



SERENDIB TRAILS

AUTHENTIC SRI LANKA TRAVEL GUIDES BY A LOCAL

FREE 10-DAY COMPREHENSIVE TRIP PLANNER

SRI LANKA 10-DAY TRIP PLANNER

The First-Timer Route, Train Booking Cheat Sheet & Packing Checklist

The 10-Day Route

Sigiriya, Kandy, Ella, Yala & Southern Coast with exact travel times.

Train Cheat Sheet

Timetables, 30-day ticket booking secrets & scenic side guide.

Smart Checklists

Temple attire rules, packing checklist, real 2026 costs & scams to avoid.

INSIDE THIS FIELD GUIDE:

- [OK] Complete 10-Day Day-by-Day Itinerary:** Exact stops, driving hours, and scenic train transitions.
- [OK] Kandy to Ella Scenic Train Masterclass:** 30-day ticket booking rules, class selection & right-side seat tips.
- [OK] Printable Packing Checklist with Tick-Boxes:** Temple-appropriate dress codes, hill country warmth & beach gear.
- [OK] Real Daily Budget & Price Benchmarks:** Updated 2026 local prices in USD & LKR for meals, tuk-tuks and entry tickets.
- [OK] Local Scams & Street Smart Advice:** How to avoid inflated tuk-tuk traps, gem scams, and temple tour tricks.
- [OK] Emergency Contacts & Helpful Mobile Apps:** Essential numbers (1990 ambulance, 1912 tourist police) & PickMe setup.

Curated by Sithum

Founder & Sri Lanka Local | serendibtrails.lk

Version 2.0 | Updated for 2026 Travel

Designed for phone reading and home printing

Welcome to Serendib Trails

A warm greeting from your local guide in Sri Lanka

Ayubowan & Welcome!

My name is Sithum, born and raised right here in Sri Lanka. I started Serendib Trails because too many international visitors fall victim to overpriced tourist traps, rushed 4-hour van sprints, or bad train booking advice found in outdated guidebooks.

This planner gives you the realistic, tried-and-tested 10-day loop that showcases the very best of our island: ancient rock fortresses, misty hill-country tea plantations, ethical wildlife encounters, and relaxed palm-fringed southern beaches—balanced with sensible travel times.

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Emergency Contacts, Apps & Next Steps

Direct links to official visa portals, 1990 ambulance & apps

FULL ONLINE COMPANION GUIDE AVAILABLE

Bookmark our comprehensive step-by-step article with interactive maps and hotel recommendations at:
serendibtrails.lanka.com/blog/sri-lanka-10-days-itinerary

The 10-Day Classic Route

The optimal geographic loop designed to minimize backtracking

NIGHTS ALLOCATION AT A GLANCE:

2 Nights Sigiriya | 1 Night Kandy | 2 Nights Ella | 1 Night Safari (Udawalawe) | 3 Nights South Coast

1

CMB Airport --> Sigiriya / Dambulla

Transit: Private Car / Highway Express | Estimated travel time: 3.5 - 4.0 Hours

Highlight: Golden Cave Temple at sunset

2

Sigiriya --> Kandy

Transit: Car / A9 Highway via Matale | Estimated travel time: 2.5 - 3.0 Hours

Highlight: Pidurangala sunrise & Temple of the Tooth

3

Kandy --> Ella

Transit: World-Famous Main Line Scenic Train | Estimated travel time: 6.5 - 7.0 Hours

Highlight: Tea estates, misty tunnels & viaducts

4

Ella --> Udawalawe / Yala

Transit: Car via Ella Gap & Wellawaya | Estimated travel time: 2.0 - 2.5 Hours

Highlight: Diyaluma Waterfall & wild elephant safari

5

Safari Region --> Mirissa / Weligama

Transit: Scenic Southern Road / Express | Estimated travel time: 2.5 Hours

Highlight: Golden beach sunset & fresh seafood

6

Mirissa --> Galle Fort

Transit: Coast Road (Tuk-Tuk or Bus) | Estimated travel time: 45 - 50 Minutes

Highlight: Dutch colonial ramparts & lighthouse walk

7

Galle --> Colombo / Airport

Transit: Coastal Train or Southern Expressway | Estimated travel time: 2.0 - 2.5 Hours

Highlight: Ocean-side railway views & souvenir shopping

LOCAL ROUTE WISDOM:

Do not attempt to cram Jaffna (North) or Arugam Bay (East) into a 10-day itinerary unless you have at least 14-16 days. Sri Lanka looks compact on the map, but mountain roads are winding and average travel speeds are 35-45 km/h.

