

History

PREHISTORY

Legend and history are deeply intertwined in the early accounts of Sri Lanka: did the Buddha leave his footprint on Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) while visiting the island that lay halfway to paradise? Or was it Adam who left his footprint embedded in the rock while taking a last look at Eden? Was the chain of islands linking Sri Lanka to India the same chain that Rama crossed to rescue his wife Sita from the clutches of Rawana, king of Lanka, in the epic Ramayana?

It is probable that the Ramayana has some fragile basis in reality, for Sri Lanka's history recounts many invasions from southern India. Perhaps some early invasion provided the elements of the story of Rama and Sita, recounted throughout Asia.

Whatever the legends, the reality is that Sri Lanka's original inhabitants, the Veddahs (Wanniyala-aetto), were hunter-gatherers who subsisted on the island's natural bounty. Much about their origins is unclear. However, anthropologists generally believe that Sri Lanka's original inhabitants are descendants from the people of the late Stone Age and may have existed on the island since 16,000 BC. The first Sinhalese, originally from North India, arrived in Sri Lanka around the 5th or 6th century BC. Traders and fisherfolk from South India who visited Sri Lanka during the late centuries BC also made the island their permanent home. The intermingling of the new arrivals produced a harmonious multicultural society – a state that, unfortunately, did not continue in the centuries that followed.

THE RISE & FALL OF ANURADHAPURA

According to Sinhalese accounts it was crime and banishment that led to their settlement in Sri Lanka in the 5th or 6th century BC. Vijaya, son of a North Indian king, was ousted from his title and kingdom due to his acts of assault and robbery. With a contingent of 700 men, the *sinha* (lion) prince was set adrift on the high seas in dilapidated ships, to face his destiny – punishment by death. But destiny took a different turn and as they travelled south, Vijaya and his men were blessed by the

The early Sinhalese are credited with the invention of the pit valve, an ingenious irrigation device that contributed to their successful early settlement in Sri Lanka.

The bodhi tree in Anuradhapura has a 2000-year history of human care and custody, making it the world's oldest tree of this kind.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Changing the country's name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka in 1972 caused considerable confusion for foreigners. However, for the Sinhalese it has always been known as Lanka and, for the Tamils as *lankai*; the Ramayana, too, describes the abduction of Sita by the king of Lanka. But the island has been known by many other names. The Romans knew the island as Taprobane and Muslim traders talked of Serendib, which means 'Island of Jewels'. The word Serendib became the root of the word 'serendipity' – the art of making happy and unexpected discoveries. The Portuguese somehow twisted Sinhala-dvīpa (Island of the Sinhalese) into Ceilão. In turn, the Dutch altered this to Ceylan and the British to Ceylon. In 1972 'Lanka' was restored, with the addition of 'Sri', a respectful title. In the 1980s pedants pushed for the spelling of 'Shri Lanka', but 'Sri Lanka' now seems entrenched.

www.lankalibrary.com is broad in scope but sometimes short on facts! Read it in conjunction with other material to form your own view on anything Sri Lankan.

Buddha and (as accounts would have it) came to land on the west coast of Sri Lanka on the very day that the Buddha attained enlightenment. Vijaya and his men settled around Anuradhapura, forming the basis of a Sinhalese kingdom that developed there in the 4th century BC. Later, the Sinhalese kingdom of Ruhunu was established in the southwest but Anuradhapura remained the stronger kingdom. Early settlement took place mainly along rivers, as the aridity of the north was not conducive to human settlement and the cultivation of crops. No doubt banishment and the need for survival can be great motivators: Vijaya and his descendants demonstrated impressive resourcefulness. To overcome the challenges of climate they constructed water channels and reservoirs (known locally as tanks) – great feats of engineering and mathematics. Such inventiveness enabled the early settlements to develop and prosper.

In the 3rd century BC the Indian emperor Ashoka sent his son Mahinda and his daughter Sangamitta to the island to spread the Buddha's teachings. Mahinda soon converted the Anuradhapuran king Devanampiya Tissa, an event that is tremendously significant to the Sinhalese as it deeply influenced their customs, created a sense of national identity and, by developing scriptures and commentary, instituted a literary tradition. The mountain at Mihintale (p255) marks the spot where the conversion is said to have occurred. Today 1840 steps lead up the mountain to the site – it's a popular pilgrimage place, especially on the June *poya* (full moon), the reputed anniversary of the king's conversion.

Sangamitta brought to Sri Lanka a cutting of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. She planted this in Anuradhapura, where it still survives today, garlanded with prayer flags and lights (p250). Other bodhi trees, grown from cuttings of the Anuradhapuran tree, now spread their branches beside many of the island's temples.

With the conversion of the king to Buddhism strong ties were established between Sri Lankan royalty and Buddhist religious orders. Later, these ties strengthened as kings, grateful for monastic support, provided living quarters, tanks and produce to the monasteries. A symbiotic political economy between religion and state became consolidated. When the Sinhalese king Valagambahu fled from South Indian invaders he was given safe haven by monks who resided in the cave structures at Dambulla. When he regained his position in about 90 BC he expressed his gratitude by developing a huge cave-temple complex (p231). Since that time it has been a centre of Buddhist practice.

Buddhism underwent a major development when the teachings, previously conveyed orally, were documented in writing. Sri Lankan monks played a significant role in the documentation process, when, at the Aluvihara monastery (p229) in the 1st century BC, they began in-depth commentaries on the teachings. Their work forms the major part of the classical literature of the Theravada (doctrine of the elders) school of Buddhism (p44). It was in Sri Lanka that the Theravada school developed, later spreading to Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. Even today, Buddhists of the Theravada school in Myanmar, Thailand and other countries look to Sri Lanka for spiritual leadership and interpretation of the scriptures.

Another event that served to intensify Buddhism in Sri Lanka was the arrival of the tooth relic (of the Buddha) at Anuradhapura in AD 371 (see

TIMELINE Prior to 6th century BC

Island is inhabited by the Veddahs (Wanniyala-aetto)

6th–5th century BC

Sinhalese come from northern India to settle in Sri Lanka

4th century BC

The kingdom of Anuradhapura is formed

Late centuries BC

South Indians make Sri Lanka their permanent home

p166). It gained prominence not only as a religious symbol but also as a symbol of sovereignty – it was believed that whoever held custody of the relic had the right to rule the island. Modern-day presidents, prime ministers and governments see it as their duty to protect the relic and the rituals that surround it. It now lies in the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Sri Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy.

In AD 473, King Kasyapa assumed the throne by engineering the death of his father and the exile of his elder brother, Mugalan. Kasyapa's skills were not limited to eliminating relatives – he also recognised a good piece of real estate and was a dab hand at property development. His reign saw the construction of the spectacular rock fortress of Sigiriya (p233), with its intricate water systems, ornate gardens and frescoed palaces. However, the exiled Mugalan, incensed by his ousting, returned to Sri Lanka with an army of Indian mercenaries. Mugalan defeated Kasyapa and reclaimed the throne, but he established a perilous precedent. To retain power, future Sinhalese kings found themselves beholden to Indian mercenaries. Centuries of interference and disorder followed with repeated invasions and takeovers of Anuradhapura by South Indian kingdoms, and self-defeating entanglements in South Indian affairs by Anuradhapura's rulers.

Anuradhapura was pummelled many times but rebuilding was possible through *rajakariya*, the system of free labour for the king. This free labour provided the resources to restore buildings, tanks and irrigation systems, as well as to plant, cultivate and harvest crops.

Finally in 11th century AD, Vijayabahu I, weary of the continual cycle of conflict, destruction and renovation, abandoned Anuradhapura to make Polonnaruwa, further southeast, his capital.

THE KINGDOM OF POLONNARUWA

Polonnaruwa (p237) survived as a Sinhalese capital for more than two centuries – a period that provided a further two kings of note. Parakramabahu I (r 1153–86), nephew of Vijayabahu I, was not content simply to expel the South Indian Tamil Chola empire from Sri Lanka, but carried the fight to South India and even made a raid on Myanmar. Domestically he indulged in an orgy of building in the capital, and constructed many new tanks around the country. But his warring and architectural extravagances wore down the country's resources, and probably shortened Polonnaruwa's lifespan.

His successor, Nissanka Malla (r 1187–96), was the last king of Polonnaruwa to show interest in the wellbeing of the people and in the construction and maintenance of buildings and irrigation systems.

He was followed by a series of weak rulers who allowed the city to fall into disrepair. With the decay of the irrigation system, disease spread and, like Anuradhapura before it, Polonnaruwa was abandoned. The jungle reclaimed it within a few decades.

TAMIL KINGDOMS

During Polonnaruwa's decline the first Tamil kingdom established itself in Jaffna. Movements of people between India and Sri Lanka had been happening for centuries but from the 5th and 6th centuries AD resurgent Hindu Tamil empires such as the Chola, Pallava and Pandya repeatedly threatened the Buddhist Sinhalese rulers.

With the decline of the Sinhalese northern capitals and the ensuing Sinhalese migration south, a wide jungle buffer zone separated the northern, mostly coastal Tamil settlements and the southern, interior Sinhalese settlements. This jungle zone, called the Vanni, was sparsely inhabited by mixed Tamil-Sinhalese clans called the Vanniyaars.

Initially the 'rulers' of Jaffna were possibly diplomatic missions from the early South Indian kingdoms. At other times Jaffna came under the sovereignty of the major South Indian centres of Madurai and Thanjavur. However, developing rivalry between Indian empires allowed Jaffna to gain autonomy. It became a trade centre, especially in spices and elephants from the Vanni region, and established weaving, dyeing and pearl-fishing industries. An important centre for art and literature developed at Nallur (near Jaffna) in the 15th century, and studies combining astrology and medicine provided health services to the population. But things changed with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505.

EARLY MUSLIM LINKS

Muslim settlement in Sri Lanka developed from centuries of Arab trade. In Arabic the island was called Serendib, from *seren* (jewel) and *dwip* (island). Gems were a valued item of commerce, as were cinnamon, ivory and elephants. With the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD Arab traders arrived with their new faith. Some stayed and settled on the island and many Sri Lankan Muslims are proud that their ancestry can be dated from the time of the Prophet.

Muslim traders found favour with Sri Lankan kings, and relations were generally cordial. Early Muslim settlements took hold in the north at Jaffna and southwest at Galle, as well as on the eastern side of the island. However, with the arrival of the Portuguese many Muslims fled inland to flee persecution.

THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD

After Polonnaruwa, the centre of Sinhalese power shifted to the southwest of the island, and between 1253 and 1400 there were five different Sinhalese capitals. During this period Sri Lanka suffered attacks by Chinese and Malaysians, as well as periodic incursions from South India. Finally, the Portuguese arrived in 1505.

By this time Sri Lanka had three main kingdoms: the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna, and Sinhalese kingdoms in Kandy and Kotte (near Colombo). Of the two Sinhalese kingdoms, Kotte was the more powerful. When Portuguese Lorenzo de Almeida arrived in Colombo, he established friendly relations with King Bhuvanekabahu of Kotte and gained a Portuguese monopoly on the spice trade, which soon became very important in Europe.

Tamil-Portuguese relations were less cordial, especially when the colonial missionaries attempted to convert the local population to Catholicism. Infuriated by this, the Tamil king Sangily organised a massacre of the missionaries and their converts.

The different responses to the Portuguese – alliance from Kotte and hostility from Jaffna – made no difference to the end result: Portugal took over the entire coastal belt. However, the Portuguese were unable to

For a controversial account of Sigiriya, see former archaeologist Raja De Silva's *Sigiriya and its Significance*, which argues against earlier views about the site.

Want to understand more about people's names in Sri Lanka? It's all revealed at <http://asiarecipe.com/srinames.html>.

3rd century BC

Buddhism arrives in Sri Lanka

4th century AD

The tooth relic of the Buddha arrives in Sri Lanka

5th century AD

King Kasyapa constructs the fortress of Sigiriya

7th century AD

Muslim traders begin to settle in Sri Lanka

conquer the central highlands, and the kingdom at Kandy resisted several later Portuguese attempts at capture.

With the Portuguese came religious orders such as the Dominicans and Jesuits. Many of the Karava fishing communities on the west coast converted, but reluctance to assume the new faith was often met with massacres and the destruction of local temples. Buddhist priests and others fled to Kandy, whose role as a stronghold and haven endowed it with a special status on the island – one that was consolidated by later colonial failures to capture it. This status is still cherished today by many Sri Lankans, especially those from the high country.

The Portuguese tried to entice their compatriots to settle in Sri Lanka. Some did, intermarrying with locals, and their descendants form part of the small group known as European Burghers. The Portuguese also brought slaves from Africa who are today almost totally assimilated. Known as the Kaffirs, their contribution to Sri Lankan culture is evident in the *bailas* – folk tunes based on African rhythms.

THE DUTCH PERIOD

In 1602 the first Dutch ships arrived in Sri Lanka. Like the Arabs and Portuguese, the Dutch were keen to acquire trade, and they vied with the Portuguese for the lucrative Indian Ocean spices. For the Kandyan king, Rajasinha II, the Dutch presence provided an opportunity to rid Sri Lanka of the Portuguese. A treaty was duly signed, giving the Dutch a monopoly on the spice trade in return for Sri Lankan autonomy. This, however, only succeeded in substituting one European power for another. By 1658, 153 years after the first Portuguese contact, the Dutch had taken control of the coastal areas of the island. During their 140-year rule, the Dutch, like the Portuguese, made repeated unsuccessful attempts to bring Kandy under their control. And, just as the Portuguese had done, the Dutch encouraged their fellow citizens to reside in Sri Lanka. Their descendants, the Dutch Burghers, comprise a minority group in Sri Lanka today.

The Dutch were much more interested in trade and profits than were the Portuguese, and developed a canal system along the west coast to transport cinnamon and other crops. Roman-Dutch law, the legal system of the Dutch era, still forms part of Sri Lanka's legal canon.

THE BRITISH PERIOD

The British, concerned that they may be defeated in conflicts with the French in South India, and requiring a safe port in the area, began to consider the eastern Sri Lankan harbour of Trincomalee. The British ejected the Dutch in 1796, and in 1802 Sri Lanka became a crown colony. In 1815 the British won control of Kandy, thus becoming the first European power to rule the whole island. Three years later a unified administration for the island was set up.

The British conquest deeply unsettled many Sinhalese, who had long held the view that only the tooth relic custodians had the right to rule the land. Their apprehension was somewhat relieved when a senior monk removed the tooth relic from the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (p166), thereby securing it (and the island's symbolic sovereignty) for the Sinhalese people.

In 1832 sweeping changes in property laws opened the doors to British settlers – at the expense of the Sinhalese, who in the eyes of the British did not have title to the land. Coffee was the main cash crop but when leaf blight virtually wiped it out in the 1870s the plantations were quickly switched over to tea or rubber.

The British, unable to persuade the Sinhalese to labour on the plantations, imported large numbers of Tamil workers from South India. Today these workers' descendants, totalling about 850,000 people (5% of the population), form the larger of the two main Tamil communities. About 700,000 of them still live and work on the estates.

The British influence lingers: the elite private schools with cricket grounds, the army cantonments and train stations, and the tea-estate bungalows, not to mention the English language. English was demoted from being the official language after independence, but the requirements of a globalised economy have helped bring it back into vogue.

INDEPENDENCE

In the wake of Indian independence, Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was then known, became an independent member of the British Commonwealth in February 1948. The first independent government was formed by the United National Party (UNP), led by DS Senanayake. His main opponents were the northern and plantation Tamil parties, and the communists.

At first everything went smoothly. The economy remained strong and the government concentrated on strengthening social services and weakening the opposition. It certainly achieved the latter, as it disenfranchised the Hill Country Tamils by depriving them of citizenship. Eventually, deals in the 1960s and 1980s between Sri Lanka and India allowed some of the Hill Country Tamils to be 'repatriated' to India, while others were granted Sri Lankan citizenship.

DS Senanayake died in 1952 and was succeeded by his son, Dudley. An attempt a year later to raise the price of rice led to mass riots and Dudley's resignation. Sir John Kotelawala, his uncle, replaced him, and the UNP earned the nickname 'Uncle Nephew Party'. The UNP was easily defeated in the 1956 general election by the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna coalition, led by SWRD Bandaranaike.

THE BANDARANAIKES

The Bandaranaiques were a family of noble Kandyan descent who had converted to Anglicanism for a time in the 19th century, but who had returned to the Buddhist fold. The 1956 election coincided with the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment and an upsurge in Sinhalese pride, and SWRD Bandaranaike defeated the UNP primarily on nationalistic issues.

Nearly 10 years after independence, English remained the national language and the country continued to be ruled by an English-speaking, mainly Christian, elite. Many Sinhalese thought the elevation of their language to 'official' status would increase their power and job prospects.

Caught in the middle of this disagreement (English versus Sinhala, and Christian versus Buddhist) were the Tamils, whose mother tongue is

Sir James Emerson Tennent's affable nature shines through in his honest and descriptive writing about 19th-century Sri Lanka, now serialised at www.lanka-web.com/news/features/ceylon.html.

During the British administration, Major Thomas Rogers is reputed to have killed 1400 elephants.

10th century AD

A Tamil kingdom is established in Jaffna, and the Sinhalese capital moves to Polonnaruwa

1505

Portuguese colonial period begins

1658

Dutch colonial period begins

1796

The British take over Sri Lanka's rule from the Dutch

William McGowan's *Only Man is Vile* is an incisive, unrelenting account of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, penetrating deeply into its complexities.

Tamil. When Bandaranaike enacted the 'Sinhala only' law, Tamil protests were followed by violence and deaths on both sides.

