

SRI LANKA

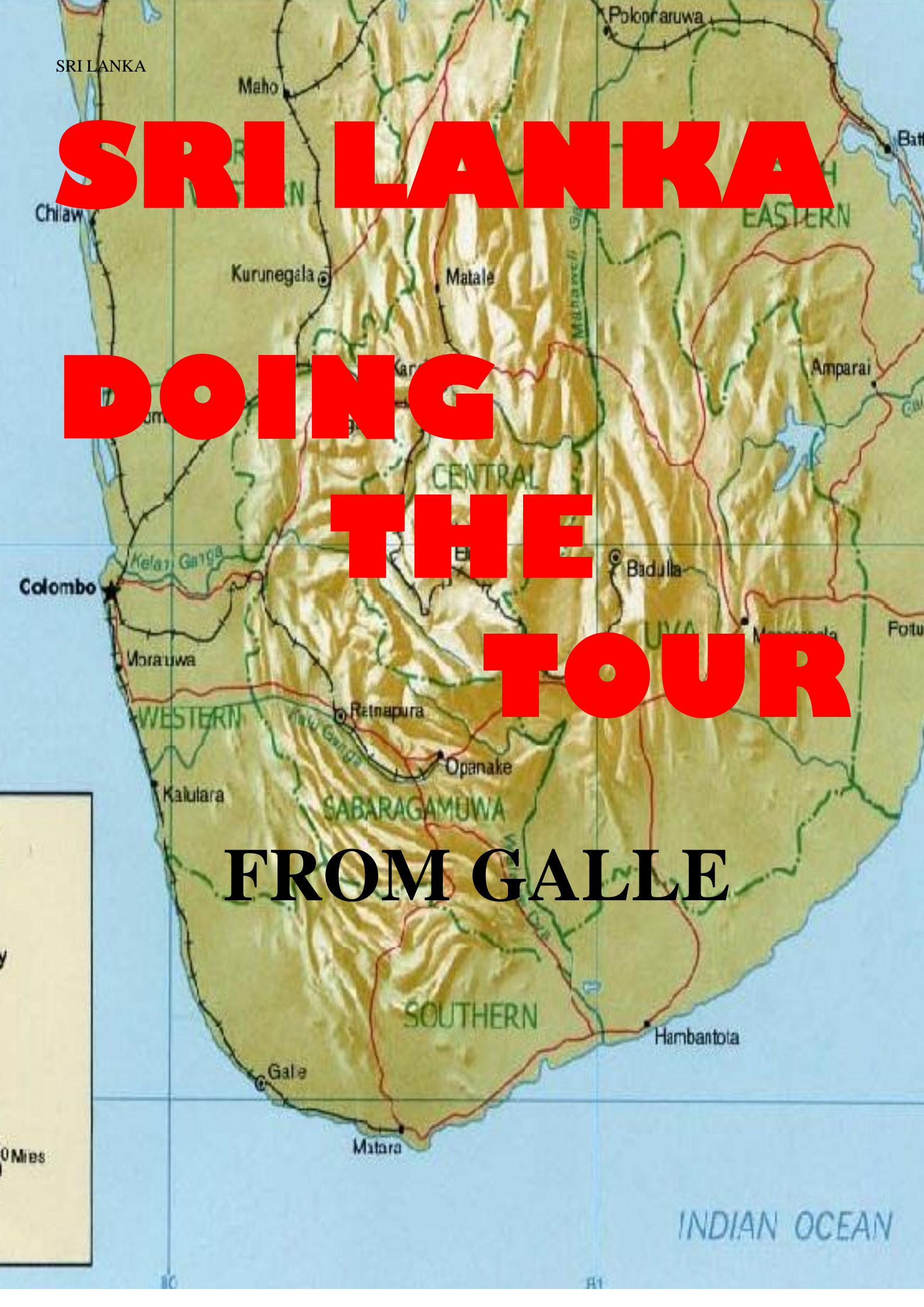
SRI LANKA

DOING

THE

TOUR

FROM GALLE



FIRST.....some important points about Sri Lanka.....

Galle is not a great representation of the rest of Sri Lanka

Public transportation is readily available but you may need a little patience

Hotels and guest houses, away from the coast, rarely get fully booked up even though an internet search through some of discount accommodation sellers may say otherwise

Getting your Tablet and Phone connected, even for a short visit, is well worth while if not essential.....It's cheap and works well.

