

Jaffna & the North

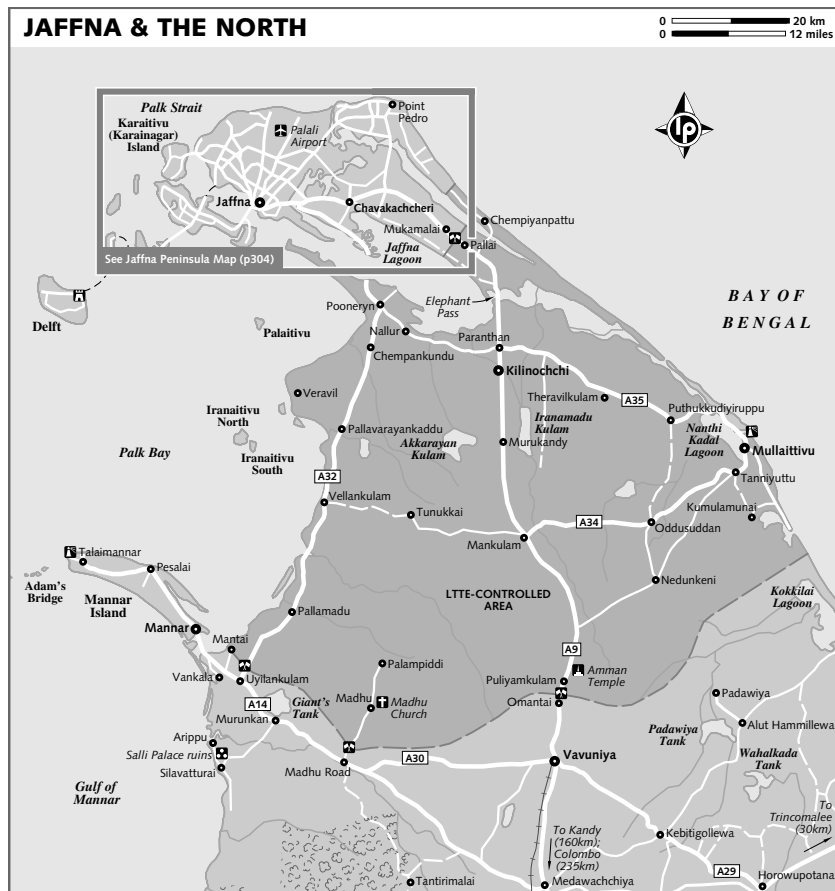


Towering gaudy Hindu temples, the rapid-fire staccato of spoken Tamil, cupolas heaped on oversized churches, sombrero-sized masala dosas cooking on open-air griddles... Welcome to a different world. The North is a vast cultural contrast to the rest of Sri Lanka. Its flat, low-lying scenery has a sprinkling of minor sights and even a few far-from-home baobab trees, but meeting the industrious, highly educated locals is the most memorable part of a visit. Conversations here fascinatingly underline the gulf of misunderstanding between the Tamil heartland and the Sinhalese South. And seeing battle-scarred Jaffna for yourself vividly brings into relief the reasons for Sri Lanka's intractable conflict.

Tourists are very rare up here. In government-held areas, the myriad checkpoints and army camps can feel intimidating for first-time visitors. But foreigners are rarely stopped. Meanwhile, most of the Vanni region is efficiently run by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as virtually a separate country. Crossing this strange statelike entity adds an intriguing frisson to reaching Jaffna. The LTTE's 'terrorist' image needn't scare you off, but sensitivity, tact and open-mindedness are key items for your backpack. So too is a hefty umbrella if you come during the northeastern monsoon (October to January); the rest of the year the region is hot and dry, verging on arid. In sweaty August Jaffna, goes wild during the extraordinary Nallur festival.

At the time of writing there was no sense of danger for travellers in government- or rebel-held zones. However, tensions have since flared again in Sri Lanka, so keep a very careful eye on the news and fast-changing politics of the region.





History

When Arab traveller Ibn Batuta visited Ceylon in 1344 he reported that the powerful Hindu-Tamil kingdom of Jaffna extended south as far as Puttalam. Over several centuries territories expanded and retreated, but even under colonial regimes Jaffna, like Kandy, remained highly autonomous. This lasted until the 19th century, when British bureaucrats decided it would be more convenient to administer the whole of Ceylon as a single unit. By independence in 1948 the idea of breaking the island into different states would have seemed preposterous to Sinhalese and Tamil citizens alike. Yet barely 50 years later, insensitive politics and two decades of ferocious civil war has almost had that effect. For the sake of peace nego-

tiations, the LTTE now claims that it will accept autonomy within a federal Sri Lanka rather than outright independence. But the Vanni region it administers (Tamil Eelam)

THE 2004 TSUNAMI – AFTERMATH IN THE NORTH

The 2004 tsunami absolutely devastated the northeastern coast. The LTTE stronghold of Mullaittivu was especially badly ravaged, barely two years after rebuilding itself from the rubble of war. However, as that zone is out of bounds to tourists, the only place you're likely to see tsunami scars in the North is at a few small villages around Manalkadu.

acts almost as a separate nation, leaving the Jaffna peninsula, controlled by the Sri Lanka Army (SLA), physically cut off from the rest of government-held Sri Lanka.

GROWING CONFLICT

As with many world problems, it's easy – if simplistic – to blame the Brits. British managers found Tamils to be agreeably capable at learning English and fulfilling the needs of the colonial administration. This apparent 'favouritism' meant that Tamil candidates were soon overrepresented in universities and public service jobs, creating Sinhalese resentment and contributing to anti-Tamil sentiment in the 1950s. This led eventually to the infamous 1956 'Sinhala only' language policy (p34).

Now it was the Tamils' turn to feel discriminated against. As passions on both sides rose, one of the defining moments came in 1981 when a Sinhalese mob burnt down Jaffna's library, complete with irreplaceable Tamil documents (p309). To the horror of Tamils everywhere this atrocity received minimal public criticism, and thus the seeds were sown for civil war. Small-scale reprisals/terrorism followed. But the world only noticed two years later in 1983, when full-scale anti-Tamil massacres broke out in Colombo.

The horror of this 'Black July' created a groundswell of sympathy for the multiple Tamil resistance groups, and brought notable funding from fellow Tamils in southern India. The LTTE, increasingly the best-organised Tamil resistance group, came to virtually control the North for a while. However, the SLA had pushed it back to Jaffna by 1987, when Sri Lanka welcomed an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). The welcome didn't last long. The LTTE refused to be disarmed and goaded the Indians into battle, resulting in more ferocious fighting. Human rights nightmares were perpetrated on Tamil civilians by their Indian would-be protectors. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government faced vociferous criticism and a Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) terrorist backlash for allowing in the Indians at all (p36). In a series of bizarre Machiavellian twists, the Sri Lankan government briefly started supplying arms to the LTTE to get rid of the Indians! The IPKF finally left in 1990. The LTTE, who had hidden

BEHIND THE CADJAN CURTAIN

The Soviets had their Iron Curtain. Mao closed a Bamboo one. Now Sri Lanka has the Cadjan Curtain. Behind it lies the LTTE-controlled Vanni region, which they call Tamil Eelam (Tamil Precious Land). There's a Tamil Eelam Bank, an Eelam Law College and a fully developed administration, including customs officers and neatly uniformed police – many of the female agents sport distinctive loops of plaited hair. Until Colombo's recent decision to move the country's clocks back by half an hour, the region even had its own time zone. On the week leading up to Martyr's Day (the 'national' festival on 27 November), red and yellow flags appear everywhere and families flock to LTTE graveyards to honour those who have died in the separatist struggle. Just as the Queen's speech marks a British Christmas, Martyr's Day culminates in Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran's annual address.

out in jungle tunnels based on Vietcong and *Rambo* originals, battled its way back into Jaffna.

Failed attempts at national reconciliation in 1995 resulted in a third phase of war that saw the Tigers once again ejected from Jaffna, where LTTE monuments and graveyards were unceremoniously bulldozed. As ever, the Tigers regrouped in the jungles and mounted renewed terrorist strikes. In 2000, to general astonishment, it launched a full-scale military assault, managing to grab Elephant Pass (the Jaffna peninsula causeway), which it still holds.

APPROXIMATE PEACE

Following a Norwegian-brokered cease-fire of 2002, a certain optimism reigned. Over a quarter of the 800,000 refugees and internally displaced persons who had fled the area since 1983 began to return, bringing an economic boost to devastated Jaffna. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) began to deal with an estimated two million land mines.

But large swaths of the Vanni remain too dangerous to farm, and the SLA's nervously tentative hold on the Jaffna peninsula has led to the creation of despised High Security Zones – beaches are no-go areas,

STAYING SAFE

Isolated killings continue with depressing regularity and the causes of the civil unrest are far from solved. Most of the time all you'll notice is a general sultry calm. But situations could turn dangerous instantly and dramatically. Keep an eye on political developments with www.tamilnet.com.

Many land-mine areas have now been cleared or marked with little red skull-and-crossbones warning signs. But you'd still be extremely unwise to explore any land that's overgrown or fenced off. The same goes for deserted beaches; however, most of the potentially lovely sand on the Jaffna peninsula is off limits anyway to prevent the LTTE from landing weapons.

many street-corner homes have been commandeered and whole villages, including port-town Kankasanturai, have been entirely depopulated for military use.

The November 2005 presidential election brought no apparent new hope for lasting peace (see Who Controls Jaffna, p305).

VAVUNIYA

☎ 024

Virtually all transport to and from the north funnels through energetically bustling Vavuniya (vow-nya). It makes sense to stay here overnight to get an early start on the cross-Vanni trip to Jaffna. Although there are no real sights, an afternoon here isn't unpleasant and the local people are charmingly hospitable.

Information

Reasonably fast Internet access is available at **SeeNet** (☎ 222 1222; 395/1 Horowapatana Rd; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 7.30am-9pm; ☎) and **Vastec** (☎ 222 2869; 2nd fl, 65 Station Rd; per 15 min/hr Rs 15/40; ☎ 8am-9pm). West of the clock tower, **Sanpath Bank** (Station Rd) and **Commercial Bank** (Station Rd) both have ATMs. For LTTE-permit enquiries, there's a **Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation office** (TRO; ☎ 222 1975; Jaffna Rd).

Sights

The town arcs around a quietly attractive **tank** that is best observed from **Sothida Niliyam Kovil**, a tiled, shedlike Ganesh temple. More photogenic is the **Kandasamy Kovil**

(Kandasamy Kovil Rd), a Murugan (Skanda) temple with a very ornate, if faded, **gopuram** (gateway tower) and a gold-clad image in its sanctum. The **Grand Jummah Mosque** (Horowapatana Rd) might really be pretty grand one day when the building work is finally complete. Also eye-catching is the **Bhagwan Sri Sathya Seva Centre** (www.sathyasai.org), shaded by palms, hibiscus and neem trees in a peaceful side street one block west of the Rest House. It's an ashram of the latter-day Indian guru and Jimi Hendrix-lookalike Sai Baba. On the ashram's colourful lotus balcony stands statues of Buddha, Krishna and a bindh-browed Jesus. Very multicultural.

