

Sri Lanka

A Treasure Trove of Biodiversity

February 22 to March 12, 2025



Leopards
© Amit Sankhala

SAFARI OVERVIEW

Discover the magic of Sri Lanka's wild heart on this captivating journey where you'll encounter a rich and diverse range of flora and fauna. Join jeep safaris, bush walks, boat excursions, night drives, and night walks to forge a unique and personal connection with the wildlife. Explore some of the lesser-visited parks for an even more intimate encounter with nature. Despite its small size, Sri Lanka, owing to its incredible variety of wildlife, proudly ranks among the world's best destinations for big game. This ecological richness can be attributed in part to Sri Lanka's fascinating geological history: around 10,000 years ago, the current island was connected to the Eurasian landmass before rising sea levels isolated large land animals, shaping the distinctive ecosystems that you'll have the opportunity to explore in this intriguing nation.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Seek elusive leopards and Sri Lankan sloth bears.
- Ascend the incredible Sigiriya Rock Fortress.
- Meet a rare slender loris on a night walk.
- Boat safari alongside swimming Asian elephants.
- Encounter the world's largest mammal – the blue whale.

LEADER: Sunil Gunathilake.

DAYS: 19, including estimated travel time.

GROUP SIZE: 14.

COST: \$9,205 per person, double occupancy, not including airfare, singles extra. See the *Costs* section on page 10.

Date	Description	Accommodation	Meals
Feb 22-23	Travel to Sri Lanka		
Feb 24	Arrive in Colombo and transfer to Negombo.	Jetwing Lagoon, Negombo	D
Feb 25	Travel from Negombo to Wilpattu and take afternoon safari.	Mahoorra, Wilpattu	B, L, D
Feb 26	Safari full day in Wilpattu National Park.	Mahoorra, Wilpattu	B, L, D
Feb 27	Take another full-day game drive in Wilpattu National Park.	Mahoorra, Wilpattu	B, L, D
Feb 28	Travel from Wilpattu to Sigiriya and climb the rock fortress.	Water Garden, Sigiriya	B, L, D
Mar 1	Visit the ruins of Polonnaruwa and night safari in the Sam Popham's Arboretum.	Water Garden, Sigiriya	B, L, D
Mar 2	Climb the Pidurangala Rock and spend the evening in Minneriya National Park.	Water Garden, Sigiriya	B, L, D
Mar 3	Travel from Sigiriya to Gal Oya then walk with a resident naturalist.	Gal Oya Lodge, Gal Oya	B, L, D
Mar 4	Boat safari in Gal Oya National Park.	Gal Oya Lodge, Gal Oya	B, L, D
Mar 5	Jeep Safari in Gal Oya National Park.	Gal Oya Lodge, Gal Oya	B, L, D
Mar 6	Travel from Gal Oya to Yala for an afternoon game drive.	Jetwing Yala, Yala	B,L,D
Mar 7	Spend full day game driving in Yala.	Jetwing Yala, Yala	B,L,D
Mar 8	Spend another full day game driving in Yala.	Jetwing Yala, Yala	B,L,D
Mar 9	Transfer from Yala to Galle by way of Bundala National Park.	Le Grand, Galle	B
Mar 10	Go whale watching and then explore Galle.	Le Grand, Galle	B
Mar 11	Depart for home or join the Ceylon Tea Trails Extension .		B
Mar 12	Arrive home.		

OPTIONS

- Continue your journey on our [Ceylon Tea Trails Extension](#) from March 11 to 14, 2025. Complete your Sri Lanka experience with a luxurious excursion to the verdant hills of Hatton.

LEADER: Sunil Gunathilake

Sunil Gunathilake, a top-ranked National Tour Guide Lecturer, specializes in wildlife tours and has decades of experience in Sri Lanka's biodiversity. Active in research and conservation since 1986, he has contributed to over 25 films and documentaries, including work with Disney's *Monkey Kingdom* and Sir David Attenborough's *The Life of Mammals*. As a conservationist, Sunil has published research on wildlife and led over 500 conservation programs, promoting environmental education and the preservation of Sri Lanka's natural heritage.