You can book your next accommodation before you travel; looking on the internet 24hrs ahead of arrival leaves you plenty of time.

You DO NOT need a guided tour with a van and driver.....you can do this yourself.. *and in many ways it is preferable to do it yourself*

There are not as many Touts about as there used to be, Bus and Train Stations will have a few and the Tuk Tuk Drivers can also be pushy Touts. HOWEVER, touts here can be useful, even the pushy Tuk Tuk Driver. They can fix you up with accommodation if you have not arranged any. Just make sure that you are getting the accommodation at the price you want to pay AND DON'T PAY the driver you fare until he takes you to an acceptable place. If you don't like what he shows you, tell him exactly what you don't like and instruct him to do better (expect at least one failure).

In the Hill Country it can get COLD, and it can RAIN so be prepared for both....A few thin layers will work better than something thick. A substantial Umbrella also works.

Coming from Thailand, you will probably be "Watted" out or done one temple to many. Sri Lanka has many more Temples and ruins to show you....but here the ruins can run to serious money! If you would like to do the main sites, it would pay to have a Park Pass.

Inland Sri Lanka has some really beautiful spots, lots to see, however some of it is rather 'oversold' so you have to be careful with both what and when you go to see things.

On the trains, stick to the standard second class tickets; going inland from Colombo, sit on the right hand side facing forward. Being close to a door is advantageous as you will no doubt want to hang out the door to get good photos.

On the buses the front seats are often available to tourists, depending on your tolerance to near death experiences; you may or may not want to use these seats for the view. Locals tend to head for the middle of the bus where there is a greater degree of safety, less motion and less chance of seeing what chances the driver is taking.

There are public conveniences, you may not however want to use them....especially for the females. There is also no guarantee that you'll find an acceptable toilet at any bar / restaurant that you may wander in to. Most of the U.S. type Fast Food Joints do have moderately acceptable toilets..... For me, nothing less than the best hotel in town will do and even then you can never be sure!

Toilets, Food and Accommodation are cheap enough without trying to cut the corners, paying just a little bit extra gets you such a huge increase in standard, it's really no saving to go cheap!

There are some really interesting scams that the locals try on (on a regular basis); as a seasoned international traveller, you may find these scams both primitive and amusing. Be warned however, they may improve with time!

Whatever.... watch where you stow your baggage....

Before travelling, check carefully for local holidays.....you should avoid travelling around these times as all public transport gets busy, the timetables get changed and often, services are cancelled altogether!

If you get a car or Tuk-Tuk driver you like, stick with him..... the next one may be suicidal!

Never travel on one opinion, always get at least three..... Such questions as “where is the bus station?” can often get you more than one answer (thank goodness for the I-pad and Google Earth).

Never ask a question that leads towards a “yes” answer....they will say yes to just about anything, it is part of their overwhelming desire to please you!