The contemporary Sinhalese-Tamil difficulties date from this time. From the mid-1950s, when the economy slowed, competition for wealth and work – intensified by the expectations created by Sri Lanka's fine education system – exacerbated Sinhalese-Tamil jealousies. The main political parties, particularly when in opposition, played on the Sinhalese paranoia that their religion, language and culture could be swamped by Indians, who were thought to be the natural allies of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Tamils began to see themselves as a threatened minority, and pressed for a federal system of government with greater local autonomy in the North and the East, the main Tamil-populated areas.

Despite coming to power on Sinhalese chauvinism, Bandaranaike later began negotiating with Tamil leaders for a kind of federation – a decision that resulted in his assassination by a Buddhist monk in 1959. Despite this, Bandaranaike is still seen by many as a national hero who brought the government back to the common people.

In the 1960 general election the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), led by SWRD Bandaranaike's widow, Sirimavo, swept to power. She was the first female prime minister in the world. Sirimavo pressed on with her husband's nationalisation policies, souring relations with the USA by taking over the Sri Lankan oil companies. Most of the remaining British tea planters left during this time. The economy weakened, and in the 1965 election Dudley Senanayake and the UNP scraped back into power. However, Senanayake's reluctance to turn back the clock on the SLFP's nationalisation program lost him much support and the UNP was massively defeated by the SLFP in the 1970 elections.

Soon after, Sirimavo Bandaranaike took the reins for the second time, a wave of unrest swept the Sinhalese heartland, feeding on a population boom and a generation of disaffected young men facing unemployment. In 1971 a Sinhalese Marxist insurrection broke out, led by a dropout from Moscow's Lumumba University, Rohana Wijeweera, under the banner of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP; People's Liberation Army). Its members, mostly students and young men, were quickly and ruthlessly eradicated by the army. Around 25,000 people died, but the JVP was later to regroup.

The revolt allowed the government to make sweeping changes, write a new constitution and create a new name for the country – Sri Lanka. The bureaucracy became politicised, and some say corruption became entrenched. Meanwhile, the economy continued to deteriorate and in the 1977 elections Sirimavo Bandaranaike and the SLFP (in its new guise as the United Left Front) went down in a stunning defeat at the hands of the UNP.

TAMIL UNREST

Meanwhile, two pieces of legislation increased Tamil concern. The first piece, passed in 1970, cut Tamil numbers in universities; previously, Tamils had won a relatively high proportion of university places. The second was the constitutional declaration that Buddhism had 'foremost place' in Sri Lanka and that it was the state's duty to 'protect and foster' Buddhism.

Unrest grew among northern Tamils, and a state of emergency was imposed on their home regions for several years from 1971. The police and army that enforced the state of emergency included few Tamils (partly because of the 'Sinhala only' law) and therefore came to be seen by the Tamils as an enemy force.

In the mid-1970s some young Tamils began fighting for an independent Tamil state called Eelam (Precious Land). They included Vellupillai Prabhakaran, who founded and still leads the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), often referred to as the Tamil Tigers.

OPEN ECONOMY

Elected in 1977, the new UNP prime minister, JR Jayawardene, made an all-out effort to lure back foreign investment. He attempted to emulate Singapore's successful 'open economy', and his policies yielded some successes: unemployment was halved by 1983, Sri Lanka became self-sufficient in rice production in 1985, and expat Sri Lankans and tourists began bringing in foreign currency.

Jayawardene introduced a new constitution – Sri Lanka's third – in 1978, which conferred greatest power on the new post of president, to which he was elected by parliament.

In 1982 he was re-elected president in national polls (after amending his own constitution to bring the voting forward by two years) and then, in the same year, won a referendum to bypass the 1983 general election and leave the existing parliament in office until 1989. As usual there were allegations of electoral skulduggery.

ETHNIC VIOLENCE

Jayawardene promoted Tamil to the status of 'national language' for official work, but only in Tamil-majority areas. Clashes between Tamils and security forces developed into a pattern of killings, reprisals, reprisals for reprisals and so on. All too often the victims were civilians. The powder keg finally exploded in 1983, when an army patrol in the Jaffna region was ambushed and massacred by militant Tamils. For several days after, mobs of enraged Sinhalese set about killing Tamils and destroying their property. Between 400 and 2000 Tamils were killed and some areas with large Tamil populations – such as Colombo's Pettah district – were virtually levelled.

The government, the police and the army were either unable or unwilling to stop the violence. There had been small-scale ethnic riots in 1958, 1977 and 1981, but this was the worst and for many it marked the point of no return. Tens of thousands of Tamils fled to safer, Tamil-majority areas, while others left the country altogether; many Sinhalese moved from Jaffna and other Tamil-dominated areas.

Revenge and counter-revenge attacks grew into atrocities and large-scale massacres. The government was condemned for disappearances and acts of torture.

The area claimed by the Tamil militants for the independent state of Eelam covered Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern Provinces – equal to about one-third of Sri Lanka's land area. Tamils comprised the majority in the Northern Province, but in eastern Sri Lanka Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils were nearly equal in numbers.

Not an easy read but an important one, *When Memory Dies*, by A Sivanandan, is a tale of the ethnic crisis and its impact on one family over three generations.

1815

The British conquer Kandy, the first European colonial power to do so

1948

Sri Lanka becomes an independent nation

1956

Protests and conflict break out after the 'Sinhala only' language law is passed

1970s

Formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

The violence cost the economy dearly. Tourism slumped, the government spent crippling amounts on the defence forces, and foreign and local investment dried up.

INDIAN INTERVENTION

In 1987 government forces pushed the LTTE back into Jaffna. In an attempt to disarm the Tamil rebels and keep the peace in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, Jayawardene struck a deal with India for an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). A single provincial council would be elected to govern the region with substantial autonomy for a trial period.

Soon it became clear that the deal suited no-one. The LTTE complied initially before the Indians tried to isolate it by promoting and arming other Tamil rebel groups. Opposition to the Indians also came from the Sinhalese, the reviving JVP (below) and sections of the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks). This led to sometimes-violent demonstrations.

Jayawardene was replaced as leader of the UNP by Ranasinghe Premadasa, the first leader from a common background. He promised to remove the Indian peacekeepers; when they withdrew in March 1990, they had lost more than 1000 lives in just three years. In June, however, the war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government began again. By the end of 1990, the LTTE held Jaffna and much of the North, although the East was largely back under government control.

RETURN OF THE JVP

The presence of the IPKF pushed the mood of young Sinhalese past boiling point. In 1987 the JVP launched its revolution with political murders and strikes, which were enforced through the use of death threats. With 16 years to study the failed 1971 revolt, the JVP, still led by Rohana Wijeweera, had prepared brilliantly. They were tightly organised, with recruits from students, monks, the unemployed, the police and the army. It attempted a Khmer Rouge-style takeover, aiming to capture the countryside and then isolate and pick off the cities.

By late 1988 the country was terrorised, the economy crippled and the government paralysed. The army struck back with a ruthless counter-insurgency campaign that still scars the country. Shadowy militias and army groups matched the JVP's underground warfare in brutality. They tracked down the JVP leadership one by one until Rohana Wijeweera was killed in November 1989. The rebellion subsided, but 30,000 to 60,000 people had died in the three-year insurrection.

Within a few years a new leadership brought the JVP into the political mainstream, and it now has seats in parliament and supports the current government and the president, Mahinda Rajapase.

WAR IN THE 1990s

In May 1991 Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber. It was generally assumed that Gandhi's assassination was in retaliation for his consent to Jayawardene's 1987 request for the IPKF. Soon after this, war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese intensified.

Although a high proportion of Tamils and Sinhalese longed for peace, extremists on both sides pressed on with war. President Premadasa was

assassinated at a May Day rally in 1993; the LTTE was suspected, but never claimed responsibility.

The following year, the People's Alliance (PA), a coalition of the main opposition SLFP and smaller parties, won the parliamentary elections. Its leader, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the daughter of former leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike, won the presidential election and appointed her mother prime minister.

Although the PA had promised to end the civil war, the conflict continued in earnest, and Kumaratunga was targeted by a suicide bomber just days before the December 1999 presidential election. She was injured, losing sight in her right eye, but won the election. Curiously enough, the economy was showing signs of life during this period. Garment exports grew, growth ticked along at 5% to 6% a year between 1995 and 2000, and the ongoing war partly solved unemployment in the rural south.

In the October 2000 parliamentary elections President Kumaratunga's PA won a narrow victory. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the president's mother and three-time prime minister of Sri Lanka, died shortly after casting her vote.

ELUSIVE PEACE

In 2000 a Norwegian peace mission, led by Erik Solheim, brought the LTTE and the government to the negotiating table, but a cease-fire had to wait until after the elections of December 2001 – won by the UNP after the collapse of the short-lived PA government.

Ranil Wickremasinghe became prime minister. He and President Kumaratunga (both from different parties) circled each other warily. Under Wickremasinghe economic growth was strong at 6% per annum and peace talks appeared to progress. But in late 2003, while Wickremasinghe was in Washington meeting with George W Bush, Kumaratunga dissolved parliament (although it had a mandate to govern until 2007) and called for elections. By combining with the JVP, Kumaratunga formed a new party, the United People's Freedom Alliance, and in the subsequent elections defeated Wickremasinghe and his UNP.

Peace talks stumbled. Time and talk passed, and the situation became ever more fraught. Accusations of bias and injustice were hurled from all sides. In October 2003, the US listed the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). Some believed this to be a positive move; others saw it as an action that would isolate the LTTE, thereby causing further strain and conflict. In early 2004 a split in LTTE ranks pitched a new dynamic into the mix. Among killings, insecurity, accusations and ambiguities, the Norwegians went home in September 2004.

Almost all of Sri Lanka, including most of the Jaffna Peninsula, is now controlled by the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE controls a small area south of the peninsula and pockets in the east, but it still has claims on land in the Jaffna Peninsula and in the northwest and northeast of the island.

TSUNAMI & BEYOND

An event beyond all predictions struck the island on 26 December 2004, affecting not only the peace process but the entire social fabric of Sri Lanka. As people celebrated the monthly *poya* festivities, the mighty

At least one million land mines were laid during 1990s Sri Lankan hostilities. Efforts to clear the mines have meant that thousands of displaced people have been resettled.

John Richardson applies his long experience in international resources and relationships to produce his huge tome *Paradise Poisoned*. Important and timely, it investigates terrorism in Sri Lanka, with recommendations that can be applied globally.

Anil's Ghost, by Booker Prize-winner Michael Ondaatje, is a haunting novel about turmoil and disappearances of late-20th-century Sri Lanka. The book has received much international commendation and some local condemnation.

1983

Conflict and riots between Sinhalese and Tamils intensify

1987

Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) attempts to establish stability

1987–90

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) creates a rebellion in which 30,000 to 60,000 people die

2000

Norwegian peace mission initiates peace talks between the government and the LTTE

waves of the tsunami cast their fury, killing 30,000 people and leaving many more injured, homeless and orphaned. Initially there was optimism that the nation would come together in the face of catastrophe, but the optimism soon faded into argument over aid distribution, reconstruction, and land tenure and ownership.

Meanwhile Kumaratunga, seeking to extend her presidential term, sought to have the constitution altered. However, her plans were thwarted by a Supreme Court ruling, which directed that presidential elections occur in 2005. Among the numerous contenders, two candidates were the most likely victors – the then prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse, and the opposition leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe. With an LTTE boycott on voting, Rajapakse, supported by the JVP and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (a party of Buddhist monks), won by a narrow margin. The LTTE's motives for the boycott were unclear but their actions cost Wickremasinghe an expected 180,000 votes and the presidency, and, perhaps, the country a better chance at peace.

As president, Rajapakse pledged to replace the Norwegian peace negotiators with those from the UN and India; to renegotiate a cease-fire with the LTTE; to reject Tamil autonomy; and to refuse to share tsunami aid with the LTTE. Such policies did not auger well for future peace. Meanwhile, LTTE leader Prabhakaran insisted on a political settlement during 2006, and threatened to 'intensify' action if this did not occur. Within days of coming to power, Rajapakse reneged on his first undertaking and invited the Norwegians to continue their negotiations. But tensions were high and once again Sri Lanka was perched on a precipice. Killings, assaults, kidnappings and disappearances occurred on both sides, and commentators predicted the worst. As the first anniversary of the tsunami approached, world leaders, aid agencies and the global community pleaded with the government and the LTTE to stop the violence and return to the peace talks. Both parties agreed, and in February 2006 the Norwegians were able to help negotiate a statement that included commitments to a cease-fire and to further talks.

Tensions eased, and the country returned to the intricate process of creating peace. Yet in April 2006, interethnic violence once again threw Sri Lanka's future into doubt. For the sake of the island, its peoples and cultures, one hopes that the peace process can continue.

A candidate for the 2005 presidential elections sought to impress the electorate with a promise to import Indian cows to Sri Lanka.

2002

Cease-fire begins

2004

The waves of a tsunami hit Sri Lanka, taking 30,000 lives and leaving many more homeless

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Visitors to Sri Lanka notice first the gentleness of the land and people. Life is leisurely. Time moves at a different pace. Rivers make an unhurried journey to the coast. And at the coast, waves gently lap the sands. Inland, white-domed dagobas (stupas) send their slim spires high into the skies. Wattle-and-daub homes and large mansions settle easily within the natural environment. People wander with flowers to temples. And throughout the island, people greet visitors with warmth and hospitality.

Markets may bustle. Bus stations may hustle. Yet the sway of sarong, sari or skirt preserves a pace that is slower and more refined. And the heat and humidity insist upon it.

Every so often, things are less gentle. Rivers swell, inundating the land and snatching lives. Tides rise, destroying everything in their path. Ethnic violence engulfs the people and more lives are lost and shattered.

Yet somehow Sri Lankans continue to overlay this chaos with gentleness. They exude a charismatic charm that is immediately alluring. For the visitor there is still the warmth of welcome. There is the waiter, barefoot and composed, delivering the king coconut to the traveller by the pool. There is the hand of assistance up the steep steps of Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) or Sigiriya. There is the invitation to share home-prepared rice and curry, or to attend a relative's monastic initiation.

This island nation has welcomed those from afar for millennia. Different faiths and ethnicities have mixed and married, yet clear distinctions exist. Each is proud, and rightly so, of its heritage. Yet in a nation where a single statement about an ancient event can shatter the harmony, history can have an electrifying currency.

Poverty exists beside luxury here, where servants tend their masters as they have done for centuries. The modern exists beside the ancient as the young park their 4WDs near rickshaw drivers, whose transport may be their only home.

But gentleness, especially for the visitor, persists.

LIFESTYLE

Daily life for Sri Lankans depends very much on their position in society. Monks rise early to chant or meditate. Devotees make an early morning visit to the temple. Other Sri Lankans walk on the Galle Face Green or visit the gym. Tea pickers don their colourful clothes and hurry to the leaves. Servants prepare breakfast for the family. Stockbrokers and engineers are chauffeured to the office, farmers cultivate their land and stall holders arrange their *kadé* (street-side huts) with fruit and goodies.

Sri Lankan Life

Traditional life in Sri Lanka centred on the *gamma* (village). This was a highly organised hub of activity, where each knew their role and how to fulfil it. Agriculture was the mainstay, with rice paddies dotting the landscape around the village. Buffalo, a source of rich curd, wallowed in ponds while poultry strutted their stuff beneath jackfruit, mango, banana and papaya trees. Some villages focused on particular products such as pots or masks, and still today you'll pass 'car-tyre-gamma' and 'cane-furniture-gamma', as well as delicious Cadjugama (Cashew-Nut Village), where you'll be hard pressed to resist the cashew sellers.

Culture Shock! Sri Lanka by Robert Barlas and Nanda P Wanasundera gives travellers a confidence boost by offering a glimpse into the unknown and unfamiliar.

Spice exports from Sri Lanka create Rs 5700 million (US\$56 million) in revenue annually.

Modern Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is a fusion of old and new. Twin towers – tributes to trade – soar above shanty huts. Computers record stock-market results and machines cultivate land and cut timber. Yet, in some areas, only 3% of homes have water on tap and only half have electricity. Many people still live the traditional village life, albeit with a TV or motorbike.

The belief that Sri Lanka would become another Singapore has not eventuated. Modern buildings emerge, but their construction on marshland has the inevitable consequences of sewage blockages, flooding, and transport and pollution problems.

Employment

Aid organisations advise potential volunteers that the Sri Lankan work ethic is different – it is unhurried. Yet this belies the fact that most Sri Lankans work long, hard hours.

Villagers traditionally had a strong sense of duty to family, community, monarch and monk. The *rajakariya* (labour for the king) ensured the achievement of massive projects such as temple building and tank construction. When a task was vast, such as harvesting the crops or threshing rice, it became a community task. Some people had agricultural or home duties, while others had more specific roles, such as astrologer, medicine man or toddy tapper. No doubt if astrological or medical counsel failed the toddy tapper came in handy! This idea of working for the common good persisted well into the 20th century, and even now public servants talk of performing *rajakariya* (although they do get paid).

Today graduates and teachers earning between Rs 3000 and 5000 per month bemoan the fact that garment workers may earn more than them, but at Rs 114 per day, garment workers need to work long hours to achieve such an income. Sri Lanka's strong jewellery trade and the high profits associated with it mean that jewellery cutters and polishers can receive from Rs 6000 to 10,000 per month.

It's clear that improved economic conditions have mostly benefited 20% of the population, who tend to reside around Colombo. The remaining 80% have seen little benefit, and income inequality is increasing. Almost 25% of Sri Lankans live below the poverty line and, while unemployment is estimated at 8%, it is generally agreed that many workers, even those working long hours, do not earn a liveable wage.

