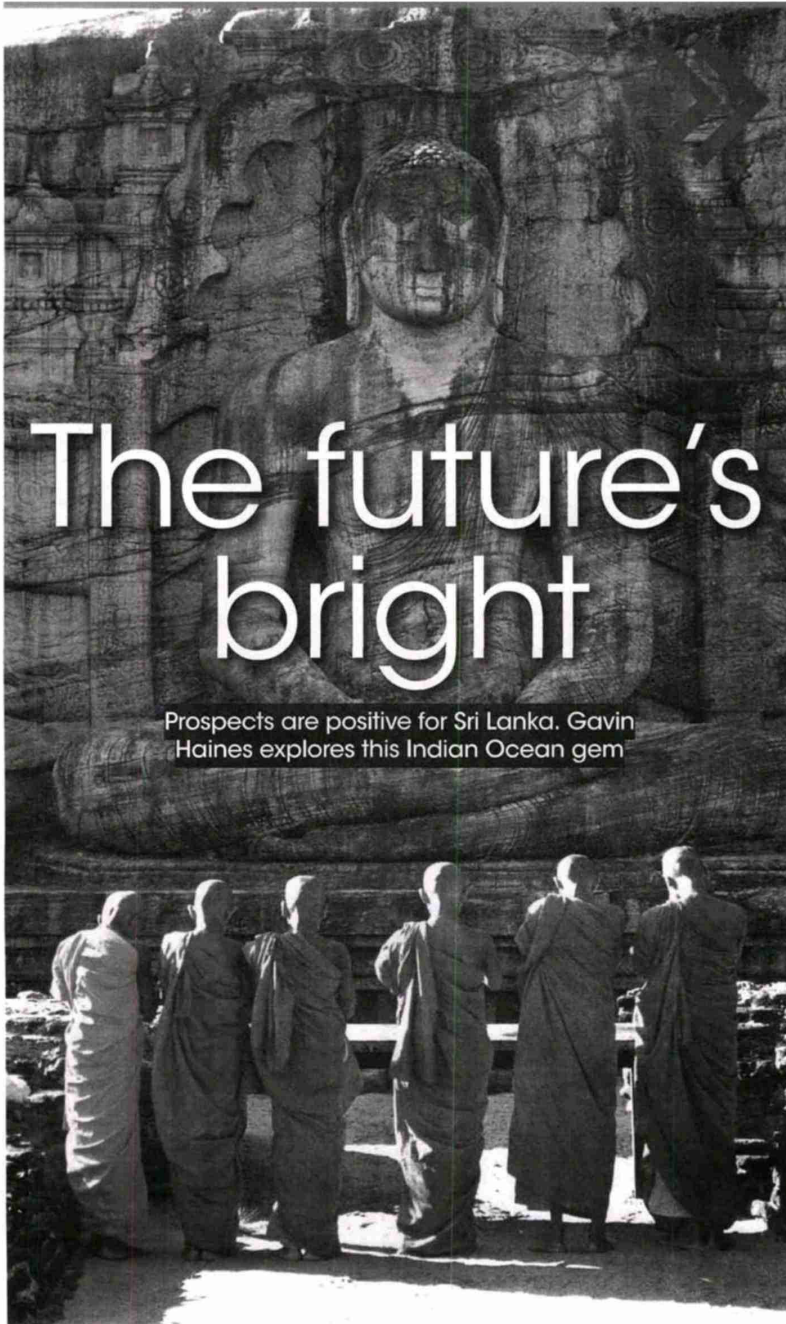


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The future's bright

Prospects are positive for Sri Lanka. Gavin Haines explores this Indian Ocean gem

Desperate not to be beaten by the sunrise, pilgrims scramble up the last steps to reach the summit of Adam's Peak.

This holy site in central Sri Lanka is supposedly where Adam – of Garden of Eden fame – first set foot on Earth, and if you look hard enough you can find one of his "footprints" in the rock. However, all I see is the sun poking its head over the clouds, heralding a new day on this teardrop-shaped island in the Indian Ocean.

The summit is a four-hour trek, but the reward is a suitably biblical view: as far as the eye can see, verdant peaks jut out from the morning mist. From here, Sri Lanka looks boundless, but it's an illusion; this diminutive nation is about the same size as Ireland.

Like Ireland, Sri Lanka has endured a tumultuous history. Until 2009, the former British colony was engaged in a civil war. Though the south was easy to visit and a tourist favourite, the north, where the Tamil Tigers fought for an independent state, was off-limits.

How times have changed. With peace, prosperity is growing, and today a sense of optimism and opportunity prevails. As the entire island has opened up, tourists have been quick to rediscover the island. Cox & Kings reported a 60% year-on-year increase in customers travelling to Sri Lanka in 2012. The value for money is undeniable too. In its Holiday Money Report, the Post Office tied the island with Spain as the cheapest destination for 2013.

● SEE: ISLE OF VARIETY

For such a small nation, Sri Lanka has plenty of draws.

It boasts an evocative cocktail of palm-lined beaches, luscious hill country and historical sites. Perhaps that's why British Airways named the island its top destination for 2013 – and not just to publicise its new Gatwick-Colombo service, which launches in April.

