Sri Lanka

Country Facts
Population: 21,324,791
Languages: Sinhala and Tamil (both official), English
Predominant Religions: Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, Christian
Time Zone: Six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 220 volts
Telephone Codes: 94, country code

Introduction:
A visit to Sri Lanka sometimes feels like a vacation at the circus. Sitting along the road at the famous Kandy perahera (parade), tourists can watch bare-chested men cracking whips, boys on stilts juggling torches, and crimson-robed elephants lumbering along beside their bejeweled mahouts. And the carnival atmosphere doesn’t evaporate after the parade ends. Sri Lankans smile constantly — perhaps amused, perhaps joyous — at the spectacles that surround their daily lives: stilt fisher folk reeling in mullet along the south coast; young couples walking the walls of the 17th-century Dutch fort in Galle; children searing their tongues with a fiery curry meal. For the traveler, it all starts to feel like a never-ending perahera. Sri Lankans sweep you into their circus so persuasively that you’re soon moving with the show, instead of watching it.

Sadly, the island’s spirit was dampened by the tragic impact of the tsunamis that struck Southeast Asia in December 2004. The giant waves caused widespread damage to the south and eastern coast of Sri Lanka, especially around the resort city of Galle. More than 35,000 people lost their lives. The nation continues to grieve as it undertakes the slow and arduous process of rebuilding — attracting tourism will constitute an essential element of the healing process.

Additionally, the years of civil and ethnic conflict have left hundreds of thousands of people displaced, and many of them now live in slums or barrack-style camps with little or no clean water or proper sanitation. Most affected are mothers with young children, and the rate of women who die in childbirth and the babies who die in their first month of life is higher in these slum areas than the rest of the country.

Compassion in Sri Lanka:
Compassion International’s work in Sri Lanka began in 2010 with the Child Survival Program to help highly vulnerable mothers and their babies. By 2013, Compassion hopes to establish the Child Sponsorship Program as well. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Sri Lankan children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- You’ll often find Sri Lankans smiling, often for no discernable reason. Smile back!
- Sri Lankans shake their heads side to side to say “no” but use a slightly similar wobbling of the head to indicate “OK.” Although it’s confusing at first, you will get the hang of it.
• Don’t expect to find a standard line at a bank, post office or anywhere else. Instead, join the crowd and don’t be shy about pushing forward.
• Ask permission before taking a photograph. Don’t take photos of people if religious buildings or shrines are in the background (posing next to a Buddha is especially frowned upon). And don’t take photos of military installations, bridges, airports or other strategic areas. Even some religious buildings have camouflaged gun emplacements and military bunkers.
• The main attractions of Sri Lanka are observing beautiful scenery, spectacular flora and fauna, the Kandy perahera, beaches, Hindu and Buddhist temples, shopping for gems, safaris to wildlife sanctuaries, hiking, bird-watching, scuba diving and historical sites. The island will appeal to adventurous travelers who love tropical climates, Asian culture, festivals and beaches.
• Do expect the frustrations and delays that sometimes occur when traveling in a developing country. Sri Lanka is not for those who cannot tolerate extreme heat and humidity.
• The traditional salutation is ayyubowan [may you have a long life]. Use it as a “hello” and a “goodbye.”
• Bargaining is expected, especially outside of government shops. Souvenir shopping in government-operated stores, using hard currency, is a tame experience. Go out and bargain with the local merchants: They are good-natured and sometimes loud, but the encounter can be a better souvenir than the item purchased.
• Sri Lanka grows some of the finest tea in the world, but most of it is exported. Your best chance to get a good cup is in the hill country, where tea plantations and hotels serve the best of the local crop.

Dos and Don’ts:
• Do visit an Ayurvedic spa. Ayurvedic medicine, which developed in India, uses natural products to treat illness. Even if you’re not sick, you can still enjoy an oil massage or a steam bath at one of the many Ayurvedic centers around the island.
• Don’t forget that Colombo is divided into 15 postal zones, and that address numbers repeat themselves from zone to zone. Along Galle Road for instance, which passes through several zones, you might find seven buildings with an address of 110 Galle Road.
• Do be careful if buying the Sri Lankan version of fast food — the curried meat, fish or vegetable packets sold on the street at lunchtime. Its cleanliness can be suspect.
• Do handle all security delays as the Sri Lankans do — with a smile.
• Do have a drink from a fresh coconut by the side of the road. For about Re10 (10 rupees), a vendor will lop the top of the fruit and put a straw in the hole, giving you a safe and delicious tropical drink. Be more careful about other fresh fruit juices — outside tourist hotels they may be mixed with unpurified water.
• When you send postcards from post offices do ask the attendant to cancel the stamp, or it’s unlikely the postcard will reach its destination.
• Do be aware that not all “gem museums” in Ratnapura are true museums — some are nothing more than showrooms.
• Do bring toiletries, cosmetics, medicine and more digital memory cards or film than you think you’ll need.
• Do watch your step — Sri Lanka leads the world in deaths by snake bite per capita.
• Don’t forget to take off your shoes if you enter a temple or mosque.

**Travel Tips**

**Personal Safety:**
Be aware of the current political situation and observe notices that restrict travel to some parts of Sri Lanka. Travel north of the ancient city of Anuradhapura, as well as to Jaffna or the northern peninsula, is not recommended. Travel to the east coast, which has beautiful beaches and occasionally attracts the more adventurous tourists, should be undertaken only with caution. Roadblocks and checkpoints are common, but the military presence is less visible in the hill country and in the small communities along the southern and western beaches. Security at the international airport has improved greatly and no longer causes delays.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them (purse, wallet, backpack, etc.) on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion–hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

**Health:**
Sanitary conditions in most restaurants in Sri Lanka can pose problems for travelers. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe, but peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables before eating, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, avoid local dairy products, and assume the tap water is unsafe [stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks]. Public hospitals in Sri Lanka are well-staffed but poorly supplied. Be aware that rabies is present on the island, so if you’re even nipped by an animal, seek medical attention. Take along all prescription medicine needed for the trip. Malaria, including strains of chloroquine-resistant varieties, is endemic outside Colombo, Kalutara and Nuwara Eliya. Use plenty of insect repellent. The sun can be very strong, so bring sunscreen and wear a hat.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations. Vaccinations for hepatitis and typhoid, as well as anti-malarial medication, may be recommended.
Money:
U.S. dollars and other major currencies can be exchanged for Sri Lankan rupees at banks in all major cities, and ATMs can be found throughout the country. Credit cards can be used at most hotels, but smaller guesthouses may accept only cash.

Weather:
Sri Lanka’s weather is affected by two different monsoons. The southwest part of the island gets soaked May through July, and the northeast monsoons arrive December through January. Humidity is high year-round, however, and you can expect some rain just about every day. The humidity and heat are at their most uncomfortable in April, when anyone who can flees to the hill country. Temperatures there are about 10-15 F / 5-8 C degrees cooler than temperatures along the coasts. In the highest part of the country — around Nuwara Eliya — it gets surprisingly cool in the evening. Be sure to bring a jacket or sweater.

Dress:
No matter what time of year you visit, bring an umbrella. Sri Lankans use them constantly — as parasols if it’s sunny or as umbrellas if it’s raining (it’s always doing one or the other). Shorts and T-shirts are fine for sightseeing, but if you visit a religious site, make sure you are appropriately dressed. Don’t wear skimpy clothing at holy sites or on city streets. Make sure your arms are covered at the predominantly Muslim Galle Fort. If you are visiting temples or mosques, make sure to remove your shoes before entering.

All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.