

Sri Lanka's Tropical Flora

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Colombo.

Day 2 Muthurajawela Sanctuary.

Day 3/4 Sigiriya.

Day 5 Matale.

Day 6/7 Kandy.

Day 8/9 Nuwara Eliya and Horton Plains.

Day 10/11 Sinharaja Forest.

Day 12 Return Colombo.

Day 13 Fly London.

Blue Whales extension

Days 12/14 Koggala

Day 15 Colombo.

Day 16 Fly London.



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Dates 2024

Saturday 9th March – Thursday 21st March 2024	£2,995
Extension: Wednesday 20th March – Sunday 24th March	£795

Dates 2025

Saturday 8th March – Thursday 20th March 2025	£2,995
Extension: Wednesday 19th March – Sunday 23rd March	£795

£500 reduction if booking own flights.

Single room supplement

£695 (Add: £295 for Blue Whales extension)

Grading

Grade A. A leisurely botanical tour, including gentle forest walks

Focus

Sri Lankan flora and other natural history

How does this tour benefit the local community and wildlife?

Butterflies and plants are two of the most studied subjects in the natural history world, yet there are so many new discoveries made each year around the world. Sri Lanka is no different as we search deeper about the symbiosis between butterfly and plants and how it contributes to humankind. With the ever-changing climate and habitat loss, keeping a track on butterflies and host plants has gained importance on the island. We are proud to be associated with the Butterfly Conservation Society of Sri Lanka, to which a part of your payment is donated towards the continuous study and research of Butterflies and plants.

With the increasing interest in Whale watching around our waters many Sri Lankans have now diverted their attention to studying marine biology and the feedback and recommendation coming from these new minds are helping to shape policies about the subject and learn more about these animals. The most recent outcome of this was to change shipping lanes further into international waters thereby decreasing the fatalities and injuries caused to whales due to collisions with vessels.



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

From a casual inspection of a map it may appear that the tropical island of Sri Lanka is a mere adjunct of southern India: in reality there are many differences between the two countries, not least the stunning flora and fauna which demonstrate more affinities with south-east Asia than with the Indian sub-Continent. Sri Lanka is a lush, verdant country in which plant growth flourishes, indeed it is said that almost anything planted in the ground will grow within days! This attribute was fully exploited by the various colonists occupying the island over the centuries and each in turn added to the diversity of species through their ornamental and commercial introductions. In this way an extraordinary flora has developed, rich in unique endemic species but also augmented by a myriad of additions from all over the world. This tour will celebrate the richness of the flora by visiting wonderful natural habitats where native species occur as well as Botanical Gardens where large collections have been amassed by generations of horticulturists. We shall also be visiting Spice Gardens and Tea Estates ensuring that we do not neglect these important industries which have developed because of the ideal growing conditions.

Day 1

Saturday

In Flight

We depart London in the evening on a direct Sri Lankan Airlines scheduled flight to Colombo. We will be in-flight overnight. If you would prefer to fly on any other airline from London to Colombo, we can arrange this for you (availability permitting), though this is likely to involve extra cost. Call Rajan on 01962 733051 for details.

Day 2

Sunday

Colombo

We arrive in Colombo early this afternoon and will be met at the airport by our Sri Lankan naturalist guide, who will be with us throughout the tour. From the airport we will be transfer to a hotel close to the airport. The rest of the day is available for relaxation after the long flight or for those eager to begin botanising, a stroll in the leafy hotel gardens. In the evening, we plan an excursion to the Muthurajawela Mangrove Reserve, a coastal lagoon marshland of reed beds, shrubs and mangroves. The mangroves comprise of *Acanthus ilicifolius*, *Acrostichum aureum* (the only Mangrove Fern), *Acrostichum speciosum*, *Bruguiera cylindrica*, *Bruguiera gymnorhiza*, *Rhizophora apiculata*, *Rhizophora mucronata*, *Sonneratia alba*, *Sonneratia caseolaris*, *Avicennia marina*, *Nypa fruticans* (the only Mangrove Palm in Sri Lanka). In the open shallow water submerged and floating aquatic plants such as *Aponogeton*, *Potamogeton*, *Salvinia* and *Nymphaea* species can be seen.