Vavuniya's **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 222 4805; 2 Horowapatana Rd; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Wed-Mon) is unlikely to impress you if you're arriving from Anuradhapura, but some of the pinched-faced terracotta figures from Kilinochchi (4th to 5th century) are delightfully primitive, while the central hexagonal chamber has some fine 5th-to-8th-century Buddha statues in Mannar limestone.

The quietly charming **Madukanda Vihara** (Horowapatana Rd) is a Rs 100 three-wheeler ride from central Vavuniya, beyond the 3km post on the A29. It was reputedly the fourth resting point in the journey of the sacred Buddha tooth relic from Mullaivivu to Anuradhapura during the 4th-century reign of King Mahsen. Near the white dagoba (stupa) and a 150-year-old bodhi tree, appealing ancient ruins include fine guard stones and lion-and-elephant-decorated banisters. The heavy dressed-stone rectangle that looks like a Palaeolithic swimming pool was probably a **bodhigara** (enclosure for a sacred bodhi tree).

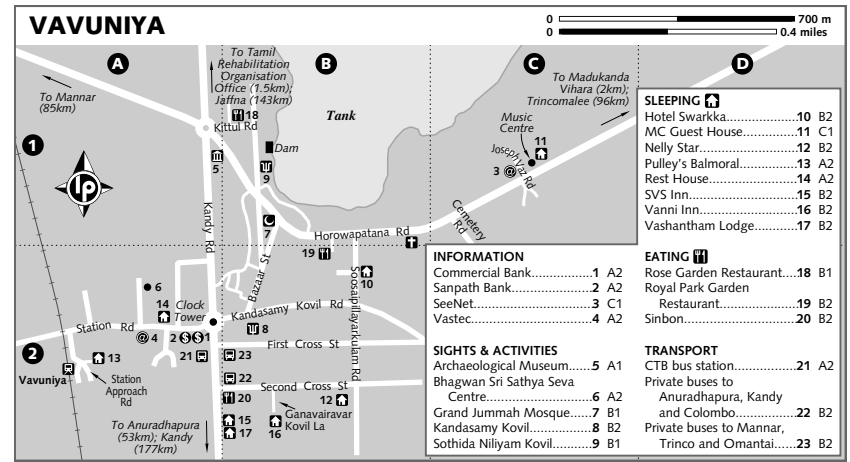
Sleeping

Few Vavuniya hotels have mosquito nets – annoying in the wet season.

BUDGET

Hotel Swarkka (☎ 222 1291; Soosapillayarkulam Rd; tr with fan/air-con Rs 1000/1500; ☎) The very recent renovations and very good-humoured staff make this the best of many crushingly ordinary box-room guesthouses.

Rest House (☎ 222 2299; Station Rd; s/d Rs 450/500, with air-con Rs 750/800; ☎) This place has plain, decent value rooms with bare, thick walls behind a beer garden that attracts local ex-office alxies. Not ideal for single women.



SVS Inn (☎ 222 2978; Kandy Rd; s/tw with fan from Rs 400/650, tw with air-con Rs 1500; ☎) This inn has cheap, almost clean rooms; those costing over Rs 500 have attached toilet. Air-con twins are small, functional and slightly messy.

Vashantham Lodge (☎ 222 2366; 40 Kandy Rd; r Rs 385-1430; ☎) This concrete purgatory is entered upstairs via a dodgy back passage leading to a cinema. Tatty, if tolerably clean, rooms range from prison-cell singles sharing an outside squat toilet to bearable but entirely unappealing upper rooms with rumbling old air-con.

MIDRANGE

Nelly Star (☎ 222 4477; 84 Second Cross St; r with fan/air-con Rs 1700/2200, VIP Rs 3000; ☎) Striking modernistic architecture with bright orange, custard yellow and royal blue paintwork makes Nelly Star Vavuniya's place of the moment. Standard rooms don't quite live up to expectations but are nonetheless the best in town for now. The VIP rooms are much more spacious and have a minibar, TV and bathtub, plus a little sitting area.

Pulley's Balmoral (☎ 222 2364; Station Approach; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 550/715, tw with private bathroom & fan/air-con Rs 1375/1650; ☎) This old low-rise villa sits in a big palm garden, entered through a snack-stall alley opposite the train station. Air-con rooms are big, well-equipped and freshly decorated, but lack real windows. Food here is good value (meals Rs 50 to 200) and diners may bring their own booze at least until the place gets licensed.

MC Guest House (☎ 222 0445, 077 662 5292; 411 Horowapatana Rd; apt Rs 3300; ☎) Families might consider renting this fairly lovable house with two twin bedrooms (one air-con, both with bathrooms) and basic kitchen. The big, if somewhat sparse, sitting room has flapping plastic floors. Keys are available from the nearby Music Centre, an 85-year-old house.

Vanni Inn (☎ 222 1406; Ganavairavar Kovil Lane; d with fan/air-con Rs 935/1870; ☎) This place has neutral rooms off somewhat depressing corridors; there's good air-con, and it's rarely full.

Eating

Royal Park Garden Restaurant (☎ 222 4026; 200 Horowapatana Rd; meals Rs 125-450; ☎ 11.30am-10pm) Set behind a brash new wedding palace, the much cosier garden is a great place for dinner when the weather's not unbearably hot. Attractive twinkling lights, outside tables and little pavilions nestle amid ornamental trees, and the Rs 125 mushroom **paneer** masala (mushroom and unfermented cheese curry) is richly delicious. The restaurant has an open-to-view kitchen. No prices on menus.

Rose Garden Restaurant (☎ 222 4473; 8 Kittul Rd; meals Rs 45-300; ☎ 7.30am-9pm) This is a big, excellent value party-hall restaurant. Food of widely varying styles includes a spicy **tom yam goong** (Thai shrimp soup) that lacks lemon grass but is generously full of shrimps for a mere Rs 80.

Nelly Star (☎ 222 4477; 84 Second Cross St; mains from Rs 150; ☎) The restaurant at this hotel (p299)

serves dishes like pizza (Rs 395) and strangely sweet spaghetti (Rs 160). Much better is the eggplant curry (Rs 30), listed as a side dish but a worthy small meal on its own. The dining room doubles as a wedding hall and is often booked for functions.

Sinbon (Kandy Rd; ☎ 6.30am-8pm; ☹) This is a modern café ideal for passing the time when you're waiting for a bus. Unusually, local women feel confident enough to come here unchaperoned for coffee (Nescafé Rs 15), cakes or ice-cream sundaes (Rs 50). Next door is an air-conditioned supermarket.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The Central Transport Board (CTB) bus station is close to the clock tower. Private buses to Mannar (Rs 50, 2½ hours), Trinco (Rs 80, four bone-shaking hours) and, on alternate days, Omantai (for Jaffna; see p303 for details) leave from First Cross St, while for Anuradhapura (Rs 34, 1½ hours, at least hourly until 7pm), Kandy (Rs 96 to 106, four hours) and Colombo (bus/air-con minibus Rs 200/250, 5½ hours) they start from Second Cross St. Colombo services run around the clock on the Puttalam route (via Anuradhapura) and until 7pm on the Dambulla route, but some buses will charge full Colombo fares for intermediate drop-offs.

TRAIN

Vavuniya is the northern railroad for the line from Colombo. There are four trains to Colombo daily, plus a 7am Anuradhapura service. Fares to Colombo are Rs 560/290/160 in 1st/2nd/3rd class on the 3.15am slow train, 6.05am express (five hours) and the 1.15pm semiexpress (9½ hours). The convenient overnight sleeper train (seven hours) departs 10pm and costs Rs 520 for a 1st-class berth and Rs 309/175 for a 2nd/3rd class sleeperette. Reserve your tickets at the station between 7am and 10.30am within 10 days of departure.

VAVUNIYA TO MANNAR

Although the army controls the road to Mannar it has little or no presence either side of it. North of the road is effectively a different country, as you'll see if you venture to Madhu Church (opposite). **Murunkan** (at the 60km post) is the only village between

Vavuniya and Mannar with shops, a basic guesthouse and three-wheelers for hire.

If you head south from here along the bumpy road to **Arippu** via **Silavatturai** you'll see whole deserted Muslim settlements, left in ruins by LTTE attacks. Off the road lie Mannar's long abandoned oyster-bed **pearl banks**. Unless you're a keen historian, don't let locals persuade you that visiting the **Salli Palace ruins** near Arrippu is worth the bone-shattering 40km detour. The remnant brick arches are vaguely picturesque and supposedly 500 years old. However, most of the unkempt structure has already toppled off the sandy cliff onto the long narrow strip of beach below. If you do go, the site is just beyond an unexplained **obelisk** that locals misleadingly call 'the Lighthouse'.

West of Murunkan the main Mannar road follows the edge of the **Giant's Tank**, Sri Lanka's second-largest ancient reservoir. However, you'll need to climb the bank for views across its beautiful bird-attracting waters; it's best to do so beside the small roadside Hindu temple behind which fishermen moor their outrigger canoes in the wet season. Before arranging an informal boat trip double-check with nearby sentry posts that there's no new rule against such ventures.

At Uyilankulam (70km post) there's a **'Crossloading Point'**, where all lorries bound for Tigerland must unload their goods for inspection. The nearby LTTE crossing point is closed to foreign tourists, though ongoing road repairs on the A32 to Pooneryn may eventually change things.

Between the 76km and 77km markers of the Vavuniya-Mannar road is a large military camp and a big, colourful gateway. ID checks are required to pass through the latter on a side road that leads 5km north to **Thirukketeeswaram Kovil**. This is one of Sri Lanka's four most important *kovils* (Hindu temples), supposedly dating from 700 BC. It probably marks the site of ancient Mantota, once one of Lanka's great historic ports, which silted up entirely over the centuries. Today the *kovil* is imposing with a towering, colourful *gopuram* though the present structures look relatively new. It's possible to peep inside during the atmospherically cacophonous *pujas* (prayers or offerings). The *pujas* occur at 5.30am, 8.05am, 12.30pm and 5.30pm, and are busiest on Fridays. Judging

from the jigsaw of imported carved stonework in the yard, a vast new building spree is planned. Ranged around the temple are open-fronted pavilions containing five gigantic floats. These are wheeled out each February for the impressive **Maha Sivarathiri** festival.

Madhu Church

The **Our Lady of Madhu Church** (☎ 5.30am-8.30pm) is Sri Lanka's most hallowed Christian shrine. Its revered Madonna-and-child statue was brought here in 1670 by Catholics fleeing from Protestant Dutch persecution in Mannar. The statue rapidly developed a reputation for miracles, notably as a protector against snakebite. Madhu has been a place of pilgrimage ever since. Its 10 annual festivals attract huge crowds of pilgrims, especially around 15 August. Many in the crowds are superstitious non-Christians.

The present church dates from 1872 and has soaring, if unembellished, central columns apparently fashioned from hugely long tree trunks. Outside, its most striking feature is the elongated portico painted cream and duck-egg blue. The church sits in spacious grounds with gnarled old trees. The forest of blue-and-white poles look like snow-drift markers but actually serve to hold lamps and bunting at festival times.