**HAVING SAID ALL THE ABOVE,
DO NOT BE DISHEARTENED....**

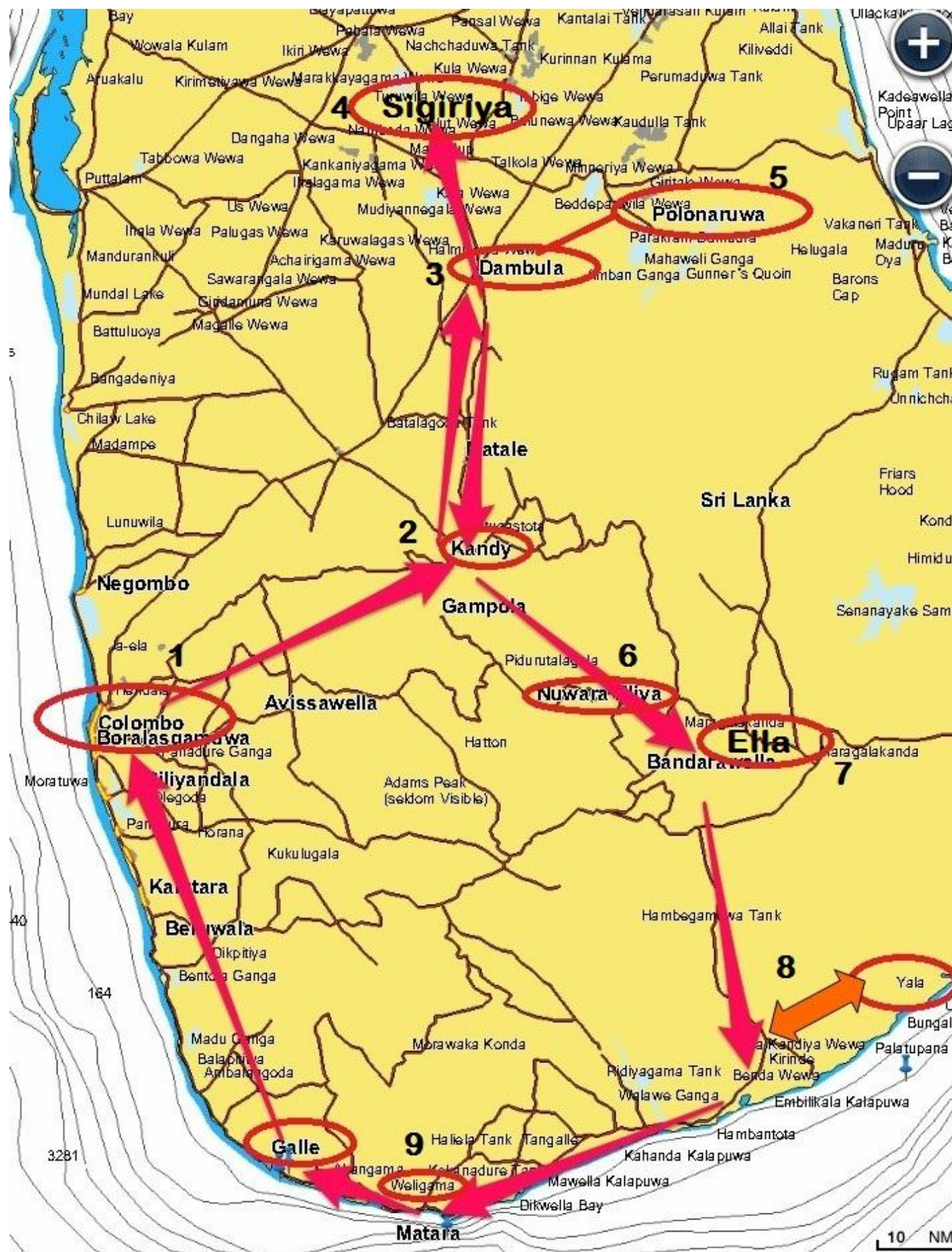
The Sri Lanka people are generally courteous and most helpful; they have a cheerful disposition and love having tourists visit their country. In general they are relatively poor by most western standards; however that is a situation that is changing fast and prices are rising in line with that change. They do like to bargain and will gladly take money from anyone foolhardy, you must play the game and always try to hammer them down on price; they will respect you more for this. Whatever, they are still going to make money from you but at least if you have bargained well, you don't often feel ‘ripped off’ (just sometimes!). There is a lot to see and the distances are not great so you don't have to spend an awful long time travelling.

For most yachties, Galle Harbour is not a great place and you are right to be worried about leaving your boat unattended there. I never heard about thieving, the main worry is that boats drag anchors, get bashed about, get covered in cement dust, get oil and crap on their waterlines. Dinghies and mooring lines get covered in dirt and fresh water from shore is hard to get (let's not mention the shower block!).

The new Marina may change things.... but I doubt it.

My advice is not to hang around, get your tour done and get out as soon as possible.

OUR SUGGESTED ROUTE



THE TOUR

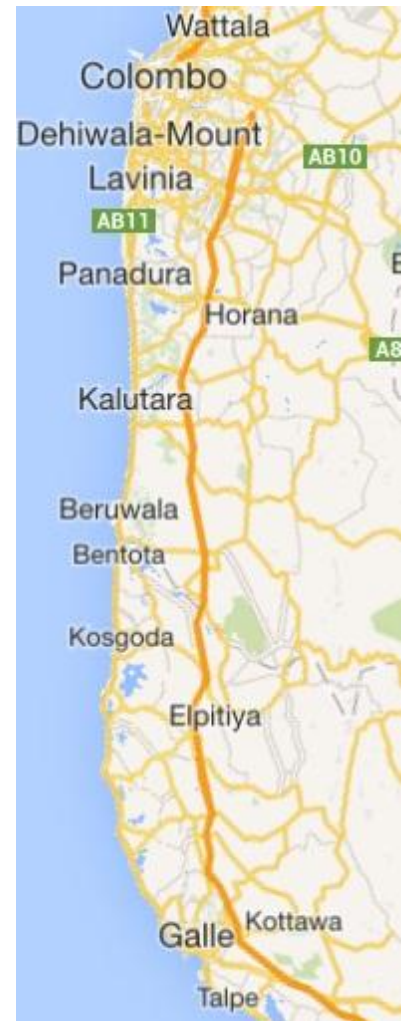
THIS IS WHAT WE DID WITH ADJUSTMENTS FOR WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE DONE AND A SUGGESTION OR TWO BECAUSE WE HAD DONE SRI LANKA ONCE ALREADY

STEP 1: Galle to Colombo

There is a nice new motorway running north just a little way inland from the coast.... Unfortunately this is no good to you unless you have a hire car or a van with a driver as any of the Buses that run up that way are subject to transfers, stops and delays somewhere between the end of the motorway and the inner city.

The train runs up the coast and would seem a logical alternative, however the trains on this line are both slow and overcrowded, and particularly at the time you really need it, in the early morning.

Thus it works best to get on an air-conditioned private bus running from the Galle Bus Station, if the Bus looks suitable just jump on and at least you have a seat for the entire journey (something you may not get on the train!).



Like all journeys in Sri Lanka, you want to start early so as to have plenty of time to arrange your accommodation (in case some adjustments are required).

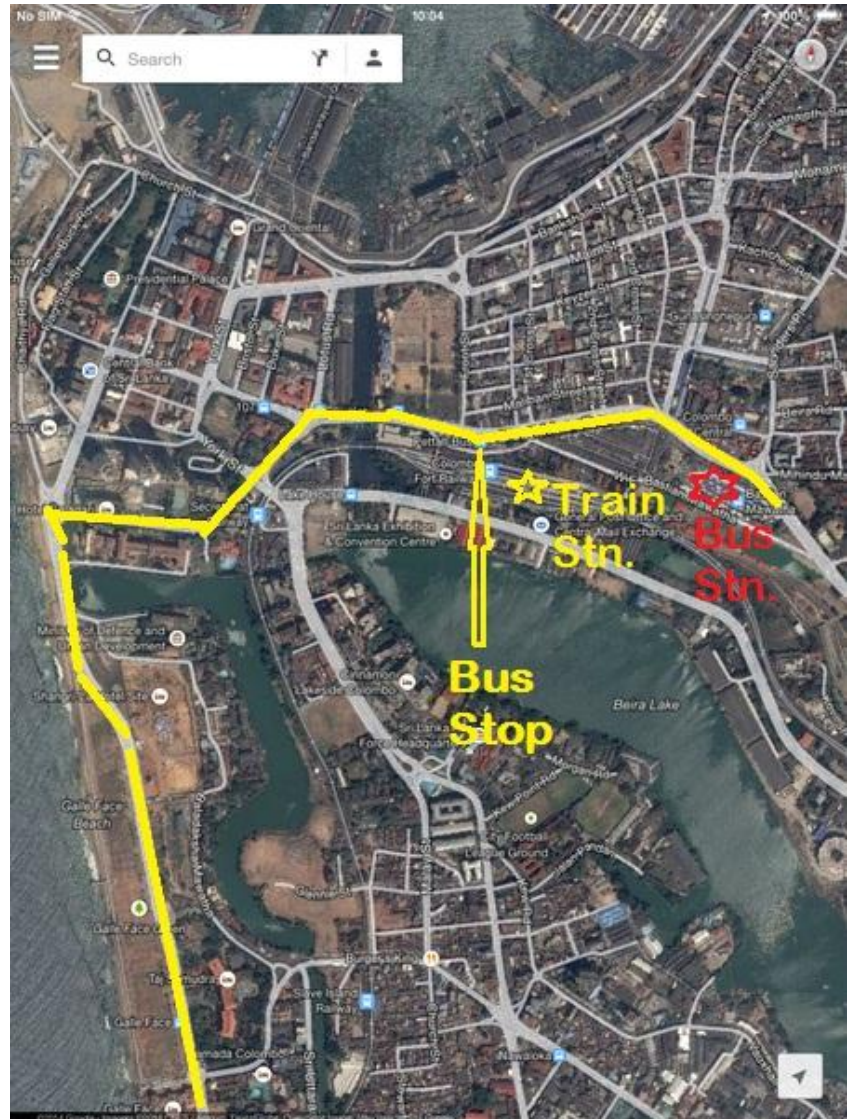
We got picked outside the dock gates at 0715 and shown to the right bus by our local Tuk Tuk driver.... the run is about two hours (360rpy p/p).

Colombo:

Arriving by bus in Colombo
The bus follows along the seafront then makes a sharp right turn to head into the town. If you want to go 'down-town' to see the City or to a central Hotel then you should alight at the first stop after this turn is made.

If you want the Train Station, there is a stop almost across the road from it (by a Pedestrian Overpass). Even if you have not been advised by fellow passengers, it is quite clear from the bus....

The main Bus Station is just a little further on and worth avoiding unless you have to....



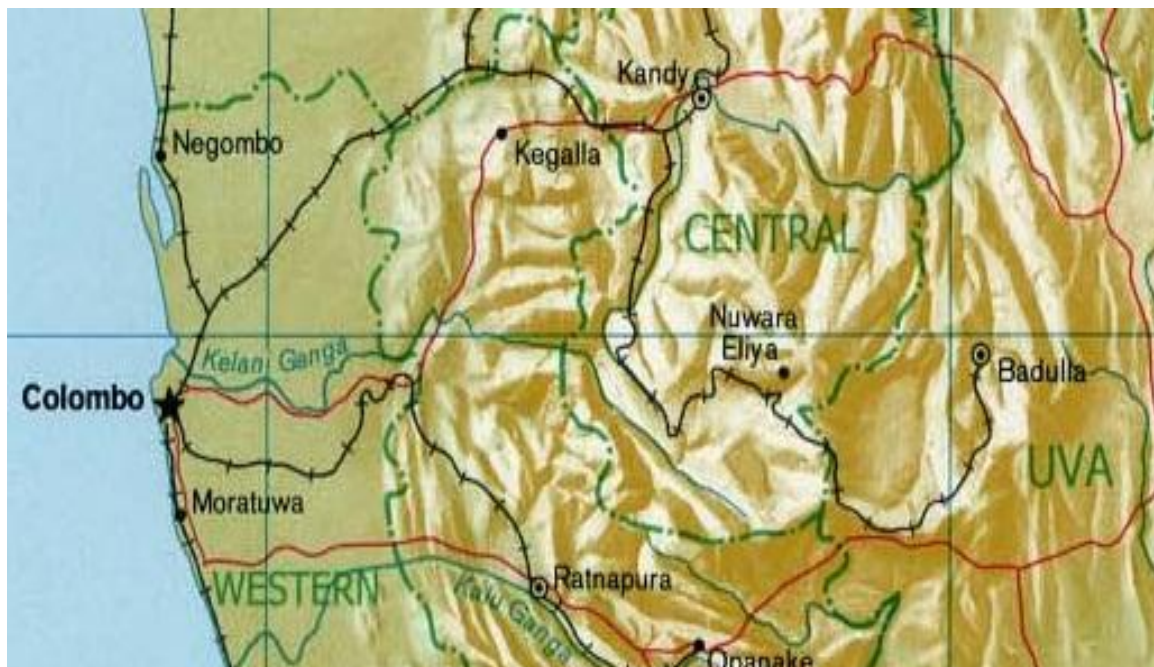
Personally...I would not waste my time in Colombo; however it does have some very attractive Colonial Buildings, a couple of quite good Museums, some really nice Hotels and some relaxing, shady parks. So if any of that takes your fancy, you can easily book a good a Hotel a very good price, online, before coming up here.

STEP 2: Colombo to Kandy

The main thing is to get out of Colombo early so as to have time to find your accommodation in Kandy , get settled in and maybe take in the town with an evening meal before it gets too late.

The accepted norm is to take the train...If you go this way, it is important that you use your best Rugby Scrum tactics to get on the train first, grab a seat on the right hand side facing forwards; preferably near a door. GET a 2nd Class Ticket... the observation car will have you looking the wrong way and first class will get you bottled up with no way to lean out the door when pictures are available.

Having said that....this is **not** the most scenic leg and there were not that many good photos to take; mostly due to the telegraph wires that are always getting in the way. For speed, comfort and convenience it may be worth considering an air-conditioned Bus for this leg; it is considerably faster!



We got a train that left at 1040hrs costing 390rpy per head and arrived in Kandy mid-afternoon.

Our Hotel was The Kandy View Garden Hotel, located at Aniewatta, at the very top of the hill above the Aniewatta Tunnel. The owner was Mahinda Tel.0777 821946. It was good, clean accommodation at a very reasonable price and they will cook an evening meal for you if you request it in advance, the breakfast was also very good.

What we should have done here, and just about everywhere else, was to phone the hotel just as we were getting into the Tuk Tuk; **BECAUSE, Sri Lankan Tuk Tuk drivers get lost**; either that or they have no sense of direction! Apart from the “getting lost” aspect, the Hotel will make sure that you are not overcharged for the ride. We did get to our hotel but saw a fair bit more of Kandy than was necessary on the way (we paid 400rpy for this ride but the Mahinda assured us that the fee should max at 200rpy).

As you will be arriving in the afternoon you should book for **THREE** nights and do the tours..... Mahinda has a very reliable and **SAFE** driver (Karu) with car available at 5000rpy/day

One tour you **MUST** do is the Elephant Orphanage, for which you should leave the hotel by 0800hrs. But..if you have children and want to feed the baby elephants, you should leave at 0730. The Orphanage is On Line so you can get your tickets and pay the little extra to do the feeding before you go (to avoid disappointment).

We also did a Tea Factory and the Botanical Gardens in Kandy on the same day out..... it was a long day out!

We took in the Kandy Cultural Show and saw the Temple of the Sacred Tooth on our first evening but we'd done Kandy before, which is why we stayed only two nights and you really need three.....!

STEP 3: Kandy to Dambulla

After a relaxing breakfast, Mahinda will arrange a Tuk Tuk to take you to the bus station and the driver will see you to the bus you need to get to Dambulla, about two hours north.

This is an unremarkable journey, except that you get to hurtle downhill for the initial stage (something that bus drivers in Sri Lanka take great pleasure in!). Then you get to pass through Matale, which I remember to be the very last place on earth I'd want to get stuck in!

Eventually, and thankfully you roll into Dambulla.....



BEWARE.... The Cave Temple of Dambulla is situated a little ways before the town and the Bus Driver may assume that, because you are a tourist, this is where you want to go and deposit you there. This may not be the case, especially if you have baggage you want to deposit at your Hotel before you go climbing the many steps of the temple.

The Main Bus Station is beyond the Temple but still some way short of down-town...if your bus terminates in Dambulla you may have to get a Tuk Tuk from here to your hotel.

Our Hotel was in the centre of town, about fifty yards north of the in-town Bus Stop that lies just beyond the big roundabout around which the town sprawls. There are plenty of Hotels in this area and you should choose one on-line as I cannot really recommend the one that we stayed at!

STEP 4: Dambulla to Sigiriya

From here you must arrange a day tour to Sigiriya (3900rpys each)(30 min in a car), which could be reached by Tuk Tuk but the comfort of a car may be a worthwhile investment!

Beware.... Many older / slightly infirmed people get to Sigiriya only to balk at the massive assent.....it's a long way up, lots of steps!



You need to get to the entrance of the park by +/-0800hrs for 0830 opening and once you are in, start climbing!

By 0930 all the coaches are arriving and hundreds of people are slogging up the thousand or so steps in the rising sun...this would be a hot, long slog! Once you have got up to the top, you can take your time, best to take a little food and plenty of water for the trip. Best not do this if it's going to rain!

STEP 5: Dambulla to Polonnaruwa

Another day trip from Dambulla would be to the phenomenal ruins at Polonnaruwa (3900rpys each)(45 min in a car). You could catch a bus from Dambulla to Polonnaruwa and a TukTuk to the ruins; if you are only to see one set of ruins in Sri Lanka, the ones at Polonnaruwa are probably the best.