The minimum age for employment is 14 unless the child is working for a parent. In 2002 over 200,000 children were working and not attending school. Also, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) recruits children as young as 13 into its army.

Society & Attitudes

While Sri Lanka may seem to be a conservative society, it displays, as it has for centuries, a range of attitudes and behaviours.

Traditionally, marriages in Sri Lanka were arranged. Although young people may now choose their own partners, horoscopes, caste and parental approval are still important factors.

Homosexuality is illegal, although the law is rarely enforced. That said, discretion is advised – it's probably best to avoid a 12-year jail term. Censors are strict – the play *Bed of Nettles*, by Gratiaen Prize-winner Visakesa Chandrasekaram, was banned because of its homosexual themes. However, the gay community is becoming ever more vocal.

The elderly are respected in Sri Lanka, and old age brings increased security. Elders usually remain an integral part of the extended family.

The caste system has traditionally played an important role for Sri Lankans, but it now has minimal influence. Although Buddhism discourages distinctions based on caste, a caste system operates among Sinhalese. About 50% of Sinhalese belong to the highest caste, the Govigama (descendants of landowners and cultivators). Traditionally Govigama were royal dignitaries and aristocracy. Today they are still the people of power – politicians and corporate flyers. Lower down the scale come the Karava (fisherfolk), Hakurus (makers of jaggery sweets), Berawaya (drummers), Paduvua (palanquin bearers), Radhu (washerfolk) and the Rodiya (beggars and itinerant entertainers). Today, these distinctions are virtually irrelevant (indeed, the one place it has any influence is in the marriage market, particularly in partner-seeking advertisements, where caste is still one of the many desirable 'qualities'), and you're more likely to hear tut-tutting about Kandyans and low-country Sinhalese (depending on the speaker).

For Hindus, caste has been more important. The Brahmin (priests) is the highest caste, and other high castes include the Vellalas (landlords akin to the Govigama), Karaiya (fisherfolk, similar to Karava) and Chetti (involved in commerce). Artisans and labourers come next, followed by those involved with butchery and cleaning. The lowest castes, traditionally known as Untouchables, were once forbidden to enter temples and own land. The Jaffna Tamils, mainly of the Vellala caste, used education and employment in prestigious positions to increase their influence throughout the last century. However, the Hill Country Tamils, who pick the tea, mainly come from lower castes. Some caste customs are still practised and social problems caused by caste inequity persist. However, legislation and equality-based social welfare are causing caste distinctions to fade and many people go about their daily lives happily ignoring caste and the disparities it may bring.

Ritual & Ceremony

Traditionally, rites of passage, often celebrated with elaborate rituals, brought families and villagers together. These connections were sealed with beliefs that linked nature with the supernatural; the land, rivers, trees and sky were all seen as life-givers and therefore land was tilled with respect and its produce was received with gratitude and ceremony. Every village had a protector deity (or several), usually associated with aspects of nature.

Tradition still has an important role at times of life transition. A newborn child may be named according to an auspicious time and letters, indicated by the astrologers. The child's first solid food is *kiri bath* (coconut-milk rice), the traditional food of ritual and celebration. It's common for children to receive a *pancha uda* (necklace of five weapons), containing small charms of a sword, bow, arrow, conch and trident – all symbols of protection.

A custom still practised by some families, especially in villages, is the daughter's coming-of-age. During her first period she is separated, usually in a room of her own. Female family members keep her company and feed her special foods. At a time determined by the astrologer, she is bathed and later celebrated with gifts of jewellery and clothes.

The wedding ceremony depends on the religion of the couple, although it's usual for mixed-faith couples to marry with customs from both religions. Buddhist weddings usually take place on a *poruwa* (square platform) decorated with flowers. Religious stanzas are chanted in Sinhala and Pali (a dialect of Sanskrit), and the bride and groom pass betel leaves to their parents as an expression of thanks. The bride's little finger on her right hand is tied with thread to the little finger of the groom's left hand, the end of the thread is lit and, as it burns towards their hands, water is

Each year the 800,000 Sri Lankans who work overseas (mainly in the Middle East) boost the economy by sending home US\$1 billion.

There is no minimum wage in Sri Lanka. Instead, 38 boards determine basic wages for each industry.

Although bonded labour is illegal in Sri Lanka, some children are bonded as servants to pay off family debts.

For gay information and contacts, visit the promising www.sriconnection.net, or the more accessible www.utopia-asia.com/spec/sripride.htm. For lesbians, there's www.wsglanka.com.

The divorce rate in Sri Lanka is one of the lowest in the world, with just over one divorce per 10,000 people per year.

poured, extinguishing the light and symbolising their union. The couple cut the *kiri bath*, sign the register and join the feast.

Hindu weddings are religious affairs that occur in the temple. The Hindu wedding takes place around a fire that symbolises Brahman, the supreme being. As with most new ventures, prayers are offered to Ganesh, the elephant-headed deity. Sacred texts are recited and the end of the bride's sari is tied to outer clothing of the groom. They circle the fire seven times, a symbol of commitment and union. After exchanging rings they are usually showered with rice and flowers.

The *nikaah* (Muslim marriage) is usually a simple affair. There is no religious ceremony, just an agreement by the couple. Celebrations and gift-giving depend upon the orthodoxy of the couple – the greater the orthodoxy, the simpler the event.

At funerals mourners invariably wear white, and white flags are strung along fences, providing a guided path to the place of cremation.

POPULATION

Unlike other countries, Sri Lankans have not made a marked exodus from country to city. Twenty-five percent of the population lives in the city and many of these city dwellers retain close attachments to village life through family and continued land ownership.

Now with a population of 19.9 million, Sri Lanka's population doubled from seven million in the 30 years following the departure of the British in 1948, somewhat giving credence to the old adage, 'No sex please, we're British'.

The social policies of most governments since independence have given Sri Lanka a creditable literacy and health record. Sinhala and Tamil are both national languages, with English described as a link language. Most Sri Lankans are bilingual, even trilingual. See p351 for useful words and phrases.

Sri Lanka's ethnic groups have formed around language and religion. Throughout history, relations among the groups been marked by integration and cooperation, as well as tension and conflict.

Sinhalese

The Sinhalese constitute about 74% of the population, speak Sinhala and are predominantly Buddhist. Their forebears came from northern India in about the 6th century BC.

Sinhalese sometimes divide themselves into 'low country' or 'high country' (ie Kandyan). The Kandyan Sinhalese are famously proud, stemming from the time when the Hill Country was the last bastion of Sinhalese rule. Today, for Sinhalese Buddhists, Kandy is the spiritual capital of the island.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

'But that's a case of koheeda yannee mallee pol, no?'

This is actually a case of Singlish – a combination of Sinhala/Tamil and English. Some Sri Lankans bemoan this development, claiming it is a breakdown of their home culture or an abuse of the English language. Radio broadcasters have even been criticised over the inclusion of English words in their programmes. Yet it continues – not usually in print, but certainly in speech.

And what does the above statement mean?

It means '[But that's a case of]...they got the wrong end of the stick.'

Phrase quoted from *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* by Manique Gunesequera.

Computer literacy in Sri Lanka ranges from 3% in some rural areas to 20% in the Colombo area.

For an interesting and humorous read see *The Postcolonial Identity of Sri Lankan English* by English scholar Manique Gunesequera. Then you'll know what's happening if you're called a *bittaree!*

Tamils

The Tamils constitute 18% of the population, are predominantly Hindu and speak Tamil. About 60 million more Tamils live across the Palk Strait in India. While connections exist between Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils, especially for religious rituals and pilgrimages, they generally see each other as discrete racial groups.

There are two distinct groups of Tamils in Sri Lanka, separated by geography, history and caste. The Jaffna Tamils are descendants of the South Indians who settled in northern Sri Lanka during the late centuries BC. Most still live in the North and some reside with communities of Sinhalese and Muslims along the northeast coast.

The other Tamils are the 'Hill Country' or 'plantation' Tamils. Their ancestors were brought by the British from India in the 19th century to work on tea plantations.

Muslims

About 9% of the population is Muslim. Most are the so-called Sri Lanka Moors, who are the descendants of Arab or Indian traders, and whose presence goes back at least 1000 years. Escaping persecution from the Portuguese, many moved into the hilly interior, and you'll still come across enclaves of Muslims as you travel around the hill towns. They are also scattered all over the island, perhaps more thinly in the South and North.

Muslims have largely steered clear of the Sinhalese-Tamil troubles, though there has been some conflict in the East.

The Malays are a smaller group of Muslims; their ancestors came with the Dutch from Java. They still speak Malay and mostly live around Hambantota. Another small group, the 'Indian Moors', are more recent arrivals from India and Pakistan.

Veddahs

The Veddahs (Hunters), also called the Wanniyala-aetto (People of the Forest), are the original inhabitants of the country. Like so many other indigenous groups, the Veddahs have fared badly. Each wave of migration seized more land, leaving the Veddahs with less forest on which to subsist. Today their numbers are highly disputed, with estimates ranging from 200 to thousands. Some people contest Veddah existence, claiming they long ago integrated into the majority cultures. Only a small (and diminishing) number of people identify themselves as Veddah and retain a semblance of their old culture, which emphasised a hunting lifestyle with close relationships to nature and their ancestors.

When the Dutch arrived in Sri Lanka there were Veddah communities as far north as Jaffna. Today there are two groups: Kele Weddo (jungle-dwelling Veddahs) and Can Weddo (village-dwelling Veddahs), living mainly in the area between Badulla, Batticaloa and Polonnaruwa.

While Sinhalese legends claim the Veddahs were descended from evil spirits (a view that has certain political uses), it seems they are related to the Vedas of Kerala, India. Like some traditional Keralan groups, they have a matrilineal society.

Central to the issues of Veddah identity and land rights are the traditional hunting grounds of the Veddah in the Maduru Oya National Park, which was created in 1983 as a refuge for wildlife displaced by the Mahaweli irrigation scheme. Sri Lankan law prohibits hunting and gathering in national parks and Veddahs have been arrested for such activities. As they continue to work for the right to follow their customs, the official line may be softening – due, perhaps, to UN support for the

For an absorbing insight into historical and contemporary Veddah life and customs see the comprehensive website <http://vedda.org/index.htm>.

Veddah cause and the growing recognition that Veddah knowledge is vital to forest protection.

Other Ethnic Groups

The Burghers are Eurasian, primarily descendants of the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Even after independence, Burghers had a disproportionate influence over political and business life, but as growing Sinhalese nationalism reduced their role in Sri Lankan life, many Burghers emigrated to Australia and Canada. It's estimated that about 34,000 remain in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, names such as Fernando, de Silva and Perera are still common.

There are also small Chinese and European communities, as well as a few downtrodden South Indians, who perform mostly menial tasks.

RELIGION

Buddhism is the belief system of the Sinhalese, and it is followed by 70% of the population. It plays a significant role in the country, spiritually, culturally and politically, and Sri Lanka's literature, art and architecture are, to a large extent, a product of its Buddhism. About 15% of the population, mainly Tamil, is Hindu. Muslims account for about 9% of the population and Christians about 6%; they include both Sinhalese and Tamil converts.

There is much mixing among religious groups. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians all venture to some of the same pilgrimage sites – Adam's Peak and Kataragama in particular. And a Catholic may well feel the need to pay respects to the Hindu god Ganesh to ensure that no obstacles impede a prospective venture. As one Sri Lankan commented, 'I praise Lord Buddha, I praise Lord Hindu and I praise Lord Catholic.'

The Sri Lankan government, while seeing Buddhism as the island's foremost religion, established ministries representing each of the major faiths of the island. However, on election in 2005, President Rajapakse combined these into a ministry for religious affairs. Concerned for its Buddhist heritage, the primarily Sinhalese government is opposed to proselytising by other religions, particularly Christianity. This has caused some tension as Christian groups endeavour to spread their faith.

Buddhism

Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a religion but a philosophy and moral code espoused by the Buddha. Born Prince Siddhartha Gautama, on the border of Nepal and India around 563 BC, the Buddha left his royal background and developed philosophies and disciplines for understanding and overcoming life's challenges.

The Buddha taught that suffering is inescapable, and that everyone will experience suffering as long as they are attached to the sensual and material aspects of life. Freedom from suffering comes from developing a higher consciousness, mostly by training the mind through meditation and by living by a moral code. This is an evolution through many rebirths and many states of spiritual development until nirvana (enlightenment) is reached, bringing freedom from the cycle of birth and death.

Central to the doctrine of rebirth is karma; each rebirth results from the actions one has committed, maybe in a previous life.

In his lifetime the Buddha organised a community of celibate monks, the Sangha, to spread his dharma (teachings).

The conversion of the Sinhalese king to Buddhism in the 3rd century BC (p29) ensured that Buddhism became firmly implanted in Sri Lanka.

Translating the Buddhist scriptures receives government support in Sri Lanka.

Each year in May, the anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment (Buddha Jayanthi) is cause for huge celebration in Sri Lanka. This was particularly so in 2006, when the 2550th anniversary occurred.

A Concise Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, by John Powers, attempts a nearly impossible comprehensiveness, and covers everything from Anuradhapura's Abhayagiri monastery to the Tibetan Lama Tupden Zopa.

POYA DAYS

Poya days fall on each full moon. On these days, devout Buddhists visit a temple, fast after noon and abstain from entertainment and luxury. At their temple they make offerings, attend teachings and meditate. These days, which are public holidays in Sri Lanka, have been observed since ancient times. Each *poya* day is associated with a particular Buddhist ritual. Some notable days:

Vesak (May) Celebrates the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha.

Poson (June) Commemorates Buddhism's arrival in Sri Lanka.

Esala (July/August) Sees the huge Kandy festival, which commemorates, among other things, Buddha's first sermon.

Unduwap (December) Celebrates the visit of Sangamitta, who brought the bodhi tree sapling to Anuradhapura.

Durutu (January) Marks the first visit of the Buddha to the island.

A strong relationship developed between Sri Lanka's kings and the Buddhist clergy, creating a Buddhist theocracy.

Worldwide there are two major schools of Buddhism – Theravada and Mahayana. They have much in common, but Theravada (*thera* means 'learned elder') scriptures are in Pali (the language of the Buddha's time), while Mahayana (Large Vehicle) scriptures are in Sanskrit. Theravada is seen by some as more academic, Mahayana as more universal. The Mahayana school claims to have extended Theravada teachings.

While Mahayana Buddhism is practised and studied in Sri Lanka, it is the Theravada school that has been widely adopted. There are several factors that have consolidated the significance of Buddhism (especially the Theravada stream) in Sri Lanka. Firstly, Sinhalese Buddhists attach vital meaning to the words of the Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle; one of their sacred texts), in which the Buddha designates them as the protectors of the Buddhist teachings. The commitment emanating from this was fuelled by centuries of conflict between the Sinhalese (mainly Buddhist) and Tamils (mainly Hindu). For some Sinhalese, Mahayana Buddhism resembled Hinduism, and therefore defence of the Theravada stream was crucial. Also, the destruction of many Indian Buddhist sites in the 10th century AD heightened Sinhalese anxiety – it provided further impetus for preservation of Buddhism.

Sri Lankan monks took Theravada Buddhism to other Asian countries, and over the centuries there has been much interaction between the various Buddhist schools. Thai and Burmese *theras* have lived in Sri Lanka to revive higher ordinations that had lapsed; the order of Buddhist nuns (the Bhikkuni) was re-established as recently as 1996.

Since the late 19th century an influential strand of 'militant' Buddhism has developed in Sri Lanka, centred on the belief that the Buddha charged the Sinhalese people with making the island a citadel of Buddhism in its purest form. It sees threats to Sinhalese Buddhist culture in European Christianity and Tamil Hinduism.

Sri Lankan Buddhism, historically intertwined with politics, can and does exert great pressure on politicians. Indeed, it was a Buddhist monk who, dissatisfied with Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike's 'drift' from a Sinhala-Buddhist focus, assassinated him in 1959 (p33). Today, some Buddhist monks oppose compromise with the Tamils and not all follow a virtuous path. On the other hand, many monks are dedicated to the spirit of Buddhism and are committed to the welfare of devotees.

Besides the festivals and the numerous ways that Buddhism permeates people's daily lives, Buddhists gather at temples on *poya* (full moon) days to make *puja* (prayers and offerings) and to hear the ancient truths from the Sangha.

Theravada Buddhism, by Richard Gombrich, details the context, history and practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

In Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka, Lynn de Silva combines lucid writing, fascinating information and a scholarly (but never inaccessible) approach that casts light on much that can appear incomprehensible.

SYMBOLS OF SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka, symbols are everywhere. Some are subtle, quiet and unnoticed. Others demand attention. These symbols are the keys to the stories and the ideas that have woven their way through Sri Lankan culture from ancient times. Interpretations of the symbols vary from person to person, and from place to place, and may range from the practical to the profound. The list here is not exhaustive but it provides an entrée into the meaning of the symbols and their cultural significance. However, always ask if you want more information. And ask again. The different interpretations you receive will provide for rich reflection.

Astamangala

Since ancient times the Astamangala (Eight Auspicious Symbols) have been seen to bring good luck and happiness. They were often placed at the base of temples and dagobas (stupas), and were worn by kings and nobles for luck and protection. Today the symbols still have meaning: for the 50th anniversary of independence, the Central Bank in Sri Lanka released a coin with the Astamangala. Buddhist groups differ on the composition of the Astamangala, but in Sri Lanka the following generally constitute the eight.

Ankus (elephant goad) The *ankus* disciplines and directs the elephant. Likewise, the teachings of the Buddha discipline the mind and direct the individual to the right path.

