

LIFE&STYLE

48 HOURS in...

DUBLIN



WHERE TO STAY

A beautiful restoration of four Georgian townhouses, the five star **Merrion** is the most luxurious place to stay in central Dublin. It's smart and stylish but welcoming, too. And it has a two Michelin starred restaurant. merrionhotel.com



WHERE TO DRINK

A haven in the heart of the city, the **Library Bar** at the Central Hotel Dublin won Best Hotel Bar at the 2012 National Hospitality Awards and we can see why – the grand old furnishings make it the perfect place to enjoy a Jameson on the Rocks. centralhoteldublin.com/library-bar



WHERE TO VISIT

Since its completion in 1204AD, **Dublin Castle** has played a prominent role in Ireland's rich and tumultuous history. Spanning over 44,000sqm, it houses two museums and gardens. Well worth a visit, especially for history buffs. dublincastle.ie



WHERE TO EAT

With an adjoining bookshop, the **Winding Stair** has long been a favourite among Dublin's many arty types. The food is special, too, with traditional Irish classics reformulated for modern palates. winding-stair.com

Sri cheers: the fortunate isle is back on the tourism map

The tropical island right in the middle of the Indian Ocean a few degrees north of the equator is – once again – working its magic, writes **Sean Sheehan**

SCIENCE fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke spent the last 50 years of his life in Sri Lanka and believed the island exerted an unusually strong gravitational pull. Perhaps this helps explain why visitors are being increasingly drawn to the place, though it is also to do with the cessation of the civil war in 2009 and the resumption this April of British Airways flights from Gatwick to Colombo.

Visitor numbers are sure to increase. With sun-kissed beaches and spa-adorned hotels, exciting wildlife, a rich Buddhist culture and ravishing landscapes of mountains, rainforest and lagoons, it is a place where travellers of all ages and inclinations are welcomed with disarming charm by the people who live there. The good-natured population is matched by the natural beauty of this green island: coconut, pineapple and banana trees, tea plantations and, along the coastline, giant plant leaves move gently in the winds.

Outside houses, white banners –

white being the traditional Buddhist colour for funerals – stand out against the greenery. They serve as a reminder that Sri Lanka is home to the world's oldest branch of Buddhism.

The airport is a little way north of Colombo. If you have to spend the night in the bustling capital, hotels such as the relaxing Cinnamon Lakeside – spread over seven acres of land on the banks of Beira Lake – insulate you from the 360,000 tuk-tuks that buzz around the city like demented flies.

A popular route out of Colombo heads northeast towards the Cultural Triangle, where many ancient sites relating to Sinhalese civilisation can be found in a small area. The town of Dambulla feels like the middle of nowhere but it makes a convenient base for visits to an atmospheric set of cave temples, filled with more Buddha statues than a well-stocked tourist shop. The mildly difficult climb to the top of Sigiriya (a giant ochre-coloured slab of rock looming



200m above the ground) is relieved by ancient murals depicting frisky damsels and, from the summit, panoramic views. Just remember to negotiate carefully if you opt for one of the guides hanging around the entrance to Sigiriya.

There is little point in staying in Dambulla itself when the serene pool-bar-equipped Amaya Lake hotel is so close by. Drinks at dusk are enhanced by the sight and sound of a flute player perched atop a tree and the natural calm generated by the peaceful lake.

The picturesque city of Kandy, the second largest in Sri Lanka, also deserves a stopover on your itinerary. Built around a lake and forested hills, it's home to the Temple of the [Buddha's] Tooth and with numerous

hotels and restaurants. I stayed in one of the hundred large rooms at Mahaweli Reach hotel, and enjoyed the landscaped gardens and river views, skipping a visit to the Temple of the Tooth in favour of the local bars in Colombo Street. They are friendly, though far from salubrious-looking, and the tippie of choice – arrack – is every bit as aggressive as its name suggests. A fermented toddy made from the sap of palm trees, it is best when mixed with coke or ginger ale. Be warned.