Day 3 / 4

Monday – Tuesday

Sigiriya

After breakfast we leave the coast and drive to Sigiriya. Initially we travel through extensive coastal estates of Coconut (*Cocos nucifera*), some of it underplanted with Pineapple, and Rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) plantations, some admixed with Cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*). It is a very attractive landscape and in the villages many of the gardens contain useful food

plants such as; Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Areca-Nut (*Areca catechu*), Guava (*Psidium guajava*), Breadfruit (*Artocarpus incissus*), Jack-Fruit (*A. heterophyllus*) and Lime (*Citrus aurantifolium*). The 'home-garden' system of agriculture has a long history in Sri Lanka, where crops for food, drink, fuel and traditional medicines were all grown on one plot. Mahogany and Teak are often planted for timber and all woody garden waste serves as fuel for the kitchen fires. The King Coconut, a variety with golden-orange fruits, is much esteemed for the sweet sterile water contained in the unripe fruit and is commonly sold at the roadside, a very cheap but totally refreshing natural alternative to bottled drinks.

At Sigiriya we find ourselves in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka and the forest type here is described as dry mixed evergreen. Although a few deciduous species occur in these forests the evergreen character is maintained by some widespread species. Therefore these forests are also referred to as semi-evergreen forests. The sanctuary around the ancient Rock Citadel is comprised of many flowering plants such as *Calatropis gigantea* (Sodom's Apple), *Capparis zeylanica*, *Cassia fistula*, *Crataeva adansonii*, *Ochnalanceolata*, *Martynia diandra* (Tigers' Claws), *Derris scandens* and tree species like *Drypetes* spp., *Manilkara hexandra*, *Diospyros ebanum*, *Bauhinia racemosa*, *Schleichera oleosa*, *Limonia acidissima* and *Syzygium cumini*.

Some aquatic plants such as *Nelumbo nucifera*, *Nymphaea nouchali*, *Nymphaea pubescens*, *Nympoides indica* and *Aponogeton natans* with their beautiful flowers can be seen in ancient tanks around Sigiriya.

King Kasyapa was responsible for the building of a city fortress on Sigiriya rock in 477 AD. Standing at the foot of the rock today it seems a staggering achievement but a palace and complex of gardens were constructed on the three-acre summit and for eighteen years served as a royal citadel. Visitors can reach the site by ascending flights of steps hewn in the rock but it is a stiff climb and not recommended for anyone with a fear of heights. A few frescoes are all that remain of some 500 paintings that formerly graced the rock walls and these can be viewed during the ascent. Shahin Falcons nest on the rock and the surrounding primary forest is superb for birds, containing many interesting species which keen birders may find an attractive alternative to scaling the rock. Birds to look for include Woolly-necked Stork, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Emerald Dove, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Alexandrine Parakeet, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Racket-tailed Drongo, Black-crested Bulbul, Paradise Flycatcher, White-browed Fantail, White-rumped Shama, Forest Wagtail, Oriental White-Eye, Brown-capped Babbler and Pale-billed Flowerpecker.



Day 5

Wednesday

Matale – Riverstone

After breakfast we drive to Riverstone with our packed lunch and will spend the whole day exploring the Pitwala Pathana plains and the Riverstone mountain. We will come across the endemic species in Knuckles such as *Ilex knucklesensis* and *Brachystelma lankana* amongst many other flowering plants and trees unique to this area.

Riverstone is elevated approximately 850 metres above the sea level and is located 30 kilometres from the Matale town, rather windy with quite a few hairpin turns but in good condition, offers great views all around. The weather here is on a cooler side and has two great waterfalls 'Sera Ella' and 'Bambarakiri Ella'. When the clouds descend to the plains you get to experience a unique feeling driving through them.

'Dumbara' the mist laden mountains, is the Sinhalese name for these mountains which derive their English name from the clenched fist appearance of the ridges. This is a wild expanse of undulating hills, misty forests, pastures and forests rich in flora and fauna. Two endemic creatures found here are the Tennent's Horned Lizard and Keerthisinghe's Rock Frog plus a tremendous variety of birdlife.

Later in the evening we will proceed to our hotel in the Matale town for our overnight stay.

Day 6

Thursday

Kandy

After breakfast we leave for Kandy and will briefly stop at our next hotel to pick up our packed lunch before setting off once again to visit the Knuckles mountain range.