Bhadrapitha (throne) The portrayal of royalty here is clear. However, the throne also represents the attainment of enlightenment, somewhat akin to royal or noble status in the spiritual realm.

Camara (fly whisk) The whisk is a gentle deterrent. Devotees, too, must be gentle with intrusions or impediments that may obstruct their path.

Matsya-yugala (pair of fish) Because fish breed prolifically, this symbol represents fertility and life. Originally the two fishes denoted the two great rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna, symbolic in themselves of the sun and moon, and male and female. And because fish swim freely, they also symbolise the notion that

devotees will not become submerged in life's difficulties but will be buoyed by the Buddha's teachings.

Nandyavaria (swastika) This is a symbol of peace, of luck and, sometimes, of the Buddha's heart.

Purna-kalasa (vase) The vase is considered to encompass wealth and prosperity.

Sankha (conch shell) The sound of the conch pierces the atmosphere and continues to reverberate. Similarly, the Buddha's teachings reach out to all and continue to resound.

Srivasta (goddess Lakshmi) This goddess is a symbol of fertility, life and prosperity.

Bodhi Tree

Trees are important symbols in Sri Lanka but the bodhi tree (also known as *pipal*, or *Ficus religiosa*) is all-important. It was beneath a bodhi tree that the Buddha achieved enlightenment – *bodhi* actually means 'enlightenment' – and a cutting from that sacred tree still grows at the ancient city of Anuradhapura (p250). Bodhi trees grace the courtyards of many Sri Lankan temples, and the incense and lamps burning beneath the branches of these trees are offerings that symbolise the light of wisdom.

Dagoba (Stupa)

You'll see dagobas everywhere throughout Sri Lanka (p56). Domed structures with fine spires rising high into the sky, they hold the relics of a sacred person and are the destination of many a pilgrimage. Some people say they represent the body of the Buddha, while others equate them to the five elements, with earth represented at the bottom, and water, fire, air and nothingness rising to the sky.

Elephant

In Hindu mythology elephants were linked with clouds and, therefore, with rain. As such they are seen as symbols of water, life and fortune. They are also seen as noble and gentle, the qualities achieved when one lives a good life. In Sri Lanka, only the elephant gets to parade with the sacred Buddhist relics and Hindu statues. A

little white elephant is associated with Saman, the deity of Adam's Peak (Sri Pada).

Footprint

The footprint symbolises a place visited by a holy person – hence the pilgrimage site at Adam's Peak, also known as Sri Pada (Holy Footprint). Each faith sees the site as sacred; Buddhists believe it was visited by Buddha; Christians and Muslims believe it was Adam who visited; and Hindus hold that it is the abode of Shiva.

Lamp

Lamps are lit to represent the light that dispels ignorance and evil. They are particularly evident at the Vesak festival, celebrating the Buddha's enlightenment (usually in May) and Deepavali, celebrating the triumph of good over evil (usually in October). Any important event in Sri Lanka begins with the lighting of the Garuda-headed lamp; Garuda, half human, half bird, symbolises the banishment of all evil.

Lion

Seen as a forceful creature, the king of the jungle and the protector of the clan, the lion represents the knowledgeable beings who protect the sacred teachings and places. Lion statues are often seen at the entrance to temples.

Lotus

Rooted in mud, the lotus grows through water and blossoms in the light above. It symbolises the human path from the depth of difficulties through the fluidity of life's concerns to the glow of knowledge and enlightenment.

Moonstone (Sandakadapahana)

The moonstone is the semicircular first step in a flight of steps leading to a sacred site. Ornate sculptures follow the arced shape of the stone, and each arc symbolises another step on the path from human life (the outer arcs) to en-

lightenment (the inner semicircle). The flowers of the outer arc depict human life, while the arc of animals (elephant, lion, horse and bull) represent life's challenges: birth, disease, old age and death. The vine that weaves among these elements depicts the entanglements in which humans get caught as they are lured away from an upright path, and the swans signify the saints and ancestors that may assist along this path. The vine near the centre represents the cosmic/heavenly spheres and, finally, the centre with the lotus petals is nirvana (enlightenment).

Parasol

The parasol signifies protection from cruelty. It also indicates royalty and is often seen above the image of a deity.

Peacock

The peacock is believed to be capable of eating poison yet surviving. As such, it is symbolic of great beings who take on the suffering of others, transmuted into knowledge and understanding. The peacock symbolises the path through challenge to liberation. When depicted in pairs it represents the duality that exists in life – good/evil, sickness/health, black/white. The peacock is the vehicle of the favoured deity of Kataragama, also known as Murugan and Skanda.

Sun & Moon

This is the twin representation of truth – the truth of earthly life and the truth that exists beyond comprehension.

Vel

Generally associated with Kataragama (Murugan), the *vel*, with its spearlike point, signifies warrior strength, as well as the piercing of ignorance and the creation of an opening for knowledge. There are Vel festivals in honour of Murugan in Jaffna and Colombo around July/August.

Hinduism

Tamil kings and their followers from South India brought Hinduism to northern Sri Lanka. Today there are Hindu communities in Colombo, Kandy, the tea plantation areas, the North and the East.

Hinduism often appears to be a complex mix of beliefs and gods. Essentially, all Hindus believe in Brahman, the One who is uncreated and infinite.

The myriad deities are simply manifestations of this formless being, where one may come to understand life and all its facets. Although beliefs and practices may vary, there are several unifying factors. These include beliefs in ahimsa (nonviolence), samsara (the recurring cycle of births and deaths until one reaches a pure state and is reunited with Brahman), karma (the law of cause and effect) and dharma (teachings about laws for living).

Hindus believe that living a life according to dharma enhances the chance of being born into better circumstances. Going the other way, rebirth may take animal form, but it's only as a human that one may gain sufficient self-knowledge to escape the cycle of reincarnation and achieve moksha (liberation).

For ordinary Hindus, fulfilling one's ritual and social duties is the main aim of worldly life. The Hindu text Bhagavad Gita is clear about this; doing your duty is more important than asserting your individuality.

Hindu worship takes many forms, but has a particular connection to *darshan*, the act of seeing and being seen by the deity present in a shrine.

GODS & GODDESSES

The Hindu pantheon is prolific; some estimates put the number of deities at 330 million. Brahman is often described as having three facets, known as the Trimurti: the three deities of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Tamil Hindus usually revere Vishnu or Shiva but they also pay respect to the many gods and goddesses of the harvest, the arts and prosperity. Gods are usually associated with a goddess, who represents *shakti*, the female force that gives life to creation.

Brahma & Saraswati

Brahma created the universe. His essence infuses the cosmos, continuing its creation. His consort, Saraswati, is the goddess of learning, wisdom and music.

Vishnu & Lakshmi

Known as the preserver, Vishnu is lawful and devout. He is usually depicted with four arms, which hold a lotus (symbolising the unfolding of the universe), a conch shell (symbolising the cosmic vibration from which all existence emanates), a discus (symbolising the mind) and a mace (symbolising power). Vishnu has 22 incarnations, including Rama (of the Ramayana) and Krishna, who depicted in blue and is known for his dalliances with *gopis* (milkmaids) and his love affair with Radha.

Vishnu's consort is Lakshmi, goddess of beauty and fortune.

Shiva & Parvati

The destroyer of ignorance and evil, Shiva is often symbolised by the *lingam*, a phallic symbol. With 1008 names, Shiva takes many forms. As Nataraja, lord of the *tandava* (dance), his graceful movements begin the creation of the cosmos.

Shiva's consort, Parvati, is capable of taking many forms, from the universal mother to the ferocious and destructive Kali. Known as the 'black one', Kali is the most fearsome of the Hindu deities. She manifests power to destroy life. Kali is often depicted garlanded with human heads, dancing on a corpse. An odd sect of ascetics propitiates the goddess with mortifying acts of necromancy – it's supposed to be a short cut to ego death, but there's a high dropout rate into madness. You may come across Kali shrines in Sri Lanka's Hill Country.

Other Gods

The elephant-headed Ganesh, chubby, wise and kind, is held in great affection. The elder son of Shiva and Parvati, he is the lord of beginnings, remover of obstacles and patron of scribes – he used his broken tusk to write the Mahabharata.

Murugan (Skanda), the Kataragama deity and the god of war, is the younger brother of Ganesh. His devotees offer crimson garlands when they visit his shrine. Under the name Skanda he is viewed as a protective deity by Buddhists.

Hanuman, the monkey deity, embodies bhakti (devotion). A hero of the Ramayana and the loyal ally of Rama, it was Hanuman who discovered where the King of Lanka, Rawana, was hiding Sita. There is a cave at Ella (p216) that is claimed to be the site of her captivity.

The goddess Pattini has been popular with Sri Lankan Buddhists and Hindus. Elaborate rituals were undertaken in her honour, particularly when requesting her help to eradicate disease. Pattini's main shrine, in Navagamuwa, some 20km south of Colombo, is now somewhat eclipsed by a Buddhist site. Her devotees are mainly pregnant women seeking blessings for a safe and healthy birth. There's a small shrine in Kandy and a large *kovil* (Hindu temple) at Vattappalai, near Mullaittivu.

The guardian deity of the popular pilgrimage site Adam's Peak is Saman, who is associated with a little white elephant. You'll see shrines to Saman as you approach Adam's Peak. Pilgrims of all religious persuasions seek his assistance as they make the long climb to the top.

Islam

There are 1.8 million Sri Lankan Muslims, descendants of Arab traders who settled on the island from the 8th century.

Islam was founded in the 7th century in present-day Saudi Arabia by the Prophet Mohammed. The Arabic term *islam* means 'to surrender': believers undertake to surrender to the will of Allah (God), revealed to Mohammed through the angel Jibreel and recorded in the poetic scriptures of the Quran.

Islam is monotheistic, and believes that everything has been created by Allah. The purpose of all living things is to submit to divine will. Human-kind's weaknesses are its pride and its sense of independence.

After Mohammed's death a dispute over succession split the movement into two main branches – the Sunnis and the Shiites. Sunnis emphasise following and imitating the words and acts of the Prophet, interpreted by different schools of Islamic law (Maliki, Hanifi, Sha'fi and Hambali). They look to tradition and the views of the majority of the community. Shiites believe that only imams (exemplary leaders) are able to reveal the meaning of the Quran. Most of Sri Lanka's Muslims are Sunnis, although small communities of Shiites have migrated more recently from India.

All Muslims believe in the five pillars of Islam: the shahada (declaration of faith: 'there is no God but Allah; Mohammed is his prophet'); prayer (ideally five times a day); the zakat (tax, which today is usually a donation to charity); fasting during the month of Ramadan; and the haj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

Christianity

Some Sri Lankan Christians believe that their faith arrived with the Apostle Thomas in the 1st century AD. Certainly, during the early centuries AD small numbers of Christians established settlements along the coast.

With the Portuguese in 16th century, Christianity, specifically Roman Catholicism, arrived in force and many fisherfolk converted. Today Catholicism remains strong among western coastal communities. The Dutch brought Protestantism and the Dutch Reformed Church, which mostly has a presence in Colombo. Evidence of the British Christian denominations, such as Protestantism and Anglicanism, can be seen in the

For more information on Hinduism, avoid the hype and glitz and go to www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism.

Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists by Ananda K Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita converts the 'bibles' of Sri Lanka – the Mahavamsa and the Ramayana – into accessible stories that provide insight into Sri Lankan beliefs.

Hill Country, where quaint stone churches dot the landscape. Christian communities have decreased in numbers in the last 25 years, but Our Lady of Madhu Church (p301), near Mannar, remains popular, with up to 300,000 pilgrims visiting every 15 August.

WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

As you travel throughout Sri Lanka you'll see women participating in most aspects of Sri Lankan life.

Sri Lanka became the first country in the world to have a female prime minister when Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected to office in 1960. In 1994 her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga became president. This, however, should be viewed more as a continuation of dynasty than an indicator of gender equality; mother and daughter attained office in the absence of their husbands, both of whom had been assassinated. Today, 5% of parliamentary members are women and their representation in local councils is much less.

Given the importance placed on education in Sri Lanka, girls have opportunities to move into all occupational areas. However, the situation for women depends very much on their position in society. In general they are responsible for the home – a role that is viewed with respect. A professional woman may have servants to whom she can delegate such duties, while poorer women undertake home duties and may also work in the fields.

The ethnic conflict has had catastrophic effects on women. One in five Sri Lankan households is now headed by women, and human rights agencies warn that with fewer men and boys for combat, women, and even young girls, are forcefully enlisted.

For some women, widowhood still remains a stigma. Other women avoid widows, fearful that they too may suffer the 'curse' of solo status. The practice of a man taking another wife, while not common, is also not unheard of. This can have distressing effects on the first wife who, restricted by finance and the potential stigma, remains in an unhappy marriage. But as more women pursue higher education, careers and greater freedom, they are less subject to these restrictions.

Sri Lanka's vibrant feminist movement acts as an umbrella organisation for several groups that focus on issues to do with peace, missing relatives, racism, agricultural and factory workers, and refugees from ethnic conflict.

No matter the status, the education or the position of a woman, in social situations she is usually demure. Men do most of the talking. Women do most of the listening, even if discussion is tedious. They nod in the right places, and laugh appropriately at jokes, even if they've heard them many times before.

But with a high female literacy rate, educational opportunities and a vibrant feminist discourse, the women of Sri Lanka are well positioned to take a greater role in determining their country's future.

ARTS Dance

Sri Lanka has a rich dance heritage comprising three main schools: Kandyan dance, masked dance-drama and devil dance.

KANDYAN DANCE

This dance form flourished under the Kandyan kings and became so refined that Buddhist monks admitted it to temple courtyards and it became an integral part of the Kandy Esala Perahera (p167).

Now considered the national dance of Sri Lanka, there are five types of Kandyan dance: *pantheru*, named after a tambourine-like instrument, which was used as an accompaniment to dances after victory in war and is associated with the goddess Pattini; *udekki*, connected to several gods, involves the dancer singing and drumming; *naiyaki*, a graceful dance performed at the lighting of lamps prior to festivals; *ves*, considered the most sacred, is the most frequently seen dance, particularly in the Kandy *perahera* (procession); and *vannamas*, inspired by nature and deities.

The best-known costume of male Kandyan dancers is a wide silklike garment. The dancer's bare chest is covered with necklaces of silver and ivory, while the arms and ankles wear bangles of beaten silver. The dances are energetic performances with great leaps and back flips accompanied by the complex rhythms of the *geta bera*, a Kandyan tapering double-ended drum that yields different tones from monkey hide at one end and cow hide at the other.

MASKED DANCE-DRAMA

There are four folk-drama dance forms: *kolam*, *sokari*, *nadagam* and *pasu*. The best known of these is the *kolam* (Tamil for costume or guise). *Kolam* has numerous characters (up to 53), which have many grotesque and exaggerated deformities, including bulging eyes and nostrils that issue forth tusks and cobras.

Performances, with a cast of singers and drummers, are traditionally held over several nights at New Year (late April). After songs in praise of Buddha, the master of ceremonies explains the origin of the *kolam* – a pregnant Indian Queen had cravings to see a masked dance-drama.

Of the many *kolam* plays, the two best-known are the *Sandakinduru Katava* and the *Gothayimbala Katava*. In the first, a king who is out hunting kills a man-bird creature who is later restored to life by the Buddha. In the second, a demon who falls in love with a married woman is beheaded by her avenging husband. The demon regenerates itself over and over, until the husband is rescued from the dilemma by a forest deity. You're most likely to see *kolam* and devil dancing at Ambalangoda.

MASKS FOR DANCE & FESTIVALS

There are three basic types of mask: *kolam*, *sanni* and *raksha*.

The *kolam* mask – a form of disguise – is used in *kolam* masked dance-dramas, in which all the characters wear masks. *Kolam* masks are generally for dance, not for sale to tourists.

The second mask type, *sanni*, is worn by dancers to impersonate and exorcise demons that range from rheumatism, boils or blindness to gruesome conditions of bile and phlegm. The whole grotesque ensemble is bordered by two cobras, and other cobras sprout from the demon's head.

Raksha masks are used in processions and festivals. There are about 25 varieties, including the common *naga raksha* (cobra) masks, in which a demonic face, complete with protruding eyeballs, lolling tongue and pointed teeth, is topped with a coiffure of writhing cobras. The *gurulu raksha* mask developed from the legend of the Rakshasas, an ancient Lankan people ruled by Rawana of the Ramayana. The Rakshasas assumed the form of cobras to subjugate their enemies, who pleaded for help from the *gurulu*, a bird that preyed on snakes.

Most masks are made from a light balsa-type wood called *kaduru*, which is smoke-dried before the mask is carved. The mask's base colour is yellow, with other colours added as desired. Finally, it is glazed with a mixture of resin powder and oil.

The best place to watch masks being made is Ambalangoda, which also has some museums that detail the mask-making process (p122).

Deities and Demons by Nandadeva Wijesekera features vivid illustrations of past (sometimes enduring) Sri Lankan customs. For an enjoyable read you'll need to abandon all notions of syntax and feminism.

Neloufer de Mel's *Women and the Nation's Narrative* probes Sri Lankan 20th-century history from a women's perspective. It's an important work that confronts conventional views about caste, colonialism, guerrilla warfare and morality.

At www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/lk/lkorgs.htm you'll find listings of, and links to, women's organisations. Although sometimes out of date, the sites provide valuable insight into women's issues in Sri Lanka.

DEVIL DANCE

Traditionally, devil dancing was performed to free a person from evil spirits or bad luck. There are many types of devil dance: *sanni yakku* exorcises the disease demon, *kohomba kankariya* ensures prosperity, and the *bali* honours heavenly beings.