DETAILED ITINERARY

Feb 22 - 23 ~ Travel to Colombo, Sri Lanka

Feb 24 ~ Arrive in Colombo, Sri Lanka from home

Arrive in Sri Lanka with meet and greet services at the Silk Route Arrivals Lounge. Have some refreshments and meet your local representative before transferring to the Jetwing Lagoon in Negombo (30 minutes).

Feb 25 ~ Wilpattu

After a leisurely breakfast, transfer to Wilpattu (3.5 to 4 hours).

This is camping in style! The camp is set up with mobile tents, a fully equipped kitchen to serve all guests, well-set dining areas, hammocks, attached flushable toilets, and shower area. You can enjoy Mother Nature at her best or simply relax in the hammocks alongside the campsite.

After a delectable lunch, you begin your afternoon safari until dusk falls. You will be returning to the campsite to enjoy a drink in the jungle bar before dinner in a specially-selected location.



Walpattu Lodge
© Amit Sankhala

Feb 26 ~ Wilpattu

Venture from the campsite early for a full day safari with packed breakfasts and lunches inside Wilpattu National Park.

Wilpattu National Park is the largest national park in Sri Lanka and is home to many diverse forest types. Wilpattu was one of the first parks to open in Sri Lanka, and thus has a rich heritage. There are over 30 recorded mammalian species inside Wilpattu. Apart from leopards and sloth bears, there are also Sri Lankan elephants and spotted deer as well as many other animals. Wetland bird species such as the pin tail, whistling teal spoonbill, and the white ibis can also be found in the park.



Sloth Bear
© Amit Sankhala

Wilpattu retains its status as a preferred safari destination due to a strong prevalence of elusive leopards. Though the present number of Sri Lankan leopards in the park is unknown, it is one of the best wildlife safari destinations to observe these big cats. Another highlight is the dense population of Sri Lankan sloth bears, which are a highly threatened sub species of sloth bear that exists only on the island.

Sundown tea and a delicious dinner by a roaring campfire await after returning from safari, and your adventure on this day is capped off with a night walk along the borders of the park to meet some of the nocturnal residents of the jungle and even possibly catch sight of the elusive slender loris!

Feb 27 ~ Wilpattu

Spend a second full day and evening on safari in Wilpattu National Park.

Feb 28 ~ Wilpattu to Sigiriya

Start the day with a morning walk guided by a camp naturalist to a nearby lake which is a hotspot for birds. Capture stunning avian moments then head back to the campsite for breakfast before driving (2 hours) to Sigiriya and climbing the Sigiriya Rock Fortress.

Sigiriya Rock Fortress is one of the most outstanding architectural wonders in Sri Lanka. Rising nearly 700 feet above one of Asia's most well-preserved, ancient, landscaped gardens, the rock fortress of Sigiriya, a giant granite monolith, is an unforgettable sight. Sigiriya, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the most dramatic, inspiring, and beautiful historical locations in the world. A mythical past of feuding dynasties suits Sigiriya's striking setting – it was built in 5th century AD by King Kasyapa as a fortress-palace. Legend says that King Kasyapa murdered his father, Dhatusena, and claimed the throne for himself. However, Kasyapa was not the direct heir (his mother was one of Dhatusena's concubines), and he was fearful that his half-brother, Prince



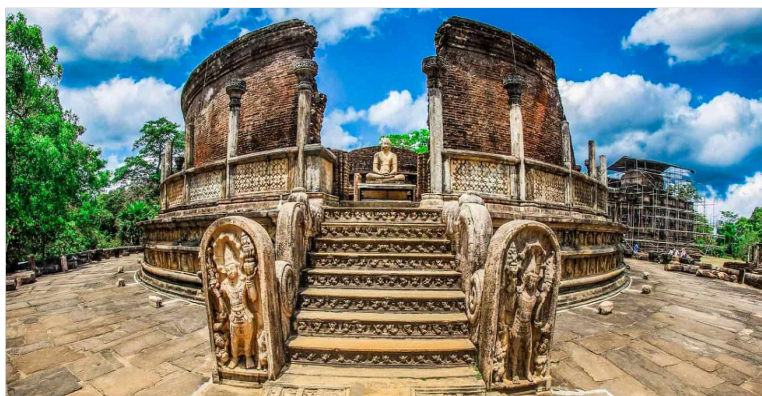
Sigiriya Rock Fortress
© Amit Sankhala

Moggallana, would return from exile in India and rightfully claim his crown. Moggallana did return to find Sigiriya in its full glory and Kasyapa's army waiting for him. Despite building an seemingly impenetrable stronghold, Kasyapa was defeated. Abandoned by his army, Kasyapa killed himself and left his half-brother to reign from his castle paradise. Worthy of being called the "8th Wonder of the World," Sigiriya is Sri Lanka's

