

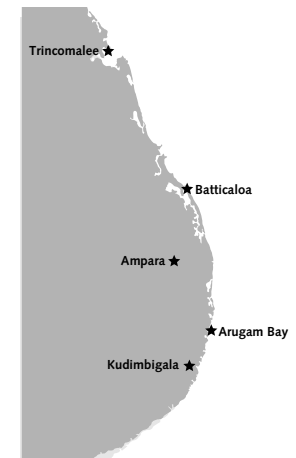
The East



Visiting eastern Sri Lanka is travelling as it used to be: tropical lushness, unexplored beaches and scattered jungle ruins that feel way off the beaten track. The main tourist draw is Arugam Bay, a laid-back hang-out that's also Sri Lanka's top surfing spot. The hinterland is full of wildlife, and you're virtually assured of seeing wild elephants at Ampara. Eccentrically craggy forest-scapes tumble into mesmerising vistas of paddy fields as you head north. The coastline leads on to Batticaloa and Trincomalee via chaotic strip villages and beautiful lagoons, uncleared tsunami debris and paradisaal beaches. The best-developed beaches are at Uppuveli and Nilaveli, and you can find some real accommodation bargains here in the rainy low season, which runs from October to April. But while swimming is OK in the low season, stick to the dry season (May to September) for surfing or snorkelling.

So few foreign travellers bother to visit the east coast that you're likely to find a very heartfelt welcome and a great generosity of spirit. But you'll need to tread gently. Ethnic conflicts remain unresolved – not just between Sinhalese and Tamils, but also between Tamils and Muslims, and between Tamil factions. For inquisitive travellers, learning about these complex interrelationships is part of the excitement. But sensitivity and tact are crucial.

Meanwhile, some roads remain closed or controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Checkpoints are common. At the time of research, soldiers gave us grins and merry waves rather than shakedowns or body searches. But keep an eye on the situation – as the recent violence has shown, renewed civil war is not entirely off the menu.





BUTTALA

☎ 055

Little more than an overgrown crossroads, Butttala is ideal for viewing the lovely scenery and visiting the uncrowded temples and ruins in the vicinity. Historically this area was part of the ancient Ruhunu kingdom, and is believed to have been an important staging point before King Dutugemunu's much hyped battle with the Tamil king Elara. The name means 'Rice Mound', in reference to the area's agricultural bounty. Today the main industry is sugar cane.

Butttala's attractions lie in the surrounding countryside, but it's worth strolling up picturesque little Temple Rd to visit the idyllically peaceful **Dolapeela Vihara** (a *vihara* is a Buddhist complex), with its small whitewashed dagoba (stupa), 800-year-old bodhi tree and worn old moonstone.

Information

Butttala Pharmacy (Badalkumbura Rd; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) at the central crossroads offers IDD phone calls and one slow Internet computer (Rs 6 per minute).

Sleeping

Lakanji Holiday Inn (☎ 227 3691/2; Temple Rd; d with fan Rs 650-850, with air-con Rs 1450) The four best upper-floor rooms are all newly built with clean, well-tiled floors and a shared balcony looking down on mango and palm trees. It's delightfully quiet, despite being a mere 200m north of the town centre, but the access lane is very dark at night. Cheaper rooms are much more tatty.

Tourist Home (☎ 227 3919; 10/7 Temple Rd; tr Rs 450) Large, good value, if slightly musty, rooms fill a large bungalow in the garden beside the Lakjani. Each has toilet, shower and fan. Darmakirti, the manager, speaks good English and is relatively knowledgeable about the area.

Hansika Guest Inn (☎ 227 3443; Wellaway Rd; d Rs 650-1000) This recently built low-rise house at the western edge of town has five neat, clean fan-cooled rooms. It's 1km from the crossroads, and 200m west of a checkpoint chicane. Attractively surrounded by paddy fields, it's great for watching the clouds of giant fruit bats at sunset. Room prices vary by size, not quality. Nets are new and effective against predictably prevalent mosquitoes. A reasonable variety of food is served

THE 2004 TSUNAMI - AFTERMATH IN THE EAST

The East bore the brunt of the December 2004 tsunami, yet it seems to have received the least help in rebuilding. Certainly, there are still dozens of NGO workers racing about in huge 4WDs, and donations of fishing dinghies have been so overgenerous that some villagers have reportedly gathered a small fleet. However, rehousing has been relatively slow and highly controversial; what use is a home 8km inland to a fisherman who has no transport to reach the sea? Such sites were originally chosen because of a blanket exclusion zone preventing rebuilding within 200m of the sea. However, in the lead up to the November 2005 election the 200m rule was softened or removed altogether in many places. That only added to the nightmare for rebuilding planners, whose carefully surveyed inland resettlement-village sites now seem irrelevant. The complex relationships between Muslim and Tamil villagers has compounded the difficulties of reconstruction. Meanwhile, aid workers preferring to operate from the perceived safety of mostly Sinhalese Ampara are sometimes seen as out of touch with local realities.

For years to come you're likely to see ruined beachside buildings, especially in hard-hit areas like Kalmunai. Much more has been done to rebuild Arugam Bay's sea-facing properties, but considerable destruction remains. Central Batticaloa and Trincomalee both survived fairly intact, but Nilaveli beach has only recently scabbled back to life and Kalkudah beach remains virtually deserted. Some owners of reconstructed beach hotels keep photos of their tsunami-wrecked buildings, and Hotel Club Oceanic in rebuilt Uppuveli marks the tsunami high-water line on its wall.

in the large, if rather characterless, dining room (mains Rs 130 to 300).

Eating

Lanka Chinese (☎ 492 0315; Okampitiya Rd; mains from Rs 140; ☎ 9am-midnight) This restaurant's beautifully inviting porch drips with foliage and naturally artistic contorted branches. Inside, the atmosphere is much less special, with underlit dining booths set behind a central drinking den. Nonetheless the food is tasty and the portions are generous. Beer is available (Rs 100), but it's not cold.

Dissanayaka Restaurant (☎ 227 3876; mains from Rs 120; ☎ 8am-10.30pm) This place has a bland atmosphere but serves great devilled dishes. It's in an alley off the central crossroads.

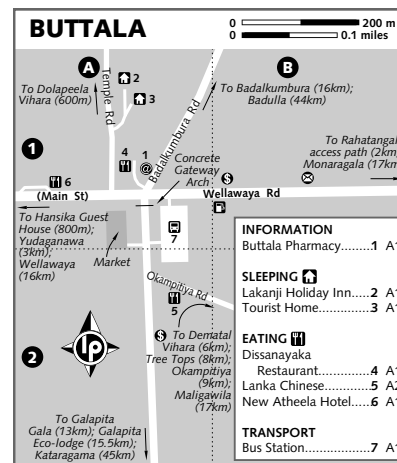
New Atheela Hotel (Wellaway Rd; meals from Rs 50; ☎ 6am-10pm) One of several cheap places that serves fresh hoppers (bowl-shaped pancakes) in the evenings.

Getting There & Away

Butttala is the logical junction for transferring between the Hill Country or east coast and Kataragama in the South. Frequent Wellaway-Monaragala buses intersect here with ten daily Badalkumbura-Kataragama buses. The last buses to Kataragama (Rs 40, 1¼ hours) leave at 4pm and (some days) at 5.30pm.

AROUND BUTTTALA

Yudaganawa (Udhaganawa)
One of the biggest yet least known of Sri Lanka's Buddhist dagobas lies quietly hidden in a forest clearing at Yudaganawa, just 3km west of Butttala. Only the bottom third remains, topped with *cadjan* (matting made from coconut fronds), but the setting is charming. It's 1.5km off Wellaway Rd. Just before reaching the main site you'll pass the moss-encrusted ruins of the much smaller 12th-century Chulangani Vihara, with a pudding-shaped dagoba and fragments of a decapitated 7th-century Buddha.



BUTTALA

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | To Dolapeela Vihara (600m) | 2 | To Badalkumbura Rd | 3 | To Badalkumbura (16km); Badulla (44km) |
| 4 | To Hansika Guest House (800m); Yudaganawa (3km); Wellaway (16km) | 5 | To Dental Vihara (6km); Tree Tops (8km); Okampitiya (9km); Maligawila (17km) | 6 | To Rahatangala access path (2km); Monaragala (17km) |
| 7 | To Galapita Gala (13km); Galapita Eco-lodge (15.5km); Kataragama (45km) | | | | |

Maligawila & Dematal Vihara

Two inscrutable **ancient statues** (admission free; ☞ dawn-dusk) stand in an appealingly shady forest glade at Maligawila (mali-ga-wila). The site is delightful and the village so diffuse that it's virtually invisible apart from the archaeological site's car park. A path from the back of the car park burrows between stalls selling fruit and offerings, continuing into the partly manicured woodland. Here are the extensive 7th-century remnants of Pathma Vihara. To reach the statues, walk five minutes to a five-way junction, where you meet the degraded asphalt of Siyawasa Mawatha. Turn right up that track to reach the first statue, the 10m-high **Maitreya Bodhisattva** (Avalokitesvara), which stands very impressively atop a great five-storey stone temple tower. It was reconstituted between 1989 and 1991 from over 100 fragments unearthed in the 1950s. Sadly, it's shaded by a banal corrugated canopy.

Walk 10 minutes in the opposite direction to find an 11m-tall **Buddha statue**, considered by some to be the tallest freestanding ancient Buddha in existence. Free of ugly modern covers, he elegantly commands an enclosure containing very aged bricks and a moonstone.

Maligawila is 9km southeast of Okkam-pitiya, a small village famous for its small-scale gem pits. Direct Maligawila buses run surprisingly frequently from Monaragala (Rs 23, 70 minutes, last bus at 5.30pm), and six times daily from Buttala, which is slightly nearer (last bus at 4.45pm). Of the latter, four go via Kumbukkana, but two use the shorter, narrower and much more scenic road passing delightful **Dematal Vihara**, a gorgeous temple lost in a sea of picturesque rural paddy fields.

Weliara Ridge

The spiky **Weliara Ridge** leading south from near Buttala is dotted with barely visible ruins and many caves. Most were Buddhist retreats in the era of the Ruhunu kingdom, and some are now used again for the same purpose. One of the best known is **Rahatanga**, two hours' hike by an initially well-trodden trail that starts beside a temple 2km east of Buttala on the Monaragala road. Further south, **Arhat Kanda**, the scenic 'Hills of Enlightenment', can be accessed on guided hikes (\$14) from Tree Tops (right).

Staying at **Tree Tops** (☎ 077 703 6554; www.treetopsjunglelodge.com; per person all-inclusive US\$49), an extraordinarily isolated eco-lodge at base of the Weliara Ridge, 8km from Buttala, is a philosophical statement. This is intensely personal communing with nature: enjoy the starlight, and listen for wild elephants in the ebony trees right behind the sole twin-bed bungalow. That bungalow is simple (no electricity) but comfy, and has hammocks on the terrace. If you're the type who finds it liberating rather than invasive to bathe at a private open-air well with great forest views, Tree Tops is your kind of place. While prices seem high, remember that the whole place is likely to be working just for you. Food (vegetarian, except by special request) and drinks (including an evening cocktail) are included in the price.

At a pinch, two more guests could occupy a tiny, delightfully wobbly tree house if they value views over space and don't suffer from vertigo. But this version of a *chena* perch (used by farmer-guards trying to protect their fields), offers no more than a mattress and mosquito net in a tree.

Dropping in to Tree Tops without reservations is neither wise nor welcomed, as food and staff won't be ready; send an email at least a week in advance. There's no phone signal at Tree Tops, so phoning will only work if the owner happens to go into town.

A three-wheeler to Tree Tops from Buttala costs Rs 350. If the track degrades, as it has in previous years, you might have to walk the last kilometre or two, especially in the rainy season.

Buttala to Kataragama

Roughly following the course of the **Menik Ganga** (River of Gems), this road is especially scenic in its northern section, where it runs parallel to a spiky dragon's-back ridge of forest-topped mini mountains. These reach a curious crescendo at **Galapita Gala** (Rock on a Rock). Here a weird rocky hook, shaped like a giant cashew, is plonked on a bigger outcrop, creating a silhouette that looks something like a huge tortoise's head. As with most such formations, there's a small Buddhist hermit's retreat on top.

A couple of kilometres away, located in splendid, idyllic isolation, is **Galapita Eco-lodge** (☎ 077 316 4167; www.galapita.com; full board per person US\$70). Although it's actually very

simple (there's no electricity), the elegant design gives this place the feeling of a multi-star getaway. The adobe-finished rooms and tree houses mostly overlook the lily-pond-flanked river as it cuts into living rock. One of the outdoor showers is fashioned out of hollow tree branches. Although there's little to do here, that's really the point. You can wander the sugar-cane fields or take a guided hike up to Galapita Gala, but just splashing in the river or groping for gemstones is pleasure enough for a day or two. Bookings are made through Colombo's **Paradise Lanka** (Map p88; ☎ 011-250 8755; paradiselanka@sltnet.lk; 62 Havelock Rd, Col 5). Galapita Eco-lodge is 1.5km west of the 31km marker.

Further south the land becomes flat, and all habitation peters out as the road cuts through the scrubby forest of Yala National Park. There's no permit required, assuming you stay on the road, though if you want to enter the park proper from the gate beside the Galge army camp you'll have to pay.

MONARAGALA

☎ 055

Dripping with green foliage, the centre of Monaragala nestles beneath Peacock Rock, a round-topped hunk of forest-covered mountain. The town then straggles 3km west along Wellawaya Rd (A4) to Hulan-duwa Junction, where the road meets the A22 to Bibile and Badulla.

Mainly seen as a transit point for reaching Arugam Bay, the town is nonetheless a

friendly and attractive place once you get off the busy main road. It's also an alternative place from which to visit the impressive statues and ruins at Maligawila.

Information

Commercial Bank (Bus Station Rd) and several other banks dotted along Wellawaya Rd all have ATMs. In the market area, **Samudura Communications** (☎ 227 6765; per hr Rs 80; ☞ 7.30am-8pm) has the cheapest Internet connection for miles around.

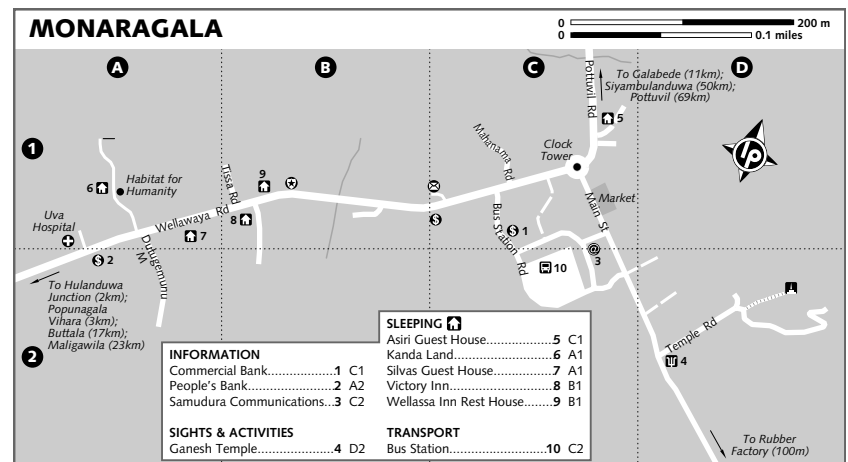
Sights & Activities

An easy but beautiful hike starts near the bus station; walk five minutes past a colourful little Hindu **Ganesh Temple** to the ageing **rubber factory**, then veer left to a charming rock-paved footpath that climbs between attractive boulder fields through Monaragala's famous rubber plantations.

If you're at a loose end, visit **Popunagala Vihara**, located at the 249km post, 1km west of Hulan-duwa Junction. Here, on a low rocky outcrop, a blindingly white 14m-tall **Buddha statue** is 'growing' out of a concrete lotus.

Sleeping & Eating

Victory Inn (☎ /fax 227 6100; 65 Wellawaya Rd; s with fan Rs 1210, d with fan/air-con Rs 1420/2970; ☞) Monaragala's main hotel complex offers small but neatly, tiled modern boxlike rooms above a decent restaurant (which serves beer). The takeaway out the front offers pretty much the same food at cheaper prices.



Wellassa Inn Rest House (☎ 227 6815; Wellawaya Rd; tw Rs 650) Set behind a lovingly tended garden, this older place has a few functional, slightly worn but sensibly priced rooms. They have little sitting areas out the back but no views. Served around a small ornamental pool, meals are available if you order ahead.

Kanda Land (☎ 227 6925; tw Rs 300) These ultra-basic, ageing rooms have bucket baths in the shared bathrooms, but they are cheap and very clean. The owners speak English, and their son can lead guided walks in the rubber plantations. The unmarked building is opposite Habitat for Humanity in a dead-end lane off Wellawaya Rd.

Silvas Guest House (☎ 227 6296; Wellawaya Rd; tw/tr Rs 500/600) This place has very ordinary rooms with mosquito nets, and bathrooms whose toilets don't always flush too efficiently.

Asiri Guest House (☎ 227 6618; d/tr Rs 500/600) This guesthouse is central yet reasonably quiet, but the toilets and fans are dodgy and the clientele isn't always salubrious. The attached beer garden is relatively pleasant for a sunset drink.

For very cheap meals there are various fly-friendly dives around the bus station area.

Getting There & Away

The most reliable buses to Pottuvil (for Arugam Bay) depart at 8.30am, 11.15am and 12.15pm. Alternatively, take a bus to Siyambulanduwa and change. To Ampara, buses leave roughly twice-hourly until 2.45pm using two possible routes: via Siyambulanduwa (for Arugam Bay) or via Inginyagala (for the Gal Oya National Park). Colombo-bound intercity buses (Rs 220, seven hours) run at roughly 45-minute intervals until late, though there are gaps in the schedule. For the south coast, buses leave roughly hourly to Matara (4½ hours). Services run very frequently to Wellawaya (Rs 40, 50 minutes) for the Hill Country, passing though Buttala; change in Buttala for Kataragama.

EAST OF MONARAGALA

The A4 winds laboriously east around the forested bulk of Peacock Rock, passing endless habitation – although houses are so hidden by trees that you'd hardly notice even a village. At **Galabede** (Galabadda, Bisokotuwa; admission free) there's a gently attractive step well, the remnant of a 12th-century palace complex.

It's 100m south of the road, between the 264km and 265km posts.

Siyambulanduwa

The bus stand of Siyambulanduwa (often abbreviated to Siyambulan – pronounced syam-bulan) is where the A4 and A25 roads meet. There's nothing to see, but coming here improves your options for transport to Pottuvil and Arugam Bay.

If you're stranded overnight, **Nethmini Guest & Rest** (☎ 072 250 7523; Ampara Rd; s Rs 1000, tw Rs 750-1000; ☎) is very acceptable, guarded by concrete mini-elephants on a manicured, suburban-style lawn. Rooms 3 and 4 are air-conditioned at no extra charge. The Rs 750 rooms share a bathroom. It's on the A25, around 1.5km north of the bus stand.

There's a cheap drink-and-snacks 'hotel' at the bus stand. Just 100m north, thatched **Ilukgedara Restaurant** (Ampara Rd; beers Rs 100; ☎ 8am-10pm) looks misleadingly inviting. In fact, this is primarily an arrack-drinking den, but check out the ageing poster of the Spice Girls, Hindu bindis added to each forehead.

Last buses depart for Ampara at 4pm, for Panama (via Arugam Bay) at 5pm, and for Monaragala at 9.10pm. A three-wheeler to Arugam Bay costs Rs 600, or around Rs 1000 with side trips to the various sites en route.

Siyambulanduwa to Ampara

Forest-smothered rocky outcrops soar above the road for the first 20km of this lushly gorgeous route. This is most dramatic around Nine Mile Junction, where the vast cliff face of **Govindahela** rises above the road to the east. Once a refuge used by the 13th-century king Buvenekabahu, the mountain so impressed colonial Brits that they nicknamed it Westminster Abbey. Another rather grand outcrop occurs at **Wadinagala** (wadi-nag-ala). Just north of the town (at the 27km post), a small but asphalted road short-cuts to Inginyagala. Around 3.5km up that side road, the modest **Panathgoda Rock Temple** offers bucolic views across the paddy fields from its pretty little lily pond. The site is unmarked, 300m west of the road.

At the 36km post on the A25, the photogenic **Ekgal Aru Reservoir** is overlooked by the beautifully situated but spartan and old-fashioned **Ekgaloya Circuit Bungalow** (s/d/tr US\$75/100/130). Even if it weren't so over-

priced, the fact that you must prepay at the **Department of Wildlife Conservation** (Map pp84-5; ☎ 011-269 4241; www.dwlc.lk; 18 Gregory's Rd, Col 7) is enough to put off most tourists from over-nighting here.

Public transport to Ampara veers east at the sugar-processing town of Hingurana rather than following the A25 through Vari-pattanchenai. So jump off the bus at Hingurana if you want to find a three-wheeler to Deegawapi (p278).

Siyambulanduwa to Pottuvil

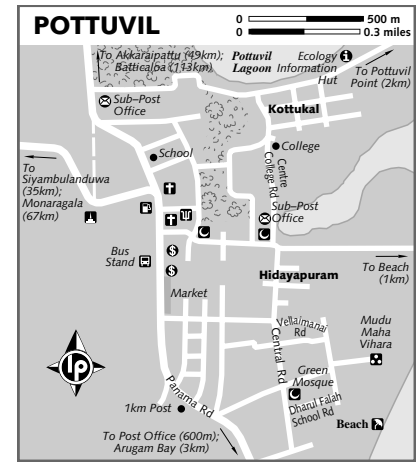
Though tourists rarely bother stopping, there are several minor attractions en route to Pottuvil. The **Tharulengala Cave Temple** at Ulannugeh has concrete steps leading up to a very eroded reclining Buddha, fashioned from ancient mud. The site is fairly pretty, though dense foliage limits views of the tank (artificial lake) and the paddy fields below. It's 1.5km north of the A4 at the 299km marker. Further east the road passes through the small **Lahugala National Park**. Although the park itself is not open to tourists, large groups of elephants are often visible across the tank that lies just behind Lahugala hospital (at the 306km post).

About 12km before Pottuvil lies an evocative 'lost-in-the-jungle' ruin called the **Magul Maha Vihara** (donation requested). Built by King Dathusena (473-453 BC), the ruin is often (if mistakenly) described as the wedding site of Queen Viharamahadevi. The ruins feature a *vataadage* (circular relic house) in a cross-shaped raised area at the southwest corner. Large stones at the base are carved as crouched lions. The site is 1km south of the A4 between 308km and 309km posts. To reach the ruins, walk five minutes south from the car park, passing hefty stone slabs that lead down to an ancient tank.

POTTUVIL

☎ 063

Majority-Muslim Pottuvil is the southernmost sizable town on the east coast. For most tourists it's simply the transport hub for reaching Arugam Bay, just 3km further south, where all the accommodation is located. However, Pottuvil does have two banks near the bus stand (no ATMs), and a decent market; its **main post office** (Panama Rd; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) has Internet (Rs 8 per minute).



Hidden away in the backstreets are the ancient ruins of **Mudu Maha Vihara**. This delightful little site, partly submerged in the encroaching sand dunes, features a fine 3m-high standing Buddha statue whose eroded face stares at two smaller, better-conserved Bodhisattva figures. The **beach** just behind is wide, beautiful and undeveloped, though unshaded. Access from the southbound main road towards Arugam Bay is via the second street to the left (east) after the 1km post (signed in bright yellow in local script). Pass a small green mosque, and at the T-junction beyond turn left then immediately right.

A hexagonal **ecology information hut** by the lagoon in Pottuvil's northernmost Kottukal area is the starting point for delightful two-hour **mangrove tours** (www.arugambay.com/pages/eco.html; tours per person Rs 1500). Outrigger canoes take pairs of visitors across the lagoon – a peaceful punt with lovely heron-watching opportunities. You get dropped off at an environmentally important, if dull, mangrove nursery and (much more interestingly) on a deserted sand bar dotted with handsome rocks, located in front of a beautiful curve of beach. This point is also accessible by a sandy road, and the nearby headland is well known to surfers as **Pottuvil Point**. Note that mangrove tours are much easier to arrange from the **Arugam Bay Hillton Guest House** (☎ /fax 224 8189; www.arugambay.lk) – the price includes transfers from there anyway.

Buses depart from Colombo (Rs 320, 10 hours) via Monaragala at 6.45am and

5.30pm. Otherwise take one of several daily departures to Monaragala or Siyambulan-duwa (Rs 40, 1½ hours) and change.

To Batticaloa there's a bus at noon, or make short hops via Akkaraipattu (Rs 40, 1½ hours) and Kalmunai.

Buses heading to Panama via Arugam Bay (Rs 20) run when full, but as it's only Rs 100 to Arugam Bay by three-wheeler it's rarely worth the wait. However, if you're arriving on a bus from Siyambulan-duwa or Monaragala bound for Panama via Arugam Bay, don't believe touts who say the bus will wait an hour in Pottuvil. It usually continues on within 10 minutes.

ARUGAM BAY

☎ 063

Lovely Arugam Bay (aru-gam-beh) is the east coast's most traveller-friendly destination. It's basically a single laid-back strip of beach accommodation, following the Panama road and backed by the Muslim village of Sinna Ulla.

From April to October it has the best surfing waves in Sri Lanka, but Arugam Bay is also a great place to unwind, eat seafood and enjoy a mellow party scene. During the low season (November to April) things get very quiet, though NGO types still come for week-end getaways and the sea is better for swimming. At any time of year the surrounding region offers some superb opportunities for viewing birdlife, crocodiles and elephants.

Information

At the time of writing the nearest banks were in Pottuvil, though a Bank of Ceylon was being built into the front of Siam View Beach Hotel beside the beautifully air-conditioned, if fiercely expensive, **Internet Café** (☎ 224 8195; per min Rs 10; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-9pm; ☎). Surf & Sun's surf shop also plans to provide Internet access. The nearest post office is 500m southwest, between Arugam Bay and Pasarichenai.

Dangers & Annoyances

Single women might receive unwanted attention on the beaches, and there have been some cases of attempted sexual assault in secluded areas, particularly south behind the surf point. Use normal common sense. There is a tourist police post on the beach behind Siam View.

Activities

SURFING

Arugam Bay offers consistent surf from April to September, with some good days until November. The surf does not produce high-performance waves but there are good right-breaking waves of up to 1.6m, and it's a good place to learn to surf. With a water temperature of 24°C to 28°C year-round, you don't need a wet suit. The main promontory on the south curl of Arugam Bay (near Mambo's) is arguably the best surf spot: it's easy to reach and has a long, sectioned wave rolling north. But there are many more breaks of similar quality, including Pottuvil Point, to the north of Arugam Bay (Rs 800 return by three-wheeler); Pasarichenai Beach, near Crocodile Rock (Rs 250, 3km south of Arugam Bay); and various others further south, including Peanut Farm, Panama and Okanda.

From November till early March the waves die off but you might find surf a few days a month off the main beach.

Places that rent out boards:

A-bay Surf Shop (☎ 077 707 0307, 077 958 5008; boogie boards Rs 250-300, surfboards Rs 400-500) Rents out boards, fixes broken fins, and arranges scooter and motorbike hire.

Aloha (boogie boards Rs 450, surfboards Rs 700-1200)

This guesthouse (p273) has about the best quality boards available. Johnson, the manager, is a local surf champion.

Surf & Sun (short/long boards per half-day Rs 250/400)

The very surf-savvy owners of this guesthouse (p273) organise various surfing excursions, including multiday trips using their own Land Rovers.

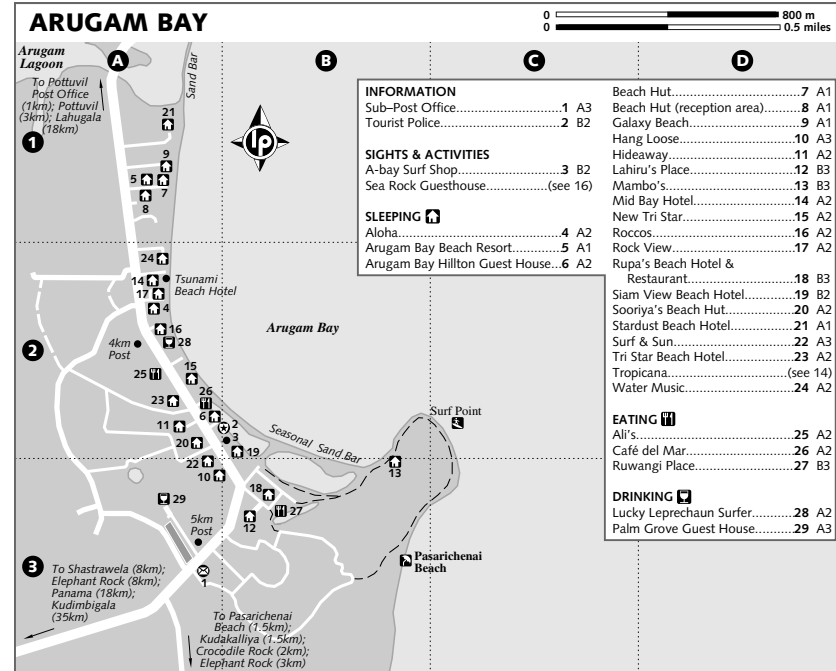
Mambos (boogie/surfboards per hr Rs 100/200) The boards at this guesthouse (p272) are expensive, but OK for beginners wanting just a quick splash.

SWIMMING

Seas are OK for swimming during the low season, but ask local advice before plunging in at lesser-known beaches where rips might be strong.

WALKING & CYCLING

It's possible to walk right around the surf point and down the mostly undeveloped Pasarichenai Beach to long, low Crocodile Rock. When water levels are low you can ford the nearby creek and continue to Elephant Rock, which you can climb for beach views and the possibility of spotting elephants, especially at dusk. Further inland, reached by a confusing, twisting track south



of Elephant Rock, is the ancient if somewhat underwhelming cave-temple complex of Shastrawela. Like so many places in the region, this spot is mythically linked with Queen Viharamahadevi. With a bicycle it's accessible from the Panama road, though the last section (behind an army camp) gets rough and steep. The Panama road makes for pleasant, if very hot, cycling.

NATURE-WATCHING

The highly recommended mangrove tours (Rs 1500 including transfers) on Pottuvil Lagoon (p269) are sold from the Arugam Bay Hillton Guest House (p273). This splendid grass-roots initiative supplements the incomes of local fishermen, and a percentage of profits is donated to an important mangrove replanting programme.

The Hillton also plans sea safaris (around Rs 2000) to see whales and dolphins, but you can organise the trip for yourself by calling the **United Deep Sea Fishermen's Co-operative Society** (☎ 0777 845266).

Several guesthouses offer tours to the Yala East National Park, but these get pretty

expensive and, unless you have a specialist interest, the excellent wildlife-watching possibilities outside the park will probably satisfy you at a vastly lower cost.

Ask guesthouses about crocodile tours or just head to Panama and take a three-wheeler to Crocodile Lake. Along the way there's a high chance of seeing elephants. There's a good chance of seeing crocodiles and elephants around Crocodile Rock on Pasarichenai Beach, just south of Arugam Bay proper. To see bigger groups of elephants, although at greater distance, head to Lahugala National Park (p269).

For **bird-watching**, the various nearby lagoons are marvellous for waterfowl and waders, while brahminy kites regularly soar above the surf point.

TAMIL LESSONS

Inquire at **Sea Rock Guesthouse** (☎ 224 8341) about Tamil lessons.

GAMES & PASTIMES

Aloha (☎ 224 8379) has table football, **Galaxy Beach** (☎ 224 8415) has a badminton set and

several guesthouses keep a selection of board games and reading books. **Hideaway** (☎ 224 8259) has a little library that includes some practical bird-watching guides.

Sleeping

Note that many of the restaurants have rooms, and most of the guesthouses serve meals; the line between the two is blurred. Many other places were under construction or reconstruction at the time of writing, so expect plenty of new alternatives. Spookily, the Tsunami Beach Hotel was named well before the 2004 disaster. It should soon be up and running again soon.

The term 'cabana' is applied to anything from ultrabasic plank or *cadjan* huts to rather luxurious full-facility concrete bungalows. Prices quoted are for high season (May to September). Off-season discounts of 20% to 35% are common. Come prepared for power cuts with a torch for cheaper places, which usually don't have generators.

BUDGET

Many locals have erected a cabana or two or rent out cheap rooms to tourists. Some of the people most affected by the tsunami ask for donations of mattresses or equipment; while perhaps understandable, this makes for an uncomfortable atmosphere and such places have not been reviewed here.

Beach Hut (☎ 224 8202; cabanas Rs 350-800) It's hard to beat this place for atmosphere, budget-level great value, excellent food and thoroughly friendly management. The reception area is slightly set back from the beach with a few rooms, including two two-storey *cadjan* affairs with a bathroom downstairs and an airy bedroom above. The tightly grouped knot of basic shared-facility huts has an even better location – they're right on the beachfront. Remarkably, some of these well-designed high-stilt cabanas survived the tsunami, which washed underneath. Lamps are somewhat understrength. Free bicycle use for guests.

Lahiru's Place (☎ 077 900 5322; d Rs 350-650) Extremely basic, but this place is popular for having the cheapest huts close to the surf point. Many guests rave about the iced coffee and the mashed potatoes.

Mambo's (☎ 077 782 2524; s/d Rs 1000/2000) Uniquely located right next to the main surf point, the four single-bed cabanas here are

ultrarough bare-plank shacks, but the three doubles are solid new affairs with toilet and fan. The café closes during the low season, requiring you to make a dark trek across the beach to find your dinner.

Rock View (☎ 077 642 4616; tw/cabana Rs 700/1500) This guesthouse's sturdy, concrete-floored cabana, sleeping three or four people, is right on the beach. Its private bathroom is appealingly decorated with shell fragments. Cheaper rooms are tucked behind the quiet restaurant.

Rupa's Beach Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 077 666 0934; cabanas Rs 1000-1200, bungalows Rs 2000) Location is the key for this somewhat overhuddled selection of basic cabanas, which have solid concreted floors, small double beds and shared bathrooms. Each cabana has a table on the small porch area. The sturdier concrete bungalows with tiled floors and private facilities are not the best option in the price range. The café has Western food, but the potentially lovely view of the fishing beach is marred by chicken wire.

Sooriya's Beach Hut (☎ 224 8232; s with/without bathroom Rs 600/400, tw with/without bathroom Rs 900/600) The boxy old rooms in the main concrete house are sensibly priced, if charmless. One of the two top-floor basic *cadjan*-walled rooms surveys the town, with glimpses of beach. Ram, the wise and charming owner, is a fascinating character with the looks of a sadhu. The phone line is awaiting reconnection.

Other recommendations:

Hang Loose (☎ 224 8225, 077 606 5097; d with shared toilet Rs 400, d/tr with private toilet Rs 800/900) Bare bulbs, fan and shared showers. There are no mosquito nets. The restaurant closes during Ramadan.

Tropicana (☎ 224 8242; tw Rs 800) Five basic but fresh, brand-new fan-cooled huts with outside WC. Near, but not on the beach.

Mid Bay Hotel (☎ 224 8390; d Rs 1000) Big unadorned fan-cooled rooms with private bathrooms but no mosquito nets. Prices halve during the low season.

Arugam Bay Beach Resort (☎ 224 8405; d Rs 1000-1500) Reasonable, if somewhat roughly finished, concrete cabanas without beach views.

MIDRANGE

Hideaway (☎ 224 8259; tissara@eureka.lk; d/cabanas/bungalows Rs 2200/2500/3000) This recommended NGO favourite has attractive rooms set off lovely wide verandas that drip with bougainvillea. Pleasantly shaped cabanas are bright

and have hammocks, while bungalows are more solid and spacious with a chaise longue and a shower that runs off the stonework like a waterfall. It's easy to miss Hideaway because it's hidden at the back of a lush garden.

Surf & Sun (☎ 077 606 5099; www.surfsunarugam.com; cabanas Rs 2500) At night, clever lighting makes this one of the strip's most alluring choices. Comfortable, sturdy double cabanas with tiled floors have that desert island feel, with hammocks on the porch facing the coconut palms. A few cheaper wooden-stilt cabanas are also available. Boss Saman is a delightfully obliging yet laid-back local surfer dude who knows all the breaks on the coast. Internet connection is planned.

Aloha (☎ 224 8379; www.aloha-arugambay.com; cabanas Rs 1500-1800) The characterful cabanas here have straw hats as lamp shades, banana trees growing in some private bath yards, and brilliant upper-storey sitting areas. Lockable chests are ideal for your valuables. There's limited food availability.

Galaxy Beach (☎ 224 8415; d Rs 2500) This nice spot has six very likeable cabanas, as well as some artistry in towel presentation. Each has a lookout-cum-terrace overlooking the beach.

Water Music (☎ 077 905 9064; d with/without bathroom Rs 1600/1200) Two great *cadjan* cabanas with open-air private bathrooms are right on the rock-pocked beach, with wide views round to the distant surf point. Rooms with shared (salty-water) bathrooms are tucked behind the open restaurant area.

Arugam Bay Hillton Guest House (☎/fax 224 8189; www.arugambay.lk; cabanas Rs 1300, tw Rs 1500-2700, q Rs 3000) Very clean, tiled rooms are somewhat small and dark downstairs, but brighter and with surf-point glimpses upstairs. One cabana is right on the beach, while the other is set back but has an upper-storey view platform. Both are made from *cadjan* but have private bathrooms. The Hillton is a popular meeting place and also offers a range of tours (p271).

Tri Star Beach Hotel (☎ 224 8404; bungalows/tw Rs 2500/4500; ☎ ☎) Newer rooms are oddly paired in semidetached concrete cottages alongside Arugam Bay's only swimming pool. Each room has hot water, BBC World TV and (somewhat weak) air-con, but light bulbs come bare and some terraces face walls. The drastically overpriced older bungalows are due for replacement.

Siam View Beach Hotel (☎ 224 8195; www.arugam.com; r Rs 2500-4000; ☎ ☎) This place was only partially complete at the time of writing, but the beautifully tiled rooms that were operational were impressive. Rooms have stone-floor bathrooms, while fish tanks built into the hotel's southern wall add character. It is German-owned and the subject of much local gossip and jealousy.

Roccos (☎ 077 664 2991; www.roccoshotel.com; d from Rs 2000) Eye-catching lamps made of recycled bottles draw you in at night, and the rear rooms are spacious and well built. Those further forward are more cramped but have sea-facing terraces.

TOP END

Stardust Beach Hotel (☎ 224 8191; www.arugambay.com; d downstairs/upstairs Rs 5400/6400, cabanas Rs 2400) This sturdily attractive, Danish-owned hotel commands a wide area of beach at the lagoon end of the strip. Upstairs rooms have a fridge and a beach-view balcony, while the *cadjan*-walled cabanas have brick floors, desks and lamp shades. The whole place is quietly stylish – but so it should be at these prices. The food is widely recommended (p274), and the yoga hall is being reconstructed.

Kudakalliya (☎ 224 8636; Pasarichenai Beach) This is a luxurious self-contained holiday home quite separate from the rest of Arugam Bay. Located towards Crocodile Rock, it will sleep up to four couples (when completed). Watch crocodiles in the creek behind the house, or survey the wide undeveloped beach from the water-tower lookout point. Beyond two basic shops catering to resettled tsunami victims, there are no dining facilities anywhere near so the kitchen will be useful.

New Tri Star (☎ 224 8454; fax 224 8011; tw Rs 5500; ☎ ☎) This is a discordantly modern hotel that enforces strict halal, no-alcohol rules for its predominantly Muslim clientele. A foyer with marble tables and a stylish café ends in glass doors to the beach. Painted in startling turquoise, rooms are new and well equipped, if slightly undersized.

Eating

Beach Hut (☎ 077 317 9594; meals Rs 100-150, lobster dinner Rs 600) Order ahead and join the convivial communal meal at this guesthouse (opposite). Food here is delicious and superb value. Ranga's occasional seafood or lobster beach barbecues are legendary.

Ruwangi Place (meals Rs 100; ☎ from 1pm & 7.30pm) This is a single, simple *cadjan* room offering 'The Best Rice and Curry (I Think)'. We agree. The communal all-you-can-eat set vegetarian meal is cheap yet superb. Local pensioner-singer 'Jimmy' often arrives in an arrack haze to informally serenade diners. 'Thanks for pot smoking' says another sign; it's not a spelling mistake. Booking ahead is wise.

Surf & Sun (☎ 077 606 5099; www.surfsunarugambay.com; mains Rs 280-450) Feast on superb ginger fish (Rs 320) and OK pizza (Rs 380 to 600) in the comfortable mood-lit, surfer-orientated reggae bar-café at this guesthouse (p273). It's open-sided but there are no sea views.

Stardust Beach Restaurant (☎ 224 8191; mains Rs 700-1050) The restaurant at Stardust Beach (above) has a wide menu of consistently excellent international dishes, ranging from paella (Rs 736) to Danish-style burgers (Rs 862), albeit at almost European prices.

Café del Mar (mains Rs 350-600) This is an open-sided five-table restaurant facing the fishing beach, with hammocks, swing seats and a few chill-out cushions. Follow ginger chicken satay (Rs 350) with a rum-pineapple flambé (Rs 200) and the bay's only Lavazza espresso (Rs 150).

Galaxy Beach (☎ 224 8415; mains Rs 350-400) This likeable hotel (p273) serves a flexible menu of Western-fusion cooking from a superclean modern kitchen. It has the best lime-papaya juice (Rs 90) on the beach.

Siam View Beach Hotel (☎ 224 8195; www.arugam.com; mains Rs 350-600) Pizza and authentic, if not truly memorable, Thai food is served at this atmospheric hotel-restaurant (p273). However, the manager's monkey is annoying.

Ali's (☎ 077 917 3961; meals Rs 45-130; ☎ 7.30am-10pm, Ramadan dusk-10pm) One of several local eateries dotted along the main road offering great breakfast *rottis* (doughy pancakes) and gut-busting yet complexly tasty chicken *kothu rottis* (*rottis* chopped and fried with a variety of ingredients). On request, staff can also marinate and cook up fish that you've bought from Pottuvil market.

Drinking & Entertainment

Arugam Bay is small: ask other travellers for the party place of the moment.

Siam View Beach Hotel (☎ 224 8195; beers Rs 150; ☎ 4pm-late) The café-bar in this hotel (p273) serves great locally brewed draught beers

and has a superb two-storey beach bar; the upper-storey Ladies' Lounge is decked out in cushions and is limited to women or 'loving couples'. The hotel is also a long-standing organiser of Thai-style beach parties.

Lucky Leprechaun Surfer (☎ 077 635 1965; beers R150-200; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Raised high above the beach with fantastic views, this is a great place to watch the waves while being served by Fasmeeen, a remarkable Freddie Mercury lookalike. Hammock in centre, whiffs of weed.

Roccos (☎ 077 664 2991) Located in Roccos hotel (p273), this Brit-managed beachside bar-restaurant has music that swerves somewhat schizophrenically from trance-house to soft jazz.

Palm Grove Guest House (☎ 224 8457; beers Rs 110, arrack shots Rs 55; ☎ 10am-10pm) This is a surprisingly airy place to get slammed with local boozers.

Mambo's (☎ 077 782 2524; ☎ May-Sep) In season, this hotel (p272) is the place for week-end beach parties.

Getting There & Around

Buses to Colombo and Badulla pick up in Arugam Bay at around 6.30am and 12.30pm respectively. Otherwise take a three-wheeler to Pottuvil (whole vehicle Rs 100, per person shared Rs 20) and continue from there.

It's possible to rent motorcycles from some guesthouses and from **A-bay Surf Shop** (☎ 077 707 0307, 077 958 5008; per hr Rs 350). Prices are somewhat random. Order one day ahead.

SOUTH OF ARUGAM BAY

Arugam Bay to Panama

Kilometres of untouched sandy beaches stretch south of Arugam Bay. The roughly asphalted lane to Panama stays somewhat inland but intersects with lagoons where you can spot waterfowl, wading birds, wallowing water buffalo and even the odd elephant. **Panama** is a sleepy little place with an attractive new white **dagoba** at the entry to the village. Panama's wide but unshaded arc of sandy beach is a kilometre east through town, skirting a lagoon and passing a graveyard. There's a surf break but seas are usually too heavy for safe swimming.

The NGO **Sewalanka** (www.sewalanka.org) is planning home stays, but as yet there's no accommodation.

The road from Arugam Bay to Panama is low in places and may be under water in the wet season (beware of crocodiles). If it's not too bad, you can make the trip in a three-wheeler (one way Rs 400) or wait for rare leaving-when-full buses.

Panama to Okanda

The road to Okanda is not asphalted, but it has been newly regraded. Just south of Panama village it crosses paddy fields and a marshy patch that attracts **crocodiles**. However, to see many more crocs, take the unmarked right fork soon after this marsh (the left fork is signed to Kumana). Continue along the sometimes sandy road for 2.5km to fabled **Crocodile Lake** (Kimbulawala), an attractive ancient tank where dozens of the creatures are menacingly visible at dusk.

Continuing on the Okanda road, around 9km from Panama is a tiny but lovingly tended Ganesh (Pillaiyar) shrine. The rocky outcrop behind the shrine is topped with a new Buddha image called **Sanyasi Mulai** in Tamil or **Veheregama** in Sinhala. Ancient steps in the rock suggest considerable antiquity; scurry up for views of the larger-scale rocks at Kudimbigala.

The superb 4700-hectare site of **Kudimbigala Forest Hermitage** is a marvellous jumble of Sigiriya-style outcrops set in dense jungle. Over 200 shrines and hermits' lodgings are set in caves or sealed rocky overhangs here. While none is individually especially interesting, the dagoba-topped summit of the highest rock offers marvellous panoramas across the eccentric landscape and expansive forest canopy. There are glimpses of lagoon and sand bars towards the shore, and the far southwestern horizon is distantly serrated by the spiky Weliara Ridge.

The Kudimbigala access track leads 2km west of the main Okanda track; although the sign at the junction of the road and the initial path has been ripped down, the turning is obvious enough. At the track's end take the path between the single pilgrims' rest building and the dagoba. The cave lip above the first whitewashed shrine has curious 2000-year-old Brahmi runes inscribed across it. From here bear right to find the steep, grooved steps to the highest summit. A metal guide rope helps, but descending could be dangerous in rain. If you're keen, there is a maze of smaller tracks linking

other caves, rocks, and even a wooden 'gong' fashioned from a hollow tree trunk.

No buses go beyond Panama, but the village has its own three-wheeler stand, 200m east of the Okanda junction; drivers ask around Rs 1500 for a half-day excursion to Okanda.

Okanda

The Arugam-Okanda road ends at the entry gate for Yala East National Park. Immediately east of the gate, Okanda is a seasonal settlement for local fishermen and home to the **Murugan Devale** (a *devale* is a complex designed for worshipping a Hindu or Sri Lankan deity). Though relatively small, the main temple has a very colourful *gopuram* (gateway tower), which survived the 2004 tsunami and is a major point on the Pada Yatra pilgrimage to Kataragama (see boxed text, p159). In trouble-free years, thousands of pilgrims gather here during the two weeks before the July *poya* (full moon) before attempting the last, and most dangerous, five-day leg of the 45-day trek from Jaffna.

The temple is of great spiritual importance as it marks the supposed point at which Murugan (Skanda) and his consort Valli arrived in Sri Lanka on stone boats. On the front frieze of the temple you'll see Murugan riding a peacock, with Valli and Dewani (a second consort of Murugan) at his side. He's watched by his mischievous brother Ganesh. Valli has her own tiny shrine on the **Okanda Malai rocks**, which rise directly above the main temple. Folds in those rocks create over 30 small *teertham* (holy pools), in which Valli is believed to have bathed. Pilgrims do the same, despite the water's rather green and stagnant appearance.

Just five minutes' walk from the temple is a sweeping beige white **surfing beach**. It's bracketed by two rocky promontories that devotees consider to be the remnants of Murugan's and Valli's divine stone boats. Surfers often camp on the dunes.

Yala East National Park & Kumana Reserve

This 18,149-hectare **park** (admission permits around Rs 1600; ☎ 5.30am-6pm) is much less frequently visited than its busy neighbour, Yala National Park. For the visitor, the result is a less 'zoolike' experience. However, with less manpower to prevent poaching, the range

WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Anyone venturing into this region should not forget that most of the east coast remains a potential conflict zone. At the risk of spelling out the blindingly obvious, don't snap unauthorised photographs of soldiers, checkpoints, military posts or potentially strategic sites like ports and bridges. Be aware that many locals will be too nervous to speak openly in public about politics, especially if that involves implied criticism of the feared LTTE. Patience and understanding pay off.

and density of animals is also less. The best-known feature is the 200-hectare **Kumana bird reserve**, an ornithologically rich mangrove swamp some 22km beyond Okanda. May to June is nesting season. The park also includes ruins, deer, elephants and touted-but-rare leopards. There have been sightings of Sri Lanka's very rare black-necked stork. The most famous resident is Okandaraja, a crossed-tusk elephant.

Nonspecialist visitors may find that the permit-free surrounding area has enough crocodiles, elephants and birdlife to render a trip into the park an unnecessary expense.

The **park information centre** (☎ 063-224 8623) at the Okanda gate has a three-dimensional map and reptile-identification posters, but is not enormously helpful.

Some agencies, including Colombo-based **Eco Team** (☎ in Colombo 011-553 3330; www.srilankaecotourism.com) and **Arugam Bay Hilton Guest House** (☎ /fax in Arugam Bay 063-224 8189; www.arugambay.lk) can arrange camping within the park, starting from Rs 4000 above basic trip costs.

Visits to Yala East get expensive because you'll need to rent a jeep (typically Rs 8000 per day on top of permit charges). No motorcycles are allowed.

POTTUVIL TO BATTICALOA

You can head north from Pottuvil in relatively easy minibuses via the predominantly Muslim towns of Akkaraipattu and Kalmunai. Although the route parallels the coast, sea views are minimal, and from Pottuvil to Batticaloa villages have merged to form what is virtually one unattractive strip town. Add the still considerable tsunami damage plus **Akkaraipattu's** communal ten-

sions (which saw grenade attacks between LTTE forces and Muslims in November 2005) and the area doesn't make for an ideal destination. The longer route via Ampara is more picturesque and has more sights; see p268, p269 and p280 for more details.

AMPARA

☎ 063

This reasonably prosperous district capital, patchily dappled with paddy fields, lakes and palm groves, is a possible base for visits to the Gal Oya National Park and various beautiful lakes and tanks in the surrounding countryside. It's a local transport hub, and is currently the base for many NGO workers, who find the town's workmanlike hospitality, good order and lack of Islamic restrictions much easier than the ravaged coastal towns.

Orientation & Information

Ampara is very spread out. DS Senanayake Rd is the main commercial street.

Chan Computer House (☎ 077 717 3987; 75 DS Senanayake Rd; per min Rs 8; ☎ 9am-6pm) Friendly Internet place. You can prepare your emails for free.

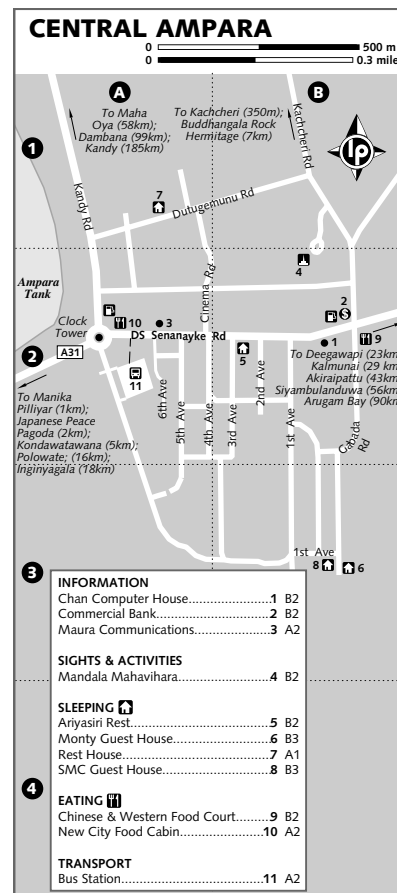
Commercial Bank (DS Senanayake Rd; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Has ATM, and changes money. Several other banks towards the clock tower also have ATMs.

Maura Communications (DS Senanayake Rd; per min Rs 8; ☎ 8am-9pm) Internet place. You can also make telephone calls here.

Sights

West beyond the clock tower and bus station, DS Senanayake Rd leads towards Inginyagala, passing scenic Ampara Tank. After about 2km (just after the 25km marker), a short right turn brings you to the graceful **Japanese Peace Pagoda**. Come here just before dusk for an almost certain chance of seeing **wild elephants**. As though on command, they pass as through a narrow passageway right in front of the pagoda. The point is even marked 'Wild Elephant Crossing'. But this is no circus show. There is a palpable sense of awe among those who come to watch; after all, wild elephants killed five humans around Ampara in 2005 alone.

The central Buddhist **Mandala Mahavihara** (Kachcheri Rd) has a large pagoda. Its interior is somewhat tackily painted with Buddhist scenes and a cloud-dotted 'sky', but it's worth a visit to listen to the eerie echoes. **Sri Manika Pillaiyar** (Inginyagala Rd) gives Ganesh



a lovely view across Ampara Tank; it's at the 24km post.

Although it was once known as Digamadulla, after founding king Digayu, today's Ampara shows few signs of its great antiquity. However, one minor historical curiosity is the **inscription stone** housed in the foyer of the *kachcheri* (administrative office). Found at Kondawatawana 5km to the west, it instructs villagers on how to punish crimes (and ploughing errors!).

Sleeping

Monty Guest House (☎ 222 2169; C32 1st Ave; r Rs 650-4000; ☎) The top choice has obliging staff and 50 rooms of varying quality. The best are full-facility air-con suites with lovely

sitting areas from where you can gaze out across the paddy fields. These have hot water, coffee-making facilities and minibars, and are often booked out by NGO workers. The cheapest rooms are contrastingly basic, with very worn paintwork and dodgy shared showers. Rooms in between include drab air-con twins from Rs 1500. Monty's is hidden away in a peaceful, green residential area that's a 10-minute stroll south of Commercial Bank.

Rest House (☎ 222 3612; Dutugemunu Rd; dm Rs 220-303) The five beds in these dorm-style rooms are charged according to how many people sleep in the room; prices range from Rs 303 for one bed to Rs 1028 for all five. It's clean, if institutional, with recently redecorated bathrooms and a peaceful yet central location. To find it, walk two blocks north up Kandy Rd from the clock tower, then turn right. It has a basic bar and dining room.

Ariyasiri Rest (☎ 222 3282; 3rd Ave; s Rs 400, tw 500-900, tr Rs 850-950) This place is visible from DS Senanayake Rd, but is entered through a squalidly narrow crack in the wall of the side street. The entry is enough to put off all but the hardest customer. Yet, if you dare to squeeze through the first building of demoralisingly cramped dosshouse rooms, you'll find a surprisingly pleasant second house in the rear garden. Rooms here are neat and clean, set off a communal upstairs dining area. Some share sparklingly clean new bathrooms, others have private facilities but are mustier.

SMC Guest House (☎ 222 3589; 1st Ave; d Rs 500) This small fall-back next door to Monty's tends to attract noisy arrack drinkers and by-the-hour custom.

Eating

Chinese & Western Food Court (☎ 222 2215; Gabada Rd; mains Rs 200-450; ☎ 11.30am-3pm & 6-10.30pm) Set in a tropical garden, this is far-and-away Ampara's most alluring dining place. The wide range of well-cooked dishes includes good stir-fried cuttlefish and excellent 'crumb chicken' – think Kentucky smeared with crushed garlic.

Monty Guest House (☎ 222 2169; buffet Rs 350; ☎ 6.30-10pm) The six-dish buffet dinners served around a lily-covered pool and bamboo grove at this guesthouse (left) are great for meeting expat visitors. It's reliably

tasty, though there's little variation night after night. Don't confuse it with poky little Monty Restaurant on DS Senanayake Rd.

New City Food Cabin (meals Rs 50-130; ☎ 7am-9pm) The brightest of several budget eateries around the clock tower, this place rings with the deafening knifework of the *kotthu rotti* maker each evening. It also serves tasty fish rolls (Rs 18) and cutlet balls (Rs 12).

Getting There & Away

AIR

For scenic, weather-dependent hops to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport, **Sri Lankan Air Taxi** (☎ 019-733 3355; www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi) flies from a small military airport 5km northwest of Ampara town. Planes leave according to demand, most frequently on Mondays and Fridays. It's US\$200 per person (50 minutes), or US\$800 for the whole plane.

BUS

The bus station is directly south of the clock tower. For Kandy, intercity buses (Rs 255, 4½ hours) leave every 45 minutes from 5.30am; normal buses (Rs 98, six hours) take longer. Buses to Colombo (Rs 300, 10 hours) leave regularly between 4pm and 8pm, some looping north via Kandy, others passing through Monaragala and Ratnapura. The Colombo buses can be prebooked.

For Arugam Bay you could minibus-hop via Akkaraipattu (Rs 32) and Pottuvil. Or, more attractively, leave before 1.15pm on any southbound bus to Siyambulanduwa and change there. For Batticaloa, minibus-hop via Kalmunai (Rs 30).

For the Hill Country there's a 2.30pm service to Nuwara Eliya (Rs 80, 2½ hours), while 6.10am and 2pm buses to Badulla take a superbly scenic country route via Bibile. There are 10 daily buses to Buttala and Monaragala, several continuing to Matara on the south coast.

AROUND AMPARA

☎ 063

Buddhangala

When approached through the secondary-growth scrub from Ampara or viewed across the paddies from the Ampara-Kalmunai road, **Buddhangala Rock Hermitage** (☎ 222 2030; donation appropriate) looks to be little more than a slight bump on the horizon. Yet at around

150m tall, it's the highest point in the area: from the top there's a wide panorama of surprisingly impressive views. Thanks to a very conscientious monk-guide and a useful explanatory pamphlet in English, the site's special spiritual relevance comes to life. Within an ancient cave overhang there's a small but interesting case of museum-style treasures. Revered Buddha relics are concreted into the sizable whitewashed dagoba. Beside the dagoba a squat and unaesthetic concrete building has an eight-frame 'history' of Buddhism in Sri Lanka painted on the ceiling. Frame six shows Dutugemunu's army heading for battle; armed with picnic skewers, the soldiers look rather fey, but the scene is controversial for it's political (rather than religious) focus. Ignoring all this is a large seated Buddha resembling Boy George, complete with karma chameleon aura.

The hermitage is 7km from Ampara; three-wheelers cost Rs 400 return.

Deegawapi

Deegawapi (Dighavapi Cetiya) is the one place in southeastern Sri Lanka that the Buddha supposedly visited in person – and three times at that – making the place of particular spiritual importance to Buddhists. It was built during the reign of King Saddartissa (137–119 BC) and patched up in the 2nd and 18th centuries AD before becoming lost in the jungle. Rediscovered in 1916, it has for decades been at the centre of disputes with the area's predominantly Muslim population, who fear the site could become a bridgehead for Sinhalese colonisation. Deegawapi's aged chief monk was killed in one such spat in 1952.

For many tourists the site isn't quite interesting enough to warrant the lengthy detour. While the vast central dagoba stub is intriguingly massive, its ancient red bricks lack the appealing forest setting of similar Yudaganawa. Nonetheless there is the compensation of a small **archaeological museum** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Wed-Mon), and numerous ancient flower altars and jumbled Buddha and elephant carvings ranged around the dagoba's circumference.

Gal Oya National Park & Inginyagala

Scenic rock-pocked and forested hills create a marvellously impressive horizon behind the waters of **Senanayake Samudra**, Sri Lanka's

biggest reservoir. The easiest way to view the scene is to climb the 40m-high dam, accessed at a small guard post opposite the hydropower station, 1km west of the Inginyagala roundabout (at the 41km post). The 78-sq-km sea, formed by the dam in 1948, is the main feature of the 62,936-hectare **Gal Oya National Park**. It supports a local fishing industry, water birds (notably cormorants) and a wide variety of wildlife, including plenty of elephants, which can be spotted in unusually large groups here.

To enter the park you'll need to arrange things with the **park office** (☎ 224 2002; permits per day US\$14; ☎ 24hr), which is in woodland off the main road between the dam and the roundabout. Minimal English is spoken.

The ideal way to visit the park is by boat; however, the park authorities don't allow tourists to charter fishing boats and the park's own craft is currently out of commission. Eventually you should be able to arrange tours through **Safari Inn** (☎ 224 2147; prem_lake@yahoo.com), which is rebuilding, to ambitious standards, a decrepit old hotel 300m south of the Inginyagala roundabout. Some ecotour agents advertise Gal Oya trips (see, for example, www.srilankaecotourism.com/galoya_national_park.htm), but in reality departures are rare.

While in Inginyagala, take a look at the well-signed **Fatima Shrine**, whose naive-style Christian statuary fills an attractive garden. It culminates in a Madonna statue on a tall brick pillar, half lost in the tentacles of a banyan tree.

From Ampara several buses per hour run to Inginyagala (Rs 18, 40 minutes) via Polowate. Six daily buses continue to Wadinagala, including the 6pm to Colombo via Siyambulanduwa and Monaragala.

Inginyagala to Bibile

Just 2km east of Inginyagala on the A31 is **Polowate** village, where the recently excavated **Owagiriya Ruins** are 200m south of the main road. Thought to date from King Saddartissa's reign (2nd century BC), they include a 2m decapitated Buddha torso and several pillar stubs, but there's minimal visual wow factor.

The very peaceful B527 jungle road from Polowate to Bibile is one of the most attractive in the region. Some 8km from Polowate it crosses the bund of the picturesque **Namal**

Oya Tank, which still sprouts the stumps of drowned trees. Beyond, it follows the Gal Oya National Park boundary, and after Mullegama there are wonderfully jumbled rocky outcrops draped in lush forest.

Two daily Ampara-Bibile buses (Rs 80, 2½ hours), eventually bound for Badulla, use this road, departing Ampara at 6.15am and 2pm.

Bibile

☎ 055

Busy little Bibile is a typical junction town, but it has a handful of 'ancient' temples, each around 5km from the town centre. Essentially, the temples are relatively modern rural monasteries around some fairly minimal ruins – their charm lies in their peaceful settings and the local monks' total surprise to see tourists at all. The ruins at **Kotasesera** are flanked by two curious lemon-yellow prayer houses that look more like Vietnamese Cao Dai churches, while its 200-year-old **image house**, in front of the main dagoba, has some beast and demon reliefs. The approach road through mossy rubber trees and across mountain-backed rice paddies has a few briefly spectacular sections. En route you can make a rough 1km detour to **Badullagamma Monastery**, which has a degraded 500-year old reclining Buddha torso and some faded murals.

Appealingly situated **Nagala Viharaya** (☎ 226 5603) is also very historic, but it is most interesting for offering **meditation retreats**, due to start in 2006. These will be run in a brand-new prayer hall with six simple guest rooms. Before arriving, arrange details with Reverend Sumonasara, who has a Dalai Lama sense of humour and studied at Catford in London. Nagala's **Cobra Rock**, named for its snakes, not its shape, slopes down to a bucolic tank. It's an idyllic spot to watch ox ploughs working the paddies, with the Hill Country rising up as a wide backdrop.

Of Bibile's three guesthouses, the best is **Sisila Rest Inn** (☎ 226 5691; Pitakumbura Rd; tr Rs 550), about 200m down the B527 towards Ampara. The five rooms have clean bathrooms and food available if you order in advance. No English is spoken.

Mecency Chinese (☎ 226 5279; Badulla Rd; meals Rs 55-150; ☎ 11.30am-2.30pm & 5-9.30pm), above the Abans Electronics store, is marginally Bibile's best eatery. Décor is limited to two

drooping palm fronds, but the egg fried rice (Rs 90) is uncommonly excellent.

With twice-hourly buses to Monaragala (1¼ hours), Badulla (Rs 50, 2½ hours), and Mahiyangana (1¾ hours), Bibile is a handy transport hub. The Badulla run is scenically magnificent. Badulla–Batticaloa buses also pass through. The main bus station is at the town's southern edge, 200m south of the Monaragala junction, but most buses trawl through town to the market before finally departing.

Ampara to Mahiyangana

In contrast to the beautiful southerly roads, this route lacks any real scenic splendour. There is eerily deserted scrubland between Uhana and tiny **Maha Oya**, whose one 'attraction' is **Kunuwaturebubule**, a handful of entirely dull volcanically heated wells 2km north of town. If stranded in Maha Oya, **Wijewickrama Restaurant** (☎ 063-224 4001; Kandy Rd; tw Rs 650) has three rooms, one with a grubby private bathroom and noises in the roof.

Regions flanking the A5 and the A26 beyond are much more heavily populated. The latter skirts the southern edge of the **Maduru Oya National Park**, created to protect the water-catchment area of the big **Mahaweli Dam project**, which irrigates a vast new settlement area and was so significant that it featured on some Rs 2 coins. However, the park's creation meant that the **Veddahs** (p43), Sri Lanka's indigenous peoples, were suddenly branded as poachers for continuing their millennia-old hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

DAMBANA

The easiest way to encounter Veddah people is to visit Dambana, just 5km off the A26. Dambana comprises four subvillages, but you'll inevitably be brought to Kotabakina, where there are 10 traditional-style Veddah homes with thatched roofs and mud floors. On arrival you're likely to encounter a gaggle of long-bearded Veddah men beckoning you in. If the chief, Ururuwarige Wanniya-Laeto, is in residence, you'll first be introduced to him. He sits surrounded by photos of his meetings with minor celebrities and of his revered father (ancestors are gods in Veddah religion). The correct Veddah greeting is to say '*Honda Mai*' while grabbing the other's forearms (proving that you are unarmed!). After this, the men will typi-

cally whisk you off to another house to see **dancing** and **archery** displays, while trying to flog you honey, leopards' teeth and rough-hewn medicine cups. Especially without a translator this can feel uncomfortably voyeuristic, somewhat like hill-tribe tours in Thailand. In a well-intentioned but as yet unproven attempt to improve the present situation, an impressive **Veddah Heritage Centre** (Wariga Rukul Pojja; ☎ 7am-5pm), between Kotabakina and Dambana school, is nearing completion. The site includes an authentically styled Veddah house and tree hut, and plans to highlight the tribe's ecofriendly lifestyle, make comparisons with other aboriginal peoples and even offer tastings of *potu-pojja* (stone-baked *rotti*). The idea is to celebrate and perpetuate Veddah culture, though almost by definition any commercialisation of that culture is liable to have the opposite effect.

Although ethnically Sinhalese, casual guide **GEM Jaisundara** (☎ 077 314 2419) speaks Veddah language and some English, and can take keen visitors to Veddah haunts deep in the jungle.

Ampara–Kandy buses and very slow Maha Oya–Mahiyangana minibuses stop at the 90km marker on the A26. Waiting three-wheelers charge Rs 150 return to Kotabakina. A three-wheeler from Mahiyangana costs Rs 350 return.

Ampara to Batticaloa

KALMUNAI

☎ 067

The only reason most tourists stop in Kalmunai is to change buses on the way between Batticaloa and Ampara or Pottuvil. The town does have a strikingly attractive arc of palm-backed beach. However, the whole foreshore is still littered with tsunami-wrecked building foundations, hardly creating a holiday atmosphere. And strong Islamic mores don't exactly encourage bikinis. The easiest beach access is 1km down Rest House Rd, the first asphalted street to the right if you're walking north from the minibus station – the Central Transport Board (CTB) bus station is just across a Y-junction from that minibus station, facing People's Bank.

New **Superstar Tourist Inn** (☎ 222 9022; 23/1 Yard Rd; d Rs 1500-2000; 🏠), in a houselike building, has fresh, air-conditioned rooms, most with hot water units in spacious private

bathrooms. Simpler Rs 1500 rooms share a bathroom. Yard Rd is on the left-hand side of Rest House Rd, halfway to the beach. Wind north for around 700m and you'll find the inn set in an attractive garden to the right.

New London Guest House (☎ 222 4525; 103 Rest House Rd; d with fan/air-con Rs 1500/2500; 🏠) is better known but less appealing than Superstar, with clean rooms ranged around an unexotic eating area that can get noisy. The cheaper fan rooms are pretty small and tend to overheat. All have a small bathroom. The beer garden out the front is popular.

KALMUNAI TO BATTICALOA

Minibuses fill rapidly, but the mere 39km takes around 1½ hours. The journey is tediously slow through almost continuous strip villages; you'll get glimpses of lagoon and beach only when crossing the causeways. Many concrete-box Hindu temples along the way have typically colourful décor, including one with a five-headed giant cobra licking a *lingam* (phallic symbol) at **Koddaikallar**.

BATTICALOA

☎ 065

Batticaloa, Batti for short, has no must-see sights. Nonetheless the relatively compact, steamy centre oozes an intangible charm, magnified by the palm-filtered sunlight glancing off the surrounding lagoons. Around town, the beaches are gorgeous if utterly undeveloped.

Orientation

Central Old Batti is a bridge-linked island sheltered within a complex lagoon system. It's gripped from the north by a double-pronged peninsula; the eastern prong (Koddamunai) shares the commercial centre and hosts the train station. Koddamunai itself is linked by a big bridge to a long, beach-edged southern peninsula (Kallady), down which New Batti extends for some 10km towards Kalmunai.

Information

Bank of Ceylon (Covington Rd; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri)

Commercial Bank (Bar Rd; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM.

Internet Café (22 Lloyds Ave; per hr Rs 50; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) The very friendly owner speaks Dutch and English.

People's Bank (Advocate's Rd; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri)
Post office (Post Office Rd) One of the colonial-era post boxes here is over 90 years old.

Wisdom Cafe (☎ 222 2963; 70/1 Bar Rd; per 20 min Rs 20-30; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm) Internet café.

Sights & Activities

OLD BATTI

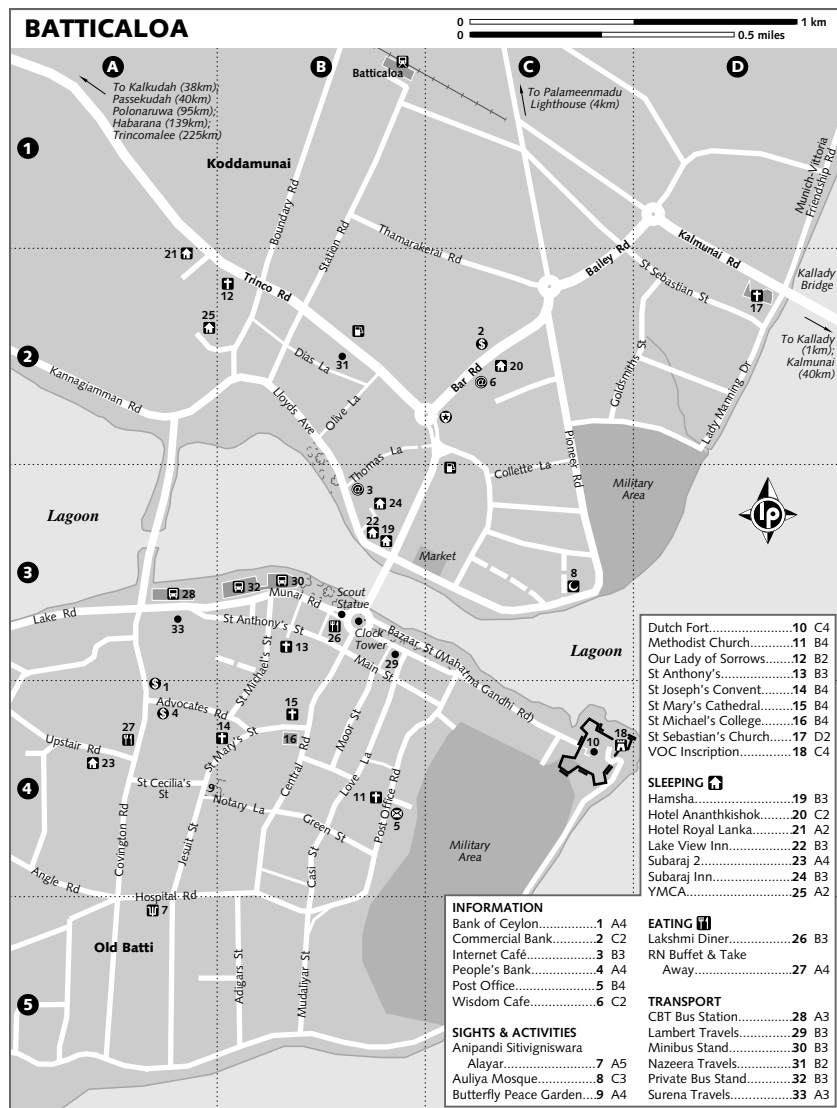
Wandering around Old Batti is particularly atmospheric late at night: cicadas scream and water drips, but not a soul stirs on the eerily empty streets. Dim street lamps give lugubrious form to shadows in the various colonial edifices like **St Joseph's Convent** (St Mary's St), **St Michael's College** (Central Rd) or the sturdy 1838 **Methodist Church** (Post Office Rd). Of the dozens of churches, the most eye-catching are the huge, unfinished **Our Lady of Sorrows** (Trinco Rd), the vaguely Mexican, earth-toned **St Anthony's** (St Anthony's St) and the grand, turquoise **St Mary's Cathedral** (St Mary's St). St Mary's was rebuilt in 1994 following its partial destruction during fighting between local Tamils and Muslims. Beside Kallady Bridge is the fairly modern **St Sebastian's Church** (Kalmunai Rd), built in the shape of a whale.

Of the many Hindu temples, **Anipandi Sivativigniswara Alayar** (Hospital Rd) is visually the finest, with a magnificent *gopuram* that's decorated with a riotous festival of intertwined god figures.

The 6m-thick walls of Batti's **Dutch fort** (Bazaar St) surround the rambling *kachcheri*. The walls themselves are not especially beautiful but they do have a 1707 **VOC inscription**, standing for Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company), which you can view while walking along the east-facing battlements. Be sure that you ask permission before approaching the fort and again before climbing the walls as parts remain under military control and the whole zone can sometimes become off limits.

A great place to observe the fort is from across the water, beside the tiny **Auliya Mosque** (Lady Manning Dr), with its curious green minaret.

The **Butterfly Peace Garden** (☎ 222 3492; 1A Jesuit St; admission free; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Tue, 5.30-6.30pm Wed-Sun) is a peaceful little oasis for children, though it primarily aims to provide play therapy for those affected by war and the tsunami.



KALLADY

Kallady has an idyllic strip of beach, but the rubble of tsunami damage remains everywhere. Notice the colourful **Tiruchendur Murugan Alayam temple** (Navalady Rd), which sits near the beach between Third and Fourth Cross Streets. Built in 1984 as a stopping point on the Pada Yatra pilgrimage to Katarama, its

Murugan image is reputed to have opened its own eyes before the painter could do the job. The structure was slammed by the tsunami, leaving its small *gopuram* leaning at an alarming angle. While visiting the site might seem like car-crash voyeurism, tourists are encouraged – their donations will eventually help to right the tower.

THE LAGOON

Bizarrely, Batti is famous for its 'singing fish'. Some describe the noise as a dolphin-like clicking and chirruping. Others have likened it to the sound produced by rubbing a moistened finger around the rim of a glass. Whether these were 'sung' by shoals of catfish, clusters of shellfish or various musical crustaceans, nobody's sure. In fact, since the 1960s very few locals have heard the 'singing' at all. Nonetheless the whole comical palaver can be amusing whether or not you actually hear anything; put a nylon string to your ear and dangle the other end in the lagoon water – ideally from a boat.

Some 5km north of central Batti, the 1913 **Palameenmadu lighthouse** was sturdy enough to survive the tsunami. It's not spectacular but its lagoon setting is lovely. To get to the lighthouse, follow Pioneer Rd north then wind along the attractive lagoonside, passing a palm-shaded landing point where outrigger fishermen bring home the catch around noon.

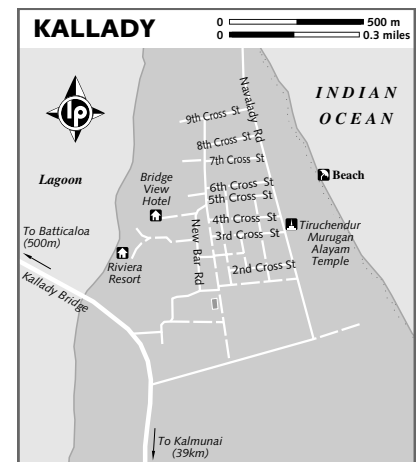
Sleeping

There's nowhere luxurious to stay in Batti. Many options are decidedly poor value by Sri Lankan standards but most are fully booked anyway so reservations are wise.

CENTRAL BATTI

Subaraj Inn (☎ 222 5983; 6/1 Lloyds Ave; s/tw Rs 1230/1980; 🚽) In *Only Man Is Vile*, William McGowan gets smuggled into Batti around 1987 to find Subaraj as the only hotel, its outside wall chipped and pocked with bullets fired by the 'peacekeeping' Indian army. These days things are much calmer and the air-conditioned Subaraj is a popular place. The bar and dining area certainly makes it the cosiest central option, but the rooms are damp and often windowless. Beneath new paint the walls have peeling sections. Subaraj 2, the unmarked annex on 1A Upstair Rd, has fresher, more appealing rooms, though they're still somewhat bare and gloomy. Check in at the Subaraj.

Hotel Ananthkishok (☎ 222 7283; top fl, 32 Bar Rd; s Rs 1500; 🚽) Because this place is new it's currently in great shape. Unfussy box-like rooms have shiny tiled floors, great air-conditioning and beds just about large enough for a cosy couple. However, many lamp bulbs are already missing, attached



toilets get sprayed by the shower and there's a slight concern with privacy as the flimsy curtains flap open when the fan is running. Management is haphazard.

YMCA (☎ 222 2495; Boundary Rd; tr/5-bed r Rs 900/2000; 🚽) The five-bed dormitory-style rooms here have good air-conditioning but are not available on a per-bed basis. The triples are fan-cooled. All have OK private bathrooms, and the position close to the lagoon is attractive, if mosquito prone.

Lake View Inn (☎ 222 2339; 6B Lloyds Ave; tw with/without bathroom Rs 650/550, with bathroom & air-con Rs 1350; 🚽) They're hardly appealing but the simplest rooms here are survivable, despite missing window slats – assuming you can persuade the boss to string up a mosquito net. The shared bathrooms aren't jolly. Ground-floor air-con rooms are particularly miserable, dark and musty.

Hamsha (☎ 222 3632; 2 Lloyds Ave; tw Rs 900) There are no nets in these grubby rooms with wet, uncleaned private bathrooms. Entry is via a flimsy metal staircase above a beer shop, and the reception is the 3rd-floor bar. Only the location recommends this place.

Hotel Royal Lanka (☎ 077 326 8279; 155 Trinco Rd; tw from Rs 400) The Rs 600 room with attached bathroom is the least depressing in this drably ordinary local hotel.

KALLADY

Peaceful and walkably close to the beach, these places are a Rs 100 three-wheeler ride from the town centre.

Riviera Resort (☎ 222 2164; New Dutch Bar Rd; s Rs 770, tw Rs 1100-1650) Perched at the water's edge with views of Kallady Bridge and the lagoon, this peaceful spot offers neat and clean, if unsophisticated, double rooms with prices that vary according to lagoon proximity. The Rs 1430 options are possibly the nicest, sharing an old-fashioned dining area, but the Rs 1650 twins each have a little terrace area of their own. Check out the tsunami photo album.

Bridge View Hotel (☎ 222 3723; 63/24 New Dutch Bar Rd; tw with fan/air-con Rs 1000/1800; ♿) This is good value by Batti standards but less appealing than the Riviera; any bridge views are imagined. The ground-floor rooms beside the restaurant are somewhat nicer than those upstairs.

Eating & Drinking

RN Buffet & Take Away (☎ 222 2684; 42 Covington Rd; lunch buffets Rs 275, mains Rs 110-286; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 7-10.30pm; ♿) This superclean little eatery above a grocery shop offers a six-dish lunch buffet that's not excessively priced. Dinner is à la carte with devilled dishes, noodles and curries.

Lakshmi Diner (23 Munai Rd; rice & curry Rs 50; ☎ 5.30am-9pm; ♿) There's no English sign, but this place, facing a scout statue, is easy to spot. Flies and rubbish-laden floors look off-putting, but the eat-with-your-fingers vegetarian curries are cheap and excellent.

Madras Cafe (Trinco Rd; meals from Rs 60; ☎ 5.30am-11.30pm; ♿) Late-night *kotthu rotti*.

The guesthouses **Riviera Resort** (☎ 222 2164; New Dutch Bar Rd; mains Rs 150-350) and **Subaraj Inn** (☎ 222 5983; 6/1 Lloyds Ave; mains Rs 110-400) have recommended places to eat that serve fair local, Chinese and occasional Western options. Both have decent little bars.

Getting There & Away

BUS

CTB buses, private buses and minibuses all have separate but adjacent bus stations on Munai Rd. To prebook Colombo departures (Rs 250, seven hours), use one of several specialist booking offices, including **Lambert Travels** (☎ 222 7204; 60 Bazaar St) and **Surena Travels** (☎ 222 6152; Munai St).

For Polonnaruwa (Rs 50, two hours) there's a noon CTB bus and plenty of private services bound for a variety of eventual destinations. Badulla-bound buses at 6.15am

and 11.30am go via Maha Oya. For Arugam Bay or Ampara go in hops via Kalmunai (Rs 30, 1½ hours); there are frequent buses and minibuses. Post buses to Mutur leave at 6.15am and 12.30pm, taking the LTTE-controlled coast road. Trinco buses travel via Habarana; there's a 6am express service (Rs 180, 5½ hours) that departs from outside **Nazeera Travels** (☎ 077 634 0351; 261 Trinco Rd); book your ticket at the agency.

TRAIN

You'll need to book one to 10 days ahead for berths or sleeperettes on the 7.15pm overnight train to Colombo (3rd/2nd/1st class Rs 310/420/700) via Polonnaruwa and Valaichchenai. A day train departs for Colombo at 6.40am.

AROUND BATTICALOA Kalkudah & Passekudah Beaches

☎ 065

To the north of Batticaloa, two fine curves of swimming beach nuzzle either side of the palm-tipped Kalkudah headland. Long touted as the east coast's touristic crown jewels, they had been recovering from years of civil-war damage when the 2004 tsunami obliterated everything. One day this lovely area is likely to be redeveloped, but for now the few who venture out here have virtually the whole place to themselves.

The smaller, safer, if less majestic, beach is Passekudah, to the north. There's a ghoulish fascination in exploring the concrete skeletons of two former resort hotels that had been sabotaged by the LTTE during the civil war to prevent their use as army strongholds. They're probably free of land mines but it definitely pays to be cautious.

The longer, creamier-coloured **Kalkudah Bay Beach** is one of those paradisaical postcard-perfect scenes dotted with occasional fishing boats and backed by palm plantations. The easiest beach approach is now blocked by an army camp at the end of the Valaichchenai-Kalkudah road. To reach the sand, bypass the camp and use the partly rebuilt beach-access lane 800m further southwest.

SLEEPING & EATING

The road southwest from Kalkudah village was once lined with modest hotels. Now only rubble remains amid the palms. The only accommodation now is a pair of basic guest-

houses, set back about 2km from the beaches on the Kalkudah-Valaichchenai road. Food is available by advance request.

New Pearl Inn (☎ 225 7987; d/tw Rs 700/700) This place has six unremarkable but acceptable rooms with fan, nets and clean bathrooms, ranged behind a pleasantly airy, if plain, old sitting area.

Simla Inn (☎ 225 7184; r without bathroom Rs 400) Victoria, the owner of Simla Inn, is legendary for her great curries and her incredible perseverance in adversity. Her Simla Inn was the only guesthouse to sit out the raging battles of the 1990s civil war. Then, having finally patched up all the bullet holes, the building got flattened by the 2004 tsunami. Unperturbed, Simla has risen again, 100m west of New Pearl. It's an ultrasimple pair of breeze-block houses without plaster or adornment. Nonetheless the four small rooms are clean and the shared bathrooms functional.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Three daily buses from Batticaloa (at 8.50am, 11.50am and 3.30pm) run to Kalkudah, passing Simla and New Pearl Inns. The last certain return is 1.30pm, though a 4pm service might run. Slow but much more frequent buses serve Valaichchenai (Rs 28, 1½ hours), which is 5km from the beaches. These get excruciatingly overcrowded between Eravur and Sittandy. Get off in Valaichchenai's market area; although the bus station is 1.5km closer to Kalkudah, finding three-wheelers (Rs 100) is harder there.

Buses on the Colombo-Polonnaruwa-Batti route might drop you off at the Valaichchenai junction on the A15. It's 2km south of Valaichchenai market but just 100m from Valaichchenai train station, where Colombo-Batticaloa trains stop twice daily. Be aware that there is a different train station called Kalkudah: it's tiny and very isolated, 2km southwest of Kalkudah beach on the seldom-used short-cut road from Kumburumoolai. Should you jump off a train here, turn right (north) and walk through the well-marked minefield towards the beach-access road.

Batticaloa to Trincomalee

From Valaichchenai most Trinco-bound traffic cuts inland via Habarana and Kantale, where virtually everyone stops to buy clay pots of locally famous **buffalo curd**. Al-

ternatively, twice-daily post buses take the coast road to Mutur, from where ferries cross Koddigar Bay to Trinco. The road between Valaichchenai and Mutur has minimal views but does provide the frisson of crossing LTTE territory.

COASTAL ROUTE TO MUTUR

The surprisingly low-key LTTE 'border' (☎ 6am-7pm) is just north of **Mankerni**, whose unusual modern **church** (Mutur Rd) has a doorway shaped like a silver fish mouth; look east from bus windows. It survived the 2004 tsunami, which hit during the Boxing Day service; virtually the whole village population was safe inside while their houses were washed into oblivion.

At **Panichchankeni** the road crosses a very flimsy causeway – attractive but unreliable in bad weather. The two biggest settlements in the LTTE zone are **Vakerai** (*va-hair-ra*) and **Kathiravelly**, both of which have LTTE **martyr memorials**. Severe postwar and post-tsunami poverty means that many people are living in wattle-and-daub or *cadjan* huts. Government control resumes at Mahindapura, where checks can be stringent.

Gently charming features of the trip include the two river-crossings at **Verugal** and **Kiliveddy**, where photogenic little ferries, just big enough for the bus, are pulled across by hand, using metal wires. At Palatoppu, three-wheelers await to whisk pilgrims to **Seruwawila**, where the ancient **dagoba** is believed to contain a fragment of Buddha's

ROAD WRECKS

None of Sri Lanka's roads are motorways. But in the east, war and neglect mean some supposed 'highways' are actually potholed wrecks with collapsed bridges that are often bypassed rather than repaired. Post-tsunami donors have been eagerly signing up to rebuild roads across the region (see www.humanitarianinfo.org/sri_lanka/docs/Annex-II.pdf), so expect a big improvement by 2008. However, nobody seems keen to rebuild the Mutur-Trinco road – it's now so appalling that buses are routed in a vast loop via Alyuru Junction and Kantale. For tourists, the happy result is an excuse to take the quietly attractive ferry ride across Koddigar Bay.

forehead. It's briefly, if distantly, visible from the main road.

Beware that there is nowhere to stay between Valaichchenai and Mutur, and there was only very basic local *kadé* (streetside huts) for rather sorry snacks.

MUTUR

☎ 026

The vibrant Muslim village of Mutur (*moo-d'r*) is not an attraction in itself. However, the Trincomalee boat ride is pleasant, especially in the late afternoon with the low light sparkling off Koddiyar Bay. If stranded in Mutur, the **Jaleel Guesthouse** (☎ 223 8444; Tariq St; tr Rs 600) is survivable, if hardly ideal for single women. It's totally unmarked behind Jaleel Shop on an unpaved street roughly 1km from the port – around halfway to the market where the Batticaloa buses terminate. Ask for directions at the first snack shop to the right on exiting the ferry jetty, or at Jaleel Hotel (a cheap eatery in the market).

Buses to Batticaloa–Mutur (Rs 82, six hours) run twice daily, departing Mutur at 5.30am and 12.45pm, and Batticaloa at 6.15am and 12.30pm. There's a meal stop at Valaichchenai bus station – helpful if you're coming from the Kalkudah beaches.

There's no passable Mutur–Trinco road. Go by boat (Rs 50, one hour); launches currently depart at 7.30am, 11am, 3pm and 4.30pm in both directions, though schedules change fairly regularly. Half an hour before departure, collect a metal tag to guarantee your place in case of overcrowding.

TRINCOMALEE

☎ 026 / pop 57,000

Trincomalee (Trinco) appeals to tourists primarily as the gateway to the fine Uppuveli and Nilaveli beaches. Possibly the site of historic Gokana in the Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle), the town itself is mildly attractive and is situated around several picturesque bays and rocky peninsulas. Its economic trump card is a superb deep-water port, considered to be one of the world's finest. However, this has made it the target for all manner of foreign attacks: the Danish preceded the Portuguese, who desecrated the city's holiest Hindu shrine before losing Trinco to the Dutch. By the British takeover in 1795, the city had changed hands another seven times. It

suffered further attacks in WWII, this time from Japanese bombing raids.

Today the population is a potentially explosive mix of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims. Although the city was safe and enjoyably vibrant at the time of research, interethnic tensions erupted again in April 2006, so keep your ear to the ground.

Orientation

Trinco's commercial heart is squeezed into a narrow isthmus that leads south to a large out-of-bounds peninsula occupied by the navy. Historic Trinco is a small thumb of rock jutting northeast, guarded by the remnant walls of Fort Frederick.

Information

Of the several banks along Central Rd, **Commercial Bank** (193 Central Rd) and **Sampath Bank** (262 Central Rd) have the most reliable ATMs. Moneychanger **Thassim Jewellers** (Dockyard Rd; ☎ 9am–7.30pm) opens longer and offers better, commission-free exchange rates than the banks for cash and travellers cheques.

Places offering Internet access:

EdgeNet@Cafe (81A Rajavarothayam St; per hr Rs 50;

☎ 7am–10.30pm)

JSP Internet Cafe (380 Court Rd; per hr Rs 60;

☎ 8am–9pm)

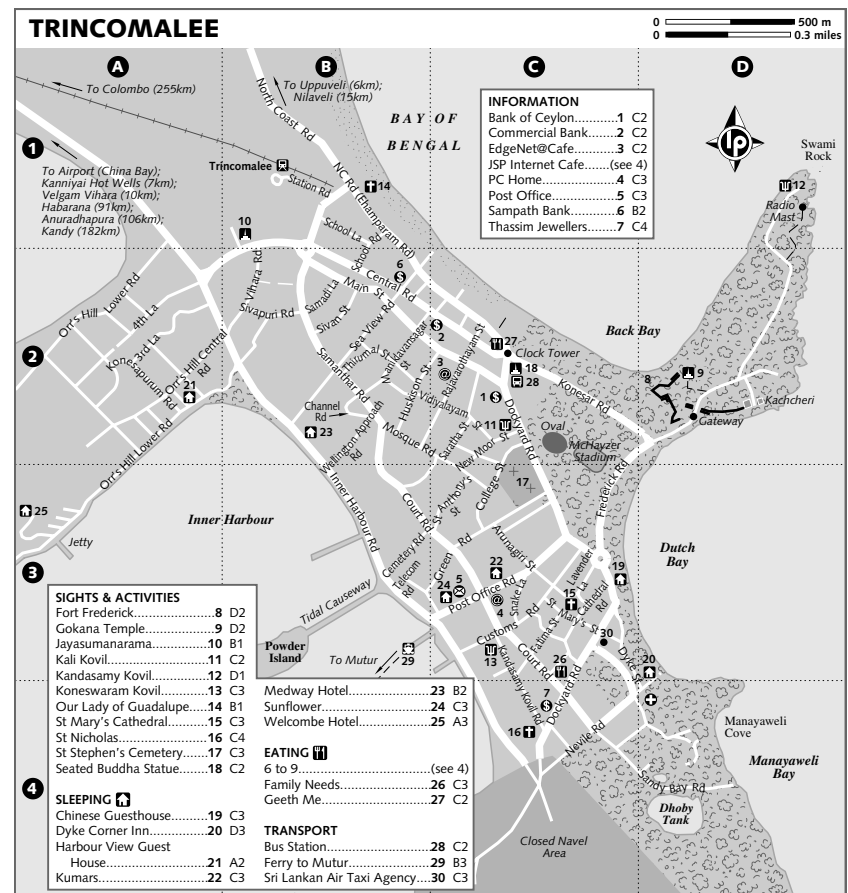
PC Home (358 Court Rd; per hr Rs 60; ☎ 7am–9pm;

☎ Usually the most reliable option.

Sights & Activities

FORT FREDERICK AREA

Built by the Portuguese, **Fort Frederick** was rebuilt by the Dutch. Today, British insignias crowns the tunnel-like gateway that pierces the fort's massively stout walls. Parts of the fortress are under military jurisdiction, but a stroll up to the big new standing **Buddha statue** at the **Gokana Temple** offers unhampered access to one stretch of the fortifications. Colonial-era buildings within the eastern section now house the **kachcheri**. The road beyond ends at **Swami Rock**, a 130m-high cliff nicknamed **Lovers' Leap**. On top is revered **Koneswaram Kovil** (☎ lingam viewing 7am–11.30pm & 4–6pm) Although not especially photogenic, it houses the rescued **Swayambhu Lingam** (p288), making it one of Sri Lanka's most spiritually important Hindu sites. The whole area is holy ground so, despite the painful gravel underfoot, you'll need to leave your shoes at the



car park, located beside a dramatic narrow cleft in the rocks. Geologists can't confirm whether this was created by a divine karate chop from the demon king Rawana.

OTHER RELIGIOUS SIGHTS

Kali Kovil (Dockyard Rd) has the most impressive, eye-catching *gopuram* of Trinco's many Hindu temples. Most others are outwardly rather plain, including the important **Kandasamy Kovil** (Kandasamy Kovil Rd), dedicated to Murugan. However, at sunset *puja* (prayer or offerings) times, chanting and incense billow forth atmospherically from many more.

The biggest Buddhist temple in Trinco, **Jayasumanarama**, is quicker to visit than to

pronounce, but it does have a fine bodhi tree and a pretty whitewashed dagoba. A new **seated Buddha statue** was erected in 2005, right at the busy bus station area. Given finely balanced interethnic relations this was considered a deliberate provocation by local non-Buddhists. Grenades were thrown, tit-for-tat assassinations followed and there were frequent *hartals* (general strikes) for a couple of months. However, the statue remains, wreathed in razor wire and guarded by army gun emplacements. The scene would be make a great photo – however, snapping such a picture would very likely get you interrogated or shot.

Of the churches the 1852 Catholic **St Mary's Cathedral** (St Mary's St) is particularly

RAWANA & THE SWAYAMBHU LINGAM

The radio-mast hill opposite Swami Rock is considered to be the site of the mythical palace of the 10-headed demon king Rawana. He's the Hindu antihero of the Ramayana, infamous for kidnapping Rama's wife Sita. Along with Sita, he supposedly carried to Lanka the Swayambhu Lingam, taken from a Tibetan mountaintop. This *lingam* (phallic symbol) became the object of enormous veneration. However, in 1624, the proselytising Catholic-Portuguese destroyed the surrounding cliff-top temple, tipping the whole structure, *lingam* and all, into the ocean. It was only retrieved in 1962 by a scuba-diving team that included writer Arthur C Clarke. Clarke described the discovery in *The Reefs of Taprobane*. For cameraman Mike Wilson, who first spotted the *lingam*, the experience proved so profound that he renounced his career and family to become Hindu Swami Siva Kalki (see <http://kataragama.org/sivakalki.htm>).

attractive, with a sky blue neobaroque frontage and a tiled, towered rear. Anglican church **St Nicholas** (Kandasamy Kovil Rd) is also appealing, while the church **Our Lady of Guadalupe** (NC Rd) rises discordantly from the ruins of its bombed-out former self.

BEACHES & WHALE-WATCHING

Trinco's most famous beaches are at Uppuveli and Nilaveli, but right in the centre, picturesque **Dutch Bay** is also attractive. Swimming is possible despite sometimes-dangerous undertows. However, it's more a place for strolling, and ice-cream sellers cater to the evening *passaggiata*. Don't consider bathing in **Inner Harbour**, where the water is so polluted that at times fish die off en smelly masse. **Manayaweli Cove** is an appealing curl of fishing beach reached by strolling past **Dhoby Tank**, where local washerwomen do their laundry.

You can try organising a whale-watching trip from here, though it's generally easier from Uppuveli, where boatmen are more familiar with tourist interests.

A peculiarity of **Seaview Road** is that if you stand in the middle you can see the sea at either end of the street.

Sleeping BUDGET

If you just want a bed there are all manner of sordid little dosshouses. These include rooms behind basic restaurants on Central and NC Rds, several places of dubious repute near the bus station and more-attractive places in the back alleys of Green St (though they're ultrabasic and full of transient Indian men). Many Western visitors don't stay in town at all, preferring the accommodation in Uppuveli (p291), just 6km north.

Kumars (☎ 222 7792; 102/2 Post Office Rd; s/d with fan Rs 450/500, tw with air-con Rs 900; 🍷) These are neat, good-value rooms located above a prize-winning 'cream-house' café opposite Sihara Cinema.

Sunflower (☎ 222 2963; 154 Post Office Rd; tw with fan/air con Rs 800/1800; 🍷) Located above a bakery-café are these rooms, which are pleasant and new, albeit slightly underlit.

Harbour View Guest House (☎ 222 2284; 22 Orr's Hill Lower Rd; tr with fan/air-con Rs 1100/1650; 🍷) These rooms are basic but clean with big bathrooms. The best feature is the ramshackle little terrace café area with nice bay views.

Chinese Guesthouse (☎ 222 2455; 312 Dyke Rd; tr Rs 400-500) There are no nets here, and the cheaper downstairs room have a slight 'prison feel' with black-green walls and window bars. However, the upstairs rooms are breezy and newly decorated, and there's a wonderful view of Fort Frederick ramparts from the shared terrace area. Good value.

Dyke Corner Inn (☎ 222 0318; 210/1 Dyke St; s/tw Rs 400/800) This place has small, basic but clean and reasonably bright rooms right on the beach. The bathrooms are shared for now.

MIDRANGE

Welcombe Hotel (☎ 222 3885; welcombe@sltnet.lk; 66 Orr's Hill Lower Rd; s/d/tr US\$45/45/60; 🍷 📺 📶 📶) By far the most creative architectural statement in Trinco's hospitality industry, the upmarket Welcombe's semi-Japanese taste for modern angles and lines looks great. However, style doesn't always prove comfortable, as you'll find from your wooden-board armchairs. There's a good restaurant and a wood-panelled pub. The swimming pool could use more-regular cleaning. In a previous incarnation this site was a secretive naval centre rumoured to have harboured a torture chamber.

TRINCO'S CELEBRITY CONNECTIONS

In 1775 young Horatio Nelson, future admiral and column topper, visited Trincomalee (Trinco) and described it as the world's finest port. In 1800 Arthur Wellesley, future Duke of Wellington, arrived in Trinco thinking he was due to lead an attack on the French island of Réunion. Discovering that he was, in fact, to be sent to Egypt, he pre-empted London's command and organised a force to depart for the Middle East from Bombay in advance of orders. However, just before departure he fell ill and didn't join the mission. That proved lucky for him because the *Susannah*, in which he was due to travel, sank without survivors in the Red Sea. Perhaps Napoleon would have won at Waterloo without Wellesley's timely bout of Bombay belly. Locals can't agree where exactly in Trinco Wellesley lodged, but it was probably within Fort Frederick. The Iron Duke is now honoured by a city-centre street named Wellington Approach Rd.

Some minor celebrities are supposedly buried in the rather overgrown **St Stephen's cemetery** (Dockyard Rd). These include author Jane Austen's younger brother (Admiral Sir Charles Austen) and PB Molesworth, a Ceylon railway manager whose amateur astronomy led him to discover Jupiter's Red Spot. If their graves are still there, seeking them out is frustratingly fruitless. The name plates on the headstones have since disappeared, and the Anglican church records that once showed where each grave was have been lost.

Medway Hotel (☎ 222 7655; fax 222 2582; jrstrinc@sltnet.lk; 250 Inner Harbour Rd; tw/tr Rs 3025/3575; 🍷 📶 📶) The eight sizable rooms here veer towards comfortable with 24-channel TV and (unreliable) hot water. The fragrant frangipani-and-hibiscus garden shades you from the views and smells of Inner Harbour bay.

Eating & Drinking

Basic eateries are dotted all over town, especially on NC Rd, Main St and in the busy block of Court St between Customs and Post Office Rds. There are also a couple of comical local party-night restaurants 2km northwest up the road to Anuradhapura, including Hotel Prasad with its zoo of concrete animals. However, few really deserve recommendation. Hotels at nearby Uppuveli (p292) offer a more cosmopolitan alternative.

Welcombe Hotel (☎ 222 3885; welcombe@sltnet.lk; 66 Orr's Hill Lower Rd; mains Rs 500-750) The appealing restaurant at this hotel (opposite) serves some original and mostly successful Western dishes, including lamb chop in wine and rosemary, and jumbo prawns in lemon-garlic butter.

Family Needs (☎ 222 7314; 145A Dockyard Rd; mains Rs 35-200; 🍷 7-10am, noon-2.30pm & 5-9.30pm) This shack-fronted rice-and-curry place, which you'd never look at twice, actually bakes the east coast's best pizza (Rs 200), with thick, leavened crust and not too much hot pepper. Order well ahead to get it fresh from the oven; availability is irregular.

6 to 9 (360 Court Rd; meals from Rs 60; 🍷 7am-2pm & 5-9pm) This is a very slight notch above most typical eateries, with a few attempts at décor including dangling plastic chillies and unusual green-and-red checkerboard walls. Serves typical noodles, curries and devilled dishes.

Geeth Me (☎ 222 2378; 25 NC Rd; meals Rs 150-600) A rare place offering beer (Rs 100) with meals. Food is fairly standard 'Chinese', but if you dare to wade through the dingy local drinking den at the front there's the underlit luxury of a two-table air-con dining room; it feels like the venue for a late-night poker session in a crime movie.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Scheduled AeroLanka flights to Jaffna and Colombo have been suspended. With a minimum of four passengers, **Sri Lanka Air Taxi** (☎ 019-733 3355; www.srilankan.aero/airtaxi) will fly to Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport from Trincomalee's China Bay airport (one way US\$225). However, customers are relatively rare so you may have to charter the whole plane (one way US\$900). You can book tickets in Trinco through the Sri Lanka Air Taxi **agency** (252 Dockyard Rd).

BUS

Private buses to Colombo (Rs 200, seven hours) leave Trinco from 5.30am to 5pm, and from 9pm to midnight. Air-con buses

(Rs 240, six hours) leave approximately every 45 minutes until midnight. You can use these to get anywhere en route, including Habarana, Dambulla or Kurunegala.

For Anuradhapura there are CTB buses at 7am, 9.50am and less reliably at 12.30pm. The last of the eight daily buses to Kandy (six hours) leaves at 2.30pm. Private and CTB buses to Vavuniya (for Jaffna) depart approximately hourly between 5am and 4pm (Rs 80, 4½ hours) using a very rough road. The 1.30pm bus continues to Mannar (Rs 130, seven hours).

Most private buses heading to Batticaloa (5½ hours) leave early in the morning, travelling via Habarana. For the rough coastal route start with the ferry to Mutur (p286).

TRAIN

There are two trains daily between Trinco and Colombo Fort via Habarana. The useful overnight sleeper service leaves Trinco at 8pm (3rd/2nd/1st class Rs 194/347/587, nine hours).

AROUND TRINCOMALEE

☎ 026

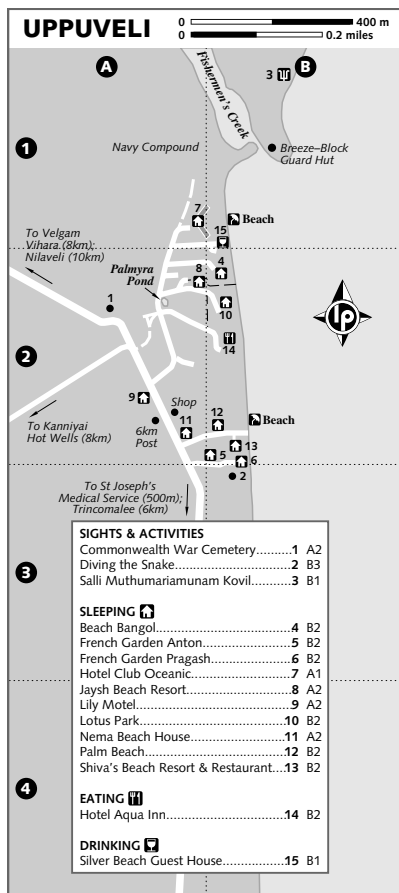
Apart from Arugam Bay, the only east coast beaches with any tourist infrastructure are north of Trinco at Nilaveli and Uppuveli. There's much more choice at Uppuveli (6km from Trinco), where you can café-hop along the attractive arc of beach and enjoy horizons that extend south to Swami Rock. Nilaveli is further from Trinco (16km to 18km) and hotels are too spread out to walk easily walk between them all. Nilaveli beach is straighter with a wilder, more deserted feel and is much closer to Pigeon Island, where you can snorkel and dive.

Beaches have golden and grey sands; the 2004 tsunami scoured off the famous powder-white layer that tourist brochures once touted.

From Trinco, or more conveniently from Uppuveli, you can make a mildly interesting excursion to the Velgam Vihara ruins and take a comical splash at the Kanniyai hotel wells.

Uppuveli

Uppuveli is at once a great beach getaway and a sensible, relaxed base for visiting Trinco. Although there are plenty of fairly



comfortable accommodation options, this remains a village at heart. Ox carts rumble down the rough local tracks between the palm trees, a palmyra production centre has old ladies weaving baskets, and teams of fishermen use the beach for hauling in huge loops of netting.

INFORMATION

There are no banks. As yet the only Internet is a dismally slow, exorbitantly expensive connection at **Hotel Club Oceanic** (per 15 min Rs 150-175).

St Joseph's Medical Service (☎ 24hr) is building an around-the-clock medical centre just south of Uppuveli's hotel area. Payment is mostly donation based.

SIGHTS

If the beach isn't holding your attention you can stroll up to the beautifully kept **Commonwealth War Cemetery** (Nilaveli Rd; donations appreciated; ☽ dawn to dusk). This is the last resting place for over 600 servicemen who died at Trinco during WWII, most of them during a Japanese raid on 9 April 1942 that sank over a dozen vessels. The caretaker likes to show you photographs of a 1995 tree-planting ceremony to mark the replacement of several headstones that were damaged during the 1980s civil war. The hat in the foreground supposedly shades the head of Britain's Princess Anne.

Beachfront **Salli Muthumariamunam Kovil** is 4km by road from Uppuveli but only the shortest hop by boat; it's directly across Fishermen's Creek, masked from view by green-topped rocks. Locals claim that the unexotic breeze-block guard hut on the rocks dates from WWII.

ACTIVITIES

Local boatmen (or hoteliers acting on their behalf) organise whale-and-dolphin-watching trips (Rs 2000) departing at dawn, when sea conditions allow. A popular alternative boat trip takes you out to Pigeon Island (p292) for around Rs 3000, including snorkelling gear. That's not much more than doing the trip via Nilaveli, and it offers the bonus of seeing the whole beach-lined coast en route. Scuba-diving trips also focus on Pigeon Island, but Uppuveli has the coast's two dive shops so it is the place to start. Consistently recommended by readers is **Diving the Snake** (www.divingthesnake.com; ☽ May-Sep), based at the French Garden Pragash guesthouse. Between October to April the seas are rarely suitable for any of the previously mentioned activities.

Swimming is pleasant in the ever-warm seas. When waves are too strong, nonguests can take a dip at the pool of **Hotel Club Oceanic** (☎ 222 2307, 232 0862; Sampaltive Post) for the (relatively hefty) cost of a drink. The Oceanic also has a pool table (Rs 400 per hour), souvenir shop, and an Ayurvedic massage centre.

SLEEPING

Given the heat and humidity here you might find an air-conditioner worth the extra expense.

Budget

Lily Motel (☎ 222 7422; tw Rs 600) This pleasantly airy family house-hotel set in a flower garden has clean, simple rooms with fan and bathroom. Although the house is on the main road, the beach is less than 10 minutes' stroll away.

French Garden Pragash (☎ 222 4546; rajfrench.garden@yahoo.com; tw with fan/air-con Rs 1000/1500; ☽) These unsophisticated but mostly well-kept boxlike rooms have terraces facing directly onto the beach. The east coast's best diving outfit is based here during the high season, Internet is planned for 2006 and there's a little playground for small children.

French Garden Anton (☎ 078 979 1024; d Rs 500) Uppuveli's cheapest offers basic rooms with small bathrooms and narrow queen-sized beds. Some have mosquito nets.

Nema Beach House (☎ 222 7613; Irakkandy Rd; tw from Rs 1000) The darkish rooms here are prone to flooding in the wet season.

Midrange & Top End

Hotel Club Oceanic (☎ 222 2307, 232 0862; www.johnkeellshottels.com; Sampaltive Post; s/d/tr standard US\$68/84/99, superior US\$76/91/106, chalet US\$99/137/175; ☽ ☎ ☎) Uppuveli's real resort hotel, Club Oceanic commands a fine stretch of curving beach. Located in a two-storey, concrete V-shaped building, the hotel has generally impressive standards of room and service. All rooms have air-con, hot water supplied by new Grohe taps, and closable shower booths (even in the standard rooms). Slight gripes if you're paying full price are the thin walls and lack of in-room safe. However, low-season prices (November to April) as low as US\$25 per person are outstanding value, especially for singles.

Lotus Park (☎ 222 5327; www.lotustrinco.com; s/d Rs 3750/4000; ☽ ☎) Second only to Club Oceanic, this is Uppuveli's top spot for resident foreigners and NGO types. Best are the comfortable bungalows that are splashing distance from the waves; they're the same price as the rooms. All accommodation is air-conditioned and has hot water in the curtainless showers. The irregularly shaped pool is rather too small for serious swimmers.

Palm Beach (☎ 222 1250; tw/tr with fan Rs 1300/1500, with air-con 1750/2000, all incl breakfast; ☽) The attractively tiled, neat new rooms face a garden where squirrels play with lizards on the palm trees. There's an access path to the

beach but no direct beach frontage. Food by order.

Shiva's Beach Resort & Restaurant (☎ 078 879 1725; tw with fan Rs 1400, with air-con Rs 1750-2000, all incl breakfast; ♿) These clean, neat, tile-floored rooms here don't have mosquito nets and are rather underlit. An attraction is the simple, thatched beach bar and a hammock amid the coco palms.

Beach Bangol (☎ 222 7599; tw with fan/air-con Rs 1000/2500; ♿) Don't be put off by the battered old building at the approach, as rooms are, in fact, in sturdy new low-rise bungalows. All have sunrise beach views through coconut palms. Air-con rooms have a fridge. The dining room lacks any atmosphere but the food (mains Rs 85 to 200) is decent and the gentlemanly owner is urbane. Foreign students get a 25% discount.

Jaysh Beach Resort (☎ 222 4043; s/tw with fan Rs 2000/3000, with air-con Rs 2500/3500; ♿) This is a new yet somewhat jerry-built place that might be worth considering if you can bargain rates to half-price.

EATING & DRINKING

The only restaurants are in hotels and guesthouses.

Hotel Club Oceanic (☎ 222 2307; www.johnkeells.com; buffet Rs 950) The excellent dinner buffet at this top-end hotel (p291) offers very high standards of Western and local foods, and is a favourite of NGO workers for miles around. Drinks cost (a lot) extra. There's also an à la carte beachfront café.

Lotus Park (☎ 222 5327; www.lotustrinco.com; mains Rs 250-500) Beachfront dining at this hotel (p291) includes some curious, almost-Western dishes like spaghetti with chips. Although our steak was tough as boot leather, other diners reported good experiences.

Hotel Aqua Inn (☎ 222 6302; meals Rs 125-300; ☎ 7.30-10am, 1-2.30pm & 5.30-10.30pm) A pleasant six-table beach café nuzzling against the sand at this otherwise dreary hotel.

Silver Beach Guest House (☎ 222 6305; beers Rs 125) The main attraction of the bare eating area between concrete pillars is that drinks cost less than half the price of those at Club Oceanic next door. Faces the beach.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Irakkandy-bound minibuses from Trinco's bus terminal run roughly every half-hour, supplemented by occasional small CTB

buses. All pass through Uppuveli (Rs 10, 20 minutes) and Nilaveli (Rs 25, 45 minutes). Three-wheelers from Uppuveli cost Rs 150 to Trinco (Rs 200 at night), Rs 250 to Nilaveli, Rs 400 return to Kanniyai hot wells, and around Rs 1000 to loop via Kanniyai to Velgam Vihara and back.

Nilaveli

When Singapore fell to the Japanese during WWII, the British Indian Ocean Fleet retreated to Trincomalee, setting up a massive communications base at Nilaveli. Today there's little left to see, but war hounds can sniff out the stubs of once-huge pylon supports and an engine room (Navy Rd) whose squat, humidity-blackened concrete shell is hidden behind a local house and filled with bats. Fernando at H&U guesthouse (opposite) can show you where it is. Of vastly more interest is the beach, which stretches several kilometres on either side.

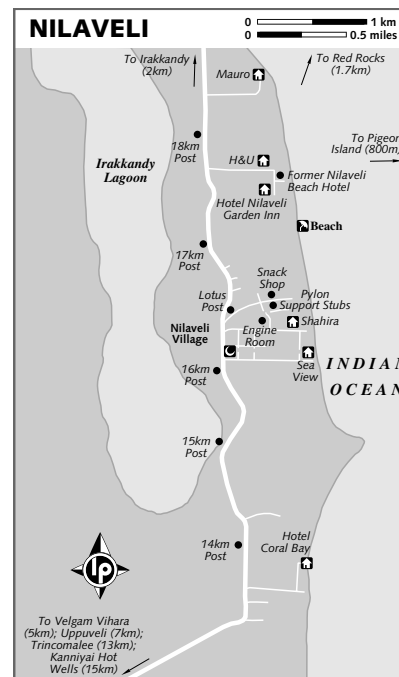
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Nilaveli Beach

For years Nilaveli has been considered one of Sri Lanka's most perfect beaches. It certainly has that feeling of paradise-island remoteness, with plenty of bending palms swaying over the golden sand. Post-tsunami, the beach is no longer powdery white and a gully at the back of the beach can form somewhat unsightly pools after rain. Nonetheless the beach remains impressively long and has the off-shore visual focus of Pigeon Island. If you don't need much in the way of entertainment, this could be your kind of getaway.

Pigeon Island

The most common day trip from Nilaveli or Uppuveli is to the dumbbell-shaped **Pigeon Island**, a short boat hop east of Nilaveli Beach Hotel. Here sands remain powdery white, if littered with broken coral fragments. However, it's rather a victim of its own popularity, with graffiti-covered rocks and dozens of picnickers during the high season making this 'desert island' the most crowded place in Nilaveli. Reports are mixed on the quality of Pigeon Island's snorkelling, best from May to September. We saw mostly damaged coral and relatively few fish, but were hampered by rough seas and turbid, low-season waters here and at nearby **Red Rocks** (Coral Island), where



there's only boat-based snorkelling. Regular divers are more enthusiastic.

Boats organised through guesthouses or directly from fishermen typically cost Rs 1500 for a two- to three-hour trip. Add around Rs 200 rental per snorkel or pair of fins. Reportedly there is some appealing scuba diving between May and September off Pigeon Island's coast, with good chances to see manta rays. Currently, the nearest dive operations are based in Uppuveli.

Irakkandy Lagoon

Around 4km north of Nilaveli the main road crosses the mouth of an extensive lagoon system. Views are pleasant from the long narrow bridge (check with the army guard point before walking across). Look to the east for a sand bar and crashing waves, west for mangroves and fishermen in outrigger canoes. Some guesthouses can arrange lagoon boat trips.

SLEEPING & EATING

Note that all Nilaveli accommodation is at least a 400m walk east of the main road, start-

ing from the approximate kilometre point noted. At the time of writing, the places reviewed represent all available options. However, more are likely to be (re)developed, including the nearly complete former Nilaveli Beach Hotel. Guesthouses can arrange boat trips and food but there are no alternative dining options.

Mauro (☎ 459 5323, 078 879 1639; s/d/tr/ste Rs 3080/3300/3630/4620; ♿) This long two-storey building faces a narrow, neatly manicured garden that extends past a very tempting swimming pool to possibly the most attractive stretch of beach, facing Pigeon Island. The comfy new rooms are relatively luxurious, with hot water, stylishly folded towels and striped bed covers. Save Rs 660 if you don't want air-conditioning, but add Rs 300 per person for breakfast or Rs 700 for half-board. There's a beach-view bar.

Sea View (☎ 492 0016, 071 418 2538) Situated right on the beach, the two-storey Sea View has rooms above an isolated dining-room with luridly blue windows. Views from the rooftop are the best in Nilaveli, though the neat, well-appointed rooms only spy the sea from across access balcony-walkways.

Hotel Nilaveli Garden Inn (☎ /fax 223 2228; www.hotel-garden-inn.de; d with fan/air-con Rs 1870/2970; ♿) Although set back from the beach about 200m, the Nilaveli Garden offers a touch of style that's lacking in most of the region's hotels. There's lots of airy, open space, the bar-restaurant is decked out with lifebelts, nets and paddles, and the air-con, hot-water rooms are decorated in a tasteful choice of colours and fabrics. The fan rooms are much more ordinary. When the occasional small German tour group visits, an attached Ayurvedic herbal massage centre operates. Ask about scuba-diving trips and all-inclusive packages.

H & U (☎ 222 6254, 0777 54390; www.guesthouse-nilaveli.com; tw Rs 500-900) Just 200m before reaching Nilaveli Beach Hotel, an arch of bougainvillea welcomes you into the tiny H&U, Nilaveli's only backpacker place. Rooms are simple but clean, and have attached bathrooms and mosquito nets. The owner speaks great English and German, and is a knowledgeable local guide.

Hotel Coral Bay (☎ 223 2272; fax 223 2202; d with fan/air-con Rs 2000/2500; ♿) This is a beach-facing, low-rise blockhouse where each of the 10 rooms has views towards the ocean

and a little sitting area complete with rattan chairs. Rooms are neat but lack mosquito nets. The swimming pool is possibly the best on the east coast, but it lacks any shade or surrounding decoration and the beach is somewhat scraggy. The other slightly off-putting aspect is that without transport you can feel a little stranded here as it's miles from any other guesthouse.

Shahira Hotel (☎ 223 2224, 071 309 0393; tw Rs 1650) Ranged around a garden that's about 150m inland, these 18 simple, clean, if somewhat dark, rooms have veranda sitting areas, fans and towels. The bright dining-room mural survived the tsunami, but the photo album shows how little else did.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and minibuses to Irakkandy leave Trinco's bus terminal about every half-hour. All pass through Uppuveli (Rs 10) and Nilaveli (Rs 25).

A three-wheeler between Nilaveli and Uppuveli costs Rs 250.

Velgam Vihara

A rough track leads west of the main coast road around halfway between Uppuveli and Nilaveli and bumps a few kilometres through former-war-zone scrub to the pretty Velgam Wewa (Velgam Tank). Just beyond, the isolated Buddhist **Velgam Vihara** (☎ 222 6258; www.geocities.com/welgamweharaya; donation appreciated) dates from around the 2nd century BC, and was embellished in the

10th century AD. There's a moss-crusted, ancient, brick **dagoba** shaped like a pudding dish. But the most striking feature is the human-sized standing **Buddha carving** surveying some valuable inscription stones. A new two-man monastic centre displays gory photos of an attack by the LTTE in 2000.

A 4km-long asphalt access road connects Velgam Vihara to the A12 at the 174km post. This allows you to loop back to Uppuveli or Trinco with a quick side trip to the nearby Kanniyai hot wells and a glimpse of the rocky cockscomb ridge of **Warodiyanagar**, near the 178km post.

Kanniyai Hot Wells

Located some 1.5km southwest of the 176km post on the A12, the **Kanniyai hot wells** (admission Rs 25; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm) were reputedly created by Vishnu to distract the demon king Rawana during a complex episode of Hindu mythology. You'll need a guide who's a really good storyteller to make this place seem at all interesting. Nonetheless it's mildly amusing to watch horse-playing youths sloshing each other with buckets of the naturally warm water, which rises up into seven totally unaesthetic tiled square pools. There are changing rooms for those who want to join in, and a shedlike 'temple' should the experience move you spiritually. Several war-ruined structures remain brutally bullet pocked. Parking is Rs 10.