

marie claire

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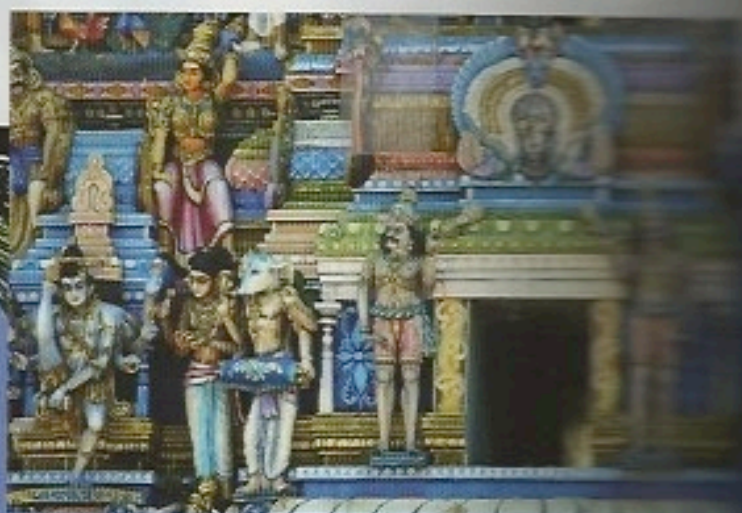
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Galle schoolgirls take shelter; an ornate Hindu temple in Colombo (right)



BRING ME SUNSHINE

Pristine beaches, lush tea plantations and a vibrant literary festival – **SRI LANKA** is the new winter hot spot, says Nigel Tisdall



And relax... Aramgalla's courtyard pool

Making the trek for fresh water




Galle's Meeran Jumma Mosque is hard to miss






Est 1889
Bogawan Lalawa
THE RUBEN VALLEY OF COYLONTA
WANA RAJAH ESTATE
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Find sand, sea and seclusion on the island's south coast



A visit to the tea plantations is a must (left); leave plenty of suitcase space for souvenirs

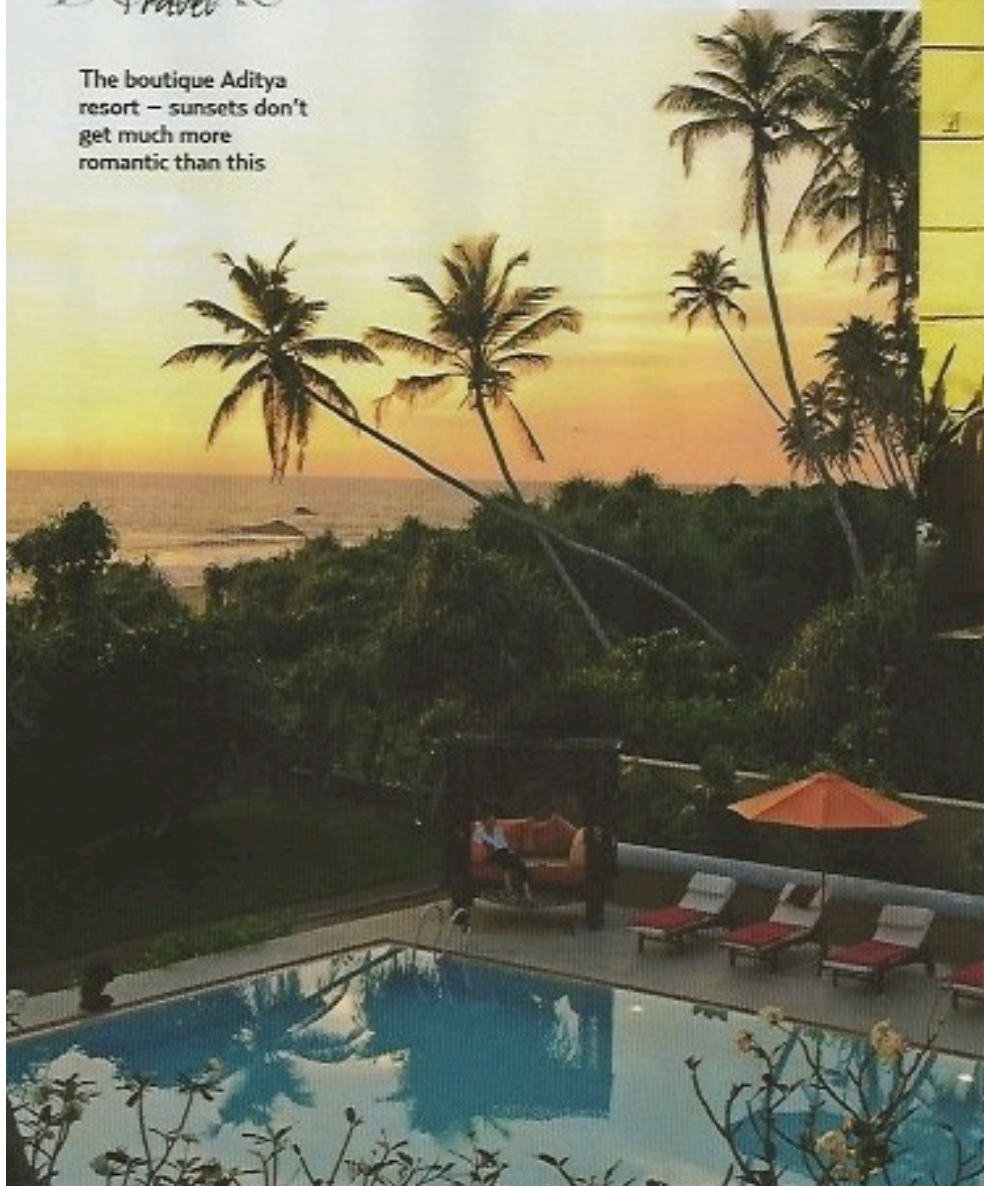
'Travellers have been eagerly returning to Sri Lanka – with rave reviews'