The picturesque Knuckles mountains where a tract of lower montane forest near Rangala is a prime example of a fast disappearing habitat. Leaving the wide Dumbara Valley behind, we ascend through extensive tea estates on the lower slopes of the Knuckles range to reach the Kaladeniya Tea Estate at an altitude of about 1300 metres. From here we climb another 170 metres on foot to the edge of the forest. Roadside plants include naturally growing Sandlewood (*Santalum*), Wild Sunflower (*Tithonia diversifolia*), Ceylon Mahogany (*Melia dubia*), Kapok Tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) with their bursting capsules of kapok and Fern-leaf Tree (*Fielicium decipiens*). We may also see the endemics *Vernonia wightiana*, *Osbeckia octandra*, *O. aspera*, *Knoxia platycarpa* and *Exacum trivernium*. The tea estates are dotted with large shade trees such as the flat-topped *Albizia falcata* and *Grevillea robusta* (Silky Oak).

Many of these native forests have been underplanted with Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) which in the long term is harmful to the development of the natural vegetation and leads to the demise of the forest. In this particular stretch of tropical montane evergreen forest there is a rich floral diversity and the average height of the canopy is 8-15 metres. Dominant tree species include *Calophyllum* spp, *Garcinia ecinocarpa*, *Syzygium umbrosum* and *Litsea* spp and *Neolitsea* spp belonging to *Calophyllaceae*, *Clusiaceae*, *Myrtaceae* and *Lauraceae* families respectively. Some plant species such as *Syzygium fergusonii*, *Eugenia hypoleuca* could be seen as endemic plants that only confined to the Knuckles mountain range.

Day 7

Friday

Kandy

A further day in the Kandy area to investigate some of the cultural attractions of this famous city such as the Temple of the Tooth or perhaps a visit to the Peradiniya Botanical Gardens with its wealth of species.

Kandy is steeped in history and was the capital for a succession of Kandyan Kings until captured by the British in 1815. The famous 'Temple of the Tooth' beside Kandy Lake is one of the best known Buddhist temples in the country and attracts thousands of visitors every year. Kandy is traditionally a center of music and dance and most nights it is possible to witness demonstrations of both art forms at special performances, which will be advertised in our hotel.

The Peradiniya Botanical Gardens in a suburb of the Kandy city. Extending over 147 acres, the gardens were established in 1820 by Alexander Moon and are situated in a bend of Sri Lanka's longest river, the Mahaweli Ganga. Peradiniya is crammed full of interesting trees and plants set out in a very attractive style and the orchid house is particularly worth a visit. Birds flock to enjoy the many fruiting trees in the gardens and we may find two endemic parrots, the diminutive Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot and Layard's Parakeet. Other regular visitors include Hill Myna, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. A large colony of Indian Flying Foxes can be watched in the heart of the gardens and as dusk approaches, the giant fruit bats become increasingly active as they prepare for their nocturnal forays into the surrounding country. It is difficult to single out botanical highlights in a place so richly endowed but the Gymnosperm collection, spice garden, medical garden, National Herbarium and arboretum are all worthy of inspection and the long avenue of Coco-de-mer palms is a spectacular sight away from the Seychelles.



Day 8

Saturday

Nuwara Eliya

After breakfast we drive higher into the hill country for a stay in the hill station of Nuwara Eliya which lies at an elevation of 1,890 metres. Village plots along the side of the road contain a variety of interesting vegetables including Snakegourd, Bottlegourd, Bittergourd, Ridgegourd, Ashgourd, Yam, Winged Bean and many other unfamiliar species but nearer to Nuwara Eliya there are extensive market gardens and the roadside produce for sale is more recognisably European featuring bunches of bright orange Carrots, Onions and Potatoes. Soon after leaving Kandy we begin to pass through one tea estate after another and this main export crop is a dominant feature of the central hill country. En route we will stop at one of the factories to observe the tea production process which has hardly changed since the industry began although these days the marketing and sales have become hi-tech! The clearance of natural vegetation for tea estates has denuded many of the hills but expanses of forest still cling to the more precipitous slopes

and occasional waterfalls spill down to create wonderful photographic opportunities. The old colonial style buildings of Nuwara Eliya are surrounded by an abundance of pine trees which frame the golf course and race track giving a distinctly British feel to the town. Nearby the highest peak in Sri Lanka rises to over 2,700 metres.

