

Stars of Sri Lanka

There's plenty to entice travellers to the country, including some superb accommodation, discovers **Adam Shaw** on a Mercury Holidays fam trip

Elephants and leopards roaming in national parks; colonial-era railway tracks intersecting verdant tea fields; fishermen on stilts plying their trade in turquoise waters – Sri Lanka's attractions are diverse and beguiling.

And despite some political turbulence in 2022, the country's tourism recovery is back on track. The year ended on a positive note with 92,000 visitors in December, narrowly beating the figure for the same month the previous year.

Sri Lanka's size means a lot can be covered in one trip, and there's accommodation across the country to cater for all preferences, from classic beachside boltholes to secluded hillside gems. Here, we take a look at some of the best.

Amaya Hills, Kandy

Best for... stunning landscapes

Set high in Sri Lanka's central mountainous region, Amaya Hills offers arresting views of the steep peaks framing the sprawling ancient royal capital of Kandy. The 100-room hotel, which is reached by a long, winding road from the city below, boasts an elegant, softly lit upstairs bar that offers views of the city and mountains below. And after sunset, clients can dance the night away at the in-house underground club,

Le Garage, which has become a popular hotspot for locals and guests alike.

Rooms: From £63 per night, based on two adults sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis.

Chaarya Resort & Spa, Tissamaharama

Best for... pampering

The accommodation at Chaarya Resort & Spa is a mix of rooms and chalets, and the leafy surroundings will immediately put clients at ease, as

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will the hotel's wellness offering, with a variety of treatments available at the Ayurveda spa. Guests might wish to book ahead for a soak in a herbal bath, followed by a back and neck massage, after a day of being driven round on a bumpy, leopard-spotting safari at nearby Yala National Park.

Rooms: From £60 per night, room-only. ➤



Amaya Hills,
Kandy

Araliya Green Hills, Nuwara Eliya
Best for... food and drink

Araliya Green Hills sits in the heart of the country's 'Little England', whose 19th-century colonial buildings and manicured lawns wouldn't look out of place back in Britain. But the hotel's cuisine is decidedly international: Glen Fall restaurant specialises in local curries, sambols, string hoppers and kottu, while Marigold serves up everything from Japanese salmon and crunchy veg to beef stews. After they've had their fill, clients can retire to sophisticated Horton's Wine Bar for a glass of port or enjoy a freshly mixed cocktail at the lively High Forest Bar.

Rooms: From £132 per night, based on two adults sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis.

Citrus Hikkaduwa, Hikkaduwa
Best for... watersports

Boutique resort Citrus Hikkaduwa, on Sri Lanka's south coast, offers

impressive sea views from its rooms, and clients will certainly have their watersports needs met. Activities available from here include snorkelling and glass-bottomed boat rides – the coral shelves on the area's shallow fringing reef are a prime place for spotting colourful fish, sea turtles and black-tipped reef sharks.

Rooms: From £100 per night, based on two adults sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis.

Ramada Colombo, Colombo
Best for... city life

With spacious, airy rooms, a sports-themed bar and an Indian restaurant, Alhambra, serving top-drawer biryanis and thalis, Ramada Colombo makes a good base in the Sri Lankan capital. A recently installed Balinese spa complements the outdoor pool, while the new 'secret garden', with its fairy lights and sofas, is a secluded haven tucked away from the rest

YALA NATIONAL PARK EXCURSION

As we ride through the expansive grasslands of Yala National Park, in Sri Lanka's lush southeast, our driver suddenly stops. He's been alerted to a possible animal sighting, and the way he skilfully reverses down a hidden track suggests it could be something special. It certainly is. As the 4x4s gather in a small clearing, engines cut, we spot a majestic female leopard stretching out lazily across a large rock. We sit watching for 15 minutes as she yawns and seeks a more comfortable resting position before slinking off into the bushes.



Leopard sightings in Yala National Park are not guaranteed,

but with a higher concentration of these magnificent big cats than anywhere else in the world, it's not a bad place to start. Plus, there are elephants, wild boar, water buffalo and a range of birds, including the Sri Lankan wood pigeon and the Sri Lankan painted stork, to spot as you glide across the plains.

