

SOUTHERN INDIA & SRI LANKA

18 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Bangalore

Today we arrive in Bangalore. Transfer to our hotel.

Overnight in Bangalore.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Bangalore: City Tour

Today we tour Bangalore, the cosmopolitan capital of Karnataka.

Bangalore is called the Garden City for its delicate blossoms and greenery that impart a unique beauty to this lovely city. The weather is the city's best feature, with pleasant summers and bearable winters. Bangalore, which literally means the 'town of baked beans', was founded by Kempe Gowda, a chieftain of the Vijayanagar Empire, around the 16th century. He built four towers in four directions to specify its boundaries.

We visit the Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens, which has a variety of old trees, fountains, lotus pools, terraces and an assortment of tropical herbs and subtropical herbs. We also see the government buildings and the Maharaja's Palace.

Overnight in Bangalore.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Bangalore - Fly to Kochi: City Tour

Early this morning we fly to Kochi (Cochin).

The history of European involvement in Kochi, from the early sixteenth century onwards, is dominated by the aggression of, successively, the Portuguese, Dutch and British, competing in their desire to control the port and its lucrative spice trade. From 1800, the state of Cochin was part of the British Madras Presidency; from 1812 until Independence in 1947, its administration was made the responsibility of a series of diwans, or financial ministers. In the 1920s, the British expanded the port to make it suitable for modern ocean-going ships; extensive dredging created Willingdon Island, between Ernakulam and Fort Cochin.

On arrival we have a tour of Kochi, including: Chinese fishing Nets -- A legacy of one of the earliest visitors to the Malabar coast, these nets are unmistakable as one enters the harbour. Records show that they were first erected between AD 1350 and 1450. Constructed out of Teak wood and Bamboo poles, they work on the principle of balance. The best place to watch is from Vasco Da Gama square, a narrow promenade that parallels the beach with little stalls that serve fresh seafood, tender coconuts and so on.

Santa Cruz Basilica: Built by the Portuguese, the church was elevated to a Cathedral by the Pope Paul IV in 1558. Spared by the Dutch conqueror of Cochin who destroyed many Catholic buildings in 1663, it later fell into the hands of the British who demolished it when they took over Cochin in 1795. For almost 100 years there was no church on the site, until the Bishop Dom Gomez Vereira commissioned a new building in 1887.

Overnight in Kochi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 4 Kochi - Allaphuza: Houseboat

We continue by road to Alappuzha (Alleppey), known as the "Venice of the East", situated on Vembanad Lake, the longest in India. A maze of canals and a network of bridges give this busy commercial town its descriptive sobriquet. Alleppey is known for its coir, the retted fibre of the coconut husk and for black pepper.

Today we board our houseboat for a very special Kerala delight -- a slow boat through its forests and palm-shaded canals. We take a leisurely cruise on the beautiful backwaters, enjoying the magnificent scenery along the waterways and stopping to admire what history and religion have left along the way.

THE HOUSEBOAT will be approx 60 feet long and 13 feet wide in the middle. There are comfortable beds, and traditional lanterns, and air-conditioning. There will be a sundeck for daytime relaxation. The boats are made of local natural fibres that truly echo the villagers harmony with the natural surroundings. As your oarsman slowly and silently propels us along the backwaters, we will enjoy the magnificent scenery along the waterways. We will stop to view working villages and witness locals fishing, swimming, crafting, and bathing (most boats will have oarsman though some will be motorized with a silencer on the motor).

NOTE: Single cabins are NOT available on the houseboat. Single supplements reflect sharing for this one night.

Overnight houseboat cruise.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Allaphuza - Fly to Chennai

Today we return to Kochi and fly to Chennai (Madras).

Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, is, like Mumbai and Calcutta, a comparatively modern creation. It was founded by the British East India Company in 1639, on a narrow five-kilometre strip of land between the Cooum and Adyar rivers, a few kilometres north of the ancient Tamil port of Mylapore and the Portuguese settlement of San Thome, established in 1522. The British were repeatedly challenged by the French who, in 1746, destroyed much of the city.

Overnight in Chennai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Chennai & Mahabalipuram

Today we travel to 60 km (37 mi) to Mahabalipuram (also known as Mamallapuram), the seaport of the ancient Palava dynasty of Kanci. The temples and carvings here date back to the 7th century. They stand out because of their simplicity and the fact that they also depict many scenes from the every-day life of every-day people. It is now recognized as the site of some of the greatest architectural and sculptural achievements in India.