Curiously the all-important Madonna statuette is rather diminutive and Mary's face looks less like a Blessed Virgin than a *Thunderbirds* bad-guy puppet. This doesn't worry worshippers, who mix Christian prayers with *puja*-style veneration. The figure's little metal crown was added in 1924 by a papal legate; the ceremony drew a crowd of 150,000.

Turn at the 47km post, a lonely spot that's nicknamed Madhu road; Madhu itself is 12km north of the Vavuniya-Mannar road. It's within Tamil Eelam, the self-styled (though not officially independent) LTTE-controlled 'country'. If you don't plan to go overland to Jaffna, part of the interest in visiting Madhu is the rigmarole of entering this other world. Start reasonably early in the morning as you are not allowed to stay overnight in Tigerland and frontiers are only open from 7am to 5pm. Border procedures (Rs 2) usually take at least half an hour. By public transport the 10am direct

FUN IN TIGERLAND

The members of the LTTE are a clean-living bunch of funsters who don't condone the public consumption of alcohol or tobacco. Other items banned at Madhu, according to signs en route, include sports goods, 'fancy goods', radios, card games, musical instruments and even ice cream.

bus from Mannar (Rs 45, two hours) gives you an hour to look around before returning at 1pm. Alternatively you could take a Vavuniya-Mannar bus to Murunkan and then take a three-wheeler (Rs 800 return). Outside festival times there are no three-wheelers reliably stationed at the 47km junction.

MANNAR

☎ 023

The only access to Mannar is by a 3km-long causeway. When the road is low in the water the journey feels like a Biblical miracle. Look left to spy the collapsed rail bridge on the horizon. The LTTE makes periodic attempts to blow up the causeway road bridge too, hoping to isolate Mannar Island – hence all the army checkpoints.

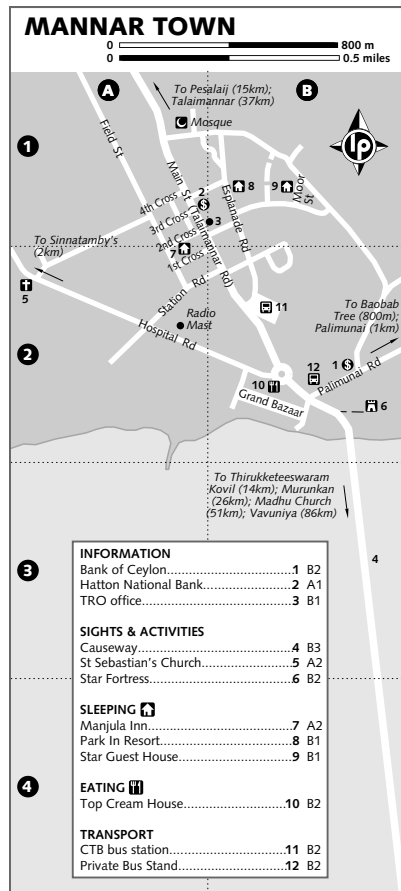
Information

The **Bank of Ceylon** (Palimunai Rd) has no ATM, and that of the **Hatton National Bank** (21 Main St) currently accepts only locally issued cards. The **TRO office** (☎ 223 2186; Main St) occupies a rather bizarrely façaded colonial villa. You could try asking for permits to explore off-limits LTTE areas, but don't get too hopeful.

Sights

The town welcomes you with a glimpse of its Portuguese-Dutch **star fortress** (out of bounds). Mannar's one off-beat attraction is a **baobab tree** (Palimunai Rd), 1.2km northeast of the private bus stand. Quite different from the stout skeletons of typical West African baobabs, this one is shaped like a giant ball with a 19m circumference. It's believed to have been planted in 1477 by Arab traders.

There's not much else for tourists, though **St Sebastian's Church** (Hospital Rd) is rather impressive; if you squint or have been on the



today you might think you'd been transported to Florence. Well, almost.

Sleeping & Eating

None of the accommodation options are luxurious, and women travelling alone have reported feeling uncomfortable.

Star Guest House (☎ 223 2177; Moor St; s/tw/tr with fan Rs 350/400/500, tw/tr with air-con Rs 1250/1500; 🚻) The new, clean, if virtually windowless, air-con rooms are the best option available in sweaty Mannar. Some travellers have complained about conditions in the cheaper rooms, which share bathrooms.

Park In Resort (☎ 223 2127; Esplanade Rd; tw/tr with fan Rs 950/800, with air-con Rs 1200/1350; 🚻) This modest but mildly charming colonial-era

house has sloping roofs, a rattan-screened veranda and wooden doors. Except for pre-ordered bread-and-tea breakfasts, no meals are served, despite the sign. Fan triples share bathrooms.

Sinnatamby's (☎ 223 2748; Thavalupadu Rd; tw Rs 500) Some 2km out of the centre via Hospital Rd, the rooms here seem dwarfed by the high roof and lack of intermediate ceiling – walls just end in midair. Though conditions are basic and not ideal for single women, this is the one place that has mosquito nets.

Manjula Inn (☎ 223 2748; 2nd Cross St; r from Rs 500) This place is well located above a small shop in an area popular with NGOs, but the atmosphere is slightly sleazy.

Top Cream House (Grand Bazaar; meals from Rs 50; 🕒 6am–9pm) Right at the main traffic circle, this ordinary eatery is fly infested but has a relatively extensive and high-quality selection of curries with fresh *rotti* or string hoppers (tangles of steamed noodles). Shrimp curry, shells and all, costs Rs 50.

Getting There & Away

Although death-trap buses head directly to Colombo and there's a daily bus all the way to Trincomalee (Rs 120, 7½ hours), the most convenient access to Mannar is by twice-hourly buses from Vavuniya (Rs 50, 2½ hours). Check both CTB and private bus stands for the next departure.

MANNAR ISLAND

Off Mannar Island's western end, **Adam's Bridge** is a chain of reefs, sandbanks and islets that almost connects Sri Lanka to India. In the Ramayana these were the stepping stones that the monkey king Hanuman used in his bid to rescue Rama's wife Sita. Mannar's proximity to India was once its main tourist draw. Sadly, the Indian ferries that once used a jetty near **Talaimannar** haven't operated since 1984 and are highly unlikely to resume service any time soon.

If you're really seeking sights, try visiting **St Lucia's Church** at Palimunai and **Martyrs' Church** at Pesalai. The latter is named for the unfortunate converts killed when a king of Jaffna caught his son dabbling in St Francis Xavier's Christianity and decided to teach the congregation a bloody lesson. Mannar Island has some **beaches**, but swimming in the sea is locally considered to be a sign of lunacy.

VAVUNIYA TO JAFFNA

For tourists, the A9 is the only permitted land route to cross **Tamil Eelam**, the LTTE-controlled Vanni region (see Behind the Cadjan Curtain, p297). This flat, savanna-like area is today effectively another country, sometimes nicknamed Tigerland. Crossing the area is perfectly feasible and rather intriguing, though you can't explore at liberty without prearranged permission.

The trip is cheapest when made in a series of bus hops. Vavuniya to Jaffna can be done in under six hours if all goes seamlessly (although it's usually easier southbound). Transport connections are best in the mornings, and you'd be wise to start out by around 8am. Once the **frontiers** (🕒 7am–5pm) close, those stranded in Tigerland for whatever reason will have to camp down on a concrete floor and wait until the next morning.

The first hop is from Vavuniya to **Omantai** (Rs 25, 25 minutes, twice hourly) on a bus that is run on alternate days by the CTB and private companies. The scenery of overgrown minefields is dotted with army posts and burnt-out buildings but, as fellow passengers are quick to point out, the area was densely populated before the civil war.

At Omantai, women file left, and men right for the **SLA checkpoint**. Beyond you can walk the 700m across no-man's-land or take a Rs 5 shuttle bus to a bus park within Tigerland. Here you jump aboard another bus before dealing with LTTE checks 4km further north at **Puliyankulam** (no stops here southbound). Locals go through counters 10 and 11, but foreigners need to head to counter 2, a special blue hut to the left. Here

you'll apply for what is effectively the Tamil Eelam transit visa. This free transit pass is issued without any awkward questions. However, if you want to stop in Kilinochchi or venture off the A9, you'll need a Rs 1000 passbook, which looks a little like a shortened air ticket. This is usually only issued to those with a specific 'good' reason (tourism isn't sufficient) and you'll generally need to have visited the TRO in Vavuniya beforehand to get back-up documents. (Southbound there's a slightly better chance of getting this pass at Mukamalai but don't hold your breath.)

Armed with your transit pass, proceed through counter 12 for baggage checks, after which you'll receive a chit. Locals have to declare their valuables and pay a series of taxes and duties on all they 'import' to Eelam but foreigners generally get waved through. Return your baggage-checked chit when requested and you are free to board a bus to Mukamalai (Rs 150, 2½ hours). These wait outside and depart when full. Buses are quite frequent in the early morning but much rarer later in the day.

The express bus makes two short temple stops en route. The first is at the **Amman Temple**, where a pot-bellied holy man gets aboard and smears ash blessings on foreheads for a reconstruction-fund donation.

On the southern edge of Mankulam, before the Mullaattivu road junction, look left to see the **Captain Pork statue**, honouring an oddly nicknamed suicide bomber. His solo mission destroyed the SLA's Mankulam base in November 1990.

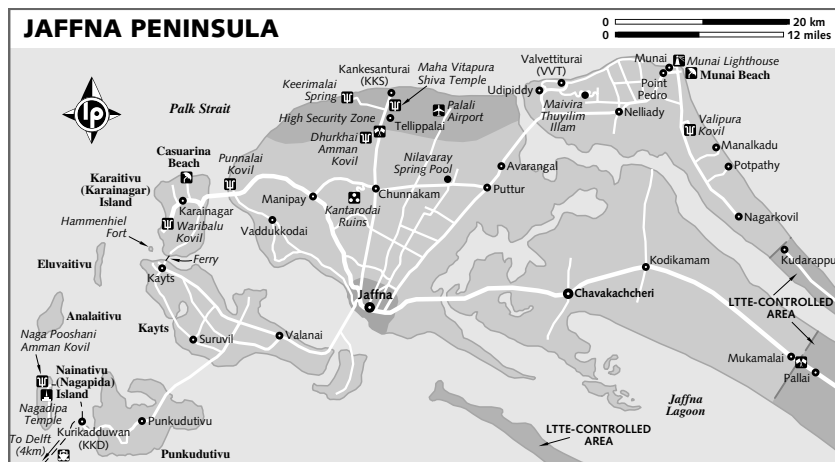
At Murukandy, the very old but particularly tiny **Ankaran Temple** is considered

CROSSING TIGERLAND Mark Elliott

The LTTE bus décor was as confusingly mixed as my emotions: the Buddha and the Madhu Madonna sat incongruously amid Hindu gods, Chinese Baby posters and a few pictures of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran. The distinguished-looking gentleman sitting beside me was obviously a Tiger sympathiser. 'What do you notice?' he asked me, waving generally at the overgrown minefields of Tamil Eelam.

He answered himself. 'No soldiers. No ID checks. We don't want an army to "save" us. Here nobody is harassed. Nobody pushing you around. Here people are free to get on with living.'

When there were ruins he'd bemoan SLA callousness. When there was a paddy field or coconut grove he'd burst with pride that 'the boys' had managed to 'liberate' the land from SLA land mines. At Murukandy, an innocent-looking young man came aboard with twitchy moustache, flip-flops and army-style fatigues. An LTTE 'soldier'. 'You call this a terrorist?' asked my new friend incredulously, yanking playfully on the young man's sleeve. The 'terrorist' simply smiled shyly.



so holy that the road has been diverted to create more room for coconut-cracking pilgrims. Locals consider a prayer here imperative to ensure a safe journey, so virtually all road transport stops, including buses. The atmosphere is lively, with plenty of stalls selling peanuts and dry snacks. Notice truck drivers slapping holy ash on their vehicles as well their brows.

The bus passes without stopping through **Kilinochchi**. It's the only sizable town en route to Jaffna, and is the administrative capital of LTTE-controlled territory. The difficult conditions of life here are most visible at the **Central College** (251km marker), where bombed-out skeletons of the original concrete structures now support thatched roofs so that classes can continue.

North of Kilinochchi, roads branch off to **Mullaitivu**, the LTTE's tsunami-pummelled naval base and former military command centre, and to **Pooneryn**, with its supposedly fine Dutch fortress. The A9 continues north between salt pans and across the **Elephant Pass**, a 1km-long causeway that is the only thing anchoring the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of Sri Lanka. Its capture by the SLA in 2000 was considered the LTTE's most audacious and profound military victory.

The checkpoints for leaving Tigerland are just beyond Pallai in **Mukamalai**. Local bus passengers queue up, but foreigners should nip over to the booth on the left to have their exit pass stamped and collected. Then everyone jumps back on the bus again

for the last 500m across to the **SLA checkpoint**. Men and women queue separately for baggage checks and possibly a little interview. At the end of the checkpoint are buses for Jaffna; there's a choice of frequent minibuses (Rs 40, 55 to 75 minutes) and slower-filling CTB buses (Rs 35, 1½ hours).

JAFFNA

☎ 021 / pop 120,000

Low-rise Jaffna has a compulsively fascinating cityscape. Mostly it's a sprawling patchwork of comfortably middle-class colonial-era suburbs, almost lost in lush foliage and palms. But all this screeches to a halt in the commercial centre, which, in turn, rubs shoulders with the gaping holes and eerie rubble of bombed-out former civic offices. It's an intriguing, friendly and utterly untouristed place that repays gentle exploration. You'll appreciate Jaffna more for its insights into the region's special personality than for any specific sights.

History

For centuries Jaffna (or Yarl) has been Sri Lanka's Hindu-Tamil cultural and religious centre, although the 17th-century Portuguese tried hard to change that. In 1620 they captured Jaffna's King Sangli (whose horseback statue stands on Point Pedro Rd), then set about systematically demolishing the city's fabulous Hindu temples. A substantial wave of mass Christian conversions followed – hence all the beautiful

WHO CONTROLS JAFFNA? Mark Elliott

A week before the November 2005 presidential election I interviewed dozens of local Tamils. All told me excitedly that they planned to vote for the opposition 'peace' candidate, Ranil Wickremasinghe. One strong LTTE sympathiser had travelled from Colombo to Jaffna specifically to vote. An almost 100% vote for Wickremasinghe seemed assured among Jaffna district's 400,000-plus electorate.

Then came the bombshell.

The LTTE had originally been noncommittal about the 'irrelevant' election. But a few days before polling day, its line hardened. A boycott was announced. Ominous little fliers announced 'unfortunate repercussions' for Tamils who dared to vote. Suddenly my pro-Wickremasinghe Tamil friends claimed they had 'no interest' in the election!

On polling day an army of international observers sat around to check that voting was free and fair. But there were no voters. Only one vote was cast all day at the station I visited. Jaffna was utterly silent. The only bus that dared to run in contravention of an LTTE travel ban had its windows smashed by 'unknown' youths. Jaffna's turnout was a record-low 0.014%; virtually every Tamil stayed home praying for Wickremasinghe's victory rather than making it happen. He lost by around 180,000 – entirely because of the boycott.

Why would the LTTE want to hand victory to their most vociferous opponent? Many fear it's because the election's victor, Mahinda Rajapakse, is more likely to provide the LTTE with an excuse to restart the war. And few doubt that the LTTE wants to 'liberate' Jaffna. Whatever the reality, the election showed all too graphically just who holds the real power in Jaffna.

churches. Many Hindu temples were not rebuilt until the mid-19th century.

Jaffna surrendered to the Dutch after a bitter three-month siege in 1658. Various Portuguese and Dutch fortifications remain dotted around the peninsula, but most are either ruined or still in military use (and so are inaccessible to tourists).

In 1795 the British took over Jaffna, sowing the seeds of future interethnic unrest by 'favouring' the Jaffna Tamils (p296).

Escalating tensions overwhelmed Jaffna in the early 1980s, and for two decades the city became a no-go war zone. Various besieged by Tamil guerrillas, SLA troops and the so-called peace-keeping force, the city lost much of its population to emigration. In 1990 the LTTE forced out most Muslims, though around 3000 have now returned.

Somehow Jaffna survived the endless bombings and a crippling blockade (kerosene once retailed here for 20 times the market price). In the sudden peace created by the 2002 accords, Jaffna sprang back to life. Today the town feels 'occupied' but surprisingly calm and relaxed. Although the town has been officially held by the government since 1995, in fact the LTTE wields considerable real power (above). Unlucky Jaffna citizens pay tax twice: both to the government and to the Tigers.

Orientation

Commercial activity is crammed into the bustling, architecturally crapulous 1960s concrete of Hospital, Kasturiya and Kankasanturai (KKS) Rds. Their fascinating ugliness is enhanced by humidity stains and occasional shell holes. Southeast of the fort is an area of Beirut-style shattered buildings that creates a sorrowfully photogenic sense of war horror. Most guesthouses are a world away in the delightfully leafy Naluru and Chundukuli residential areas, notably around Kandy Rd. Jaffna makes for fascinating bicycle rides, but distances are too great and temperatures too sweaty for wandering too far on foot.

Jaffna's addresses have 'old' or 'new' street numbers that can create an apparently non-consecutive jumble.

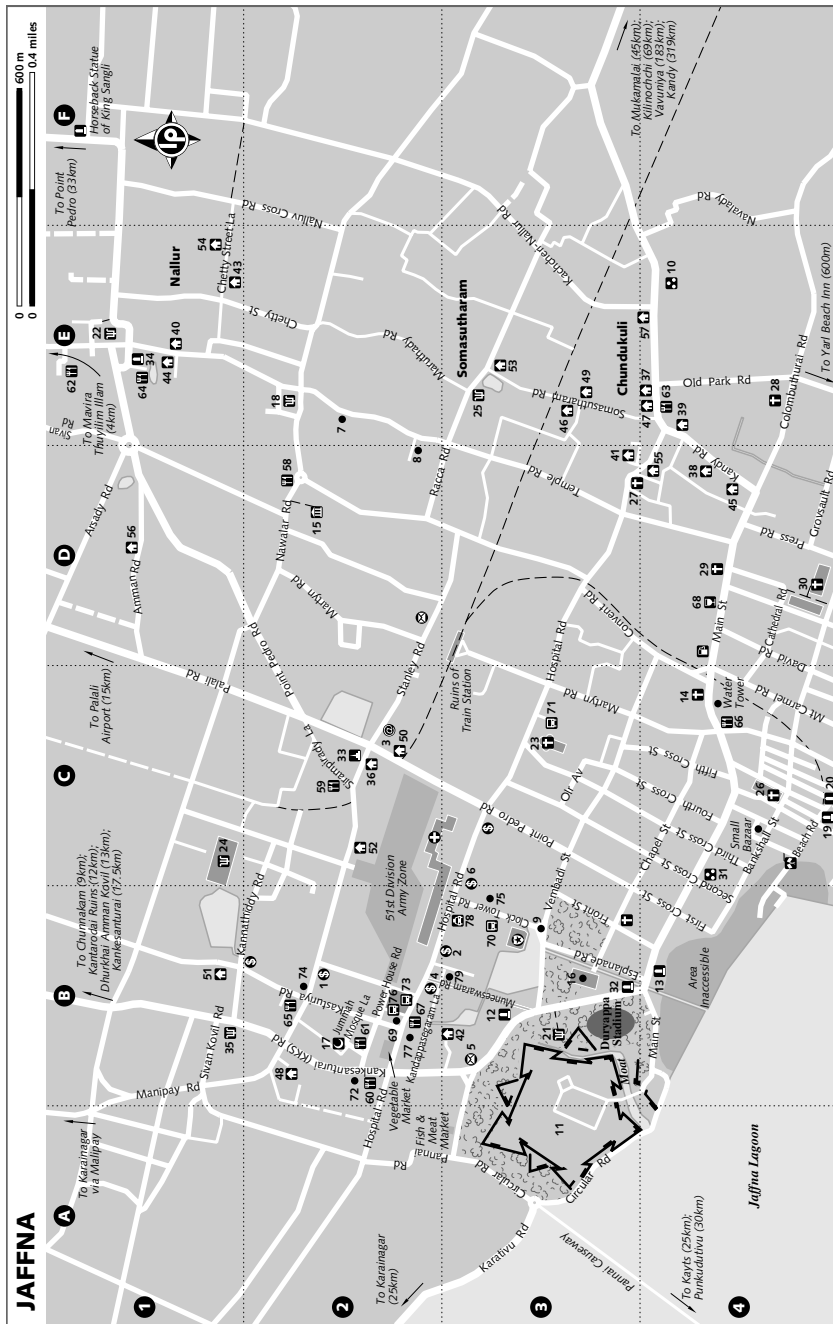
Information

INTERNET ACCESS

AeroLanka (6 Modern Market, Hospital Rd; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 6am-9pm) This airline office (p312) has a reasonably fast connection but few other programs installed on the computers.

Express Net Cafe (328 Stanley Rd; per hr Rs 40; ☎ 9am-9pm) Neither express nor a café.

Jaffna Public Library (☎ 222 7835; 259 KKS Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ 9am-7pm) Head up the library's (p309) stairs, then right to the back beyond the reference and self-study sections.



INFORMATION		
Bank of Ceylon.....	.1	B2
Commercial Bank.....	.2	B3
Express Net Cafe.....	.3	C2
HNB.....	.4	B2
Post Office.....	.5	B3
Seylan Bank.....	.6	C3
Theresa Communications.....	(see 53)	
TRO Office.....	.7	E2
Universal Link.....	.8	D2
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St John's.....	.28	E4
St Martin's Seminary.....	.29	D4
St Mary's Cathedral.....	.30	D4
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SJV Selvanayakum Monumen.....	.32	B3
Sri Nagavihara International Buddhist Centre.....	.33	C2
Thilleepan Memorial.....	.34	E1
Vaitheswara Kovil.....	.35	B1
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YMCA.....	.57	E4

EATING		
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Cosy Restaurant.....	.59	C2
Food City.....	.60	B2
Malayan Café.....	.61	B2
Mangos.....	.62	E1
Old Park Restaurant.....	.63	E4
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Sri Palm Beach.....	.65	B2
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Three Star Hotel.....	.67	B2

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TRANSPORT		
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Airport Bus Drop-off Point.....	.70	B3
Airport Bus Pick-up Point.....	.71	C3
Atlas.....	.72	B2
Bus Station.....	.73	B2
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Sethu Travels.....	(see 67)	
SNJ Travels.....	.77	B2
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		
Clock Tower.....	.9	B3
Former Kachcheri.....	.10	E4
Fort.....	.11	A3
Headless Statue.....	.12	B3
Headless Statue.....	.13	B4
Holy Family Convent.....	.14	C4
Jaffna Archaeological Museum.....	.15	D2
Jaffna Public Library.....	.16	B3
Jumma Mosque.....	.17	B2
Kanabady Kovil.....	.18	E2
Martyr's Monolith.....	.19	C4
MGR Statue.....	.20	C4
Muniyabrar Kovil.....	.21	B3
Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil.....	.22	E1
Our Lady of Refuge Church (OLR).....	.23	C3
Perumal Kovil.....	.24	C1
Pillaiyar Kovil.....	.25	E3
St James'.....	.26	C4

SLEEPING		
Anisham Lodge.....	.36	C2
APAT Guesthouse.....	.37	E4
Bastian Hotel.....	.38	D4
Green Inn.....	.39	E4
GTZ Guesthouse.....	.40	E1
Holiday Resort.....	.41	D3
Jaffna City Hotel.....	.42	B3
Lux Etoiles.....	.43	E1
Morgan's Guest House.....	.44	E1
New Bastian Hotel.....	.45	D4
New Rest House.....	.46	E3
Palan's Lodge.....	.47	E4
Pillaiyar Inn.....	.48	B2
Sarras Guest House.....	.49	E3
Serendib Inn.....	.50	C2
Sri Balaje Inn.....	.51	B1
Stanley Lodge.....	.52	C2
Theresa Inn.....	.53	E3
Thinakkural Rest.....	.54	E1
US Guest House.....	.55	D4

Theresa Communications (☎ 222 2597; 72A Racca Rd; per min Rs 8; ☎ 8am-7pm or on request)
Universal Link (☎ 222 7286; 127/1 Temple Rd; per hr Rs 30; ☎ variable)

LTTE INFORMATION
TRO office (☎ 222 5125; 141 Temple Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm)
 Friendly, but not keen on giving LTTE-area permits to tourists.

MONEY
Bank of Ceylon (52 Stanley Rd), **Commercial Bank** (Hospital Rd), **HNB** (Hospital Rd) and **Seylan Bank** (Hospital Rd) all have ATMs.

POST
Post office (Postal Complex, KKS Rd; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-1pm Sat)

Sights
NALLUR KANDASWAMY KOVIL
 Much the most impressive religious building in Jaffna, the **Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil** (Temple Rd; donation appropriate; ☎ 4.30am-6pm) is one of Sri Lanka's most significant Hindu temple complexes. The original 15th-century temple was destroyed by the Portuguese, and the current structure dates from 1734.

Get your first view from the east, where the unusual golden-ochre god-encrusted *gopuram* is the focus of Point Pedro Rd. Within, your eye is drawn to the central brassed-framed Murugan image. To the left a succession of tigersque beams leads towards a colonnaded, stepped holy pool. Other shrines and murals are somewhat gaudy and naive, but the curious ticking clock on the PA system adds a Hitchcock-style sense of mystery. It's most interesting at *puja* (☎ 5am, 10am, noon, 4pm and 5pm). Men must remove shirts as well as shoes.

The temple is the focus of the country's wildest Hindu festival (25 days in July/August), when pilgrims descend from all across the region. This reaches a climax on day 24, with spectacular parades of juggernaut floats and gruesome self-mutilation by entranced devotees.

Recover from a hard afternoon's prayer at a trio of refreshing ice-cream parlours around the corner.

OTHER HINDU TEMPLES
 Jaffna's countless Hindu temples range from tiny shrines to sprawling complexes featuring *mandapaya* (platforms with decorated

pillars) and towering *gopuram*. Those devoted to elephant-headed Ganesh (Pillaiyar) often incorporate attractive ponds. Many more primarily honour Ganesh's brother Murugan. Most temples are easily spotted by vertical red-and-white stripes on the external walls. **Perumal Kovil** (Clock Tower Rd) has the most spectacularly colourful *gopuram* in Jaffna, while that of **Vaitheeswara Kovil** (KKS Rd) is contrastingly sparse, its unusual blue-grey mass standing sentinel at the end of Kanathiddy Rd.

The grey columns of the **Kanabady Kovil** (Nawalar Rd) look dull by day but are appealingly mysterious when half-lit at night. The modest Somasutharam **Pillaiyar Kovil** (Racca Rd) looks picturesque when viewed across its lily pond. The small **Muniyabarar Kovil** (KKS Rd) is nestled above a curve of fortress moat and has an access tunnel into one of the remnant triangles of the outer defence wall (now used as a makeshift toilet).

CHURCHES

Pottering between the many fine churches is a great way to get a sense of Jaffna's charmingly lush back streets and quietly comfortable colonial-era homes.

The grandest church is **St James'** (Main St), a classical Italianate edifice with a silvered central cupola and twin bell towers dripping fish statues.

From Hospital Rd, **Our Lady of Refuge Church** (generally shortened to OLR and pronounced oh-wel-ah) looks like a whitewashed version of a Gloucestershire village church. Its south-facing entrance looks more French. One way or another it maintains a thoroughly European character, right down to the pointed canopy on the wooden pulpit.

St Mary's Cathedral (Cathedral Rd) is astonishingly large. It's built along classical lines, but uses modern materials that don't create any particular grace. It's curious to see banal corrugated-iron roofing held up by such a masterpiece of wooden vaulting.

St John the Baptist's (Hospital Rd) is a fine, column-sided Catholic church. The much smaller Anglican church of **St John's** (Main St) looks like a Sussex chapel, but with the napped flints replaced by cut sandstone chunks in the walls. Appropriately enough there's a cricket pitch ranged behind.

Colonnades and topiary make the **Holy Family Convent** (285 Main St) a beautiful, peaceful

oasis. Founded in 1850 and rebuilt in 1887 by French benefactors, the nearby **St Martin's Seminary** (Main St) looks like a Cambridge college transplanted into a tropical garden.

OTHER PLACES OF WORSHIP

The **Sri Nagavihara International Buddhist Centre** (Stanley Rd) was quickly rebuilt after government forces retook Jaffna from the LTTE in 1995, and it's virtually the only Buddhist structure in Jaffna. Its whitewashed dagoba contains a relic from Kataragama, which was placed inside in 2002. The **Jumma Mosque** (Jumma Mosque Lane) is quirkily colourful.

JAFFNA FORT

On a map, the city's obvious focus is the powerful pentagonal Dutch fort. Nonetheless, from the nearby city centre the fort's ultrasturdy walls are virtually invisible, hidden by wildly overgrown minefields. For much better views look from the Pannai Causeway, or stand on the little bridge on southern Circular Rd where the fortress' eastern moat flows out into the lagoon.

The fort was built in 1680 over an earlier Portuguese original. Defensive triangles added in 1792 produced the classic Vauban-esque star form.

The fort saw much fighting during the recent unrest. In 1990 the LTTE – who then controlled the rest of Jaffna – finally forced out government forces after a grisly 107-day siege. Repeated bombing means that precious little remains of the Dutch church that once stood within, and entry is not permitted anyway. Reaching the inner moat bridge is sometimes possible.

WAR RUINS

East of the fort lies the heartbreaking ruins of what was once central Jaffna's government district. They include several **headless statues** and a **shattered church** (Main St). It seems morbidly appropriate that the main business on battered western Main St is funeral direction. Parallel Bankshall Rd is particularly moving. Perhaps the most photogenic ruin is the **former kachcheri** (administrative office), a romantically gothic collection of old pillars and moss-crusting arches.

Some of Jaffna's best hotels were once along the lagoon, but these are bombed out, occupied by the military or both. The owner of the **Yarl Beach Inn** (p310) has a

photo album and plenty of stories to tell. The lagoon is out of bounds, with street access boarded up even in the curious grid of narrow alleys in the fishermen's district. To reach their boats fishermen have to use a single security-checked access point on Beach Rd, west of Third Cross St.

JAFFNA ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This unkempt but interesting **museum** (Nawalar Rd; admission by donation; ☎ 8.30am–5pm Wed–Mon) is hidden away at the end of a messy garden behind a cubic concrete library building that looks rather like a masonic lodge. At the museum's door are a very rusty pair of Dutch canons from the fort and a set of whale bones. Inside, the most interesting items are 11th-century Buddha torsos found at Kantarodai (p314), a poorly conserved life-sized portrait of Queen Victoria, and the 1845 palanquin of Point Pedro's *mudiyalal* (district governor). He must have been very small.

LTTE SITES

The LTTE built plenty of memorials for its many martyrs. Most memorials were damaged, desecrated or destroyed in 1995 when Jaffna was retaken by the SLA, but since 2002 some have been patched up or rebuilt. A helmet on an upturned gun is a common motif at such places. Perhaps the most sobering is the **Mavira Thuyilim Illam** (Martyrs' Sleeping House) at Kopay, just beyond the city's northeastern limits. Around 2000 grave markers in neat rows commemorate Tiger cadres killed in action; the majority (the smaller memorials) are for Tigers whose bodies have not been retrieved. Eerily there are around 200 headstones as yet unclaimed, suggesting that nobody thinks the war is over yet. The movingly understated box of older tombstone shards commemorates the 1995 SLA bulldozing of the original graveyard.

The monolithic **Thileepan Memorial** celebrates the LTTE's former political officer, Rasaiah Parthipan Thileepan. Seeking concessions from the IPKF in 1987, Thileepan went on a very public hunger strike and died on a plinth right in front of the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil. The memorial's design (hands with broken chains grasping a flame) is repeated in other parts of town, including the **Martyr's Monolith** (Beach Rd), which commemorates 31 locals killed by the military

WHO'S WHO IN THE TAMIL STRUGGLE

Velupillai Prabhakaran Unquestioned LTTE leader whose crudely appearance belies an extraordinary ruthlessness and single-minded strength of purpose. An insightful and very readable Prabhakaran unofficial biography (*Inside an Elusive Mind*) is sold in Colombo bookshops.

Anton Balasingham The LTTE's eloquent British-Tamil spokesperson and ideologist. His various books are available through www.eelamstore.com.

Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan Karuna Former LTTE East Coast commander who split from the Tigers in March 2004, setting off a bloody rift.

Rasaiah Parthipan Thileepan Hallowed LTTE icon, usually depicted wearing glasses and slouched on a chair during his eventually fatal high-profile public hunger strike (left).

Douglas Devananda Leader of the Tamil Eelam People's Democratic Party. As a member of the Sri Lankan parliament he's considered a 'collaborator' by the LTTE, who have reportedly made 10 attempts to assassinate him.

in 1986. The nearby statue of a grinning Ray Charles lookalike actually represents **MGR** (MG Ramachandran), a famous Indian-Tamil actor-turned-politician who became an important backer of Tamil rebels between 1983 and 1987. His two-finger V sign represents his offer of two *crore* (200,000,000) Indian rupees (around US\$4,000,000) to the LTTE. At the time, the Tiger leaders thought he'd meant two *lakh* (US\$40,000), and got a career-changing happy surprise when the funds arrived.

JAFFNA PUBLIC LIBRARY, SJV SELVANAYAKUM MONUMENT & CLOCK TOWER

Symbolically, one of the first major public buildings to be rebuilt once the civil war died down was the **Jaffna Public Library** (Esplanade Rd; ☎ 9am–7pm). It retains the original neo-Mughal design and is reminiscent of the fine public buildings in New Delhi. The earlier library (inaugurated 1841) had been burnt by progovernment mobs after the violent Jaffna District Council elections of July 1981. Few acts were more significant in the build-up to full-scale civil war, and it has been described as a kind of cultural genocide. The library had contained more than 90,000 volumes,

including irreplaceable Tamil documents such as the one surviving copy of *Yalpanam Vaipavama*, a history of Jaffna.

The strange, top-heavy concrete pillar sitting almost beside the library is the **SJV Selvanayakum Monument** (KKS Rd), celebrating the founder of the Tamil Federal Party. His somewhat Gandhiesque statue stands beside the monument.

Another nearby architectural curiosity is the spindly **clock tower** (Vembadi St), whose Moorish domed top makes it look like it belongs somewhere in North Africa.

Sleeping

There are dozens of guesthouses dotted all over town, though the greatest concentrations are in the leafy Chundukuli and Nallur districts. A map is crucial for finding those in the back lanes. Most guesthouses are adapted from local homes rather than being purpose-built buildings. Jaffna's savvy hoteliers are swift to adjust prices according to demand, so expect considerable fluctuations.

BUDGET

New Rest House (☎ 222 7839; 19 Somasutharam Rd; tw/tr Rs 1000/1000) This place has clean, good value rooms with slightly tatty attached bathrooms in a house-restaurant with great food (breakfast Rs 150, meals Rs 200 to 300).

Theresa Inn (Do Drop Inn; ☎ 222 2597; Theresa-inn@stnet.lk; 72A Racca Rd; s/tr incl breakfast Rs 750/1250; ☑ ☎) If you want a home-stay experience, Theresa Inn's three rooms offer a great opportunity to lodge with a local family. The two singles share a bathroom. All have optional air-con, which costs Rs 500 extra if you use it. Joseph speaks English, two free bicycles are available for guests and the communications hut out the front means you can get Internet access on the spot for Rs 8 per minute.

Palan's Lodge (☎ /fax 222 3248; 71 Kandy Rd; tw/q Rs 800/1200; ☎) The three fan rooms with simple clean bathrooms in a pleasantly homely atmosphere are good value. However, the Rs 1200 supplement for optional air-con seems excessive. No mosquito nets.

Yarl Beach Inn (☎ 222 5490; 8 Old Park Rd; s/tw/tr with fan Rs 500/900/1200, with air-con Rs 1250/2000/3000; ☎) The poor old Yarl bravely struggles on, despite losing its key assets – the nearby beach (under military occupation) and a former Dutch-era mansion (to 1990 bomb-

ings). Rooms have attached bathrooms and are clean, if ageing. Great seafood dinners are available on advance order. Fan rooms are great value for single travellers and the owner can spin many a heart-rending yarn.

Holiday Resort (☎ 222 5643; St John's Lane; tw with fan/air-con Rs 500/1750; ☎) This is a four-room getaway in a quiet garden of chirruping caged birds. The rooms share bathrooms and are basic but cheap and clean. The two air-con rooms have such high ceilings that the expense seems wasted. Food is available by advance order.

Green Inn (☎ 222 3898; fax 222 2298; 60 Kandy Rd; tw/q Rs 1250/2000; ☎) Shelving and rounded mirror units add a tiny bit of character to these rooms, set off the dining room of a dowdy house-restaurant. Optional air-con costs Rs 500 extra. Most rooms have attached bathrooms, though some are tiny cubicles.

APAT Guesthouse (☎ 077 773 8221; 75 Kandy Rd; s/tw/d/tr Rs 385/825/880/990) The rooms here are acceptable at the front but get increasingly dingy further back. Cheaper options share an off-puttingly grimy bathroom. There's a big communal dining table, but no food is available; as a notice reminds guests, 'Why worry?'

Bastian Hotel (☎ /fax 222 2605; 37 Kandy Rd; d/q Rs 825/1650) The basic, presentably clean fan rooms share slightly grubby bathrooms. There are no nets. Much better rooms are available in the associated New Bastian Hotel (opposite).

YMCA (☎ 222 2499; 109 Kandy Rd; s/tw Rs 250/400) The rooms here share unexciting but indoor and frequently-mopped toilets and showers. Some rooms have private toilet for Rs 100 extra. Often full.

If saving money is your only concern, there are several cheap but seriously basic options. Lone women beware.

Anisham Lodge (280 Stanley Rd; s/tr Rs 300/600)

Ultrabasic beds in a rather dusty, if characterful and fairly central, older house. Some fans work. Shared toilets and wash booths in the yard behind.

Stanley Lodge (☎ 222 8092; 218 Stanley Rd; r Rs 500)

Clean but very basic boxlike rooms with outdoor shared loo.

Sri Balaje Inn (☎ 222 2341; 293 Kasturiya Rd; s Rs 250)

Bring your own sheets and bug protection.

MIDRANGE

Sarras Guest House (☎ 222 3627, 077 717 2039; 20 Somasutharam Rd; s Rs 1250-1750, tw/tr Rs 2000/2500; ☎) This wonderful thick-walled old colonial

mansion has been tastefully developed as a comfortable but sensibly priced guesthouse. Each of the four rooms is unique. The top-floor suite is fabulous, while the upstairs single has three sides of windows, polished old floorboards and art deco furniture. Its private bathroom is a short walk along the wraparound balcony. The other rooms have attached bathrooms. All have hot water and towels are provided. Booking ahead is advised, either directly or through Theresa Inn (opposite).

Morgan's Guest House (Maria's, UN Guesthouse; ☎ 222 3666; Temple Rd; tw Rs 3000; ☎) Art, chests, stylish mirrors and real lamp shades give this four-room place far more character than any standard guesthouse. The best room has hot water and a lovely mosquito-shaded sitting area/veranda. The building is totally unmarked except for '103' (old number) on the red postbox.

GTZ Guesthouse (☎ 222 2203; 238 Temple Rd; tw Rs 2000; ☎) The neat twin rooms here share big, bright bathrooms, set between pairs of rooms. There's a pleasant lounge, a library of books in German and an eye-opening map of Jaffna district's many minefields.

Jaffna City Hotel (☎ 222 5969; 70 KKS Rd; s/tw Rs 1925/2200; ☎) The city centre's nicest option is set in a beautiful large garden, complete with silly dolphin fountain. The eight rooms are appealingly smart, except for the discordantly tatty desks. All have hot water. A big 26-room new block is being built behind.

Lux Etoiles (☎ 222 3966; 34 Chetty Street Lane; r Rs 3190-3685) The French-speaking owner has used lots of sash curtains and inexpensive reproduction art to create what he immodestly claims is 'Jaffna's best inn'. The claim might be true but perhaps not enough so to justify the relatively high prices charged. There's hot water, fridge and BBC World TV.

Yarl Paady Residency (☎ 222 6868; 51C Amman Rd; s/tw/tr Rs 1650/1815/2090; ☎) This is a pleasantly spacious new place with tiled-floor rooms and hot water. Good value. There are free rooms for drivers.

Pillaiyar Inn (☎ /fax 222 2829; 31 Manipay Rd; s/d/ste from Rs 1700/2500/5000; ☎) With a little better maintenance this breezy three-storey place could be a top choice, but missing door knobs, underlength power cords and crusty carpets that never seem to get vacuumed detract from the generally favourable impression. Some slightly older rooms in the

annex are rather less inviting. The location within a central yet quiet garden is great. Food is excellent if you live long enough to await its arrival.

Thinakkural Rest (☎ 222 6476; 45 Chetty Street Lane; tw with fan/air-con Rs 1100/2200; ☎) The big, clean rooms here have OK private bathrooms; a desk and wardrobe are the only adornments. The fan rooms are a little musty but clean and decent value. The attached bar is unappealing unless you retreat to the hotel's pleasant upstairs terrace.

New Bastian Hotel (☎ 222 7374; 11 Kandy Rd; s Rs 2200, d Rs 2750-3300, tr 3850; ☎) Entered from beneath a vine trellis, this fairly smart pad has leather sofas in the communal sitting room, and manages to squeeze in a 20-seat conference table upstairs. Rooms are outwardly modern with TV, though not all of the bathrooms have hot water and some walls show signs of premature ageing.

US Guest House (☎ 222 7029; 874 Hospital Rd; d Rs 1500-2500; ☎) Located in a new shop-house building bristling with antennae, the rooms are clean, green and reasonably well built. However, the garishly clashing colours of settees, bed linen and floor tiles might leave your senses jangling. The rooms have fridge, hot water and Rs 500 optional air-con.

Serendib Inn (☎ 222 6242, 222 3984; 86/1 Point Pedro Rd; s Rs 1100, d Rs 1650-3300; ☎) The cheaper rooms here are neat but windowless. Somewhat nicer but still underlit doubles are ranged off a pleasant dining area. All rooms have fridge, hot water and optional air-con (Rs 500 extra). No mosquito nets. Car hire is available from Rs 3000 per day.

Eating

Jaffna is a good place to try South Indian-style cuisine. Dosas (paper-thin rice- and lentil-flour pancakes) and red-hued *pittu* (a mixture of rice flour and coconut, steamed in bamboo moulds) are local favourites. Many guesthouses will provide food if you ask in advance. The Pillaiyar Inn (left) and New Rest House (opposite) are particularly good, and keep some food in stock.

Cosy Restaurant (☎ 222 5899; Cosy Hotel, 15 Sirampiradi Lane; mains Rs 90-600; ☎) Along with its attractively lantern-lit dining terrace, sheltered by *cadjan* (coconut-frond matting), the great attraction here is the tandoori oven. This allows the chef to produce excellent fresh naan (flat breads), as well as

succulent chicken tikka (chicken marinated in spices and dry roasted), which is Rs 220 for six chunks; arrive early, as supplies are limited. There's a long menu of alternatives, including somewhat bland kormas and curious 'Swiss' lamb. The attached hotel has functional, slightly musty rooms for Rs 1000/1500 with fan/air-con.

Old Park Restaurant (☎ 222 3790; 40 Kandy Rd; meals Rs 160-600) Although it's a bit like eating in someone's front room, the Old Park offers some of Jaffna's tastiest cuisine and is paradise for garlic lovers. Its small garden is pleasant for a cold beer (Rs 200). It has comfortable air-con guest rooms (twin Rs 2500) if you're too drunk to get home.

Mangos (☎ 222 8294; 359/3 Temple Rd, Nallur; short eats from Rs 15, meals from Rs 60; ☎ 7am-10pm) Behind a new café that looks somewhat half-finished is a solidly built timber-roofed dining pavilion with open sides. Here you can get good rice-and-curry lunches and traditional South Indian specialities for dinner, including excellent Rs 60 masala dosas (dosas stuffed with spiced vegetables) cooked to order.