Book it: Visits to Yala are included in a number of Mercury Holidays tours, including the Sri Lanka's Parks and Wildlife trip, where guests stay in a nearby hotel before enjoying a 4x4 safari drive the following morning. Prices start at £2,399, with departure dates available in 2023 and 2024. mercuryholidays.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Refreshments at Chaarya Resort & Spa, served both indoors and at the pool; yoga session at Amaya Lake; the swimming pool at Turyaa Kalutara **PICTURES:** Shutterstock/Ondrej Prosimsky; Devaka Seneviratne

of the hotel. For those who want to explore, it's close to the city's buzzing Fort area, with its boutique shops and landmarks such as the Old Lighthouse. There's also good road access to Galle, home of Asia's largest surviving European-built fortress, and Ella, near the photo-worthy Nine Arch Bridge viaduct. **Rooms:** From £97 per night, room-only.

Amaya Lake, Dambulla
Best for... peace and quiet

On the shores of Lake Kandalama and surrounded by lush woodland, Amaya Lake has 101 individual chalets. The secluded, private feel makes it an ideal place to unwind after exploring nearby attractions, including the imposing Sigiriya rock fortress and historic Dambulla cave temple, while additional in-hotel services such as breakfast in bed, cocktails at sunset, high tea, candlelit dinners and

boat rides on the lake can be arranged on request. **Rooms:** From £132 per night, based on two adults sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis.

Turyaa Kalutara, Kalutara
Best for... entertainment

Offering seaview rooms with private balconies, coconut palm-lined gardens and easy access to the beach, Turyaa Kalutara ticks all the boxes. But entertainment is where it really shines, with live traditional

Sri Lankan drum and pipe music in the lobby, and a dedicated nightclub space with its own bar, stage and DJ booth. There are also two bar areas – Taaza, a standalone hut in the garden with low tables and cushioned floor seating, and Twist, which looks out over the ocean and specialises in cocktails – not to mention plenty to do in the daytime, with two pools, a badminton court and pool table. **Rooms:** From £90 per night, room-only. **TW**

BOOK IT

Mercury Holidays' nine-day **Jewels of Sri Lanka** tour, which includes visits to Dambulla, Kandy, Yala and Galle and stays at Amaya Lake, Amaya Hills and Chaarya Resort & Spa, starts at £1,999, including meals, transport and flights, departing June 8. The operator's 17-day **Grand Tour of Sri Lanka** visits Kandy, Colombo, Galle, Nuwara Eliya, Dambulla and Yala, and includes stays at Amaya Hills, Amaya Lake and Ramada Colombo, with prices starting at £2,499 for a September 6 departure, including meals, transport and flights. All individual hotels can also be booked with flights through the company. mercuryholidays.co.uk

AGENTS' VIEWS



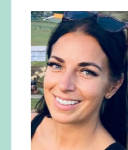
Steph Pitcher,
personal travel consultant,
Hays Travel
"My favourite

place to stay was Amaya Lake, with its huge, tastefully decorated rooms. I loved the winding pathways that led to the rooms and were lit up at night. It overlooks Kandalama Lake and has an inviting swimming pool. The reception and bar area are beautiful, and the welcome from local dancers was a lovely touch."



Sharon Goodship,
branch manager,
Hays Travel

"Turyaa Kalutara was in a great location for exploring southern Sri Lanka. Its clean, comfy rooms all overlook the Indian Ocean, with stunning sunsets. It serves tasty Sri Lankan dishes and sits alongside white sand lined with coconut palms – the perfect place for families or couples looking for a beach holiday."



Nicola O'Keeffe,
The Personal Travel Agents

"After a day exploring Kandy, there was nothing better than being welcomed by the tranquillity of the Amaya Hills hotel. The rooftop bar is perfect for pre-dinner drinks and the buffet restaurant means there's something for everyone. The morning views of the hills and city were incredible."