

# A LUSH GREEN TROPICAL ESCAPE

An exotic weekend getaway with world- famous beaches and forests and amazing food is right next door. What more could you ask for, says **Veathika Jain**, as she packs her bags once again.

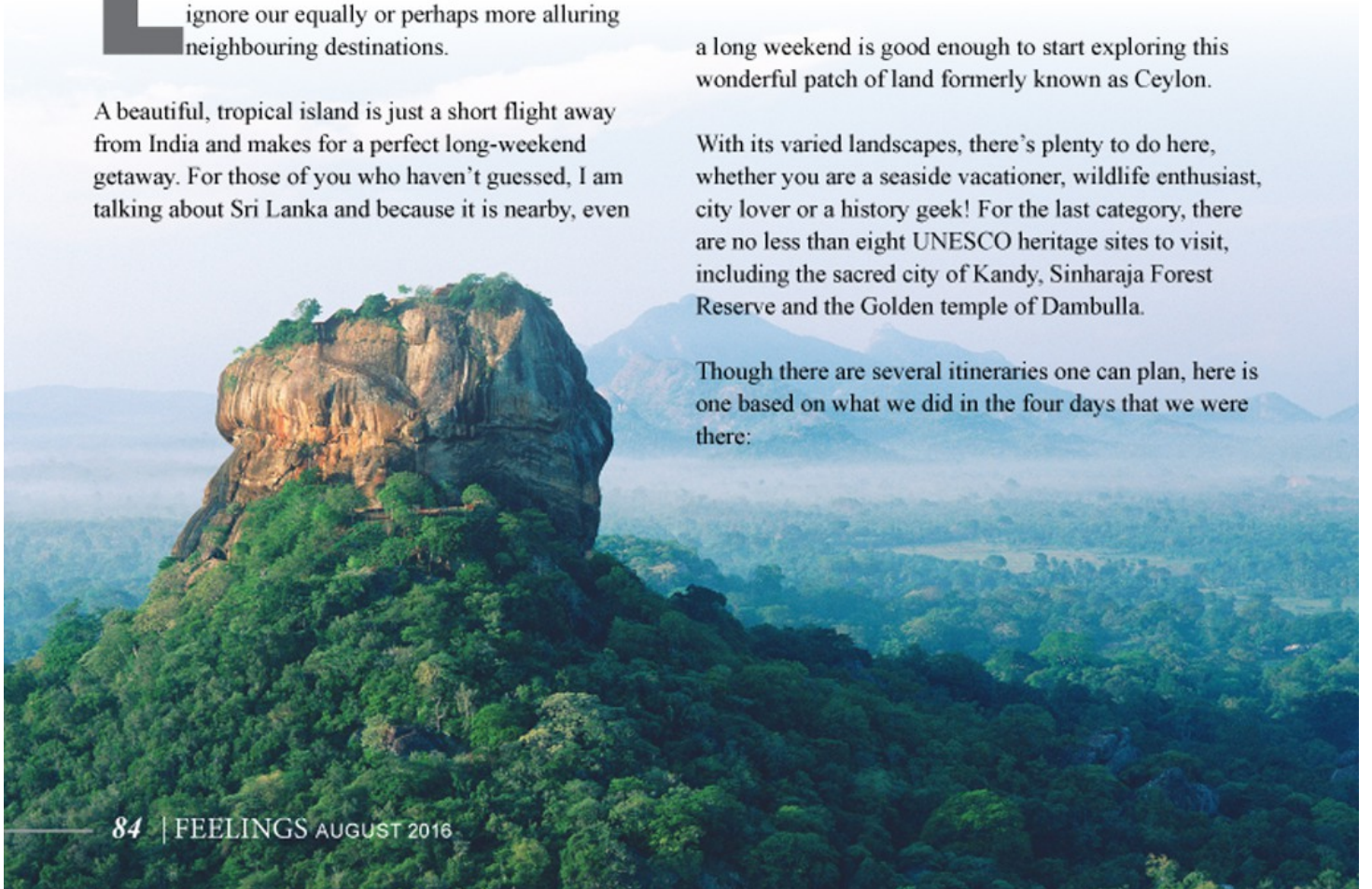
**L**ost in our dreams of traveling to faraway lands, most of us with itchy travel feet often ignore our equally or perhaps more alluring neighbouring destinations.

A beautiful, tropical island is just a short flight away from India and makes for a perfect long-weekend getaway. For those of you who haven't guessed, I am talking about Sri Lanka and because it is nearby, even

a long weekend is good enough to start exploring this wonderful patch of land formerly known as Ceylon.

With its varied landscapes, there's plenty to do here, whether you are a seaside vacationer, wildlife enthusiast, city lover or a history geek! For the last category, there are no less than eight UNESCO heritage sites to visit, including the sacred city of Kandy, Sinharaja Forest Reserve and the Golden temple of Dambulla.