Days 1 to 5: Cultural Triangle & Hill Country

From ancient cave temples to misty tea highlands

DAY 1

Arrival in Colombo --> Drive to Dambulla & Sigiriya

Transit: Car (3.5–4 hrs) | Sleep: Sigiriya (Night 1)

Land at Bandaranaike Airport (CMB). Pick up a local Dialog or Airalo eSIM and exchange cash. Drive northeast to Dambulla. Climb the gentle slope to Dambulla Royal Cave Temple during golden hour to admire 150+ painted Buddha statues. Settle into your tranquil jungle eco-lodge.

Pro Tip: Dress respectfully for Dambulla (knees and shoulders covered).

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 2

Pidurangala Sunrise, Lion Rock Fortress & Wildlife Safari

Transit: Tuk-Tuk & 4x4 Jeep | Sleep: Sigiriya (Night 2)

Start at 5:00 AM to climb Pidurangala Rock for an iconic sunrise view overlooking Sigiriya Rock. After a hearty hopper breakfast, explore the 5th-century Sigiriya Citadel water gardens. In the afternoon (2:30 PM), embark on a jeep safari in Minneriya or Kaudulla to witness wild elephant herds.

Pro Tip: Pidurangala costs only ~\$3 USD vs Sigiriya \$36 USD ticket. Do both if budget allows!

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 3

Sigiriya to Kandy: Spice Gardens & Temple of the Tooth

Transit: Car / A9 Road (2.5–3 hrs) | Sleep: Kandy (Night 1)

Drive south toward Kandy, the last royal capital of Sri Lanka. Stop briefly in Matale for tea and spices. In Kandy, stroll around Kandy Lake, tour the lush Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens, and attend the 6:30 PM evening drumming and puja ceremony at the Sacred Temple of the Tooth Relic.

Pro Tip: Arrive at Temple of the Tooth by 6:00 PM for a prime puja viewing spot.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 4

The Legendary Blue Train: Kandy to Ella

Transit: Scenic Train (6.5–7 hrs) | Sleep: Ella (Night 1)

Board the morning express train at Peradeniya or Kandy station. Marvel as the engine snakes through towering pine forests, endless green tea carpets, and rushing waterfalls. Disembark in the mountain village of Ella. Unwind at a cozy cafe on Main Street with a warm spiced tea and kotthu roti.

Pro Tip: Book 2nd Class Reserved seats for the ideal balance of reserved seating and open windows.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 5

Ella Highlights: Little Adam Peak & Nine Arches Bridge

Transit: Foot & Local Tuk-Tuk | Sleep: Ella (Night 2)

Hike Little Adam Peak early morning for sweeping panoramic views across the Ella Gap. Walk through tea estates to the famed Nine Arches Bridge (Demodara) to watch the train steam across the viaduct (around 9:20 AM or 11:45 AM). Cool off at Ravana Waterfall in the afternoon.

Pro Tip: Grab a fresh king coconut at the bridge viewpoint and wait on hillside for best aerial angle.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

Days 6 to 10: Wildlife Safari & Southern Coast

Leopards, elephants, historic ramparts and ocean waves

DAY 6

Ella to Safari Country (Udawalawe or Yala)

Transit: Car (2–2.5h) + Jeep | Sleep: Udawalawe (Night 1)

Descend from the mountains toward the dry southern plains, stopping at the dramatic Diyaluma Falls viewpoint. Check in near Udawalawe National Park. Jump into a private 4x4 safari jeep for the 3:00 PM afternoon game drive when wild Asian elephants, water buffalo, and hornbills gather at water reservoirs.

Pro Tip: Udawalawe guarantees elephant sightings with fewer crowds; Yala is better for leopards.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 7

Drive to Mirissa: Coconut Tree Hill & Coastal Relaxation

Transit: Car / Express (2.5h) | Sleep: Mirissa (Night 1 of 3)

Drive southwest to the tropical coastline of Mirissa. Unpack at your beachfront boutique hotel. In the late afternoon, take a gentle walk up to Coconut Tree Hill for the quintessential palm-tree sunset vista overlooking the Indian Ocean. Enjoy fresh grilled fish with lime and garlic butter on the sand.

Pro Tip: Visit Coconut Tree Hill around 4:30 PM before peak sunset selfie crowds arrive.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 8

Surf Lessons in Weligama Bay & Secret Beach Hideaways

Transit: Tuk-Tuk (15 mins) | Sleep: Mirissa (Night 2 of 3)

Take a beginner-friendly morning surf lesson at Weligama Bay (gentle rolling beach break, ~\$15–\$20 with board). Relax over smoothie bowls at a beach cafe. Spend the afternoon swimming at Secret Beach or take an ethical catamaran excursion. Watch the sunset from Parrot Rock.

Pro Tip: Only support certified surf instructors who provide proper rash guards and safety briefings.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 9

Galle Dutch Fort Heritage Exploration

Transit: Tuk-Tuk / Bus (45m) | Sleep: Galle Fort (Night 3)

Travel west to the UNESCO World Heritage Galle Dutch Fort. Stroll along 400-year-old stone ramparts, photograph the iconic white Galle Lighthouse, and explore cobblestone alleys lined with Dutch-colonial architecture, artisan gem workshops, and gelato parlours. Dine inside the historic fort walls.

Pro Tip: Walk the sea wall ramparts at 5:30 PM for a spectacular ocean sunset breeze.

Hotel / Booking Notes:

DAY 10

Coastal Railway to Colombo --> Airport Departure

Transit: Train (2h) + Airport Car | Sleep: Departure (CMB Airport)

Board the picturesque coastal express train from Galle to Colombo Fort—the tracks run directly alongside the crashing ocean surf! In Colombo, pick up authentic Ceylon tea and handicraft souvenirs at Barefoot or Laksala. Take the expressway taxi (35 mins) to Bandaranaike Airport for your flight home.

Pro Tip: Sit on the LEFT side of the train from Galle to Colombo for uninterrupted sea views!

Hotel / Booking Notes:

Scenic Train Booking Cheat Sheet

Mastering the Kandy to Ella Main Line Railway Journey

THE GOLDEN 30-DAY BOOKING RULE

Reserved train tickets in Sri Lanka open exactly 30 DAYS in advance at 10:00 AM Sri Lanka Time (GMT+5:30). High-season tickets (December–April & July–August) can sell out within minutes. Set a calendar reminder on your phone!

Seat Classes: Which Should You Book?

2nd Class Reserved

RECOMMENDED

- + Pros: Guaranteed reserved seat, windows OPEN for photography, refreshing mountain breeze, relaxed social atmosphere.
- Cons: No air-conditioning (not needed in cool highlands).

1st Class AC

COMFORT

- + Pros: Plush reclining seats, chilled AC cabin, very quiet and calm.
- Cons: Windows are sealed shut with tinted glass—makes glare-free photography nearly impossible!

3rd Class Reserved

BUDGET

- + Pros: Same fantastic scenic views, friendly local interaction, guaranteed seat, very cheap (~\$2.50 USD).
- Cons: Padded bench-style seats; can be slightly more crowded with luggage.

Unreserved (2nd/3rd)

LAST RESORT

- + Pros: Can never sell out—purchased directly at the station counter on the day of travel.
- Cons: No seat guaranteed! You may have to stand in aisles or door bays for 6+ hours.

THE SCENIC SIDE SECRET (WHERE TO SIT)

- Leg 1: Kandy to Nanu Oya (Nuwara Eliya) --> SIT ON THE RIGHT SIDE.
You get the best elevated views looking out over tea carpet valleys and waterfalls.
- Leg 2: Nanu Oya to Ella --> SIT ON THE LEFT SIDE.
The tracks snake along cliff edges with sweeping panoramic views across Haputale and the southern plains.