I FELL IN LOVE WITH SRI LANKA the minute I heard it had a Minister for Coconuts. It's a serious job and whenever there's a shortage, the entire island gets worked up, just as we get vexed over the price of petrol. Sri Lankans do a 1001 wonderful things with this glossy palm, from making delicious curries to carving ornate beds from its wood – and concocting reviving welcome drinks for sun-starved travellers who've just made the long haul to the exotic 'Isle of Serendib'.

The good news is it's worth it – the madness of UK airports in winter, the 11-hour flight to Colombo, the four-hour drive to the south of the island. Thanks to a delay, Alice, my wife, and I arrive at the serene, 12-suite Aditya resort in Devenigoda at midnight feeling as glamorous as an old dishcloth. Unbelievably, the staff are still up. Would madam like a glass of chilled coconut water? Perhaps a little spicy baked mullet served on a banana leaf?

The next morning, looking out at the tranquil pool and tropical *{continued}*

The boutique Aditya resort – sunsets don't get much more romantic than this



garden leading to a secluded beach, my first thought is 'Sod it – let's cancel the itinerary and hole up here.' But how mad would that be? Following the end of its 25-year civil war in 2009, travellers have been eagerly returning to Sri Lanka – with rave reviews. The white-sand beaches on its east coast are the new holy grail, but the best time to visit them is from April to September, so if you want winter sun – and a decent choice of hotels – stick to the old favourites.

For many that means heading for Galle, close to the island's southern tip. The port's crowning jewel is Galle Fort,

'The traffic-free streets are home to tempting little shops and restaurants'



Sit back and enjoy the scenery by train (left); the grand colonial facade of the historic Amangalla hotel

built in the 1660s and now a Unesco World Heritage Site with sea walls so solid they withstood the horror of the 2004 tsunami. Inside, the traffic-free streets are home to tempting little shops and stimulating restaurants. Every morning immaculately dressed

schoolgirls from Southlands College, established in 1885, gather under the venerable rain trees, and it's a delight to go wandering through the cobbled streets lined with mildewed warehouses once stacked high with spices.

There's plenty to discover, like Galle's 140-year-old



library, but it's not all history. Every January, the city stages an acclaimed literary festival that last year drew such writers as Louis de Bernières and Candace Bushnell. There's a good range of boutique hotels, too, and the grandest place to stay is Amangalla, which opened in 1863 as the New Oriental Hotel. Today it's a beautiful, 28-room modern-colonial grande dame run by Amanresorts with original jackwood floors, four-poster beds, a top-class spa, complimentary yoga and a huge, jade-green swimming pool that offers a blissful way to end a hot day's sightseeing.