After a comprehensive tour of the site and relaxing lunch break next to the Bay of Bengal we return to Chennai.

Overnight in Chennai.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Chennai, India - Colombo, Sri Lanka - Negombo

Today's city sightseeing of Chennai includes a visit to the National Art Gallery and Museum, which has a selection of ancient paintings from almost all schools of art, as well as a section entirely devoted to modern art. We will visit Fort St George, once a stronghold of the British; St Mary's Church, the oldest Anglican church in India; the San Thome Cathedral where the remains of St Thomas the Apostle are believed to

have been buried; the Mylapore Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and the Light House which is the only one of its kind in the world to be located on top of a High Court. We drive along the Marina, the thirteen kilometre-long beach which, with its shining white sands, aqua blue sea and violet lights at night, is the pride of Chennai.

After dinner we board our evening flight to Colombo, Sri Lanka and transfer to Negombo, situated nearby the International Airport and approximately 35km (22 mi) north of Colombo. Negombo town is a historically interesting place that has been strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. The Dutch captured the town from the Portuguese in 1640, lost it again in the same year, and then captured it again in 1644. The British then took it from them in 1796 without a struggle. Negombo was one of the most important sources of cinnamon during the Dutch era.

Overnight in Negombo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Negombo - Wilpattu / Evening Safari & Night Walk

This morning we depart after breakfast and head to Wilpattu National Park, the oldest and largest National Wildlife Park in Sri Lanka. This destination is a must for those wishing to explore unchartered wildlife parks in Sri Lanka. Visitor numbers here remain low, even in high season, which gives Wilpattu a genuine sense of wilderness.

Lying on the northwest coast, Wilpattu was declared as a sanctuary in 1905 and upgraded to national park status in 1938. Aside from Wilpattu's rugged beauty, there is thought to be a high chance of sighting leopard here, and in addition elephant, sloth bear, water buffalo, and spotted deer can also be found. The park is also a major sight of interest for birders!

Upon arrival we will check into our tented safari camp (all tents have en-suite facilities), our home for the next two nights. After a break for lunch at the camp we will enjoy an afternoon/evening safari with our naturalist-guide.

As our campsite is located just bordering a lake close to the park's boundary, we are able to experience something very similar to living inside the park. If we are fortunate we may even encounter wildlife in the campsite itself. Our complete tented camp experience includes expert game drivers and professional naturalists.

After dinner we will also enjoy a guided night walk!

Overnight near Wilpattu National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Wilpattu National Park: Full Day Exploration

Today we make an early start so that we can enjoy a full day safari in the park. Coffee, tea and cookies will be available at the camp in the morning, and a scenic location has been pre-selected for our picnic breakfast stop.

The Wilpattu National Park is a well known ecotourism destination -- a status which is upheld by the strong prevalence of leopards in the park. Though the present number of Sri Lankan Leopards in the park is unknown, this is one of the favoured wildlife safari destinations to observe these big cats. Another highlight is the highly population of Sri Lankan Sloth Bears that can also be found here. We will enjoy a lovely picnic lunch near a lake. A unique feature of this park is the existence of "willus" (natural lakes) -- natural, sand-rimmed water basins or depressions that fill with rainwater.

We later return to our tented camp in time for dinner, and for those who would like, another night walk is available this evening.

Overnight in Wilpattu National Park.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 10 Wilpattu - Sigiriya: Afternoon Fortress Visit

This morning we depart for Sigiriya. The ancient city of Sigiriya is a premier historical destination in Sri Lanka, and was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. For many travellers this site is considered to be one of the world's true wonders! Translated as 'Lion Rock' in English, the name of the monument indicates the way in which visitors used to begin their final ascent to the top -- through the open jaws and throat "giriya" of a lion "sinha". Unfortunately, the only remains of this lion figure are the gigantic paws, sculpted into the side of the rock. The topography of the area is flat except for the massive rock outcrop of the fortress itself, which rises an incredible 600 feet up from the green scrub jungle.