Three beings must be appeased in these ceremonies: demons, deities and semidemons. Before the dance begins, palm-leaf shrines dedicated to each of the beings are built outside the victim's house. The beings must be tempted out of these and into an arena. The dancers (all men) go through an astounding athletic routine, costumed in red headdresses hung with palm leaves and with white cloths wound tightly round their hips (which stays firm despite their gyrations). All the while, bare-chested drummers beat out a frantic rhythm on the *yak bera* (a double-ended, cylindrical drum). At the climax of their routine the dancers put on masks representing the demons, and the demon considered to be causing the distress is questioned and confronted by the chief exorcist. He exhorts, threatens and sometimes even bribes the demon to force it away.

Theatre

Theatre moved into the cities when a Parsi theatre company from Bombay (Mumbai) introduced *nurti* (new theatre) to Colombo audiences in the 19th century. *Nurti* was a blend of European and Indian theatrical conventions: stage scenery, painted backdrops and wings, an enclosed theatre, costumes, and music and song. It was to spawn a new profession – play writing – with writers drawing inspiration from Sanskrit drama and other sources, including Shakespeare.

The arrival of cinema almost killed off theatre. However, a breakthrough came in 1956 with *Maname* (King's Name), a play written by university professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra. It was staged in *nadagam*, a form of Sinhalese drama that developed from Catholic pageants. In *nadagam* the absence of masks and the inclusion of different musical forms enabled a greater audience connection with the plays. This combination of familiar folk tale and accessible staging made the play an instant hit and marked the beginning of a new era of experimentation and creativity. Sarachchandra is recognised as the father of modern Sri Lankan theatre.

Today, Sri Lankan theatre is undertaking many innovative ventures on contemporary issues, particularly on the healing of trauma in the aftermath of conflict. Such projects are sponsored by the Alliance Française, the British Council and the Goethe Institute. It's worthwhile checking out what's on when you arrive in Colombo; see p81 for details.

If you're in the Hill Country in May look out for *Kamakoothu*, an ancient folk drama that depicts the story of Kama, the Hindu god of love (akin to Cupid). The performance lasts for several days, with whole villages taking part.

Literature

Sri Lanka has a rich literary tradition drawn from Sinhalese and Tamil cultures, with colonisation also having a marked influence.

Contemporary writing tends to deal with the trauma of war and with romance – perhaps as a means of escape from war.

SINHALESE LITERATURE

Sri Lankan literature has never shied away from depicting humanity's flaws, as well as its nobility. The first works of Sinhalese literature were composed by monks, since it was they who were educated and literate.

OLA & THE SINHALA SCRIPT

The elegant swirls and flourishes of the 58-letter Sinhala script developed partly due to the nature of the *ola* (the young leaves of the talipot palm), Sri Lanka's first writing material. Tough, with a distinct fibre, the leaves tend to be split by straight lines, but swirls don't cause damage.

Before they are used, the *ola* are boiled, dried, rolled and stretched. A steel-tipped stylus etches the writing, after which the leaf is buffed with a sticky blend of charcoal and *dummala* oil, made from fossilised resin from the paddy fields. Most of the resin is wiped off, emphasising the blackened letters. The resin also preserves the leaves, which can last as long as 500 years. The Sinhalese classics, the Pali canon, the Mahavamsa and numerous Jataka tales were engraved on *ola*.

You can sometimes see *ola* being inscribed by students outside the National Museum in Colombo.

Without computers and electric light they accomplished extraordinary feats in recounting the tales of others. The earliest surviving texts date from the 10th century AD and focus on the study of Pali and Buddhism. In two major works, the Mahavamsa and the Culavamsa (Minor Chronicle), the monks recorded Sinhalese history. Generally regarded as part history, part myth, the chronicles relate the arrival of Vijaya, the lives of the royals and the coming of Buddhism. The monks demonstrated shrewd insight into human nature as they depicted centuries of history – relationships, betrayal, loss, death, patricide, tragedy and drama are all there. The Thupavamsa (Chronicle of the Great Stupa) records the construction of the huge Ruvanvelisaya Dagoba (p250) in Anuradhapura. In the 13th century the works of Gurulugomi (who wrote in almost pure Sinhala) began a transition from Pali to Sinhala in Sri Lankan literature.

Poetry was an early literary form; the graffiti on the Sigiriya mirror wall (p235) attests to that. The Jatakas, tales of the Buddha's past lives, were also recorded in verse. *Samdesha*, a popular genre originating in India, centred on themes of love and travel, describing poems that were transported between lovers on monsoonal winds. Poems also explored the peace of the Buddha and the ravages of war.

From the mid-19th century, literary endeavours went beyond the traditional, mostly religious subjects, and towards the end of the century, printing presses produced the newspapers, periodicals and the first novels. The novel *Meena* appeared in 1905. Written by Aluthgamage Simon De Silva, its theme of young love was popular with some, controversial with others. Years later this work was translated into English and published in the USA by the author's grandson. Works by Buddhist writer and political activist Piyadasa Sirisena, as well as those by Martin Wickramasinghe and WA Silva, were very popular in the early part of the 20th century. Wickramasinghe's *Gamperaliya* (Overturning of the Village), which subsequently developed into a trilogy, received much critical praise for its exploration of Western influence on village life. Many European works were translated into Sinhala, including Leonard Woolf's *A Village in the Jungle*.

TAMIL LITERATURE

Tamil writing emanates from a strong literary tradition dating back over 2000 years. It shares its literary origins with Sanskrit, but while Sanskrit ceased to be a spoken language, Tamil continued and survived – still voiced and written much as it has been for many centuries. The first Tamil writing was poetry, possibly derived from songs. One of the most loved Tamil works, *The Kural*, was written by the poet Tiruvalluvar. While

Elephant dung is part of a curious concoction that is made into paper for stationery, artwork and books.

Courageous, poetic and with a strong sense of place, Chandani Lokuge's novels *If the Moon Smiled* and *Turtle Nest* tackle the alarming and the elegant while evoking past and present Sri Lanka.

its writing is dated anywhere from 200 BC to AD 600, its 1330 couplets advocating compassion are as relevant today as when they were written.

The period from the late centuries BC to early centuries AD was a particularly fruitful time for Tamil literature, with the Sangam – the academy of literature in Tamil Nadu (India) – nurturing a rapidly growing literary scene. Many works from this time are included in *Pattuppattu* (Ten Idylls) and *Ettuttohāi* (Eight Anthologies). Sri Lankan Tamils date their first poet, Eelattu Poothanthevanar, from the Sangam period, his work being found in the anthologies. Two epics, *Silappadhikaram* and *Manimekhalai*, considered comparable in distinction with the Ramayana and Mahabharata, were produced by Tamil poets of the late Sangam period.

As the Sangam period progressed, all the major styles of literature were in vogue, especially the epic and the poem, which invariably took a highly moral stance. The sciences, including astrology and medicine, was also a favoured topic.

Having drawn upon these rich literary beginnings, Sri Lankan Tamil writing has developed a keen sense of place as well as a strong awareness of the Tamils' social and political context. It has also been a significant influence within the Tamil diaspora. Through the colonial years, particularly the British period, Tamil writing explored and analysed the colonial experience. Tamil newspapers, begun in the 1930s, were well established by the 1940s, enabling greater debate and dissemination of views – important in the preindependence climate.

The two decades post independence saw a lively literary debate that mostly focused on politics. This vibrant literary movement was hit by a massive blow in 1981 when the library in Jaffna was burnt down by a Sinhalese mob. Thousands of works, including ancient *ola* (the young leaves of the talipot palm) manuscripts, were lost. Local and global efforts have re-established the library, which opened in March 2004. However, this attack, combined with the general ethnic violence has led to Resistance Literature – writing that aims to not only protect and promote Tamil language and literature but to explore it as a means of retaining identity and dignity. It aims further to record violent activity while contesting attempts at suppression.

On declaration of the cease-fire in 2002, Tamils immediately began activities to reinvigorate their literary culture. Just 10 months later the Trincomalee Literary Festival celebrated Tamil language, literature and culture, reinforcing the significance of these to Tamil identity and belonging.

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Much of Sri Lanka's more recent literature centres on romance and ethnic conflict. *Born to Labour* by CV Vellupillai describes the lives of tea-estate workers, while, according to some travellers, *Medusa's Hair* by Gannath Obeyesekere is a must for understanding Kataragama's fire-walking ceremony. In fact, Obeyesekere is a good option at any time; although somewhat verbose, his work provides fascinating insights into the lesser-known aspects of Sri Lankan culture. For an entrée into the Burgher community, look at Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree*, for which he won the 1993 Gratiaen Prize. Jean Arasanayagam's poetry and short stories provide vivid and intimate accounts into the upheavals in Sri Lanka.

The country's best-known writer is Arthur C Clarke, who made his home here in the 1950s. His *The Foundations of Paradise*, set on an imaginary island, features places remarkably like Adam's Peak and Sigiriya.

Sri Lankan children have been raised on the folk tales of Mahadenamutta, a village know-all who somehow acquired numerous sycophants. Mahadenamutta is the ideal character for satirical pieces about the exploits

In Pradeep Jeganathan's *At the Water's Edge* you get to feel Sri Lanka's raw edge. The writing in these seven short stories is raw too, but it says much in few words.

of current politicians. They're witty articles that are possibly more reliable than the actual news. Look out for the articles in newspaper features.

Many Sri Lankan writers have migrated to other lands and written evocative and courageous works about their native land. *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* by Shyam Selvadurai explore relationships and societal expectations, particularly in regard to gay issues. *Cinnamon Gardens*, at times prescriptive and stereotypical, is a gutsy account of caste life in early-20th-century Sri Lanka. Selvadurai has done his research and packed it in – a little too obviously at times. For one Sri Lankan critic, the 'feminist' character was right on the mark because in spite of her attempts at liberation (bike riding) she still wore pretty saris! His latest novel, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, deals with similar subject matter.

Monkfish Moon, a book of nine short stories by Romesh Gunsekera, provides a diverse glimpse at Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Gunsekera was nominated for the Booker Prize for his novel *Reef*, which also examines lives changed irrevocably by war.

See the sidebar reviews and p19 for more titles.

Cinema

The first Sri Lankan-made film, *Kadavunu Poronduwa* (Broken Promise), was shown in Colombo in 1947, allowing audiences to hear Sinhala spoken on screen for the first time. Movies continued to be produced mostly in Indian studios, though, until director Sirisena Wimalaweera opened a studio in Sri Lanka in 1951. Lester James Peries' first feature film, *Rekawa* (Line of Destiny), is considered the first truly Sinhalese film. It attempted to realistically portray Sri Lankan life and used its filming technique to express this – it was the first film in Sri Lanka shot outside a studio.

Contemporary Sri Lankan directors tend to explore themes directly related to war. *Death on a Full Moon Day*, made in 2000 by Prasanna Vithanage, explores the story of a father who refuses to accept the death of his soldier son.

Today, in spite of government support, the local film industry struggles to compete with Indian movies and TV.

Films shot on location in Sri Lanka include *Elephant Walk*, which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Peter Finch, and David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai*. More recently Sri Lanka has been used as a setting in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Mountbatten: The Last Viceroy*.

Music

Sri Lankan music has been influenced by Buddhism and Hinduism, the rhythms of the African slaves, the melodies of Europe and the energy of India.

Initially *bailas* (folk tunes with an African beat) were accompanied by guitar and the beat of drums or handclapping. Now electrified instruments strum the accompaniment. The most popular contemporary *baila* singer is Desmond de Silva. Although currently living in England, he still inspires many Sri Lankan bands, including Shanaka and his Sri Lankan Vibes, who incorporate *baila*, hip-hop, pop and classical Sri Lankan music. You may hear them in Colombo, Kandy or Dambulla.

One of Sri Lanka's best-known composers is Ananda Samarakone (1911–62), who wrote the Sri Lankan national anthem. Samarakone studied in India, where the work of the great poet and composer Tagore, who had transformed Indian writing and musical composition by refusing to work within their traditional forms, had a significant impact on him. Inspired, Samarakone introduced new musical and lyrical forms that

To find out what's happening with Sri Lankan rock, go to www.clublk.us for information, downloads and blogs.

involved great complexity. Today, he is considered to be the inspiration for much of Sri Lanka's current music.

Until the late 1990s Sri Lanka's popular music was mainly film music, Hindi pop and imitations of Western pop. Many locals longed for a more home-grown style. For some, their longings materialised when heavy-metal band Stigmata burst onto the scene. Stigmata's latest work, *Lucid*, while still promoted as heavy metal, is a more placid piece with interesting harmonies. Other popular and influential bands are Bathiya and Santhush, Iraj and Samitha, and Centigradz, whose *Dark Angel* jumped quickly to the top of the charts on release. Most popular music could be described as hip-hop meets Hindi pop meets soft Western pop. Look for the Rock Saturday events held regularly at various venues; you'll see them listed in the newspapers, and on numerous posters on walls and poles.

For more traditional sounds, be at the Kandy temple at dawn, where you'll hear the shrill conch shell as it announces morning *puja*. There, and throughout the island, you'll hear the animated rhythms of the Kandy drums, particularly at wedding celebrations.

For those with a classical bent, the **Sri Lankan Symphony Orchestra** (SOLS; ☎ in Colombo 011-268 2033; solsnat@yahoo.com; 204 De Saram Pl, Col 10) may have little resonance – nevertheless, it's still quite an experience! Sadly, the annual concert for the Pinnawala elephants has ceased. Contact the Orchestra for a concert schedule.

Architecture

Sri Lankan architecture is an expression of ancient and modern, aesthetic and functional. The simplest and most economical structure is the *cadjan* (coconut-frond matting) dwelling, made from timber frames covered with woven coconut fronds. No doubt they're similar to the structures favoured in ancient times by ordinary people. Particularly suited to Sri Lanka's climate, the *cadjan* dwellings' availability and low cost made them especially effective after the 2004 tsunami.

BUDDHIST

One of the most striking features of Sri Lanka's architectural landscape is the dagoba – those smooth, lime-washed bell-shaped structures that protrude above the tree line along the coast and dot the dry zone at Anuradhapura. The dagoba is actually a chamber for holding 'relics', the corporal remains

or possessions of the Buddha or enlightened monks, along with other sacred material. In ancient times, the *hataraes kotuwa*, a square structure above the lower bell shape, contained the relics but later they were lodged in a granite piece (known as the mystic stone) just below the spire. You can see these stones at museums in Anuradhapura (p253) and Mihintale (p258).

Rising from the *hataraes kotuwa* is the furled ceremonial parasol called the *chatta*. The dagoba is very often surrounded by a *vahalakada* (platform), used by devotees to make a clockwise circuit; stairways to the *vahalakada* pass through gates situated at the cardinal points.

Dagobas are made of solid brick, which is then plastered and lime-washed. Early dagobas were probably simple structures, but they became increasingly sophisticated. The Ruvanvelisaya and Mirisavatiya Dagobas, built in the 2nd century in Anuradhapura by King Dutugemunu, had their foundations established well below ground (stamped down by elephants, legend has it). The Jetavanarama Dagoba in Anuradhapura, which dates from the 3rd century and is the focus of a gigantic reconstruction project, is nearly as high as Egypt's Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops). As it is mainly a repository for relics, the dagoba is not usually entered.

A uniquely Sinhalese architectural concept is the *vatadage* (circular relic house). Today you can see *vatadages* in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, but perhaps the finest example is at Medirigiriya. The *vatadage* consists of a small central dagoba flanked by images of the Buddha and encircled by columns. Some people believe that long ago these columns may have supported a wooden roof, but all traces of early wooden architecture have disappeared.

Another peculiarly Sinhalese style is the *gedige*, a hollow temple with thick walls topped by a trussed roof. Often the walls are so thick that stairways can be built into them. There are a number of *gediges* in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, and a restored one at Nalanda (p230).

The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (p166) is a magnificent example of Kandyan architecture. Surrounded by a large moat, long since dried up, from outside its most obvious feature is a *pathiruppuwa*, an octagonal structure from where the king traditionally delivered important public communications. Inside, the lower of the temple's two storeys contains an open pillared area that leads to several smaller shrines. The Audience Hall is a large impressive space with columns, edged with paintings and reliefs.

HINDU

In Sri Lanka, Hindu temples, known as *kovils*, are mostly dedicated to Shiva or Murugan. They consist of a prayer hall and shrine room, and there is a covered space that allows worshippers to take the ritual clockwise walk. The *sikhara*, a central edifice that is usually dome- or pyramid-shaped, towers above the shrine room. Walls and domes may be covered with ornate murals. Some temples also have *gopurams* (gateway towers). The *gopurams* soar towards the heavens in a glitz of sculpted, brightly painted deities and saints.

EUROPEAN

The colonising Europeans all made an impact on Sri Lanka's architecture. The Portuguese influence can be seen in the high-pitched roofs and covered verandas. This style continued well after the Dutch defeated the Portuguese because, barred from administrative duties, they turned to the building trade to earn a living. The Dutch influence, characterised by fort ramparts and the broad sturdy walls of churches and administrative buildings, is, however, far more apparent. These solid features are often softened

Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works, by David Robson, is a comprehensive book with stunning images. Detailing the life and work of the acclaimed architect, Robson cleverly demonstrates how Bawa's early life influenced his later work.

GEOFFREY BAWA – 'BRINGING POETRY TO PLACE'

The most famous of Sri Lanka's architects, Geoffrey Bawa (1919–2003) fused ancient and modern influences in his work. Architect Ranjith Dayaratne described it as 'bringing poetry to place'.

Using courtyards and pathways, Bawa developed pleasing connections between the interior and exterior of his structures. These connections frequently included contemplative spaces, as well as framed areas that enabled glimpses of spaces yet to be entered.