Though there are several itineraries one can plan, here is one based on what we did in the four days that we were there:



**DAY 1:** Land at Colombo Airport and head straight to Kandy, the second largest city after Colombo which was also the capital of the ancient kings. It is about three to four hours drive and en route you can take a break to visit a unique orphanage - the Pinnawala elephant orphanage. Feed cute baby elephants and also watch them bathe and getting trained.

Once you arrive at Kandy and check in to your hotel, you can relax for the rest of the day depending on what time you reach, or go for a cultural show followed by dinner in the evening.



**DAY 2:** Your first stop should be the Temple of Tooth Relic of Buddha. It is mainly because of the Temple that Kandy is a World Heritage Site. This is one of the most sacred places in the world for Buddhists to worship, who form about 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population, according to a 2011 census.



Later, one can head to the gem museum for a quick stop. Though the display which ranges from jewellery to ivory is nothing to talk about, the building is embedded with some moonstones. You can also visit a batik-making factory to see the process first-hand. Batik is practiced as an art in many countries including Indonesia, India, Malaysia and Nigeria. Sri Lanka has its own traditional designs and you can either buy some fabric or buy a sarong, like I did.

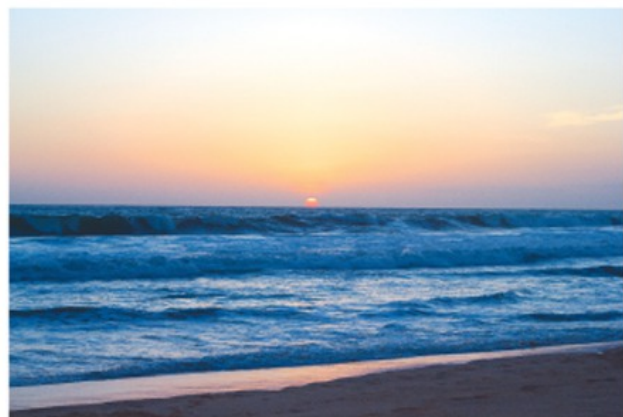
Post lunch, drive down any of these two beach destinations on the west coast - Bentota or Negombo. Bentota is about four and a half hours away while Negombo is closer with a driving time of three hours. Whichever you choose, both are stunning and have a wide range of resorts to choose from.



**DAY 3:** Be a beach bum today or engage in some water activities and spa treatments. If you chose Bentota then you could also go for Dolphin and Whale watching or river rafting. There are some historic and cultural tours to choose from as well. If you are in Negombo then you have *Angurukaramulla* Temple, the Dutch Fort, *Abhayasekararama* Temple and St Mary's church to visit.

We had narrowed down on Bentota and our stay at the Taj property made the whole beach experience superb.

**DAY 4:** Soon after breakfast, drive to Colombo. From





Bentota the drive will be about two hours, while from Negombo it'll take you less than an hour.

Colombo being the capital is vibrant and has loads of restaurants and shopping. A trip to *Odel* – the huge department store is a must. You can shop for clothes, the unparalleled Ceylon tea, souvenirs and knick knacks, even make-up, if you like. Clothes shopping here is a good idea as most of them are made in the same factories as some famous international brands such as Banana Republic and Gap.

Another beautiful boutique shop is *Barefoot* which has tablecloths, napkins and linen in hand-woven fabrics. The store also has a bookshop and a café. You should definitely fit in one meal at the café here.

Four days had gone by just like that for us and we had yet to touch upon the wild side of this island nation that is also one of the top five biodiversity hotspots in the world. Luckily for us, we have no choice but to return for the rainforests and wildlife sanctuaries. For now though, we go back dreaming of what we have experienced - delightfully warm, azure seas and pristine white beaches. ■

#### EATING IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lankan cuisine is quite rich with some unique dishes to taste and try.

Try the Kottu or Kuttu roti – a popular street food, which is basically paratha stir-fried with spices and vegetables or meat options.

Another favourite dish is the Hopper. It's like an appam, served with various curries. Hoppers are usually plain but you can ask for the egg version.

Sri Lankan curries range from shrimp and cuttlefish to eggplant and chicken.

For the vegetarians too there is a multitude of options available in the cuisine.



#### TRAVEL TIPS

Hiring a car and a driver is a good idea as it's reasonably priced with the driver becoming a local guide by default and helping you make the right choices, especially when it comes to eating out.

The journey to anywhere usually takes an extra hour from what the driver or tour companies will say, so keeping an extra hour's buffer when you plan is wise.

Kandy has some spice gardens so it's the ideal place to pick up vanilla beans, sandalwood, nutmeg and mace - some of the best spices to buy. Be a bit cautious however while buying beauty products like soaps, lotions and creams and check the ingredients to see if they are all natural as they claim.