After checking into our lodge we will head out for our visit to the rock fortress of Sigiriya. Rising dramatically from the central plains, the enigmatic rocky outcrop of Sigiriya is perhaps Sri Lanka's single most dramatic sight. The Sigiriya Rock Fortress is surrounded by an extensive network of gardens, lily-covered moats, ponds, canals, alleys and fountains. Climbing to the top is not easy (and perhaps not possible for everyone), but we have plenty of time and will not be in a rush. There are about 1,200 steps! That's roughly the equivalent of climbing 60 flights of stairs in a 60 story building. But, don't panic... with proper footwear and lots of water, you can climb at your own pace and turn back at any time that you wish.

After conquering the winding spiral staircases and limestone steps, you will reach the summit of Sigiriya rock. Once at the top, relax and savor the unmatched panoramic views! Here stood the royal complex, complete with bathing pools, royal chambers, and a throne. Once you reach the top you will understand why Sigiriya is often referred called the "palace in the sky."

We later return to our lodge in nearby Kandalama in time for dinner.

Overnight in Kandalama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Sigiriya & Polonnaruwa

After breakfast we will enjoy a walk along a village trail with our local guide in order to learn more about the way of life in the nearby community. Today we will enjoy a typical local lunch prepared by the villagers.

Later this afternoon we will visit the UNESCO protected ancient city of Polonnaruwa. Polonnaruwa is nearly 1,000 years, and is one of Sri Lanka's ancient capital cities. This is part of the famous 'Cultural Triangle' of Sri Lanka. Kings ruled the central plains of Sri Lanka from Polonnaruwa 800 years ago, when it was a thriving commercial and religious centre. Although King Vijayabahu was the first to claim the city as his capital, it was King Parakramabahu who made it what it is today... with its massive buildings, ornate parks and the 'piece de resistance' -- a 2500 hectare tank called 'Parakrama Samudra' (Sea of Parakrama). The city itself is divided into the 'new' and 'old' town, with the impressively preserved ruins split into five main areas. Due to its reasonably compact layout, the ruins can be easily explored on foot.

Tonight we will enjoy dinner at our lodge with our special guest -- Sunil Gunathilake from The Primates Project. Sunil is the Senior Research Assistant of the project, and he will take us through almost 50 years of history of the Monkey Kingdom (A 2015 American nature documentary) in Polonnaruwa, where the primate "actors" became an instant hit with award winning movie.

Overnight in Kandalama.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 12 Sigiriya - Kandy / Temple of the Tooth

Today we depart from the Sigiriya region and travel south towards Kandy. Kandy is Sri Lanka's second largest city located in the mountainous center of the island, and considered by some as the cultural capital of Sri Lanka. Kandy was declared as a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1988. The cooler climate and smaller size make it a pleasant place to visit. The easy to explore compact downtown area is surrounded by beautiful and lush hills.

In the early evening we will enjoy a city walk in Kandy, and we will visit the Sacred Temple of the Tooth. Sri Dalada Maligawa -- famously known worldwide as The Temple of the Tooth -- dates back to the 16th century, though most of the present buildings were built in the 19th century. Venerated as the most important object in the Buddhist world, the Sacred Relic of the Tooth of Buddha is enshrined at the Temple.

Brought from India 2500 years ago, it is said that the possessor of the Relic had the right to rule the country. The Relic is kept in a gold casket and stored amidst great security in the Inner Chamber. The Temple complex is made up of numerous buildings most of which are highly decorated with paintings and carvings depicting Buddha. Rich in history and tradition, the Sri Dalada Maligawa is a religious centre where daily worship is a colourful and joyful way of everyday life.

At several times throughout the day different services are held, and with the large numbers of worshippers present it is clear to see why Buddhists are so piously devoted towards the Sacred Tooth Relic. Spine-tingling traditional drumming can be heard coming from the Inner Chamber, and will signal that the ceremonial opening of the window for the public viewing of the casket with the Relic within is just about to begin.

Overnight in Kandy.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Kandy / Gadaladeniya & Lankathilaka

Today after breakfast we will visit Gadaladeniya & Lankathilaka. These sites are both important, though lesser-known highlights of the Kandy region.

This Buddhist temple of Gadaladeniya dates from the 14th century, and the main shrine room contains a stunningly beautiful, gilded seated Buddha. Built on a rocky outcrop and covered with small pools, the temple is reached by a series of steps cut into the rock. Lankathilaka is an ancient Buddhist temple built upon a huge rock and dates back to the 14th Century. During our visits this morning we will be met by a spiritual leader and invited to attend a brief Buddhist ritual (approx 45 minutes) where we learn about the Buddhist way of life and mediation. Our special invitee, Vipula Wanigasekera, was in the spiritual studies for nearly three decades. Vipula is a senior lecturer at the Sri Lankan government owned National School of Business Management.