Café Yours & TCT Supermarket (☎ 077 922 2829; 527 Nawalar Rd; snacks from Rs 20; ☎ 7am-10pm) The tiny modern café attached to this Danish-owned supermarket serves reasonable instant coffee (Rs 10) and makes mini pizzas (Rs 50) to order.

Malayan Café (36-38 Grand Bazaar; meals from Rs 50; ☎ 7am-9pm) This downmarket but wonderfully olde worlde eatery has marble-topped tables, long glass-and-wood cabinets and occasional blasts of incense to bless the in-house shrine. The cheap vegetarian fare is served on banana leaves rather than plates and is eaten by hand. When you're finished, fold up the leaf and post it through the letterbox-shaped waste chute in the hand-washing area.

Sri Palm Beach (☎ 222 6634; 205 Kasturiya Rd; mains Rs 180-350; ☎ 11.30am-10pm; ☎) This is a comfortably air-conditioned upstairs place with wide, reliable menu. It serves pleasant, if not outstanding, fried chicken '65', as well as masala dosas after 6.30pm.

Thanj Hotel (Main St; snacks from Rs 20; ☎ 5am-9.30pm) Basic, friendly place for fresh hoppers (bowl-shaped pancakes) in the evening.

Rio Ice Cream (448A Point Pedro Rd; sundaes Rs 40; ☎ 9am-10pm) This is the biggest and brightest of three popular ice-cream parlours around the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil.

Three Star Hotel (☎ 222 7125; 162 Hospital Rd; meals from Rs 55; ☎ 7am-10pm) This typically fly-infested servery has particularly delicious rice-and-curry meals. The vegetable curry is mild, the saffron rice is laced with raisins and for Rs 70 you can add a chunk of prefried chicken.

Food City (175 KKS Rd; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) Central Jaffna's most Western-style supermarket.

Drinking

The unchallenged meeting place for NGO types is the cosy garden bar of **Morgan's Guest House** (Temple Rd; most drinks R200; ☎ 6-11pm), the unsigned but characterful guesthouse (p311). Pleasant alternatives for a beer include Old Park Restaurant (left) or the garden of the Jaffna City Hotel (p311). The **Rosarian Convent** (☎ 222 3388; 333 Main St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5.30pm), formerly at 123 Main St, makes Rosario 'wine' (Rs 175 per bottle, takeaway only). Sweet and laced with cinnamon and cloves, it tastes rather like German gluhwein. It also makes startlingly coloured grape 'juice' (Rs 150) and 'nelli crush' (Rs 125), both nonalcoholic fruit cordials with pleasant, if slightly bubble-gum-style, flavours and laxative properties. Add water.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Both **Expo Aviation** (☎ /fax 222 3891; www.expoavi.com; 1E Stanley Rd; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-5pm Sun) and **AeroLanka** (Hospital Rd ☎ 222 3916; 13 Hospital Rd; Serendib Inn ☎ 222 3984; 86/1 Point Pedro Rd) fly to Colombo's Ratmalana Air Force Base (one way/return Rs 6700/12,000, 75 minutes). Both currently depart daily around 9am, though schedules change frequently. Palali airport is 17km north of Jaffna, but don't try to go to there independently; it's a military installation in an otherwise closed high-security zone. Airfares include a bus shuttle. This departs from an unlikely-looking tin-roofed **shelter** (Hospital Rd) at the Sinhala Maha Vidyalyaya. Arrive there three hours before flight departure time for security checks. Bring your own refreshments. Coming from Palali, the shuttle drops arriving passengers on Clock Tower Rd.

Several agencies sell air tickets. Try **Manoj Express** (☎ 222 3916, 077 780 1038; 32 Clock Tower Rd; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) and, for AeroLanka only, **Thampi Travels** (☎ 222 2040; Kandappasegaram Lane; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) or Serendib Inn (p311).

Jaffna to Trincomalee flights have been suspended.

Ceylinco Travels & Tours (☎ 222 5063; www.ceylinco.lk/travels; 1 Stanley Rd; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat) are agents for SriLankan Airlines. It has proposed a new **SriLankan Air Taxi** (☎ 019-733 3355; www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi) shuttle to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport (US\$250).

BUS

An extensive CTB network covers the Jaffna peninsula, and routes are duplicated by helpfully numbered private minibuses that leave from a stand behind the bus station. Useful, frequent services include bus 750 to Point Pedro via Nelliady, bus 751 to Point Pedro via Valvetiturai (VVT) and the northbound bus 769 to Dhurkhai Amman Kovil via Chunnakam (for the Kantarodai Ruins). Confusingly, an altogether different bus 769 runs eastwards to Mukamalai (LTTE checkpoint) via Kandy Rd. Take this bus to go anywhere in Sri Lanka beyond the Jaffna peninsula; after crossing the LTTE-controlled Vanni region you'll emerge eventually at Vavuniya in around 5½ to seven hours, depending on waiting times. While this is not too difficult (see p303), those who don't want to make three changes of bus can buy tickets to Colombo (Rs 1100 to 1200, roughly 12 hours) on direct air-con buses or vans. All direct bus services leave Jaffna between 7am and 8am; the return service leaves from Colombo at around 10pm. Agencies that sell Colombo tickets:

Atlas (☎ 222 5464; 77 KKS Rd; ☎ 6.30am-9pm)

Sethu Travels (☎ 222 2822; Three Star Hotel, 162 Main St; ☎ 7am-10pm)

SNJ Travels (☎ 222 2837; Hotel Rolex, Main St)

In Colombo, many agencies on Galle Rd in Wellawatta, including **Sadu Communications** (☎ 077 325 3017), sell these bus tickets. Or contact **SNJ** (☎ 232 1449; 160 Wolvendael St, Col 13).

Note that when done in hops, the Jaffna-Colombo trip costs under Rs 500. That's less than half the price of a direct bus, and southbound it can even prove quicker!

TAXI

A convenient and relatively good value way to visit Jaffna's hinterland is to rent a van or taxi. If you do this through a guesthouse or travel agent you'll rarely pay more than

CLASSIC CARS

Havana has its classic American cars, maintained in the face of economic boycott. Years of war and isolation means that Jaffna has its less glamorous equivalent – a small fleet of 1960s Austin Cambridge and Morris Minor taxis. Though many are rather rundown, riding in one of these bangers adds a touch of photogenic fun to your trip. But don't expect lower rates; the old cars tend to be fuel inefficient so new air-con vans can actually be cheaper.

if you hire one off the street, and you might also get a driver who speaks a modicum of English. Costs range between Rs 2750 and 4000 per day for up to 100km. Add Rs 25 to 35 per kilometre for extra mileage. Around 130km covers virtually every 'sight' on the peninsula except the offshore islands.

Getting Around

From Kandy Rd, any westbound bus (Rs 4) or minibus (Rs 5) heads to the bus station. Coming back, take the frequent eastbound bus 769 for Chundukuli or bus 750 for Nallur via Point Pedro Rd. Three-wheelers and wonderfully antiquated taxis wait in the centre of Hospital Rd. Three-wheelers cost Rs 50 for short trips, Rs 100 to Nallur or Rs 300 per hour to potter round town. A bicycle is more pleasant for exploring, and several guesthouses will lend or help you find one.

JAFFNA PENINSULA

Bananas, palmyra palms, cassava plantations and even little plots of grapevines characterise the intensively cultivated Jaffna peninsula (Map p304). It's heavily indented with lagoons and wetlands, and dotted with Hindu holy spots, sacred wells and a number of LTTE memorials. Added up this can provide a mildly interesting day trip or two, especially if you rent a van to zip along the confusing web of narrow lanes. However, individually none of the sights are especially memorable and almost all decent beaches are in closed High Security Zones.

Towards Kankasanturai (KKS)

The port of KKS and its once famous Palm Beach are totally out of bounds to tourists, but there are a few places to see en route.

ACRONYM LAND

Tamil names can be quite a mouthful. Handily, the peninsula's longer town names are often abbreviated. Common examples include KKS (Kankasanturai), VVT (Valvettiturai) and KKD (Kuri-kadduwan). The acronyms don't stop there. Northeast Sri Lanka is often nicknamed NGO land, such is the plethora of nongovernmental organisations trying to help out, post-tsunami. Then there are the myriad players in the ever-shifting fields of politics and Eelam separatism. Official documents can choke on their own acronyms. An example...

'The GOSL and LTTE created the SLMM through signing the CFA on Feb 22nd 2002. Based on the CFA, the NRG and GOSL concluded a SOMA where status, privileges and immunities of SLMM are defined.'

No wonder the public is confused!

Some useful translations:

CFA – Cease-Fire Agreement

EPDP – Eelam People's Democratic Party (www.epdpnews.com); Marxist-leaning Tamil party working with the government

GOSL – Government of Sri Lanka

LTTE – Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; the Tamil Tigers

NRG – Royal Norwegian Government

P-TOMs – Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structures; also known as the Joint Mechanism, this is the means by which aid was at long last delivered to the desperate coastal communities of LTTE-administered areas.

SLA – Sri Lanka Army

SLMM – Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission; provided by Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland to oversee the 2002 CFA

SOMA – Status of Mission Agreement

RRR – Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (www.mrrr.lk)

TRO – Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (www.troonline.org); the LTTE's self-help humanitarian aid NGO

At Chunnakam bus stand you can pick up a three-wheeler to travel the confusing squiggle of lanes that lead 3km west to the puzzling **Kantarodai Ruins** (Purana Rajamaha Vihara). Here, some two dozen pudding-shaped little dagobas, 1m to 2m in height, grow like mushrooms in a palmyra patch the size of a modest garden. Discovered in 1916, the ruined foundations of many more dagobas are easy to make out. OK, so it's hardly a mind-blowing vista and the dagobas are somewhat crudely patched up but they're probably 2000 years old. Nobody really knows what they were built for. Returning towards Chunnakam, the modest **Kantarodai Pillaiyar Kovil** is attractively located, with its festival chariot parked outside facing the palm-flanked tank.

Beside the KKS road at the 13km marker, the big **Dhurkhai Amman Kovil** is set behind a fairly deep, stepped pool. The temple celebrates the goddess Durga and draws relatively large crowds on Tuesdays. *Puja* is occurs at 7am, 11am, 4pm and 6pm, although in the past they were exactly half an hour late, as the temple worked on LTTE

'Eelam time', which was half an hour behind Sri Lankan time.

The temple is as far as you can go by public transport (northbound bus 769, Rs 18 from Jaffna). A kilometre further north is the start of one of the controversial High Security Zones from which the whole civilian population has been evicted. If you have a car or van, the one way to get a view inside is to request permission to visit the sacred **Keerimalai spring**. This 'miraculous' spring is said to have cured a horse-faced princess of her equine features. Despite waves crashing melodramatically on razor wire behind, the site is about as photogenic as an uncaared-for swimming pool. Nonetheless, the trip to get here is one of Sri Lanka's most surreal experiences. It starts with SLA security checks: hand in your phones, cameras and (nerve-rackingly) passport to the duty officer, who places them in an unlocked cubbyhole. You get a worn old pass in return. An assigned soldier-minder then hops aboard your vehicle to stop you straying or exploring the fascinating wreckage en route. Still, you get a good view of abandoned **Tellippalai** just

by driving through. Here, bored soldiers shuffle about the otherwise deserted streets, creating an extraordinary atmosphere that feels like a very real war-movie set. Turn off the KKS road next to the greying *gopuram* of the **Maha Vitapura Shiva Temple**. Just before arriving at Keerimalai spring there's a quick glimpse of **Naguleswaram Kovil**. This spiritually significant temple was bombed by the army in 1990. Some parts have reportedly been repaired, but the visible sections resemble classic Angkor Wat ruins as the jungle creeps into the cracks.

