

Sri Lanka surprises

EVIE FARRELL and her daughter take us on a loop around palm-fringed Sri Lanka, where elephants, temples and kid-friendly beaches are just the start.

It's one of the hottest destinations for families right now, and the popularity of this sun-drenched, palm-filled island is well deserved. Sri Lanka is the fabulous family holiday spot you've been dreaming of, with white-sand beaches and palm trees, ancient ruins and fortresses, epic train rides through terraced tea plantations, wild elephants, peacocks and leopards, delicious curries and wide-grinned happy locals who welcome tourists with open arms.

"We need to buy land here," I declared to eight-year-old Emmie when we stumbled upon the horseshoe-shaped Hiriketiya Beach a few years ago, and we almost did. This tiny bay on Sri Lanka's south coast is calm enough for children to splash around in and learn to surf while parents take on the big waves out the back. It was one of many Sri Lankan villages where we fell in love and tried to turn soil.

Surfing, saris and sacred rocks

When I ask Emmie what she likes most about Sri Lanka, I get a long list of loves, from seeing elephants in the wild and feeling the long grass whip her feet from the doorway of the blue train, to hiking **Sigiriya Rock** and learning to surf against a backdrop of palms and blue sky. She adores getting around barefoot, chasing the music-playing 'bread men' who deal fresh sugar buns from the back of their tuk-tuks, and gazing at the sari-clad women who glide past, adding colourful splashes to the jungle-green landscape.

You could spend months in Sri Lanka with the fam and still have more to see, but after many visits we have our favourites that take us on an easy loop, starting with a night or two settling in at beautiful Negombo Beach. It's only a 30-minute ride from the airport and is a great spot to acclimatise to the heat, enjoy some local 'short eats' and get ready for an upcoming adventure.

Next, take the train or a private car to Sigiriya for a few days. The climb to the ancient ruins of a fortress palace atop Sigiriya Rock is challenging but not difficult,



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although I'd recommend it for kids aged from five up. It's also best to climb early in the morning to beat the crowds and the heat. It's worthwhile hiring an accredited guide here; they will approach you as you walk through the gardens to the rock.

While in Sigiriya, visit the **Dambulla Cave Temple** and make sure you try *kottu* (stir-fried shredded roti), hoppers (fermented rice flour pancakes) and the ubiquitous curry triangles. There are also many traditional Ayurvedic massage centres around town where your ailments will be massaged away.

Only 40 minutes from Sigiriya, **Minneriya National Park** is home to hundreds of wild elephants that wander in herds and play along the grassy shores of the reservoir, occasionally charging in for a splash. You can book your safari through your hotel for around \$50 a truck, plus park entry fees.

Temples, tea and train rides

From here travel to Kandy and spend a night, visiting the **Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic**, the Botanic Gardens and **Child Action Lanka's Buono**, a coffee shop that helps local children and families break the poverty cycle.

The train ride from Kandy to Ella along the tea plantation route is not to be missed. Book seats in the second- or third-class carriage, where you will have your own seats and the vestibule doorways are open for fun! You can

sit and watch the world go by as you pass villages, plantations, waterfalls and mountains.

Jump off in laid-back Ella and enjoy this little town that sparkles with fairy lights in the evening. Wander along an easy path past colourful ladies picking tea up to Little Adam's Peak for gorgeous views across the mountains, and discover waterfalls and hiking trails that are suitable for kids. Check the train timetable and make your way to the Nine Arches Bridge to watch the train cross while sipping a fruit juice from one of the hillside bars. Then follow the train tracks back into town as herds of cows and kids pass you by.

You can visit a tea plantation in Ella, or if you're interested in colonial architecture, spend a few days in the Nuwara Eliya hill country, where the elevation is perfect for growing tea. Wander the town visiting tea plantations, old colonial homesteads and historic buildings like the **Post Office** and **Queen's Cottage**. There's a colourful old park in **Hakgala Botanical Garden** with ancient rides and an old Ferris wheel, but close parental supervision is recommended.