After a break for lunch we will return to the hotel in the late afternoon and you will have some free time before dinner (on your own this evening).

Overnight in Kandy.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Kandy - Nuwara Eliya & Tea Plantations

After breakfast we will head to the Kandy train station where we board our train to Nuwara Eliya.

Our journey provides us with some breathtaking views! The very first steam trains were running in Sri Lanka to bring tea, the greatest commercial export of the colonial Ceylon, to Colombo. From Nuwara Eliya we disembark and travel by bus to Nuwara Eliya.

Along our route we will make a stop at the Pedro Tea Estate where we will visit the factory and learn about the tea making process. Sri Lanka is one of the biggest and best tea producers, and tea is an integral part of the culture. The factory here was originally built in 1885 and is still packed with 19th-century engineering.

Nuwara Eliya is surrounded by mountains covered by dense, moss-covered cloud forests and tea plantations. Here one experiences perpetual English spring weather, with seasonal mists and dry winds that provide ideal weather conditions for the production of one of the choicest grades of high grown tea, to which it gives its name. The city's southern end is adorned by Lake Gregory; high waterfalls add to its scenic beauty.

Overnight in Nuwara Eliya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Nuwara Eliya - Unawatuna

Today's journey takes us to Unawatuna in the southwest of the country. We will depart the tea country and head towards the beautiful coast of Sri Lanka. This is a long drive, usually taking most of the day, but we will make several stops along the way.

For much of our route today we will pass through the hilly 'wet zone', noted for its fishtail palms, red and yellow bananas, and rubber trees. In the wet zone, the dominant vegetation of the lowlands is a tropical evergreen forest, with tall trees, broad foliage, and a dense undergrowth of vines and creepers. Subtropical evergreen forests resembling those of temperate climates flourish in the higher altitudes. Montane vegetation at the highest altitudes tends to be stunted and windswept.

En-route we pass through Kitulgala. This is a small town situated in the wet zone rainforest, and is one of the wettest places in the country. The Academy Award-winning 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' was filmed on the Kelani River near Kitulgala. Large numbers of local people make the excursion from Colombo during the weekends to enjoy the beautiful scenery.

Overnight in Unawatuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Unawatuna - Galle City Tour

After an early breakfast we will head out to the historic city of Galle, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This city truly is a jewel, and we will tour the city and Fort with a local specialist. During our walk we will witness the life of the city and visit inside the private home of a family who have been living there for generations! The exotic old trading port of Galle is blessed with imposing Dutch-colonial buildings, ancient mosques and churches, grand mansions and museums.

Founded in the 16th century by the Portuguese, Galle reached the height of its development in the 18th century, before the arrival of the British. It is the best example of a fortified city built by Europeans in South and South-East Asia

On our way back to the hotel we will stop and see the famous stilt fishermen. This is an iconic and age old method of catching fish, and there is a beauty and uniqueness to the method. Though stilt fishermen make the activity seem easy and comfortable; stilt fishing requires much skill and balance. A vertical pole with an attached crossbar is embedded into the sea floor among the shallows, or on a riverbed. The crossbar allows the fishermen to be seated a couple of meters above the water causing minimal shadows on the water and hence little to no disturbance amongst the sea life. The stilt fishermen then use a rod from this precarious position to bring in a good catch of spotted herrings and small mackerels from the comparative shallows of the sea or from the river. They collect the catch in a bag tied to the pole or to their waist. Though it is a lovely sight, it is a hard and uncomfortable task for a small catch of just enough fish to feed a few mouths.

Overnight in Unawatuna.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Unawatuna - Colombo / Colombo City Tour

After breakfast we will depart for Colombo. Colombo is Sri Lanka's commercial capital, and an important port in the Indian Ocean since ancient times. Traders from the Middle East used Sri Lanka as an exchange center while Arab traders came to gather the ivory, precious stones and spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and pepper, which were highly priced in Europe.

Our city tour will take us to the bustling Petta Bazaar, Independence Square and past the Parliament. During this time our local guide will introduce you to the melting pot of cultures that make up Sri Lanka, and you will learn about its history, trade and communities.

Overnight in Colombo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Departure from Colombo

Today we say our farewells and depart from Sri Lanka.

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BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast