe with neatly cobbled roads, mansions with brick-tiled roofs, a large central square with Dutch-style buildings and a Gothic cathedral. 52 hectares of unique UNESCO-

The first step through the threshold of Galle Fort's main gate feels like time-travelling into a medieval European town.





A colourful wooden mask decorating the front of a craft store in Galle

protected world heritage. Silent reminders of Galle's Dutch supremacy stand everywhere, yet Sri Lanka peeps unabashedly through stone and every bend. On the wide streets lined by leafy suriyas, shady paramaras and flowering frangipanis typical of the region; against the pain-chipped dull ochre archway of the National Maritime Museum which bears the 1669 Portuguese rooster coat-of-arms (Gallus is Latin for rooster); under the ancient 300-year-old Banyan trees in the Court Square, where teens indulge in their favourite game of cricket. Galle is a happy marriage of foreign influences and indigenous culture. And the harmony shows.

EXPLORE ON FOOT

The labyrinth of narrow streets is a sensory explosion. Rows and rows of airy old mansions huddle side by side, sporting a fusion of colonial decor and Asian sensibilities. A cornucopia of sloping terracotta roofs, ornate gables, decorative doorways, pretty shuttered windows and pillared verandahs keeps architecture-lovers and avid photography enthusiasts hooked. Light and shadow play hide-and-seek in exotic tropical gardens of homes reincarnated as chic cafe-retreats, funky home decor stores and tiny art galleries. Quirky distractions call from every direction...from hot-pink *tuk tuks* and vintage Morris Minors to historic hotels and old-world Ceylon-poster

ESSENTIALS

COUNTRY
Sri Lanka

LANGUAGES
Sinhala, Tamil &
English

CURRENCY
Sri Lankan
Rupee

TEMPERATURE
(April)
30°C (max), 25°C (min)



BEYOND GALLE'S BEACHES

World's healthiest tea

Handunugoda Tea Museum produces a signature Virgin White Tea, rich in antioxidants. It is said to have been originated in China, where it was a beverage reserved strictly for emperors. 23 kilometres from Galle.

Turtles hatching

Five of the seven turtle species in the world are found in Sri Lanka. At Habaraduwa Turtle Hatchery, one can watch eggs being hatched and turtles being released into the ocean. 13 kilometres from Galle.

Wooden mask tradition

The town of Ambalangoda is famous for an ancient wooden mask-making tradition. Fascinating legends and rituals surround these masks believed to have healing and protective powers. 33 kilometres from Galle.

Galle Fort is a smorgasbord of dining experiences...classy restaurants, fun pavement eateries, flower-shaded courtyard tables and swinging chairs in corridors.

shops. And there's an abundance of retail therapy....vibrant resort-wear to brilliant blue Ceylon sapphires to the world's best cinnamon.

An iconic walk along the sloping moss-green wall fort ramparts comes highly recommended. The ideal route starts from the Clock Tower, over a glorious star-shaped circuit of 3 kilometres, sandwiched between the ocean waves and red-tiled rooftops of tiny houses. One cannot help but marvel at sophisticated brick-lined underground drainage, flawlessly designed to avoid flooding by the tide, highlighted by a sunset spectacle near the white Lighthouse that guards the eastern end of the ramparts.

A FLAVOURFUL FEAST

The mood is infectious in this expat haven, where writers, photographers, designers and boutique hoteliers adapt effortlessly to loose linen garments, whirring ceiling fans and barefoot-at-home lives. Can food be far behind? Galle Fort is a smorgasbord of dining experiences... classy restaurants, fun pavement eateries, flower-shaded courtyard tables and swinging chairs in corridors. As if the options weren't overwhelming enough, one stumbles across the chalky colonnades of the former Dutch hospital, where fusion restaurants offer culinary temptations of reinvented string hoppers, coconut relish and sour fish curries.

SOUL OF THE SRI LANKAN RIVIERA

1340 kilometres of the Indian Ocean coastline dangles bait to appeal to every travel personality, whether active adventurer, laid-back lazy or photo-enthusiast. West of Galle, in the throes of unadulterated Sri Lanka, the romance starts to creep in. An endless road unabashedly shows off dazzling, tan-gold tropical sands, wave-drenched rocks and emerald palm clusters. Red-roofed houses peeking from palm groves drip 'destination envy' from white-columns and cool verandahs. Sleepy villages, sarong-clad fishing folk, cheerful red *tuk tuks* and suntanned backpackers on hired mobikes add to the 'far-away' atmosphere. *Saree* clad women dry fish on blue tarpaulin and men in short-sleeved shirts chat near curry stalls. It's pure serenity, still untouched by mindless tourism. There is a wide

range of accommodations to cater to solitude seekers...modest home-stays to elite eco-retreats and charming boutique hotels to boho-luxe villa sanctuaries.

Each beach stretch comes with its own vibe. Unawatuna, for instance, is synonymous with vibrancy. This is the place for popular nightlife, straw-roof cabanas and adventurous shipwreck dives. Wijaya Beach, on the other hand, does solitude with panache. A secret beach with palms bending over the rhythm of froth and foam, dangling yellow king coconuts, a rocky cove and heavenly prawn mango curry on rustic benches on the terrace of Wijaya restaurant.

AN ANCIENT FISHING TRADITION

Further ahead, Koggala is a playground of yesterday's magical traditions. Stilt fishermen perch

skilfully on crossbars tied to slim poles in shallow water, so that they cast minimal shadows and fool fish to come closer. Witness the fish frenzy at Weligama Bay, where enthusiastic fishermen teams are pulling the vessels ashore, baskets of fish being hauled away and noisy fishmongers are negotiating with gusto. Or an unexpected colour explosion at the Mirissa fishing harbour, where hundreds of docked boats and catamarans jostle for space. This is also the go-to place for an adrenaline rush. From blue-whale watching cruises to surfing-snorkelling escapades...a bunch of active oceanic pursuits materialise here.

A perfect day ends with a cliff-top climb to a secluded vantage point. The vision of a seductively curved beach, gust-blown palms, rolling sands and paths cutting into age-old cliffs induces a deep sigh of contentment. ☺