"This is such an exciting new route for us," explains Silla Maizey of British Airways.

"Sri Lanka has much to offer visitors, from beach, spa or adventure holidays, to cultural,



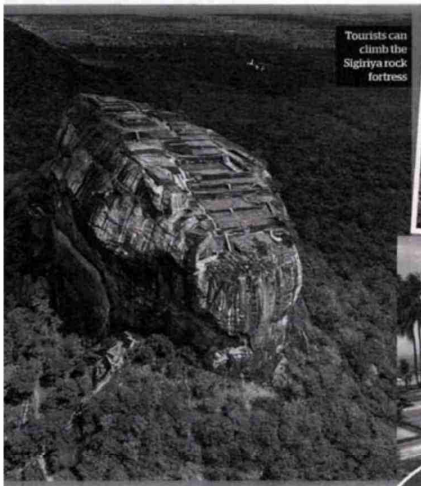
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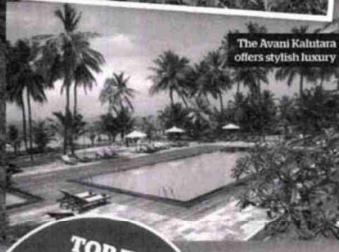
DESTINATIONS — INDIA & THE INDIAN OCEAN



Tourists can climb the Sighaya rock fortress



Tea is a major Sri Lankan export



The Avani Kalutara offers stylish luxury

TOP TIP
 Visit the north of Sri Lanka between April and September, and the south between December and March

wildlife and nature breaks." From the sun-scorched shores of Negombo to the surf-swept sands of Arugam Bay, the beaches are superb, and good-value, all-inclusive, fly-and-flop packages are popular with sun-seeking Brits.

Tourists also have the tantalising opportunity to see the largest land and sea mammals in the same day. Elephants abound in the country's national parks, while blue whales can be spotted in the waters down south. Most resorts offer day excursions to see both.

The luscious hill country in central Sri Lanka is a beautiful contrast to the balmy beaches. Among the sweeping tea plantations and tropical forests is the old colonial town of Kandy, Sri Lanka's second city. This religious metropolis is home to the Unesco-designated Temple of the Tooth, a spiritual site for Buddhist pilgrims overlooking the lake.

● STAY: BOUTIQUE BEAUTIES

Investment in Sri Lanka's creaking infrastructure and the construction of Mattala International airport in the south (scheduled for completion next month) has opened up the whole island to tourism. New resorts are cropping up everywhere, although most are

concentrated in the southwest. The island offers the full gamut of accommodation, from all-inclusive properties to secluded five-star hotels. The Avani Kalutara is one of the flagship resorts on the west coast. Colonial in style, the 105-room hotel and spa occupies a remote location overlooking the Kalu estuary and is the second Avani hotel to open in Sri Lanka in as many years.

Virgin Holidays has boosted its boutique offering in its latest brochure, adding the bijou resorts of Ranna212 and Reef Villa. Located in Tangalla and Wadduwa respectively, resorts like these are helping Sri Lanka access the upper end of the honeymoon market.

Kuoni has expanded its range of beach hotels with new properties including the family-friendly Centara Ceysands Resort & Spa and the Turkish-influenced Cinnamon Bay Beruwala.

Options in the northern areas

formerly off-limits are coming on line. Expressions Holidays features a handful of properties there, including eco-retreat Jungle Beach and relaxed Nilaveli Beach Hotel, both near Trincomalee, and village-style Maalu Maalu Resort & Spa at Passikudah Bay, where the suites boast Jacuzzis and butler service.

● SELL: TAILORED TRIPS

Owing to Sri Lanka's many and varied attractions, escorted tours are proving almost as popular as single-centre beach stays.

According to Premier Holidays, tour bookings here have doubled since 2010, an upward trend also observed by Expressions Holidays.

"Sri Lanka has such broad appeal," says Sara Chardin, long-haul programme head at Expressions. "There are lots of honeymooners and families, but also



SAMPLE PRODUCTS

Kuoni offers seven nights' all-inclusive at the three-and-a-half star Club Bentota including BA flights and transfers in May.
kuoni.co.uk
 01306 747008

Ampersand Travel offers seven nights' B&B at the newly-opened Jungle Beach near Trincomalee from £1,730 including flights and transfers.
ampersandtravel.com
 020 7289 6100

Great Rail Journeys' new Temple and Tea tour starts from £2,198 and includes 12 nights' hotel accommodation with breakfast, 11 dinners, guided excursions, flights and transfers.
greatrail.com
 01904 521936

special-interest clients looking for something different."

Demand for tailored tours has prompted both G Adventures and Great Rail Journeys to add 14-day Sri Lankan itineraries. With prices from £1,279 and £2,198 respectively, these all-inclusive cultural trips take in tea plantations, historical sites and beaches.

Kuoni has a new 10-night Sri Lanka Nature & Culture private tour staying in eco-friendly resorts, with highlights including temples, villages, the Udawalawe National Park and the Sinharahja rainforest.

The island has variety in spades on its own, but for those seeking a two-centre option, access to the Maldives is about to become easier. BA's thrice-weekly flights between Gatwick and Colombo start on April 14 and go via Malé. **TW**



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