Pinnawala elephant orphanage, 25 miles west of Kandy, is good fun during the feeding sessions and there are plenty of shops retailing gewgaws. Well worth checking out is the factory shop that makes paper products out of elephant dung; greeting cards and other stationary make an unusual gift.

Sooner or later you have to hit the beaches, and my abode for loafing about in the sun, surf and sand was Bentota, about 35 miles south of Colombo and connected with the capital by an expressway (and an extension to the airport opens this September). Beaches run for miles along the southwest of the island and Bentota is home to some world-class hotels. With one of the restaurants serving lobster cappuccino flamed with Cognac, plus all the usual facilities of a five-star place, Vivanta by Taj was one of the more memorable places I stayed.

Excursions at Vivanta include boat safaris and whale and dolphin watching in nearby Galle. But I wanted to see some hornbills so I signed up for a trip with the Bird and Wildlife Team, a company specialising in tours of the Sri Lankan wilderness. I travelled first to Sinharaja, a national park and World Heritage site, staying at



Left: buddhas outside a temple in Colombo; Above: the Sri Lankan Coastline



Martin's Lodge – simple but clean and with a magnificent view of the rainforest – and on to Uda Walawe National Park, famed for its elephants, buffaloes and birds. The place to stay here is Kalu's Hideaway, set up as a personal retreat by the Sri Lankan cricketer Romesh Kaluwitharana before he turned it into a comfortable hotel with rustic charm. To cap it all I was in the company of Deepal Warakagoda, a birder who identified a new species of owl in Sinaraja and then, with characteristic Sri Lankan

magnanimity, named it Otus Thilohoffmanni – not after himself but after the Swiss conservationist who single-handedly saved the forest from being logged into extinction more than 30 years ago. Deepal gave it the English name of Serendip, the word fifth-century Arabs used for Sri Lanka and from which serendipity is derived. Making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident is what a holiday should always allow for and, while you may not discover a new species, there are plenty of unexpected delights in Sri Lanka.

NEED TO KNOW

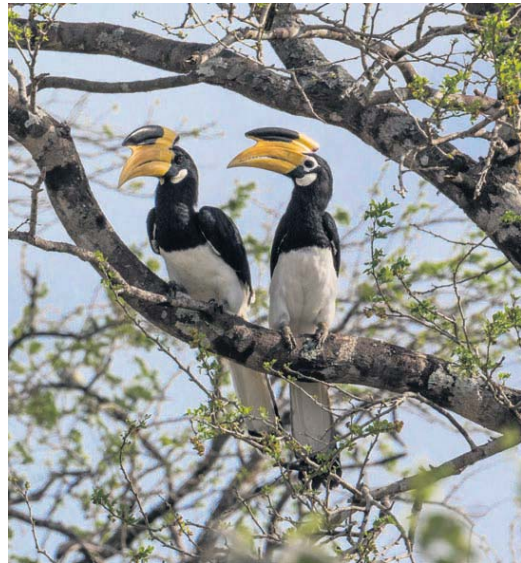
■ A nine night Taste of Ceylon tour and stay package from British Airways includes a six night tour plus three nights at the Vivanta by Taj for £1,769 per person, based on two people sharing, for travel in September. The price includes return British Airways flights from Gatwick, half-board accommodation on the tour on a bed and breakfast basis at Vivanta by Taj. Visit ba.com/srilanka or call 0844 4930758.

■ Boutique hotel specialists Mr & Mrs Smith have recently partnered with British Airways to offer holiday packages exclusively on ba.com and offers seven nights at Casa Colombo from £1,099 per person, based on two people sharing for travel in September. Price includes return British Airways flights from Gatwick and accommodation with breakfast.

For reservations visit ba.com/mrandmrsmith or call 0844 4930758

■ Rooms at Cinnamon Lakeside from £80; at Casa Colombo from £88; at Amaya Lake from £46; at Mahaweli Reach from £93; at Vivanta by Taj from £135; at Kalu's Hideaway £76.

■ Bird and Wildlife Team birdandwildlife.com



Left: hornbills in the rainforest; Below: the Sigirya rock



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