OFFICIAL BOOKING CHANNELS:

1. Official Sri Lanka Railways Portal: seatreservation.railway.gov.lk (Credit card accepted)
2. Station Booking Office: Available at Colombo Fort, Kandy, or Ella counters 30 days ahead.
3. Trusted Travel Platforms: 12Go.asia or local agency booking services if overseas cards fail.

Sri Lanka Packing Checklist

Printable checklist with tick-boxes for temples, mountains and beaches

Temple & Cultural Etiquette

Must cover shoulders & knees; shoes removed at entry

- ☐ Lightweight cotton sarong or long linen trousers
- ☐ 2-3 tops covering shoulders (white or light colors preferred)
- ☐ Slip-on sandals / flip-flops (easy to remove at temple gates)
- ☐ Dark socks (stone temple courtyards get blisteringly hot in midday sun!)
- ☐ Light scarf for head sun protection or covering exposed arms

Hill Country & Hiking (Ella & Nuwara Eliya)

Night temperatures drop to 12-15C (54-59F)

- ☐ Warm fleece jacket or lightweight packable hoodie
- ☐ Breathable waterproof rain jacket or compact travel umbrella
- ☐ Sturdy running shoes or lightweight trail hiking boots
- ☐ Moisture-wicking hiking socks (2-3 pairs)
- ☐ Compact daypack (15-20L) for day hikes

Tropical Coast & Sun Protection

High UV index year-round near the equator

- ☐ Reef-safe biodegradable sunscreen (SPF 50+ - expensive to buy locally)
- ☐ Polarized sunglasses with UV400 protection
- ☐ Wide-brim sun hat or baseball cap
- ☐ 2 swimsuits + quick-dry microfiber beach towel
- ☐ UV rash guard shirt (essential for surf lessons in Weligama)

Health, Electronics & Documents

Crucial practical essentials

- ☐ Mosquito repellent with DEET or Picaridin (dengue prevention)
- ☐ Travel first-aid: Imodium, rehydration salts (ORS), motion sickness pills
- ☐ UK Type G / Type D universal plug adapter + 10,000mAh Power Bank
- ☐ Passport (6+ months validity) + printed ETA eVisa approval confirmation
- ☐ Offline maps downloaded (Google Maps) + emergency cash in LKR

Budget Snapshot & Real Prices (2026)

Realistic daily costs in USD and Sri Lankan Rupees (LKR)

BACKPACKER \$25 - \$35 / day	MID-RANGE \$60 - \$90 / day	PRIVATE / COMFORT \$150 - \$250+ / day
LKR 7,500 - 10,500	LKR 18,000 - 27,000	LKR 45,000 - 75,000+
- Hostel dorm / basic guesthouse fan room - Local rice & curry, hoppers, street food - Public trains (2nd/3rd class) & public buses - Shared tuk-tuks & selective paid sights - Free trails (Pidurangala, Little Adam Peak)	- Comfortable boutique hotel with AC & pool - Mix of cafes, seafood & local restaurants - Reserved 2nd class train + private tuk-tuks - Shared safari jeep & national park entry - Full cultural triangle entry tickets	- Heritage colonial villas & 5-star tea resorts - Fine dining, wine & beach club dining - Dedicated private car & English driver - Private 4x4 safari with top wildlife tracker - Private surfing coaches & guided tours

Itemized Price Benchmarks (Current 2026 Rates)

EXPENSE ITEM	EST. USD	EST. LKR
Plate of Rice & Curry (Local Kada)	\$2.00 – \$3.50	LKR 600 – 1,100
Kottu Roti with Chicken & Cheese	\$3.00 – \$5.00	LKR 900 – 1,500
Fresh King Coconut (Thambili) on roadside	\$0.50 – \$0.80	LKR 150 – 250
Short Tuk-Tuk Ride (per km on PickMe meter)	~\$0.35 / km	~LKR 100 - 120 / km
Kandy to Ella Scenic Train (2nd Class Reserved)	\$4.50 – \$5.50	LKR 1,400 – 1,700
Sigiriya Lion Rock Entry Ticket (Foreigner)	\$36.00 USD	~LKR 11,000
Pidurangala Rock Entry Ticket	\$3.30 USD	LKR 1,000
Dambulla Royal Cave Temple Ticket	\$6.50 USD	LKR 2,000
National Park Safari (Half-Day Jeep + Entry/Person)	\$45.00 – \$65.00	LKR 14,000 – 20,000
Beginner 1-Hour Surf Lesson with Board (Weligama)	\$12.00 – \$18.00	LKR 3,500 – 5,500