answer to the Taj Mahal and will astonish everyone with its outstandingly beautiful views, staggering engineering, and peerless design.

Mar 1 ~ Sigiriya

In the morning, you will take an excursion to the ruins of Polonnaruwa. Polonnaruwa, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the medieval capital of Sri Lanka. King Vijayabahu I was the first to claim the city as his capital, and it was King Parakramabahu who made it what it is today: massive buildings, ornate parks, and a 2500-hectare reservoir called Parakrama Samudra (Sea of Parakrama). The city itself is divided into a new and old town with the impressively preserved ruins split into five main areas including the Quadrangle (also known as the Terrace of the Tooth Relic), the Northern City Group, and the Rest House Group (with the royal palace ruins of Nissanka Malla). Due to its reasonably compact layout, the ruins can be easily explored on foot, and with the surrounding area's flat well-maintained roads, you can leave the vehicle behind and jump on a bicycle to move around.



Sigiria
© Amit Sankhala

Your lunch will be arranged in a local restaurant run by a local family called Priyamali Gedara. The name of the homestyle restaurant is derived from combining the names of the father and mother. This culinary family of 5 (mom, dad, 2 daughters, and son-in-law) personally cook and serve hearty Sri Lankan meals to locals and curious travelers who seek authentic Sri Lankan flavors. The idea to open an eatery near the Vatadage in Polonnaruwa was inspired by groups of wandering tourists searching for nearby places to try local food. Today, they serve their homecooked goodness in an array of traditional and delicious Sri Lankan dishes with local snacks and sweetmeats to both locals and tourists.

Later in the evening, take a short drive to Dambulla Kandalama and do a night walk at the Sam Popham's Arboretum, Sri Lanka's only dry zone arboretum where an amazing spectrum of trees, birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and mammals can be observed in their natural setting. Sam Popham, an Englishman with an unparalleled love for trees, created the arboretum in 1963 on seven and a half acres of scrub jungle. In 1989, Sam Popham decided to donate his good work to the Institute of Fundamental Studies Kandy to be used for conservation, research, and education, who in turn have purchased an additional 27 acres of shrub jungle, which has now been developed as an



Loris
© Amit Sankhala

extension of the original arboretum. The arboretum typical of a semi-evergreen Monsoon Dry Forest consists of Ebony, Palu, Margosa, Weera, Milla, Tamarind, Velan and Ceylon Iron Wood amongst others.

Walk along the twisting footpaths over wooden bridges built above small streams, through endless soothing greenery accompanied by bird songs with the smell of the good earth all around, totally surrounded by the beauty of nature. The wilderness with its shady trees and spectacular bird life consists of jungle magpie robins, jungle fowl, the red vented and black capped bulbuls, black headed orioles, crimson backed woodpeckers, brown headed barbets, black headed orioles, paradise flycatchers, flower peckers, sun birds, tailor birds, parakeets, eagles, and plenty more. This natural treasure trove is also home to spotted deer, wild boar, porcupine, mouse deer, black-naped hare, rock squirrels, and the rare (endemic) slender loris.



Blue Magpie
© Amit Sankhala

Mar 2 ~ Sigiriya

Veiled in the early morning chill and mist, you will head out to climb the Pidurangala Rock. At its zenith, you will be drawn by the unique view of Sigiriya's "Lion Rock" and the surrounding pristine splendor of the forest. The remains of a monastery dating back to 2 BC is another treat for you to explore here.