His designs were based within the environment. And he was not averse to the environment claiming his structures – at times he encouraged jungle growth along walls and roofs.

While Bawa created aesthetic beauty, he was also concerned with the functional aspects of architecture, opening and exposing structures to air and light while ensuring shelter and protection from harsh climatic elements.

His approach was important not only for its originality but also for its influence on architecture in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Bawa's work included the new parliament house in Colombo, the Lighthouse Hotel (p136) in Galle, the Kandalama Hotel (p233) in Dambulla, and Hotel Serendib (p119) in Bentota.

To compare the Sri Lankan stupa with those in other Buddhist countries see www.buddhamind.info/leftside/art/build/styles.htm.

For more-detailed information on Sri Lankan art visit www.artsrilanka.org.

by ornamental edifices, small arches and, in the case of churches, stained-glass windows. The historic Fort (p133) in Galle has wonderful examples of Dutch style. The Dutch changed the Portuguese forts to suit their own architectural requirements, and the English continued the tradition. The English style is particularly apparent in the buildings in hill stations such as Nuwara Eliya, which positively cry out 'England'.

Painting & Sculpture

Images of the Buddha dominate the work of Sri Lankan sculptors. Limestone, which is plentiful, was used for early works (which means they haven't weathered well), but a variety of other materials has been used over the centuries, including jade, rock crystal, marble, emerald, pink quartz, ivory, coral and sometimes wood or metal. The Buddha is represented in three poses – sitting, standing or lying – with his hands arranged in various *mudras* (positions): *dhyana mudra*, the meditative pose, where hands rest lightly in the lap, with the right hand on the left hand; *abhaya mudra*, with right hand raised, conveying protection; and *vitarka mudra*, where the index finger touches the thumb, symbolising teaching.

The staircases at Sri Lanka's ancient temples and palaces reveal a wealth of finely sculpted detail, with the elaborately carved moonstones a notable feature (see Symbols of Sri Lanka, p46). The bottom of either side of a staircase often has guardstones. A mythical beast, *makara* (a cross between a lion, a pig and an elephant) often stretches its form along the balustrade.

Other notable examples of sculpture include the four *vahalkadas* (solid panels) at the Kantaka Chetiya (p256) at Mihintale.

Painting, like dance and music, was not encouraged by orthodox Buddhists, yet artists (influenced by Indian conventions) *did* paint; the best-known example appears in the form of the shapely nymphs on the walls of Sigiriya (p235). On the whole, painting centred on sacred themes, with the best examples to be seen at Dambulla and Polonnaruwa, and on the walls and ceilings of many temples. By the 13th century, painting as an art form appears to have declined.

Kolams (also called *rangoli*), the rice-flour designs that adorn thresholds in Tamil areas, are much more than mere decoration. Meaning 'guise' in Tamil, *kolams* are drawn by the women of the household at sunrise. The rice flour may be eaten by small creatures – symbolising a reverence for all life, even the most apparently insignificant. This gesture is doubly blessed, as it is extremely auspicious to give as your first act of the day.

Sri Lanka is rapidly developing a vibrant contemporary art scene. Locally woven and dyed fabrics are fashioned into striking garments, while numerous new art galleries, mainly in Colombo, exhibit work that is uniquely Sri Lankan: strong and evocative, and expressing traditional themes in modern styles. The **Sapumal Foundation** (Map pp84-5; 2/34 Barnes Pl, Col 7; ☎ 10am-1pm Thu-Sat) exhibits contemporary Sri Lankan art, while the **Gallery Cafe** (Map pp84-5; ☎ 011-258 2162; 2 Alfred House Rd) has exhibitions of painting and photography. See p90 for more art galleries in Colombo. For a taste of some of Sri Lanka's stunning textiles and design, visit **Barefoot** (Map pp84-5; ☎ 011-258 0114; www.barefootceylon.com/home.htm; 704 Galle Rd, Col 3) and **Yolland Collection** (Map pp84-5; ☎ 011-540300; Crescat Boulevard, 89 Galle Rd, Col 3). See p102 for details of other shops selling Sri Lankan crafts.

Pottery

The art of crafting pots, often made of red terracotta with symbolic designs, encompasses beauty, utility and unique style. The pottery industry has recently received a boost with increased government funding.

For stunning images that evoke the splendour of Sri Lanka, its festivals, architecture, landscape and much more, see any of Dominic Sansoni's books.

For a fuller listing of Sri Lankan galleries see www.leisuretimes.lk /leisuretimes_files /galleries.jsp.

Visit the well-set-up site www.craftrevival.org /SouthAsia/SriLanka /Crafts/Pottery.htm for information on pottery, pictures of pots and places to see them.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- You may see beggars in Sri Lanka, but not often and not many. You may, however, be approached by people claiming to be collecting money for charity. Children may also ask for sweets, but if you respond you will encourage begging. It's best to donate to a reputable charity.
- On a sad note, thousands of Sri Lankan children are sexually abused by locals as well as foreigners. If you suspect that such crimes are happening follow the reporting procedures at the website for **End Child Prostitution & Trafficking** (ECPAT; www.ecpat.net).
- At temples, always remove shoes (and usually head coverings) and dress respectfully.
- Always use your right hand when giving or receiving.
- Avoid plastic bags. They're everywhere in Sri Lanka and badly damage the environment.
- For information on responsible hiking, diving and snorkelling, see p64.

SPORT

It's a cliché, but true – cricket is another religion in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans may play volleyball, netball, soccer, tennis and other sports, but cricket outruns them all. Cricketers are current-day deities. Innings, wickets and scores are mantras throughout the nation, and cricket pitches (including on road sides and in forest clearings) are temples. Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup win boosted its cricket reputation nationally and internationally.

It's easy to see a big match – the main venue is the Premadasa Stadium in Kettarama, Colombo. Other venues include the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) in Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo, and ovals at Moratuwa, Borella (Sara Stadium), Kandy, Dambulla and Galle. Check the local newspapers to catch a club match or international game at almost any time of year.

One entirely sedentary sport enjoyed by many Sri Lankans is betting on British horse and dog racing! With racing in Sri Lanka frowned upon by the Buddhist establishment, you'll see people in hole-in-the-wall betting shops avidly studying the day's races in Aintree, Ascot and Hackney. Race commentaries are beamed from Britain starting at about 6pm. This passion is one reason for the mushrooming of satellite dishes, but the betting bug may take a dive as the government imposes new taxes.

MEDIA

The media in Sri Lanka comes in Sinhala-, Tamil- and English-language forms, and is both state and privately owned. After peace negotiations began in 2002, the government approved a radio license for the formerly clandestine Tamil radio station 'Voice of the Tigers'. See the daily newspapers for radio and TV programmes.

The media is generally seen as open and unafraid to be critical, but there are also claims of bias. State-controlled media is accused of government propaganda, and counteraccusations are levelled at the private media. More serious are journalists' claims that they fear retribution for their reporting. Sadly their fears are well founded, as they have suffered assaults, threats and even death. In 2004, three journalists were killed – two allegedly for articles they had written, and one while on duty.

The journalists' allegations have been investigated by the international organisation Reporters without Borders and by the local Free Media Movement. The results of their investigations have been submitted to the government, requesting that justice be administered.

Freer than print media and public broadcasts is the Internet, where Sri Lankans can read and write whatever they like.

The Net teems with cricket sites where player pics vie for space with facts. For tongue-in-cheek but reliable information go to news.bbc.co.uk/sportacademy /bsp/hi/cricket/rules /html/default.stm.

Sri Lankans can choose from eight daily newspapers, nine radio stations and 10 TV channels. For quick links to the media visit www.abynnewslinks .com/sri.la.htm.

Environment

THE LAND

Shaped like a teardrop falling from the southern end of India, the island country of Sri Lanka stretches 433km from north to south, and measures only 244km at its widest point. At 66,000 sq km it is roughly the same size as Ireland or Tasmania.

The southern centre of the island is dominated by mountains and hills, which taper down to coastal plains. The highest mountain is broad-backed Mt Pidurutalagala (2524m), rising above Sri Lanka's tea-growing capital, Nuwara Eliya. However, the pyramid profile of 2243m-high Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) is better known and far more spectacular.

Hundred of streams and rivers carry rain from the south central mountains down to the rice-growing plains. The Mahaweli Ganga, Sri Lanka's longest river, has its source close to Adam's Peak and runs 860km before emptying into the sea near Trincomalee.

The rolling plains of the north central and northern Sri Lanka extend from the Hill Country all the way to the northern tip of the island. This region is much drier than the rest of the island.

Hundreds of lagoons, marshes and beaches punctuate Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean coastline, with the most picturesque beaches found on the southwest, south and east coasts. A group of low, flat islands lies off Jaffna.

WILDLIFE Animals

Sri Lanka boasts 92 mammal species, including leopards, monkeys and elephants. Other interesting mammals include sloth bears, loris, porcupines, jackals, dugongs and flying foxes. In addition the country has registered 242 species of butterflies, 435 species of birds, 107 species of fish and 81 species of snakes.

PRIMATES

The common langur, also known as the Hanuman or grey langur, is a slender, long-tailed monkey that bounds through the tree tops with remarkable agility. Troops of 15 to 20 forage mostly in the trees but will descend to the ground to collect fallen fruit. The endemic purple-faced langur has a black brown body and limbs. It has been proposed that several species of monkey, including the shaggy bear monkeys of the mountain forests, are subspecies of the langur. Open forest, dense jungle and temples are all prime habitats.

Noisy troops of toque macaques occupy most of the island. The monkeys' heads have a distinctive thatch of hair parted down the middle.

The striking slender loris is a small, slow-moving, brown grey primate. According to superstition, its large, close-set eyes have the power to induce love! It snatches insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and small mammals with a lightning-quick lunge, and supplements its diet with fruits and leaves. It is usually solitary, but is occasionally found in pairs.

PREDATORY ANIMALS

The sloth bear is typically black with a white v-shaped blaze across the chest; its powerful forearms end in great curved claws, which are used for climbing and ripping apart termite mounds.

The golden jackal is a well-known fringe dweller. Shy and shrewd, it is mostly nocturnal; eerie howling at dusk signals the beginning of the night's activity. Notorious as a scavenger, the jackal is also an opportunistic hunter of small mammals, birds, reptiles and insects. Occasionally a large pack will congregate and run down larger prey, such as deer.

The wide distribution of the leopard attests to the adaptability of this predator. It is an agile climber and will drag its prey high up a tree to avoid scavengers. The leopard's diet can be quite diverse, ranging from insects and amphibians to large deer, although some leopards become partial to certain meats. This solitary creature roams within a defined territory, and most activity, particularly hunting, occurs at dawn or dusk. Sri Lanka has a subspecies endemic to the country, the *Panthera pardus kotika*.

Common palm civets are catlike hunters related to weasels. Long-bodied with short limbs and a very long tail, the palm civet has a speckled grey coat with indistinct longitudinal stripes or spots of a lighter colour. The palm civet is also known as the toddy cat because of its taste for fermenting coconut-palm sap.

Mongoose look like ferrets, and have a speckled grey body colour. They prey on snakes, frogs, birds and small mammals, and also eat fruit and birds' eggs. They hunt during both the day and night, usually alone but sometimes in pairs.

An armour plating of large, overlapping scales distinguishes the Indian pangolin. The grey scales, made from modified hair, cover the top of its head and the top and sides of its body. The shy pangolin ventures out at night to raid termite mounds and ant nests. When threatened, it curls itself into a ball, its tail tightly enveloping its vulnerable belly.

BOAR & DEER

The omnivorous wild boar of Sri Lanka is closely related to the slightly hairier wild boar of Europe. A strip of long black bristles, which rises when the animal is excited, runs down its spine. The elongated tusks of the upper and lower jaw, more pronounced in the male, are formidable weapons. Wild boars are common in open forests and near cultivated land.

The sambar is a big, brown and shaggy-coated deer with a mane. More active by night than day, sambar can be observed at dawn and dusk, usually near water. A matriarch hind will lead a group of 10 to 20 deer. The mature male, or stag, leads a solitary life apart from the rutting season (November to December). Prior to the rut he develops antlers, which are used in ritualistic combat with other males.

Chital deer have reddish brown backs and sides with rows of white spots. They graze in herds of 10 to 30, which may include two or three mature stags. Chital frequent open forest and places where forest meets grassland or cultivated land. Often they can be seen with langurs; the chital feed on fruit dropped by the monkeys, and both gain security from the extra eyes, ears and noses.

OTHER MAMMALS

The five-striped palm squirrel has a grey brown body and a long, bushy grey tail. These squirrels are more commonly seen in gardens and town parks than native forest. They eat fruit, nuts, flowers, shoots, insects and birds' eggs. Their scurrying and bounding is accompanied by shrill, high-pitched chatter, and much flicking of their bushy tails.

The Indian flying fox is a fruit-eating bat with an impressive 1.2m wingspan. Camps (groups of roosting bats), most often found in very large trees, can number up to several hundred bats. They decamp soon after sunset.

The Mahaweli Ganga drains 16% of the island's fresh water and is the primary source for all irrigation in the dry zone.

Although the section on Sri Lanka is rather small, *Field Guide to the Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent*, by KK Gurung and Raj Singh, is one of the few guides that detail Sri Lankan mammals.

The Department of Forestry & Environmental Science at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura maintains www.environmentlanka.com, a website that displays photos of Sri Lankan wildlife and essays on key environmental issues.

THE ROYAL PACHYDERM

Elephants occupy a special place in Sri Lankan culture. In ancient times elephants were Crown property and killing one was a terrible offence. Legend has it that elephants stamped down the foundations of the great dagobas (stupas) at Anuradhapura, and elephant iconography is common in Sri Lankan religious and secular art. Even today elephants are held in great affection and the Maligawa tusker, which carries the sacred tooth relic on the final night of the Kandy Esala Perahera, is perhaps the most venerated of all.

There are some 2500 wild elephants in Sri Lanka (compared with 12,000 in 1900), plus about 300 domesticated elephants (most of which were born in the wild). There are two subspecies of the Asian elephant: *Elephas maximus maximus* (Ceylon elephant) and *Elephas maximus vilaliya* (Ceylon marsh elephant). The Asian elephant is smaller than the African elephant; it also has a rounder back, smaller ears, one 'lip' rather than two on the tip of its trunk and four nails rather than three on its hind feet. In Sri Lanka, most females and many males are tuskless. Asian elephants congregate in family groups of up to 10 led by an adult female. Males, banished from the family group upon maturity, may form bachelor herds.

Farmers in elephant country face an ever present threat from animals that may trample their crops, destroy their buildings and even take their lives. During the cultivation season farmers conduct around-the-clock vigils for up to three months to scare off the unwelcome raiders. For farmers on the breadline, elephants are a luxury they can't afford; one solution to the problem is swift and adequate compensation for elephant-inflicted damage. Arming farmers is occasionally mooted, but this would surely hasten the demise of elephants in Sri Lanka. Creating elephant corridors is another option, as has been done with the creation of Kaudulla National Park. Problem elephants are sometimes relocated, but seem to have a knack for finding their way back.

REPTILES & FISH

Sri Lanka has many species of large reptiles, including 83 species of snakes.

Mugger crocodiles can be seen on the banks of rivers, lakes and marshes. If a pond dries up, muggers will march great distances to reach water. They feed on fish, amphibians, birds, and mammals such as young deer. Muggers are social creatures, especially during mating season.

The water monitor is distinguished by its sheer size and colourful markings – black with yellow dappling on its back and a pale yellow belly. This scavenger is an expert swimmer, and is particularly fond of crocodile eggs and bird eggs. It swallows its prey whole, mostly unchewed.

The Indian cobra is the famous hooded snake associated with the sub-continent's snake charmers. This highly venomous snake avoids confrontation and will usually retreat if threatened. Cobras are mostly nocturnal and feed on amphibians, reptiles and mammals, particularly mice and rats.

Some 54 species of fish are found in Sri Lanka's waterways and marshlands, including prized aquarium varieties such as the red scissor-tail barb and the ornate paradise fish. The British introduced several kinds of fish, including trout, which is still common around Horton Plains National Park (p205). There are myriad colourful tropical marine fish.

Sri Lanka has five species of marine turtle, all endangered: the leatherback, the olive ridley, the loggerhead, the hawksbill and the green. Though protected, they face significant threats from poachers, and environmental hazards caused by pollution and coastal development.

BIRDS

A tropical climate, long isolation from the Asian mainland and a diversity of habitats have helped endow Sri Lanka with an astonishing abundance of birdlife. There are more than 400 bird species, 26 of which are unique

Seven venomous snakes are found in Sri Lanka: Russell's viper, green pit viper, hump-nosed viper, saw-scaled viper, common krait, Ceylon krait and cobra.

Divers and snorkellers will find Dr Charles Anderson's well-illustrated *Common Reef Fishes of Sri Lanka* to be of interest.

TIPS FOR BIRD-WATCHERS

Visit a variety of habitats – rainforest, urban parks, and bodies of water in the dry zone – to see the full diversity of birdlife in Sri Lanka.

February to March is the best time for bird-watching – you miss the monsoons and the migrant birds are still visiting. Water birds are active for most of the day. Although morning is always the best time to go bird-watching, you will see noisy flocks of birds preparing to roost in the evening.

A pair of binoculars is an invaluable tool to help with identification. Small models can be bought cheaply duty-free and don't weigh much.

Consider taking a tour with a specialist if you're keen to see the endemic species and achieve a healthy bird-watching tally, particularly if time is short.

to Sri Lanka, while others are found only in Sri Lanka and adjacent South India. Of the estimated 198 migrant species, most of which stay here from August to April, the waders (sandpipers, plovers etc) are the long-distance champions, making the journey from their breeding grounds in the Arctic tundra.