After a late lunch the remainder of the afternoon is at leisure. One possibility is to look at the small reserve adjacent to our hotel where several endemic bird species and Giant Squirrels may be observed. An excursion into the town would permit a stroll in Victoria Park, delightful well-maintained gardens in the heart of the town where an interesting range of hill country birds may be seen including a number of endemics. Although on a much smaller scale than Peradeniya, the gardens are a tribute to the careful attention of generations of gardeners and contain many island specialities as well as plants imported from Europe.

Day 9

Sunday

Horton Plains

A full day will be spent in Horton Plains National Park, Sri Lanka's highest and most isolated plateau. Although only 28 kilometres from Nuwara Eliya, the road is in poor condition and the final ascent to the plateau involves some steep inclines. We may stop to look at and photograph the handsome tree ferns – *Cyathea crinita* and *C. walkeri*. This is a fascinating place, a mixture of open grassy expanses, dotted with the endemic *Rhododendron arboreum* subsp. *zeylanicum*, and patches of stunted forest, much of the latter festooned with epiphytes. The scenery is spectacular and on clear days it is possible to see the distant summit of Adam's Peak. At World's End, the plateau drops steeply to the plains over 1,000 metres below and this becomes a swirling cauldron of cloud as the day progresses.

The Plains are often immersed in cloud and the damp atmosphere has determined the appearance and composition of the forests. Stunted and twisted trunks, gnarled branches and umbrella shaped crowns are typical. Epiphytic Lichens, Mosses, Ferns and Orchids proliferate in this damp, misty environment. The tree species on the Plains include; *Actinodaphne* spp., *Neolitsea* spp., *Litsea* spp., *Syzygium* spp., *Calophyllum walkeri*, *Rhododendron arboreum* and *Gordonia* spp. Under the canopy there is a rich shrub layer containing mostly *Lasianthus* spp., *Strobilanthes* spp., and climbers such as *Piper montana*, *Kendrickia walkeri* and *Toddalia asiatica*. The grasslands and marshy areas are dominated by; *Garnotia exaristata* and *Chrysopogon nodulibarbis*. In wet places *Lycopodium clavatum* and carnivorous plants such as *Drosera* sp. and *Utricularia* may be found. Undergrowth of the mountain forests are dominated by several species of *Strobilanthes* which bloom once in their 8 – 12 years life. Gregarious blooming in every 8 – 12 years intervals made a colorful spectacular appearance over the Horton Plains. *Arundinaria densifolia* is a species of draft bamboo which is the shortest bamboo species in Sri Lanka and confined to Horton Plains. Dense bamboo clumps can be seen in boggy areas associated with some streams found in grasslands of Horton Plains.

Many interesting birds and mammals may be found in this wild and airy National Park. Endemic hill birds such as Yellow-eared Bulbul and Dull Blue Flycatcher are relatively numerous whilst less obvious residents include Sri Lanka Woodpigeon, Sri Lanka Bush Warbler and the shy Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush or Arrenga. Sambar Deer are often to be seen grazing at the forest edge, Giant Squirrels and the handsome highland race of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey inhabit the tree canopy and Leopards are not infrequently observed at night. It is also worth keeping a look out for small reptiles as several endemic species occur here.

At the end of a fascinating day we return to Nuwara Eliya for a second night at our hotel.