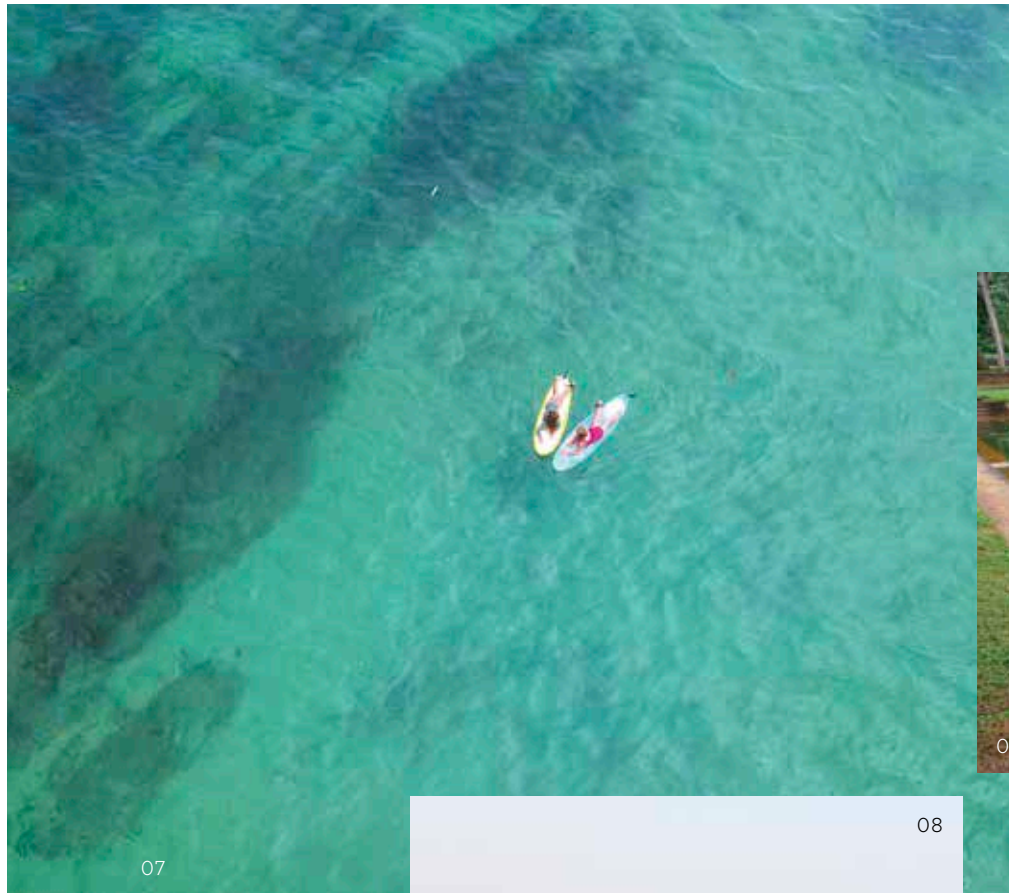
Fishermen, forts and falling

Finally, choose a beach to spend some time at or beach-hop your way back to Colombo. Our picks are Hiriketiya, Dickwella, Mirissa and Unawatuna. From Unawatuna, pop down to Dalawella Beach early in the

01 Swinging into the south coast 02 Riding the blue train from Kandy to Ella 03 Surfing Sri Lanka's south coast 04 Sri Lanka boasts a stunning coastline. All images © Evie Farrell/Mumpack Travel



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morning to see the stilt fishermen, and be sure to spend a day at Galle – a fortified city built by the Portuguese – and wander its cobblestone streets and fortress walls.

In Hikkaduwa, check out the giant turtles that come into the shallows to eat the sea grass. Pay your respects to the people of Sri Lanka with a visit to the **Tsunami Education Centre & Museum**, which is staffed by survivors of the disaster, many who lost their entire families. The educational displays are

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fine for kids, but some of the photos can be confronting so keep an eye on them. Up the road is a memorial to the victims of the tsunami and a stop here is also recommended to acknowledge those who passed.

Finally, make your way back to Colombo and the bustle and chaos of this energetic city. Of course, you will wish you had more time to explore, but now that Sri Lanka has your heart, you are sure to return. In fact, we love Sri Lanka so much we now host four guided family trips each year to this incredible island. ●

Sri Lanka Report Card



Info srilanka.travel

Getting there Singapore Airlines operates flights from Sydney and Melbourne to Colombo via Singapore. singaporeair.com
SriLankan Airlines operates daily direct flights between Melbourne and Colombo. srilankan.com

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