Local Street Smarts & Scams to Avoid

Honest insider advice to keep your journey safe, ethical and hassle-free

01 The "Temple / Road is Closed" Tuk-Tuk Trick

If a friendly tuk-tuk driver or stranger tells you the Dambulla Caves or Tooth Relic temple is closed for a special ceremony, IGNORE THEM. They are trying to divert you to an overpriced spice garden or gem shop where they collect a 30-50% commission.

02 Tuk-Tuk Overcharging: Use the PickMe App

In Colombo, Kandy, Galle and coastal towns, always use the PickMe app (the local Uber equivalent). It ensures transparent, meter-based rates. If hailing on the street, always agree on the price BEFORE stepping into the vehicle.

03 Spice Garden Sales Pitch Traps (Matale)

The educational herb and tree tour is free and genuinely enjoyable, but avoid purchasing small massage oils or medicinal ointments inside the on-site gift shops. They frequently charge \$40-\$80 for items worth \$3 at a local pharmacy.

04 Stilt Fishermen Photo Fees (Koggala / Ahangama)

The traditional stilt fishermen you see along the southern highway are often staged specifically for tourists. If you photograph them, men on the beach will immediately demand \$5-\$10 USD. Negotiate first or simply admire from afar.

05 Sacred Etiquette: Never Pose Back-to-Buddha

Turning your back to a Buddha statue for a selfie or showing Buddhist tattoos can result in heavy police fines or deportation. Always face forward and maintain quiet respect inside temple grounds.

06 Wildlife Ethics: Choose Wild Herds over Captivity

Avoid roadside elephant riding camps or questionable private orphanages. Support ethical safaris in Minneriya, Kaudulla, and Udawalawe National Park, where elephants roam freely in protected natural habitats.

07 Gem Certification Caution

Sri Lanka produces world-class blue sapphires, but never buy gems without an official government-backed Gem & Jewellery Authority certificate. Uncertified stones purchased from roadside vendors are often synthetic or treated glass.

Essential Directory & Next Steps

Important emergency hotlines, apps and official digital resources

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE NUMBERS

- 1990** **Suwa Seriya Free Emergency Ambulance** - World-class national medical response with trained paramedics
- 119** **Sri Lanka Police Emergency Service** - Nationwide 24/7 general police assistance
- 1912** **Tourist Police Division Hotline** - Dedicated multi-lingual helpline for international travelers
- 011 242 1052** **Colombo Tourist Information Centre** - Official Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau

MUST-HAVE APPS TO DOWNLOAD BEFORE LANDING

- **PickMe:** The most popular local ride-hailing app in Sri Lanka for tuk-tuks, cars and food.
- **Airalo / Dialog MyAccount:** Instant local eSIM data activation without searching for airport kiosks.
- **Google Maps (Offline):** Download Southern, Central and Cultural Triangle map packs for offline hiking.
- **XE Currency Converter:** Instant live conversion between your home currency and Sri Lankan Rupee (LKR).

OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT & RAILWAY WEBSITES:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Official eVisa / ETA Portal: | eta.gov.lk (Only use official government site) |
| Railway Seat Reservation: | seatreservation.railway.gov.lk (Opens 30 days prior) |
| Sri Lanka Tourism Board: | srilanka.travel |
| Serendib Trails Travel Hub: | serendibtrails.lanka.com |

Thank you for travelling with Serendib Trails!

We hope this guide empowers you to explore Sri Lanka with confidence, respect for our heritage, and pure joy. If you have questions or want to read our comprehensive destination articles, visit us at serendibtrails.lanka.com.

Wishing you safe travels and unforgettable adventures across the Pearl of the Indian Ocean!

Warm regards,
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