Towards Point Pedro

Travelling by private vehicle you could start out via the Kopay **Maiviri Thuyilim Illam** (p309), and join the Chunnakam–Point Pedro road beside the historic but extremely lacklustre **Nilavaray spring pool**, some 7.5km further north. The water here is supposedly fresh for the first 15m or so, becoming increasingly salty beneath; it's barely worth stopping to look.

In front of Nelliady School is the **gilded statue of 'Captain Miller'** (MMV Rd, Nelliady), nom de guerre of the first Black Tiger (LTTE suicide bomber). On 5 July 1987 he drove an explosives-laden truck into the school, which was then being used as an army camp. Hero or villain, he died taking at least 200 SLA soldiers with him. The statue and some overgrown shattered ruins are 450m north of the Point Pedro road junction, where bus 750 stops.

Ramshackle **Point Pedro** is the Jaffna peninsula's second town, and has a few very faint hints of colonial style. The harbour, located within a military zone, is off limits. However, a kilometre east, more attractive **Munai** remains accessible. From Point Pedro bus station walk 100m south then east, crossing through a curious stone **toll gate** that locals claim dates from the Dutch era. Some 250m beyond, turn left towards the sea up St Anthony's Lane to see the town's two finest **churches**. The coast road continues a kilometre east to **Munai Light-house** (no photos), beyond which the fishermen's beach becomes wider and sandier. The nicest area of sand bar is nearly 2km further on, dotted with some curious four-plank lashed fishing rafts. There are also some attractive views towards a lagoon area to the southeast. That's lovely if you don't

look behind you – with tsunami damage, refugee housing and army dugouts in most other directions this is hardly a relaxing place to unroll your bathing towel.

If you have private transport, consider continuing to the much revered **Valipura Kovil**, around 5km southeast of central Point Pedro. It celebrates a surprise visit Vishnu made here in the guise of a fish. The entrance portal is painted in restrained olive and brown tones. Its famous water-cutting festival (a boisterous ceremony where devotees are sprayed in holy water) was revived in October 2004, attracting around 75,000 pilgrims.

Another 6km southeast of the temple is an area of sand dunes that some observers have very exaggeratedly dubbed **Manalkadu Desert**. One mildly interesting sight here is the way one of the dunes has half-submerged the roofless century-old ruins of **St Anthony's Church** in Manalkadu village, 3.5km off the main road. A wonderfully gaudy **new St Anthony's church** in central Manalkadu, 400m beyond, includes a portrait of the Virgin Mary looking rather like a Walt Disney Snow White. However, the formerly picturesque surrounding village is a tragic scene of tsunami devastation, while the lovely beach is currently patrolled by the army.

Valvettiturai (VVT)

On the peninsula's north coast, VVT is an easy stopping point between Jaffna and Point Pedro. This once rich smuggling town is now most famous as the birthplace of the LTTE supreme leader Velluppillai Prabhakaran. The green-walled **Prabhakaran family house** (Vampady Lane) was damaged by security forces in 1985, an attack that also killed 70 VVT citizens and reportedly spurred the LTTE to perform the infamous Anuradhapura killings as reprisal. The house has long since been abandoned and Prabhakaran's parents have fled to India. Nonetheless, somewhat in the style of Jim Morrison's grave, the ruins continue to attract a trickle of tourists and well-wishers from around the world. There's graffiti in Tamil, Sinhalese and English and a painted sign on the gatepost out the front describes Prabhakaran as the 'President of Tamil Eelam'.

To find the house from the bus stop in central VVT, walk west for about 400m, passing the sizable **Amman Kovil** with its fine *gopuram*. Continue 200m to the first

asphalted lane on the left. There's a seat around a tree in the middle. Prabhakaran's house is the first on the left up this lane.

Around 8km southeast of VVT, half-way to Nelliady by a circuitous back lane, is the Samurabahe **Mavira Thuyilim Illam**. It's another graveyard for LTTE cadres and is fundamentally similar to the more accessible version at Kopay (p309), but it feels somewhat less stark given the attractive backing of palmyra palms and manicured gardens.

JAFFNA'S OFFSHORE ISLANDS

Jaffna peninsula (Map p304) is surrounded by a series of low-lying islands, many attached to the mainland by a web of causeways. The main pleasure in exploring here is not any specific sight, but the hypnotic quality of the waterscapes and the escapist feeling of a boat ride between them. Long strips of coastal wetland or lagoon are backed by palmyra palms, and the shallow seas are embroidered with fish traps; watch fishermen wading chest-deep to maintain them. Realistically there are two day-trip possibilities. One is to loop around through Karaitivu (Karainagar), ferry-hop to Kayts and return via the causeway. The second and generally more agreeable option is to cross the causeways to Kurikadduwan (KKD), a virtually uninhabited islet off Punkudutivu. From here you can take a ferry to windswept Delft or sacred Nainativu.

Karaitivu (Karainagar) & Kayts

The main attraction of visiting Karaitivu (Karainagar) is the approach across the very low-lying **causeway**, with its views of the fascinating maze of fish traps. Look right at the start of the causeway to spy the towering *gopuram* of **Punnalai Kovil** through the palmyra palms. This Vishnu temple was supposedly founded at the site where a magic turtle mysteriously transformed itself into the radiant rock that remains the temple's central treasure.

Don't let Karaitivu locals persuade you that litter-strewn Casuarina Beach is worth the 3km diversion.

Roughly three buses per hour (bus 782 and bus 785) from Jaffna to **Karainagar town** (Rs 25, one hour) take the western road across Karaitivu, terminating at the colourful **Waribalabu Kovil**. However, for the

ferry to Kayts you'll need the east-coast road. As all the villages on that route have been bombed to bits, buses don't operate. So hop off the Jaffna-Karainagar bus as soon as you see a three-wheeler and charter it for the 6km ride to the tiny jetty. That's within a small naval zone: there's a security check and one traveller reported being turned back, but we experienced no problems here. The wire-pulled ferry contraption runs eight times daily (Rs 5, seven minutes) but be aware that you'll need to wade through knee-deep water on sharp stones, so waterproof sandals would be useful. Ferry access is not currently feasible for cars but bicycles are carried.

From the crossing you get a rather distant view of **Hammenhiel Fort**. Built by the Dutch on its own little islet, it looks a little like Alcatraz. The name means 'Heel of the Ham', so-called because the Dutch saw Sri Lanka as shaped like a leg of gammon. It's used by the military so can't be visited.

The ferry arrives at eerie semideserted **Kayts town** between a dozen scuttled fishing boats. The two somewhat noteworthy churches are both visible by walking straight up Sunuvil Rd from the jetty. The first, 300m to the right of the main bus stop, is **St James'**. Over the entrance the sword-brandishing saint is shown riding an oddly smiling horse, while the faintly demonic silver statues of sour-faced angels and apostles above spookily recall a scene from *The Omen*. Some 400m up Sunuvil Rd from the jetty is the grand if dour neobaroque church of **St Mary's** (1895). A little beyond St Mary's the first asphalt lane to the right leads 600m to a waterfront cemetery with better, if still distant, views of Hammenhiel Fort.

Circuitous minibus 780 (Rs 32, 1½ hours) and slightly faster minibus 777 leave for Jaffna roughly every 40 minutes; last services depart 4.20pm, 5.30pm and (theoretically) 6.30pm.

Nainativu & Delft

A long **causeway** links Kayts to the island of Punkudutivu and the drive is delightful. Observe the lagoon fishermen who use wade-out traps and sail little archaic wind-powered canoes that look like miniature Nile feluccas. **Punkudutivu village**, the scene of minor riots in December 2005, has one of Jaffna's most screechingly colourful Hindu

temples. Just before the Church of South India a house has its porch supported by two curiously elongated elephant figures. Many other older houses lie in various stages of decay. Smaller causeways link the island to the curiously isolated little ferry dock at **Kurikadduwan (KKD)**, where there are a pair of desultory drink stands but no village. From here there is a choice of destinations. Boats to Delft leave at 10am, returning at 3pm (Rs 50, one hour) but are prone to cancellations. Boats to Nainativu (Rs 15, 17 minutes) are vastly more frequent with sailings every half-hour from 8am to noon, and hourly from 12.30pm to 5.30pm. Often unmarked, Jaffna-KKD minibuses (Rs 35, 1½ hours) depart approximately hourly; the last return is around 5pm.

NAINATIVU (NAGAPIDA)

Known as Nainativu in Tamil and Naga-dipa in Sinhalese, this 6km-long lozenge of palmyra groves is holy for both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims. The term *naga* refers variously to serpent deity figures and to the ancient peoples who once inhabited the island.

Right in front of you as you step off the jetty is the **Naga Pooshani Amman Kovil** complex. While it's not Sri Lanka's most beautiful Hindu temple, its setting amid mature neem trees is very attractive especially viewed from the water, framed by colourful fishing boats. The interior is brought alive by the relief metalwork framing the main image houses and there's an inscription stone explaining the ancient Tamil kings' rules about how to deal with shipwrecked foreigners. The main temple deity is the *naga* goddess Meenakshi, a consort of Shiva. Women hoping to conceive a child come here to seek blessings. This can make

for a fascinating midday *puja*: cacophonous bells, drumming, oboes and conch horns create a trancelike atmosphere. The young women, accompanied by their mothers, are handed chalice full of flower petals, then proceed to the Ganesh subshrine for further prayers before returning to smash coconuts in the culmination of the fertility rite.

Male devotees must remove shirts as well as shoes before entering. An impressive 18-day festival is usually held in early June.

Walk 10 minutes south along the coast road (ID check en route) to find the **Nagadipa temple**, North Sri Lanka's most revered Buddhist pilgrimage site. It is said that the Buddha came here in person to prevent war breaking out between a *naga* king and his nephew over the ownership of a gem-studded throne. The wise Buddha's suggestion of giving the throne to the temple averted a war and created a great centre of pilgrimage. The throne and original temple disappeared long ago but today there is an attractive silver-painted dagoba, set amid waving palms. Just behind, three happy-looking Buddhas sit in a domed temple that looks more like a chapel.

DELFT (NADANTIVU)

The intriguing, windswept island of Delft (Nadantivu) is a 10km ferry ride southwest of KKD. A small, very ruined **Dutch fort** is a short walk from the ferry dock. Behind it is a beach with many exquisite shells. Like Mannar, Delft has a rare, ancient **baobab tree**; it's shaped like an immensely overgrown bamboo shoot.

The hundreds of field-dividing walls are hewn from chunks of brain and fan corals, and local Delft ponies descended from Dutch mounts roam the island.

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