Pidurangala is a rocky promontory about 3 kilometers north of Sigiriya Fortress. It is home to an ancient Buddhist monastic complex, Pidurangala Cave temple. This monastery was developed in the fifth century by King Kashyapa when he seized Sigiriya to build his palace. He relocated the monks to the top of the Pidurangala Rock and had five ritual buildings built: a stupa, a chapter house, a house containing a Buddha, a prayer hall, and a Sangharama (the monks' residence). The monastery also includes a sacred tree. In addition to many caves (mostly old troglodyte dwellings of monks), one can see the monumental statue of a reclining Buddha.

In the evening, you'll head for the Minneriya National Park. The park is a protected wildlife reserve in the heart of Sri Lanka's Dry Zone. Its main feature is the Minneriya Reservoir, a true engineering marvel, the largest of 16 built in the 3rd Century AD by King Mahasena. Minneriya National Park is home to 24 species of mammals including the world's largest gathering of Asian elephants. Moreover, Minneriya National Park plays a pivotal role in Sri Lanka's conservation efforts, particularly in safeguarding vital habitats for elephants and other wildlife. This destination is not merely a testament to nature's wonders but also a testament to the rich history and culture of Sri Lanka.



Elephants
© Amit Sankhala

Mar 3 ~ Sigiriya to Gal Oya

After breakfast, you will start driving from Sigiriya to Gal Oya (3.5 hours) with a stop for lunch enroute. Check In at Gal Oya Lodge for the next 3 nights with a diverse experience of seeing swimming elephants in Senanayake Reservoir.

Discover an ancient land untouched by time, a haven of serenity to reconnect with the rhythms of the earth. Immerse yourself in nature. Absorb the local culture. Explore the rich wildlife of Gal Oya, one of Sri Lanka's most remote and least visited wilderness areas.

Gal Oya Lodge is a unique Sri Lankan ecolodge spread across 20 acres of private jungle. Take your time enjoying this natural paradise through the experiences offered, which include a walk with the Vedda neighbors, one of the last remaining communities of the forest-dwelling, indigenous people of Sri Lanka. As the tribesman discusses the utilization of medicinal plants, the whereabouts of their age-old hunting territories and cavernous residences, and the means by which the hunters and gatherers thrived within the historic Gal Oya jungles, the forest springs to life.



Painted Stork
© Amit Sankhala

Join a resident naturalist for a walk around the lodge enjoying the abundant birdlife and beautiful surroundings. The walk offers multiple possible routes through the trees and around the nearby lake to observe a wide range of bird species such as kingfishers, eagles, kites and many aquatic birds. Please feel free to discuss your interests with your naturalist for a tailored trip to suit your preferences.

Mar 4 ~ Gal Oya

One of the aspects that makes Gal Oya National Park truly special is that it is the only place where you can take a boat safari in Sri Lanka, and if you are lucky, see the Asian elephant swimming in its natural habitat. Imagine the thrill of being out on the water watching these magnificent creatures swimming from island to island, foraging and socializing at the water's edge. The memory will stay with you long after your return home.

In the evening, you are free to join one of the lodge naturalists on a leisurely bicycle ride during your stay. You may choose to ride on a shorter off-track trail to the small Kiri Oruwa Lake, which is teeming with bird species. Alternatively, you may ride on the longer main road which cuts through the national park to the beautiful Namal Oya Reservoir.

Optionally, you can join the resident naturalists for a night walk in the forests surrounding the lodge and have a chance to see some of the nocturnal neighbors as they emerge from their daily resting spots. Use a torch to spot eyes peering back at you that could belong to a number of different animals including amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds. One of the highlights is a chance to spot the bizarre looking frog mouth bird, or if you are really lucky, the endangered thick-tailed pangolin.

Mar 5 ~ Gal Oya

Gal Oya National Park is one of Sri Lanka's undiscovered natural treasures. Today, take a jeep into the forgotten Nilgala section of the park, once the protectorate of ancient royalty for the abundant medicinal plants and endemic birdlife unique to this ecosystem. Although shy and sometimes hard to spot, most of the animals found on the island reside in this park. Some of the more likely species to look out for include herds of elephants, four species of deer, as well as many bird species. More intrepid guests may opt for a hike to the Makara River mouth with one of our expert naturalists to further experience the jungle by seeing wildlife on foot.