Day 10

Monday

Sinharaja

A long but interesting drive is in prospect as we descend via numerous snaking loops in the road to the southern lowlands and make our way north to the rain forest of Sinharaja. The first of a number of stops punctuating the journey will be to visit the Thangamalai Sanctuary, a small montane forest near the town of Haputale. The dominant trees here belong to the *Myrtaceae*, *Lauraceae*, *Theaceae* and *Euphorbeaceae*. *Impatiens grandis* is a nationally endangered (EN) species that can be seen in Tangamalai Sanctuary. The herbaceous flora is rich in ground orchids, *Anoectochilus setaceus*, *Calanthe* sp., and a variety of balsams including *Impatiens grandis*. There are also many ferns and the rare *Legocia aurantica*. From Haputale we gradually descend along the southern slope of the central mountain range through tea estates, natural grasslands and savannah. This sparsely populated area has only recently become accessible as a result of the Samanawewa hydroelectric project. The trees in the grassland are widely spaced at 10-15 m and the vegetation is largely fire resistant, as it is regularly rejuvenated by burning. Many plants in this system have medical value and are used in ayurveda. The trees are mainly *Bridelia retusa*, *Phyllanthus embilica* (Euphorbiaceae), *Grewia damine* (Tiliaceae), *Pterocarpus marsupium*, (Fabaceae), *Terminalia bellerica*, *T.chebula* (Combretaceae), *Helicteres isora* (Sterculiaceae), *Careya arborea* (Lecythidaceae) and *Cycas circinalis*, the only native gymnosperm in Sri Lanka. *Chrisopogon* spp. and *Chrisopogon natus* are the prominent grass components. During the rainy season the herbaceous diversity in these grasslands is very high.

We will stop at Belihyuloya for Lunch and continue to our overnight destination and stay at Blue Magpie Lodge at Sinharaja.

Day 11

Tuesday

Sinharaja Forest

A full day spent in the Sinharaja Forest. This Biosphere reserve is the largest, and most important lowland forest remaining on the island. So many things about Sinharaja are unique; 80% of the Sri Lankan endemic birds breed in the reserve, 60% of the trees are found nowhere else as are a good proportion of the plants, reptiles and insects. Threatened by logging and encroachment it has somehow survived and is an essential element of any natural history tour of Sri Lanka.

Several canopy dominant species such as *Dipterocarpus zeylanicus*, *Dipterocarpus hispidus* and *Doona trapezifolia* belongs to Dipterocarpaceae family which comprised of all 58 species endemic to Sri Lanka, can be seen in Sinharaja forest. Additionally, the national tree of Sri Lanka, *Mesua ferrea* (Iron wood) is found among the canopy.

Below the *Dipterocarpus* giants which comprise the major tree components of the forest is a sparse shrub and herb layer and the low penetration of light to the forest floor encourages considerable saprophytic and parasitic activity. Delicate Bamboo Orchids and various pitcher plants grow beside the forest trails and other epiphytic orchids are numerous on the branches and trunks of the trees. Ferns include the local 'bracken' *Lindsea repens*, which is collected for shoring up the sides of the open gem mines, a delicate rambling fern *Dicranopteris linearis*, a small tree fern *Cyathea sinuate*, and a large palm-like fern, *Blechnum orientalis*.

Sri Lankan endemic Pitcher-plant, *Nepenthes distillatoria* that grows as a climbing shrub in Sinharaja. As an insectivorous plant, pitcher like traps produce a fluid in bottom of the pitcher that digest the fallen insects. Plant takes nutrients from the digested compounds of insect bodies. This fluid is also used for local medicines.

Over 200 species of flowering plants occur at Sinharaja and we will enjoy a full day in the forest admiring the flora and scenery as well as observing some of the wonderful birdlife and exotic butterflies that inhabit this magical place. To prolong our time in the reserve we will stay overnight at the Blue Magpie, a small lodge adjacent to the forest which obviates the long drive back to Ratnapura.

Day 12

Wednesday

Katunayake

We return to Katunayake today but before leaving the Blue Magpie we will enjoy another morning of birding in the vicinity of the hotel where Green-billed Coucals are often easy to find at first light and other interesting residents include Spot-winged Thrush, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher and Black-throated Munia.

Eventually we can postpone the moment no longer and will set off on the southern highway for a four hour drive north. Upon arrival in Katunayake, we will check into our 4-star The Gateway Airport Garden Hotel Colombo for some rest and a good night's sleep!



The Gateway, Katunayake

Day 13

Thursday

London

We have a mid-morning transfer to Katunayake airport to catch our afternoon Sri Lankan direct flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by early evening.

Blue Whales extension

Cost: £795

Single room supplement: £195

(The minimum number of people required to run this extension is five; however, we may decide to operate it with fewer people, at our discretion, with local guides.)