If you are into ruins and have time to spare, you could go and stay at one of the local hotels near the ruins for a night or two...we did this on our first visit and the hotel supplied us with bikes to get around with. However, the ruins are not the same anymore, no longer free and easy with no one else around. Also you may be more worried about your boat back in Galle and may not want to linger (read on for an alternative).

Back in Dambulla, there is the Dambulla Rock Temple (1500rpys each) which has some really nice artwork on the walls..... It's a bit of a walk up the hill. Women should be able to cover both their arms and legs or they will not be admitted...same for men if wearing shorts.

Just a short walk away, on the road into town, is the Main Distribution Centre for most of Sri Lanka's fresh produce.....it's a very interesting and colourful place to visit!

We also did a local tour from our hotel, just to see the surrounding area; there was a huge lake / reservoir that had lots of wildlife and situated in nice countryside.

STEP 4 & 5 Fast-track !!!!

If pushed you could do Sigiriya in the morning, Polonnaruwa in the afternoon and still get back in time to do the Rock Temple before they shut up shop (I did this in less than thirty minutes and videoed the lot!). The cost of having a car and driver for the day to do this would be offset by spending less time in a Dambulla hotel.

STEP 6/7 : Dambulla to Ella Via Kandy

NOTE: the train ride from Kandy to Ella is one of the world's Top Ten train rides and should not be missed.

We had breakfast at our hotel in Dambulla, caught the first bus going towards Kandy that came by...jumped off as the bus passed the railway station on the way into town and were on the next train to Ella by 1015.

Please watch your weather for this trip.... There is no point in doing it in the dark or the pouring rain; pick a good 'photographic' day.



6 You may want to do a stopover in Nuwara Eliya on the way to Ella, it's OK but personally I'd get to Ella and spend the time there. Whatever...remember that Nuwara Eliya is on a very high plateau and it can get COLD up there... even when passing through on the train, so you should have at least one warm jacket with you when doing this trip!

Again... 2nd Class ticket, sit on the right facing forward and not too far from the door.... On this trip you will spend some time hanging out the door. It takes about three or four hours so we arrived in the middle of the afternoon.

7 Ella has a great choice of accommodation, both in town and out of town. We picked one well out of town, 'The Hideaway' and this proved to be a great choice, however it was nearer to Bandarawela than Ella, so we actually left the train the stop before Ella and had an adventuresome Tuk Tuk ride into the Mountains.



View from our balcony at The Hideaway Hotel

There's a lot to do and see around Ella, it is a remarkably beautiful area; we spent just two nights but could have stayed a week or more. The small town is quite touristy but more upmarket than many other places... you can relax with a few nice café's and restaurants that come up to 'western standards'



STEP 8 : Ella to Yala National Park

Our hotel recommended that we get the bus down the mountain from Bandarawela...this bus goes from there to Ella before heading south however, if it is full (and it sometimes is) you could have problems getting a seat or even getting aboard. Best to discuss this with your hotel before checking out!



From Ella to Wellawaya is a Downhill Slalom that will have you trembling in the knees. The road is a knife cut along the edge of the ravine and the bus driver hurtles into every corner with suicidal intent.



You should leave this bus in TISSAMAHARAMA and make way to your hotel from there...THIS PART OF THE TRIP YOU SHOULD BOOK TWO OR THREE DAYS IN ADVANCE.

Whilst some of the Yala Tour Operators do pick up in Tissamaharama it would be best to get closer to the park as an early start into the park is essential. Also, you really do need to do a full day tour...not the half day.

We had a great Safari with a great guide....





You leave the park as the sun sets and return to your hotel worn and dusty with hundreds of photos, best make sure you can get dinner at your hotel!

STEP 9 : Yala National Park to Galle

In the morning, after breakfast, you can easily get a bus to Matara and then onwards to Galle so that you arrive back on board in the early afternoon.



SO..... that's it, grab your fuel and go.

Sri Lanka is a great and beautiful country and the people are most hospitable....

Yes there are problems around the Port area and Galle harbour is the pits..... but if you keep your visit short, you may not even notice that!

We have been there twice now and it would not stop me going again.. there are still more things to see AND, the New Marina may actually work...

If you are heading for the Maldives, don't forget to check out my guides!!!

Good Sailing

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