Reference books on Sri Lanka's birds include *A Selection of the Birds of Sri Lanka*, by John and Judy Banks, a slim, well-illustrated book that's perfect for amateur bird-watchers. *A Photographic Guide to Birds of Sri Lanka*, by Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne, Deepal Warakagoda and TSU de Zylva, is a notch above; it's a pocket-sized book jam-packed with colour photos. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka*, by John Harrison, is a hardback with colour illustrations; it's pricey, but is one of the best field guides available.

Cities, Towns & Villages

Food scraps and gardens around dwellings attract insects, which in turn attract many birds. The call of the black house crow (*Corvus splendens*) is one of the first bird sounds you'll hear in Sri Lanka. Like the common myna and house sparrow, this species is ubiquitous around settlements. The common swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) can be seen chasing insects over virtually any open space, while Loten's sunbirds (*Nectarinia lotenia*), little creatures with iridescent plumage and a sharp down-curved bill, are often seen flitting in flower gardens. The black-headed oriole (*Oriolus xanthornus*) has a bright yellow back and belly, a black head, an orange beak and yellow-and-black wings. It usually hides in the treetops; its frequent singing is a giveaway. Some species, such as house swifts (*Apus affinis*), are so accustomed to humans that they are only rarely found away from settlements.

You'll see many bird species at Viharamahadevi Park (p90) in central Colombo, and the beautiful Peradeniya Botanic Gardens (p188) near Kandy. Sigiriya village (p233) is also home to dozens of species.

Countryside

A surprising variety of birds can be seen on rice paddies, in open wooded areas and by the roadside. These birds are often lured by the insects that crops and livestock attract. The shiny black drongos (*Dicrurus macrocerus*) have forked tails; noisy and ostentatious, they're often seen swooping after flying insects. Tiny black palm swifts (*Cypsiurus baliensis*) sweep low over the fields chasing prey, while white cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*), whose breeding plumage is actually fawn coloured, pluck lice from water buffalo. Egrets also flock around farmers as they plough. Brahminy kites (*Haliastur indus*) may be spotted flying overhead. Adults of this species have a white head and chest and chestnut brown wings and belly. Green

Sri Lanka's first new bird discovery in 132 years occurred in 2001. Many birders are calling the small, orange-feathered owl the Serendib Owl.

Sri Lanka has a large proportion of endemic species: 23% of the flowering plants and 16% of the mammals on the island are native to the island.

bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) are often seen in pairs, perched near the ground or flitting around catching insects. You can identify this bird by the black stripe on each side of its head, its aqua-coloured throat and chin, the orange on the back of its head, and its green wings. The Ceylon junglefowl (*Gallus lafayetii*), an endemic relative of the domestic chicken, is widespread in remote areas but rarely found near settlements.

Most of these species are easily spotted from the comfort of a bus seat.

Wetlands, Waterways & Tanks

In the dry regions, bodies of water and their fringe vegetation provide an important habitat for many birds. You can't miss the clumsy-looking painted stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*), with its distinctive orange face and pink rump feathers. Great egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), huge white birds with yellow beaks, pick off fish with deadly precision. Spoonbills (*Platalea leucorodia*) swish their peculiar flattened bills from side to side, snapping up small creatures.

Little cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*) are regularly seen in large flocks. The little cormorant is smaller and less heavily built than the Indian cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*), and has a shorter neck and beak. Both birds are dark brown to black and are often seen with their wings stretched out to dry. Keep an eye out for the Indian darter

RESPONSIBLE ACTIVITIES

RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELLING

Sri Lanka is a wonderful place for diving and snorkelling, but it is important to observe a few simple rules to minimise your impact, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of marine areas:

- Don't use anchors on a reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral. Encourage dive operators and regulatory bodies to establish permanent moorings at popular dive sites.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body or dragging equipment across reefs. Polyps are damaged even by gentle contact. Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust. If you must hold onto the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact the surge from heavy fin strokes near a reef can damage delicate organisms. When treading water in shallow reef areas, avoid kicking up clouds of sand. Settling sand can easily smother delicate organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef. Make sure you're correctly weighted and that your weight belt is positioned so you stay horizontal in the water. If you have not dived for a while, have a practice dive in a pool before heading out. Be aware that buoyancy can change over the period of an extended trip; initially you may breathe harder and need more weight, but a few days later you may breathe more easily and need less weight.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time in them as possible, as your air bubbles may be caught beneath the roof and leave previously submerged organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of small caves to lessen the chances of contact.
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find. Plastic in particular is a serious menace to marine life – turtles can mistake it for jellyfish and eat it.
- Resist the temptation to feed the fish. You may disturb their normal eating habits or encourage aggressive behaviour.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. In particular, do not ride on the backs of turtles as this causes them great anxiety. Similarly, discourage your boat driver from circling around turtles, which also puts them under stress.

(*Anhinga melanogaster*), which has a lanky brown neck and spears fish underwater with its daggerlike bill. It is also known as the snake bird because of its peculiar habit of swimming like a snake.

The common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), with striking blue plumage and a tan belly and flank, is often seen skimming the water or watching for fish.

The dark-brown-and-white pheasant-tailed jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) trots across lily pads on incredibly long, slender toes. Its long tail feathers are shed after the breeding season.

The greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) has a short bent beak, spindly legs and white-and-pink plumage. It is mostly found in Bundala National Park (p152).

Virtually any tank (artificial lake) or large body of water is host to a selection of water birds. Try the tanks at Anuradhapura (p247) and Polonnaruwa (p237). Bundala National Park (p152) and Yala National Park (p156) are also particularly good spots.

Rainforests & Jungle

Most of Sri Lanka's endemic birds are found in the rainforests of the hill zone. A walk in the forest can be eerily quiet until you encounter a feeding party, and then all hell breaks loose! Birds of many species travel in flocks, foraging in the forest canopy and among the leaf litter of the forest floor.

What Tree Is That?, by Sriyani Miththapala and PA Miththapala, contains handy sketches of common trees and shrubs in Sri Lanka, and includes English, Sinhala and botanical names.

RESPONSIBLE HIKING

Sri Lanka offers plenty of scope for great hiking; please consider the following tips to help minimise your impact on the environment.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook items such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish; digging disturbs soil and ground cover, and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will more than likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise the waste you must carry out by taking minimal packaging and taking no more food than you need. If you can't buy in bulk, unpack small-portion packages and combine their contents in one container before your trip. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- On longer walks, don't rely on plastic water bottles, as their disposal is a major problem. Use iodine drops or purification tablets instead.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of hepatitis, typhoid and intestinal parasites such as giardia and roundworms.
- Where there is no toilet, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Consider carrying a lightweight trowel for this purpose. Cover the waste with soil and a rock, and carry out your toilet paper.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. It is important to stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts that bypass a switchback.
- If a well-used track passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud; walking around the edge will increase the size of the patch.

You'll probably see noisy orange-billed babblers (*Turdoides rufescens*), which have brown plumage and orange beaks (hence their name). Then there's the Ceylon paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi ceylonensis*), which has a distinctive chestnut-coloured back and tail, white chest and black-crested head. The male of this species has a long, showy tail. You may also see the black Ceylon crested drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus ceylonicus*) with its deeply forked tail and noisy chattering, or if you are lucky, the beautiful blue-and-chestnut Ceylon blue magpie (*Urocissa ornata*). Noisy flocks of blossom-headed parakeets (*Psittacula cyanocephala*) are often seen flying between patches of forest in the lower hills.

Sinharaja Forest Reserve (p221) contains many endemic species, while others are found at Horton Plains National Park (p205). Udawattakelle Sanctuary (p168) in Kandy is also rewarding, and is easy to reach as well.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Red Databook, produced by the World Conservation Union (formerly the IUCN), lists 43 animal species as threatened in Sri Lanka. They include the two subspecies of Asian elephant, the sloth bear and the leopard. All five of Sri Lanka's turtle species are threatened, as is the estuarine crocodile and the mild-mannered dugong, both of which are killed for their meat. Also under threat are several species of birds, fish and insects.

Plants

The southwestern wet zone is tropical rainforest with dense undergrowth and a tall canopy of hardwood trees, including ebony, teak and silkwood. Here also are some of the most spectacular orchids and many of the plants used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine. The central hill zone has cloud forests and some rare highland areas populated by hardy grasslands and elfin (stunted) forests. The remainder of the island forms the arid dry zone, with a sparser cover of trees and shrubs, and grasslands that may erupt into bloom with the first rains.

The sacred bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) was brought from India when Mahinda introduced the teachings of the Buddha to Sri Lanka. Saplings are planted in most Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. The shape of a turned-over leaf is said to have inspired the shape of the dagoba (stupa). Also often found around Buddhist temples is the *sal*, also known as the cannonball tree. You'll understand how the tree got its name when you see the huge woody fruits clinging to the trunk. The frangipani is common throughout the island; its sweet-scented white, pink or yellow flowers are used as Buddhist temple offerings. You'll also see plenty of scarlet and magenta bougainvilleas in gardens. In the Hill Country there are many eucalyptus trees, which have often been planted to provide shade at tea estates.

Fruit trees such as mangoes, papayas and bananas grow in many private gardens in Sri Lanka, but the jackfruit and the *del* (breadfruit) will catch your eye in particular. The jackfruit is a tall evergreen with the world's largest fruit; green and knobbly skinned, the fruit weigh up to 30kg and hang close to the trunk. The *del* is the jackfruit's smaller relative.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

More than 2000 years ago royalty ensured certain areas were protected from any human activity by declaring them sanctuaries. The oldest of these, Mihintale, was created by King Devanampiya Tissa in the 3rd century BC and was the first wildlife sanctuary in the world. Almost every province in the kingdom of Kandy had such *udawattakelle* (sanctuaries). All animals and plants in these sanctuaries were left undisturbed.

Supporting conservation and environmental awareness, the Green Movement of Sri Lanka is a consortium of 147 Sri Lankan groups that are involved in natural resource management; check out its website at www.greensl.net.

MAJOR NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Park	Area	Features	Best Time to Visit
Bundala National Park (p152)	6216 hectares	coastal lagoon, migratory birds, elephants	May-Sep
Gal Oya National Park (p278)	62,936 hectares	grasslands, evergreen forest, deer, Senanayake Samudra (tank), elephants, sloth bears, leopards, water buffaloes	Dec-Sep
Horton Plains National Park (p205)	3160 hectares	mossy forests, marshy grasslands, World's End precipice	Jan-Mar
Kaudulla National Park (p245)	6656 hectares	Kaudulla Tank, evergreen forest, scrub jungle, grassy plains, elephants, leopards, sambar deer, fishing cats, rusty spotted cats, sloth bears	Jan-Mar
Minneriya National Park (p245)	8890 hectares	Minneriya Tank, toque macaque, sambar deer, elephant, waterfowl	Jun-Sep
Sinharaja Forest Reserve (p221)	18,899 hectares	Unesco World Heritage Site, sambar, rainforest, leopard, purple-faced langurs, barking deer, 147 recorded bird species	Aug-Sep, Jan-Mar
Uda Walawe National Park (p220)	30,821 hectares	grassland, thorn scrub, elephants, spotted deer, water buffaloes, wild boar	May-Sep
Wilpattu National Park (p109)	131,693 hectares	dense jungle, scrub, saltgrass, elephants, leopards, sloth bears, deer, crocodiles	Jan-Mar
Yala East National Park (p275)	18,149 hectares	grassland, jungle, lagoons, mangrove swamp, waterfowl	Dec-Sep
Yala National Park (p156)	14,101 hectares	tropical thornforest, lagoons, coral reef, elephants, sloth bears, leopards, water buffaloes, crested serpent eagles, lesser flamingos	May-Sep

Today's system of parks and reserves is mostly a synthesis of traditionally protected areas and those established by the British. There are 100 areas protected by the government, covering 8% of the island and divided into three types: national parks, strict nature reserves (where no visitors are allowed) and nature reserves, in which human habitation is permitted. Some parks in the northern and northeastern parts of Sri Lanka are currently unprotected; they have no onsite rangers and are being exploited by armed poachers and loggers. See above for specific details on Sri Lanka's national parks.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

At the beginning of the 20th century about 70% of the island was covered by natural forest. By 1998 this had shrunk to about 24%. *Chena* (shifting cultivation) is blamed for a good part of this deforestation, but irrigation schemes and clearance for cultivation have also been contributing factors. In recent decades the biggest danger to the island's forests has been illegal logging.

Gem mining, sand mining and the destruction of coral reefs to feed lime kilns have also degraded the environment. On the west coast, prawn farming has done major damage to the coastal ecology between Chilaw and Puttalam.

Eighty-two per cent of the land is controlled by the state in some form or other; the majority of natural forests are under state jurisdiction. There is a raft of legislation to combat destructive activity and to protect sensitive areas. Sri Lanka is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and Bundala National Park (p152) has been recognised internationally under this convention. Sinharaja Forest Reserve (p221) is a World Heritage Site – saved after being logged during the early 1970s. Sri Lanka has two marine sanctuaries: the Bar Reef (west of Kalpitiya peninsula) and the Hikkaduwa Marine Sanctuary.

Although the 2004 tsunami had catastrophic consequences for human society along Sri Lanka's coasts, its effects on marine life were minimal. Damage to coral reefs, for example, has been estimated at 5% or less. In a few cases the tsunami altered the shapes of lagoons, coves and other coastal features, but most mangroves survived and the flora and fauna habituated to these areas live on relatively unperturbed.

In 1991, Sri Lanka became one of the first countries in the world to impose a total ban on genetically modified foods.

Food & Drink

Sri Lanka boasts a unique and exciting cuisine, shaped by the bounty of the island and the varied tastes introduced by traders and invaders. Yet, in spite of this, Sri Lankan cuisine is little known and often confused with other culinary styles. The distinctiveness of the island's cuisine comes from the freshness of its herbs and spices and the methods used to grind, pound, roast, temper and combine. Roasting the spices a little more, or a little less, delivers a very different outcome. The oil that distributes the flavours throughout the dish may be vegetable, sesame or, for a richer taste, coconut. Varieties of rice offer different textures, fragrances and flavours. Curries may be prepared within delicious sauces, or they may be 'dry'.

Regional differences in cuisine are more about availability of ingredients than ethnicity. In the North, the palmyra tree reigns, and its roots, flowers, fruits and seeds produce dishes ranging from curries to syrups, sweets, cakes and snacks. In the South, rice is considered indispensable; fish and jackfruit are popular too. In the fertile Hill Country there are vegetables and mutton, but fewer fish and fewer spices.

But it's really the personal touch that creates the food's uniqueness. The same ingredients and the same methods produce radically different results as each cook conjures up a cuisine with their own particular magic.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Rice is the main staple of Sri Lankan cuisine, and it is served in numerous ways – plain, spiced, in meat juices, with curd (buffalo-milk yoghurt) or tamarind, or with milk. It's usually eaten, in some form or other, at every meal. Rice flour often forms the basis of two popular Sri Lankan dishes: hoppers (also called *ah-ppa* or *appam*), which are bowl-shaped pancakes, and dosas (thosai), the paper-thin pancakes that are often served stuffed with spiced vegetables.

Popular breakfasts include hoppers, bread dipped in curry, and *puttu* (*puttu* in Tamil) – the latter a mixture of rice flour and coconut steamed in a bamboo mould. *Kola kanda* (porridge of rice, coconut, green vegetables and herbs) is nutritious, and although it has fallen from favour it is now regaining popularity.

At lunch or dinner you can try some short eats (p72), eat from a street-side hut, or dine on a banquet of rice and curry.

Rice & Curry

Sri Lankan rice and curry usually includes a variety of small spiced dishes made from vegetables, meat or fish. They're generally served with accompaniments like chutney and *sambol* – a term that describes any condiment made from ingredients pounded with chilli.

Local spices flavour Sri Lankan curry, and most curries include chilli, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom, coriander, *rampe* (pandan leaves), curry leaves, mustard, tamarind and coconut milk; dried fish is also frequently used to season dishes.

The many varieties of rice are often cooked with subtle spices.

Sri Lankan food is slow to prepare, hot to consume. Having endured centuries of Western whinging about spicy food, Sri Lankans have tempered it for Western palates, but if you like it hot, they'll oblige. If it's not hot enough just add some *pol sambol*, a condiment of chilli and coconut. If you don't like it hot, you'll still have a range of delicious possibilities – the

In text and images, Vinodini de Silva's *Cultural Rhapsody, Ceremonial Food and Rituals of Sri Lanka* celebrates the cuisine customs of Sri Lanka across cultures, religions and regions.

The beautifully produced *Sri Lankan Flavours*, by talented chef Channa Dassanayaka, offers recipes and personal stories of Sinhalese people and food.

lighter the colour the lighter the heat. But if your mouth suddenly explodes from chilli fire, just have some rice, yoghurt or cucumber. Alcohol's a good antidote, too, as it dissolves chilli oil – maybe the British lager louts, with their vindaloo and beer extravaganzas, have got it right!

Because Sri Lankan food takes some time to prepare, order early, state exactly what you want and leave the cooks to work their magic.

Fish & Seafood

After the 2004 tsunami many people naturally avoided seafood, but they're gradually returning to the produce of the sea. Excellent fish and prawns are widespread, and in many coastal towns you'll find crab and lobster. Seer, a tuna-type fish, is always a favourite. A southern speciality is the popular *ambulthiyal* (sour fish curry), made with *goraka*, a sour fruit.