Elephant
© Amit Sankhala

Mar 6 ~ Gal Oya to Yala

After breakfast, transfer to Yala (4 hours) arriving in time for lunch and a late afternoon safari in Yala National Park. Located in the southeast region of the island and bounded by the Indian Ocean, Yala is Sri Lanka's most famous national park. Forming a total area of over 300,000 acres of scrub, light forest, grassy plains, and brackish lagoons, Yala is very rich in wildlife, home to 44 varieties of mammals and 215 bird species.

One of the first national parks in Sri Lanka, Yala was designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1900, and a national park in 1938. Today, it has the highest leopard density in the world. Unlike elusive, and primarily nocturnal leopards living in other parts of the world, in the Sri Lankan national parks, they are rather easy to spot due to the lack of natural predators. Your best chance to see a leopard is generally early in the morning. The young males are very confident and are often seen walking on the tracks. The park is also home to large herds of elephants, spotted deer, sambar, wild boar, wild buffaloes, sloth bear, jackal, and mongoose. The birdlife is fantastic too, and numerous species such as rosy starlings, paradise flycatchers, crested hawk eagles, blue-tailed bee-eater, and common lora inhabit this natural wilderness.

Mar 7 ~ Yala

Take morning and afternoon games drive in Yala National Park in a private jeep with the service of a naturalist. Snacks along with tea/coffee will be served during the safaris.

Mar 8 ~ Yala

Spend another day taking morning and afternoon game drives in Yala.

Mar 9 ~ Yala to Galle via Bundala National Park

With another early start, you'll be heading to Bundala National Park (1.5 Hours). The rich birdlife and serene surroundings make Bundala a real paradise. Bundala National Park, with 15,000 acres of lagoons, scrub jungles, salt pans, and marshes is the most important wetland sanctuary in Southern Sri Lanka and is famous for its impressive biodiversity and prolific birdlife. It is here that the migratory birds are wintering – resting and feeding by the picturesque lagoons and intertidal mudflats.

You will proceed to Galle (2 hours) and check-in at Le Grand for your last 2 nights in Sri Lanka. The bustling provincial capital and administrative center of the South, Galle, was Sri Lanka's first international commerce and trade center. The ancient port city is famous for Unawatuna Bay, a lovely cove protected by a reef. The Galle Fort overlooking the ocean is a UNESCO World Heritage Site built by the Portuguese in 1587 and reinforced again by the Dutch. The 88-acre fortress is surrounded on three sides by the ocean, its ramparts protecting the harbour, old houses, churches, warehouses, and the Arab quarter. Even as the city of Galle modernizes, its remarkable collection of ancient structures transports visitors to another time.

Mar 10 ~ Galle

On your first morning in Galle, with a packed breakfast from the hotel, you will leave for a whale & dolphin watching experience in the sea off Mirissa, which is regarded as one of the 10 best blue whale colonies in the world.

The South Coast of Sri Lanka boasts one of the very best places to see Blue Whales, and the season is longer than anywhere else. From November to April, when the whales are on their annual migratory route from the Horn of Africa up to the Arabian Sea, they can be seen in the waters around Sri Lanka. Sperm whales with pods as well as other cetacean species, such as Bryde's whale, dwarf sperm whale, spinner dolphin, striped dolphins, and Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin can be seen also.



Leopard
© Amit Sankhala



Blue Whale
© Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris

Take time to explore Galle Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is incomparable to anywhere else in Sri Lanka. Entering through the `new` English gate or the `old` Dutch gate is akin to stepping into a different realm. Within, about 600 houses, each with various degrees of renovation to their original Dutch architecture, crowd narrow, cobblestone streets with Old World charm. The thick, high ramparts that protect and distinguish the fort are today used for romantic evening strolls, early morning power walks, and convenient viewpoints to catch the sweaty action of the local village's cricket games and the international games held in the adjacent Galle cricket stadium. Visit Dutch period churches and the museums.



Galle Fort
© Amit Sankhala

Mar 11 ~ Transfer back to Colombo and depart for home or join [the Ceylon Tea Trails Extension](#).