You could easily spend a week in Galle but, foolishly, I told the tour operator we wanted to see as much as possible. So our genial driver, Arthur, duly turns up with the news that if it's Monday it must be Mirissa Hills. A short drive east, this is a working cinnamon plantation with forest views and reasonably priced rooms, which also puts you in pole position for the early start required to go whalewatching in nearby Mirissa. From December to April, the seas off the southern tip of Sri Lanka are rich with migrating blue whales. Normally, 'whalewatching' conjures up pictures of frozen bones and dripping anoraks, *{continued}*



One of Amangalla's luxe colonial rooms, with a view of Galle Fort's rooftops



Escape the crowds at picture-perfect Tangalle beach (left); harvest time at a tea plantation (below left) – tea and coconuts are both vital to Sri Lanka's economy





Join the locals
for a dip



Book now

- In November, a 12-night tour of Devenigoda, Galle, Mirissa, Bogawantalawa and Colombo costs from £1,960 per person with Ampersand Travel (020 7289 6100; ampersandtravel.com), including flights with Emirates, car and driver, accommodation with breakfast and entrance to sites/museums.
- Recommended places to stay are Aditya (aditya-resort.com), Amangalla (amanresorts.com), Mirissa Hills (mirissahills.com), Tea Trails (teatrails.com) and Tintagel (tintagelcolombo.com).
- Sri Lanka (£14.99, Rough Guides) is a comprehensive guide; *Luxe Sri Lanka* (£4.99, luxecityguides.com) is good for shopping in Galle and Colombo.
- Galle Literary Festival (galleliteraryfestival.com) runs from 18–22 January 2012. For further information contact Sri Lanka Tourism (0845 880 6333; srilanka.travel).

Take a tuk-tuk
tour of Colombo
and bag a few
fashion bargains

so we relish the chance to do this in tropical warmth. Unfortunately the weather is unexpectedly appalling, but after a bumpy 90-minute voyage we're rewarded with a close encounter with the world's largest living creature ploughing with the waves like some huge underwater lorry – a tremendous sight that's worth every speck of vomit.

'Today will be very long,' Arthur warns as we drive inland to Bogawantalawa, near Hatton, otherwise known as Sri Lanka's 'Golden Valley of Tea'. He's right, but we've no complaints for as we climb high into the hills we are greeted by the astonishingly beautiful landscape born out of the world's devotion to the daily cuppa. Set at 4,000 feet, the hills here are a luminous green embroidery of neatly arranged rows of tea bushes. Their lush leaves create an air of permanent spring that is complemented by a decorous tableau of misty lakes, peaceful woods, Victorian churches and grand,

1920s bungalows that are now guest houses. Book one of the four run by Tea Trails and you can take dreamy walks through the tea plantations, have a green tea bath, eat pears poached in cinnamon tea – and learn so much about this lucrative leaf it may well change your life. I've not touched a grotty old tea bag since.

From here it's a four-hour drive back to Colombo. Trips to Sri Lanka often require a stop in the capital, and it's worth a night or two to admire the city's grand buildings and go shopping. One essential is a late afternoon walk along Galle Face Green, a seafront promenade created in 1859. Today it's a picturesque cavalcade of kite-fliers, cricket-players, food-sellers and giggling, sari-clad

girls dipping their toes in the Indian Ocean. The experience is all the better if rounded off with a cocktail on the terrace of the adjacent Galle Face Hotel, which opened in 1864 and has welcomed everyone from Chekhov to Richard Nixon as a guest.

Rummaging the rails for discounted clothes is another must-do – after all, a lot of familiar-name garments are made out here and the labels (Guess, Gap, Next) are often barely scribbled out. Head for department stores Odel and House of Fashion – for a quality memory take a tuk-tuk to Barefoot, a wildly colourful emporium in Galle Road. Here Alice and I get very excited by the gorgeous stationery,

fragrant spices, bathroom treats and inexpensive books – but eventually we settle for a roll of hand-woven, hand-dyed cotton in bright pink, yellow and orange stripes. Made into super-cheerful curtains, it's now hanging proud in our living room, ready to bring a daily ray of Sri Lankan sunshine into the gloom of the British winter. ■

▶ Planning a getaway? For ideas and advice, visit marieclaire.co.uk/travel