Other Specialities

Sri Lankans love their hoppers. These bowl-shaped pancakes are skilfully fried over a high flame and are sometimes served with an egg or banana in the middle. String hoppers are tangles of steamed noodles, often used instead of rice as a curry dip.

Chilli lovers will thrive on 'devil'd' dishes, where meat is infused with chilli. *Lamprais* is made from rice, meat and vegetables, all slowly baked in a banana leaf; open the leaf to release the aroma and tempt the senses.

Desserts & Sweets

Sri Lankans love to indulge their sweet teeth; sweets were traditionally eaten at the beginning of the meal but this is rare now. *Wattalappam* (*vattalappam* in Tamil), a coconut-milk and egg pudding with jaggery and cardamom, is a favourite dessert, while curd with *kitul* (syrup from the *kitul* palm; also called treacle) is good at any time. You can buy curd in clay pots with a handy carry rope; the pots are so attractive you'll want to keep them. Hardened *kitul* is jaggery, a candy and all-purpose sweetener. See p75 for a list of other desserts and sweets.

Fruit

Sri Lanka has a wide variety of fruit: passion fruit, avocados, mangoes, melons, pineapples and guavas are just a few. Try a sweet red banana or papaya with lime for a delicious start to the day, or check out some of the many products of the ever-versatile coconut (p110).

The wooden-shelled woodapple is used for refreshing drinks, dessert toppings and jam. The infamous spiky-skinned durian smells – but doesn't taste – like a blocked sewer. Rambutan is so sought after that growers guard their trees to outwit poachers. Mangosteen tastes like strawberries and grapes combined, and Queen Victoria is said to have offered a considerable prize for one. You'll get one (and more) from July to September. The jackfruit, with its orange-yellow segments, is the world's biggest fruit. It tastes good fresh, or in curry.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

In Sri Lanka's heat it's always wise to have water with you, whether boiled or bottled. Guesthouses will usually arrange the boiling for you. Sri Lanka also has a ready supply of bottled water.

Most Sri Lankans drink tea with plenty of sugar. If you don't have a sweet tooth you'll need to be assertive just to lower the dose. When made with fresh tea leaves, it's a wonderfully aromatic drink.

Sri Lanka exports over 11 million metric tons per year of seafood; almost 400 tons of that is crab and lobster.

Recipes of the Jaffna Tamils, edited by Nesa Eliezer, is a culinary journey through Tamil Sri Lanka. It is lovingly compiled from recipes and stories of spice-laden dishes contributed by local and expat Tamils.

Sri Lanka produces over 12,000 metric tons per year of cinnamon – two-thirds of the world's supply. It's mostly cultivated on land plots that are smaller than 2 hectares.

Sri Lankans don't drink coffee, so it may be best if you don't drink it either; unless you're staying in a top-end hotel, Colombo is the only place you'll get a good espresso.

Lime juice is excellent. Have it with soda water (but ask for the salt or sugar to be separate, otherwise you could be in for another major sugar kick). And the local Elephant House ginger beer is not just a thirst quencher – it's marketed as having Ayurvedic qualities (see p320 for more information on Ayurveda). Another favourite drink is *jaluda*, a syrup and milk drink that often contains jelly pieces.

A refreshing, natural option is *thambili* (king coconut), for sale at stalls everywhere.

Alcoholic Drinks

Local (Lion Lager, Carlsberg and Three Coins) and imported beers are available; Three Coins is a premium beer, and therefore will cost a little more. The local wines are syrupy sweet.

Other local alcoholic beverages include toddy, a drink made from the sap of palm trees. It has a bitter (or sharp) taste a bit like cider. There are three types of toddy: toddy made from coconut palms, toddy from *kitul* palms, and toddy from palmyras. Toddy dens are on village outskirts, where men can drink without disturbing others.

Fermented and refined toddy becomes arrack. It's produced in a variety of qualities – some are real firewater. Kalutara, 40km south of Colombo, is the toddy and arrack capital. The best mixer for arrack is the local ginger ale.

If you like a drink, remember that alcohol isn't sold on *poya* (full moon) holidays.

CELEBRATIONS

As a symbol of life and fertility, rice is the food for festivities. The Buddha is said to have derived energy from *kiri bath* (coconut-milk rice) and subsequently achieved nirvana. *Kiri bath* is the baby's first solid food; it's also the food the new bride and groom feed each other, and it's the festive food for New Year.

Dumplings are a popular celebration food, but imagine them landing on your head! This is a custom in the north involving *kolukattai* (dumplings with edges pressed to resemble teeth) being dropped gently on a toddler's head while the family make wishes for the infant to develop healthy teeth. Dumplings are also a favourite of Ganesh; sweet dumplings, *mothagam*, are offered to him in prayer.

Hindus celebrate the harvest at Thai Pongal, in January. *Pongal* (milk boiled with rice and jaggery) is offered to the sun god in thanksgiving. Later, the rice is eaten in celebration of the harvest and its life-sustaining qualities.

Ramadan ends with the breaking of the fast and the Eid-ul-Fitr festival. Muslims eat dates in memory of the Prophet Mohammed, and then *congee* (rice cooked with spices, coconut milk and meat). The food itself is not as important as its significance – a reminder to strive for equality for all. On Eid-ul-Fitr, Muslims share food (often the rice dish biryani) with family, friends and neighbours.

Aurudu (Sri Lankan New Year) is another time for celebration. After the sacred activities, feasting begins with *kiri bath* followed by *kaung* (oil cake), a Sri Lankan favourite. Try it, if you enjoy sweet oil coating your palate! Once again it's not the food that's important but its significance – reconciliation and harmony among family, friends and neighbours.

Toddy (prior to fermentation) is an excellent animal food. In recent years, Sri Lankan toddy tappers have shared their expertise with farmers in Vietnam, whose animals can now take advantage of this excellent food source.

Toddy tappers can tap up to 100 trees per day, and each tree may yield from 550L to 800L per year.

Many Sri Lankans value the gotukola plant for its medicinal properties; it has been used to treat AIDS, restore memory loss and promote intelligence.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's absolutely no doubt that the best place to eat in Sri Lanka is the home. Whether rich or poor, luxurious or simple, home-prepared food has a variety and zing that excites and satisfies. Perhaps this is why Sri Lanka has not traditionally had a restaurant culture. Tourism has changed this, and in the cities you'll find the usual restaurants, cafés and bars. Outside the cities you'll find numerous places, often aesthetically located and constructed, where you'll enjoy a range of local and Western dishes. Family-run guesthouses are the next best thing to home dining. No amount of trouble is spared in satisfying guests, so just explain your likes and dislikes, and enjoy the result. In the larger upmarket hotels, traditional-style banquets are very popular. And in most places you can dine as quickly or as slowly as you like, feeling at ease whether you're alone or with others.

Except in Colombo, most places close early so it's best to check if you're planning to eat late. Most sit-down restaurants add 15% tax to the bill, and many also add a 10% service charge. However, the people waiting on you earn minuscule salaries and tips are usually appreciated.

Quick Eats

If you're in a hurry try some short eats. These are a selection of meat-stuffed rolls, meat-and-vegetable patties (called cutlets), pastries and *vadai* (called *vaddai* in Sinhala, these are deep-fried doughnut-shaped snacks made from lentil flour and spices) – they're placed on the table, you eat what you want and the bill is totalled according to what's left.

Streetside huts (called *kadé* or boutiques by the Sinhalese, and *unavakam* by Tamils) sell *kotthu rotti*, a doughy pancake that is chopped and fried with fillings ranging from chilli and onion to bacon and egg. You'll soon become attuned to the evening chop-chop sounds of the *kotthu rotti* maker.

Also available from the *kadé* are lunch packets, a real Sri Lankan favourite. These are food parcels and are sold all over the country between 11am and 2pm. Inside you'll usually find rice, curry (generally chicken, fish or beef, though if you're vegetarian you'll get an egg), curried vegetables and *sambol*.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarian food is widely available, and there are appetising vegetable curries made from banana (ash plantain), banana flower, breadfruit, jackfruit, mangoes, potatoes, beans and pumpkins, to name just a few. An accompaniment of *mallung* (spiced green leaves, lightly stir-fried) is common, as is *parripu* curry (*paruppa kari* in Tamil), a pulse curry. Some dishes have dried Maldive fish in them, so you may wish to check this if fish is not part of your diet.

EATING WITH KIDS

Sri Lankans love children and children are welcome almost anywhere. They may thrive on the local food but if not, Sri Lankan hospitality means that people will go to any length to please them. Most places have Western-style dishes and there are the usual pizza, hamburger and chicken outlets in Colombo.

If you're wanting to introduce your children to Sri Lankan food and you're meeting some resistance, try a breakfast of *pittu*; the coconut-rice combination will be kind to their palates and the round shape may entice them. Also try hoppers (either the pancake or the string variety). Cashew nut curry is another possibility, and curd and treacle make an

Interested in the amount of manganese in tea, the annual production of okra, or the major markets for desiccated coconut? Then visit www.srilankabusiness.com. Within this slow and convoluted portal are some statistical gems.

For heaps of Sri Lankan recipes visit www.info.lanka.com/recipes. New recipes are continually coming online, and there are a few other cuisines tossed in as well.

DOS & DON'TS

- Always use your right hand to give and to receive.
- It's acceptable to use or to ask for cutlery. However, if eating with your hand, always use your right hand.
- It's acceptable to drink holding a glass in your left hand.
- Always wash your hands before you eat, for the sake of courtesy as well as hygiene.
- If you're invited home for a meal, remove your shoes before entering the home (although some people no longer follow this custom).

excellent dessert. A *bonda* (deep-fried ball made from lentil flour and spices) makes a good snack.

For more information on travelling with children, see p322.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating Sri Lankan style is one of life's greatest pleasures. It may be a breakfast hopper at the open-air *kadé*, where the hopper maker, squatting beside a fire, gently flips the pancake from the griddle. Do you want banana? If so, a banana will be removed from the hand hanging near your head and carefully placed within the hopper. You can then devour the light, crunchy hopper and the fleshy fruit. Wash it down with hot tea and you have the perfect breakfast in a perfect setting.

The rice and curry meal is a banquet *par excellence*. Social events usually begin with light eats and chatter. The main food comes later (often much later), when rice and myriad small curries are set out before you in an artistic display that is visually and aromatically stunning.

Sri Lankans say that it's only by eating with fingers that you can fully enjoy the texture of the food. If you want to try this, there's a particular etiquette. Once everyone is served you can use the fingertips of your right hand to eat the food on your plate. Separate a little rice and gradually add some curry to form a mouthful-sized wad of food. Lift the wad and place it all in your mouth. Don't let the food pass the middle knuckles on your fingers and try not to drop any on the way to your mouth. This may sound difficult, but you'll soon become adept at it. Don't take a bone to your mouth to remove meat; remove the meat first with your fingers and only take mouthful-sized quantities to your mouth. In the more upmarket places you'll receive a finger bowl, but otherwise just visit the washroom.

In traditional homes men and visitors may eat first, while the women will eat later. It's normal to take a small gift (chocolates, biscuits or ar-rack) if you're invited home for a meal. Don't be concerned if it's put aside, as gifts are not usually opened in front of the giver. And if you're out to talk business, it's customary to talk first, then eat.

European custom may suggest a slow end to the dining experience. Not so in Sri Lanka, where they up and leave immediately after they've finished eating.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Getting the food you want in Sri Lanka is not so hard, as many people speak English. But if you'd like to try the local lingo, here are a few phrases. For guidance on pronunciation take a look at p351. Just remember that language and culture are of vital importance to many Sri Lankans, so try to speak Sinhala to Sinhalese and Tamil to Tamils.

Sri Lanka is the third-largest producer of tea in the world – 300,000 tons per year. For more interesting facts on Sri Lanka's tea, visit www.pureceylontea.com/srilankatea.htm.

Wanting to know more about curry ingredients? Visit www.asiafood.org for detailed information on spices, staples and specialities.

If you want to try your hand at Sri Lankan cooking you'll find over 200 recipes at www.lankalink.net/cgi-bin/recipes/srilankan/book.cgi?Display.

Useful Phrases

Sinhala phrases are shown first, followed by Tamil phrases.

May we see the menu?

menoo eka balanna puluvandha?

What's the local speciality?

mehe visheshayen hadhana dhe monavaadha?

Could you recommend something?

monavadha hondha kiyala obata kiyanna puluvandha?

What dishes are available today, please?

kahmata monarada thiyennay?

I'd like to order rice and curry, please

bahth denna

I'm vegetarian

mama elavalu vitharai kanne

I don't eat meat

mama mas kanne naha

I don't eat chicken, fish or ham

mama kukul mas, maalu, ho ham kanne naha

I'm allergic to (peanuts)

mata (ratakaju) apathyayi

No ice in my drink, please

karunaakarala maghe beema ekata ais dhamanna epaa

That was delicious!

eka harima rasai!

Please bring a/the ...

... karunaakarala gennah

bill

bila

fork

gaarappuvak

glass of water

vathura veeedhuruvak

knife

pihiyak

plate

pingaanak

navu pattiyalai paarppomaa?

ingu kidaikkak koodiya visheida navu enna?

neengal ethaiyum shifaarsu seivingala?

sappida enna irukkiradu?

sorum kariyum tharungal

naan shaiva navu shaappidupavan

naan iraichchi shappiduvathillai

naan koli, meen, pandri iraichchi shaapiduvathillai

(nilak kadalai) enakku alejee

enadu paanaththil ais poda vendaam

adhu nalla rushi!

... konda varungal

bill

mul karandi

thanni oru glass

kaththi

oru plate

Food Glossary

Food items are shown with the Sinhala name first, then the Tamil name, followed by a definition. Some foods only have a Tamil name, while others are the same in both languages.

RICE & BREADS

ah-ppa

doon thel bath

kiri bath

kotthu rotti

appam

nei choru

paat choru

kotthu rotti

maalu paan

masala dosa

maalu paan

masala dosa

hopper (bowl-shaped pancake)

ghee rice with green peas

coconut-milk rice

rotti chopped and fried with meat and vegetables

bread rolls stuffed with fish

dosa stuffed with spiced vegetables

pittu

rotti

—

thosai

puttu

rotti

thayir saatham

dosa

rice flour and coconut steamed in a bamboo mould
doughy pancake
curd (buffalo-milk yoghurt) rice
paper-thin rice- and lentil-flour pancake

VEGETABLE & FRUIT DISHES

ala thel dala

alukehelkan uyala

kangkung

kiri kos

—

murungah curry

nelum ala uyala

parripu curry

pathola curry

umbah uyala

urulakkilangu poriyal

vaalaikkal kari

pashali keerai kari

palaakkai kari

marakari

murungakkaai kari

thaamarai kilangu kari

paruppa kari

pidalangaai kari

maangaai kari

fried spicy potatoes
green banana curry
spinach with chilli
young jackfruit curry
mixed vegetables in a mild creamy sauce
drumstick (fruit of the kelor tree) curry
lotus roots in curry
thick curry made from pulses
snake-gourd curry
mango curry

MEAT

elu mus curry

kukul mas hodhi

lamprais

aattiraichi kari

kodzhi kari

lamprais

mutton curry
chicken curry
meat and vegetables baked with rice in a banana leaf
devilish pork

ooru mas miris badun

pandri iraichi kari

FISH

dhallo uyala

kakuluwo uyala

dhallo badhun

—

kanawa meen kari

nandu kari

kanavaai potiyal

kool

cuttlefish black curry
crab curry
fried squid
a dish akin to soup, combining many ingredients
fish curry

malu hodhi

meen kari

SIDE DISHES & ACCOMPANIMENTS

—

lunu miris

mallung

pol sambol

sambol

seeni sambol

—

kekkairikkal thayir pachadi

maashi sambol

sundal

thengaapu sambol

sambol

seeni sambol

semparathappu-thayir pachadi

cucumber and yoghurt
onion and fish *sambol*
spiced green leaves, lightly stir-fried
coconut *sambol*
chilli condiment
sweet onion *sambol*
hibiscus flower and yoghurt

SWEETS

ali gyata pera

kiri aluwa

kiri dodol

—

—

thala guli

wattalappam

butter fruit dessert

alva

dhodhal

laddu

payasam

rasavalli kilangu pudding

ellu pahu

vattalappam

avocado dessert
sweetmeat made from rice flour, treacle and sometimes cashews
coconut-milk, cashew and jaggery sweets
balls of flour sweetened with jaggery and deep-fried
sago cooked in coconut milk and jaggery (may contain nuts)
yam pudding
sesame sweet balls
coconut milk, egg, cardamom and jaggery pudding

SNACKS

<i>bhoodhi</i>	<i>bonda</i>	deep-fried ball made from lentil flour and spices
<i>godambah</i>	<i>rolles</i>	meat and vegetables wrapped in pastry
<i>mas patis</i>	<i>iraichi patis</i>	deep-fried beef pasties
<i>polos cutlets</i>	<i>pinchu pilaakkai cutlets</i>	jackfruit cutlets
<i>vaddai</i>	<i>vadai</i>	deep-fried doughnut-shaped snack of spiced lentil flour

GENERAL

<i>co-ppuwa</i>	<i>glass</i>	glass
<i>han-duh</i>	<i>karandi</i>	spoon
<i>kiri</i>	<i>paal</i>	milk
<i>koh-pi</i>	<i>kahpee</i>	coffee
<i>lunu</i>	<i>uppu</i>	salt
<i>palathuru</i>	<i>paadham</i>	fruit
<i>seeni</i>	<i>seeree</i>	sugar
<i>thay</i>	<i>te-neer/plan-tea</i>	tea
<i>vathura</i>	<i>than-neer</i>	water
<i>vendhuwa</i>	<i>kooppai</i>	bowl

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