Mar 12 ~ Arrive home

COSTS (ALL COSTS ARE IN US DOLLARS)

Cost

Type	Cost per Person
Trip Cost, double occupancy	\$9,205
Single Supplement	\$2,655

Costs are per person, double occupancy, not including airfare, singles extra. See *Included* and *Not Included* sections for more details.

If you are a single traveler, we will try to find a roommate for you, but if we cannot pair you with a roommate, we will charge you a single supplement. Single rooms cost extra and are subject to availability.

Payment Schedule

Payment	Due Date	Amount per Person
Deposit	Due now to reserve your space	\$500
Final	August 15, 2024	Remaining Balance

Payments are due based on the schedule above. All reservations require a deposit to confirm reservation of your space.

Cancellations

Until the Final Payment due date, deposits are refundable except for a cancellation fee of \$150 per person, which can be applied toward another trip if reserved within six months of the cancelled trip's departure date. Cancellations are non-transferrable. No refunds are given after the Final Payment due date.

Included

- Carbon offsets for the duration of this trip.
- Silk Route / Fast track service at the airport on arrival with meet and assist service (clients will be paged at the aerobridge and fast-tracked through immigrations/custom formalities. Baggage clearance will be done by lounge staff while clients enjoy a lite snack with tea or coffee in the Silk Route Arrival Lounge).
- All leaders, transport, park entry fees, and permits for all activities unless described as optional.
- Accommodations (double occupancy) for 15 nights.
- Meals from dinner on Feb 24 through breakfast on Mar 11, except meals listed in *Not Included* section.
- Transfers on Feb 24 and Mar 11 between lodging and the Colombo airport.
- Gratuities – all tipping is included in your cost.
- Trip Planning Materials – information about entry requirements, flights, packing, gratuities, etc.

Not Included

- Carbon offsets for your flights to/from this trip.
- All airfare, airport and departure taxes, and excess baggage fees. Round-trip airfare is approximately \$1,200 to \$1,500 between the US and Colombo, depending on origin.
- Passport and visa fees.
- COVID tests.
- Lunches and dinners on March 9th and 10th.
- Divergent airport transfers (arranged by us) and extra hotel nights.
- Optional [trip cancellation insurance](#).
- Items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone calls, medical costs or hospitalization, room service, alcoholic and other beverages, items not on the regular menu, etc. If you have special dietary needs, please indicate them on your Traveler Form.

SIGN UP

Please contact us first to check availability, reserve your space, and obtain a Traveler Form. To confirm your reservation, we require a deposit and signed form from each participant.

[Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris](#)

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Phone: (800) 527-5330 or (408) 741-5

OTHER DETAILS

Climate

Temperatures in most of Sri Lanka stay the same year-round. In February, Colombo and Galoya experience highs of around 90°F and lows around 75°F. In Galle and Sigiriya, average highs are around 86°F, and lows of about 66°F.

Fitness Level

Moderate fitness levels are required for long days in nature with a combination of vehicle transportation and walking. If you wish to climb to the top of Sigiriya Rock Fortress (not required), there are approximately 1,200 steps to navigate to the top. Please contact us if you have any health concerns that may make this trip challenging.

Flights

Detailed logistical information is included in the Trip Planning Materials we will send you.

Flights you book

- Arrive in Colombo, Sri Lanka (CMB) by 4pm on Feb 24
- Depart from Colombo, Sri Lanka (CMB) after 2:00pm on Mar 11. If **you are continuing on our [Ceylon Tea Trails Extension](#)**, see the *Flights* section in its itinerary for departure information.

Terms and Conditions

Read our current [Terms and Conditions](#).

Conservation

Our company ethos has always regarded conservation as inseparable from responsible tourism. We struggle with the dilemma that traveling worldwide expends climate-changing carbon. However, we wholeheartedly believe that traveling with us will cultivate your passion for conserving our beautiful world while stimulating each destination's local economy. We encourage you to explore the various ways in which Cheesemans' operates within this context:

- **Cheesemans' Trips are [Carbon Neutral](#).**
- **Offsetting your Travel to/from our Trip:** We ask you to pledge to offset the carbon emissions for your travel to and from our trips. You can purchase offsets with most airlines (Delta includes them automatically), use our handy [carbon calculator](#) and donate to Sustainable Travel International, or contribute to your favorite offsetting organization.