Introduction

The Great Whales are a source of wonder and fascination to land-based humans as we struggle to comprehend their alien, unfettered existence roaming the mysterious depths of the world's oceans. There is a seemingly insatiable desire to savour the experience of being close to these magnificent creatures and wherever feeding or breeding imperatives bring numbers of whales to congregate in a particular area there will invariably be local boatmen taking visitors to enjoy a few precious moments sharing the ocean with these leviathans. The largest of all the cetaceans, indeed the



Blue Whale



Spinner Dolphins

largest of all mammals, the Blue Whale, has always been something of an enigma, a true ocean wanderer living a pelagic lifestyle which rarely brings them with any predictability close to land. Gradually however, scientists are beginning to gain some understanding of the enormous migrations undertaken by Blue Whales and one discovery has been their regular appearances close to the south coast of Sri Lanka between November and early April. It is this annual event that we will be taking advantage of during this extension in a country that has long been a Naturetrek favourite.

Day 12

Wednesday

Koggala

Today we leave the group and travel by road to our delightful Koggala Beach Hotel. Areas of the south-west coastline were devastated during the Tsunami but the Sri Lankans are resilient people and much reconstruction has taken place since the tragedy in 2004. Fortunately the delightful Koggala Beach Hotel was only partially damaged and this resort hotel will be our base for three nights of our extension tour. The drive from Sinharaja will probably take three hours and after settling in to our rooms a period of relaxation will no doubt be welcome and give us a chance to sample the resort amenities or perhaps simply sit on the sandy beach watching the waves breaking on the sand with binoculars ready in case a huge White-bellied Sea Eagle glides along overhead or terns begin fishing offshore. Sri Lanka is a remarkably lush, verdant tropical island and trees surround the hotel offering further birdwatching opportunities which might perhaps be taken advantage of from the comfort of a lounge beside the swimming pool! Typical species of such forest edge include Magpie Robin, Yellow-billed Babbler, three species of sunbird, Koel, Coppersmith Barbet and Flameback Woodpecker. The local bird list is sure to grow with each day spent at Mirissa.



The Beach at Mirissa

Day 13

Thursday

Mirissa

Thirty minutes' drive from the hotel is the small fishing port of Mirissa and it is here that we board a whale-watching vessel for a four hour morning excursion in search of Blue Whales. The distance sailed will very much depend on whale sightings and sea conditions but we may go up to ten kilometers offshore although it is more likely that most observations will be much closer to land. The seas off Sri Lanka are rich in marine life but it is only comparatively recently that scientists have discovered the regular appearances of Blue Whales between November and early April.

Up to a dozen or more of these enigmatic ocean wanderers may be lingering off the coast and we will rely on our skipper's expertise to locate as many individuals as possible during each excursion. Despite their huge bulk, Blue Whales have a very small dorsal fin and are not always easy to find on the surface but they do have an extremely tall columnar blow and it is this 9 metre high plume of condensed water vapour that usually betrays the presence of a whale. Blue Whales also tend to display their huge curved tail flukes before each dive and this again is an indicator of where to look. The captain will take the boat as close as he can without causing disturbance to the whales and we will



Blue Whale and remoras

hope that by drifting with the current we can allow the creatures to approach alongside the vessel, hopefully near enough to be able to smell their distinctive pungent breath! We may have to content ourselves with longer distance views on this first outing but there will be more chances for close-ups on the following days. Whilst Blue Whales will be our principal quarry, many other cetacea occur in these waters and species observed during the previous seasons included; Bryde's, Sperm and Short-finned Pilot Whales, Bottlenosed

Dolphins, Rissos's Dolphins and Spinner Dolphins, the latter sometimes in pods numbering several hundred animals. Birdlife is less plentiful at this time of year but possibilities include Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Pomarine Skua, Crested, Bridled and White-winged Terns.

The sailing will last about 3-4 hours and on return to land we will retire for a leisurely lunch before enjoying the birding around the resort. There are no boat rides in the afternoon as outings are less productive and the sea can be rough, please note boat rides are weather dependent and can be cancelled without prior notice. At the end of our boat trip as we return to the Koggala Beach Hotel we will hope to be celebrating some memorable encounters with the largest creature on earth.

On one of the afternoon in Mirissa we will enjoy an excursion to Galle, which was a thriving port long before colonial times; on the southwest of the country, it attracted Arabs, Persians, Romans and Greeks on their way across the Indian Ocean. In 1505 the Portuguese attacked and settled the town, 135 years later conceding it to the Dutch, who built the famous fort. In 1796 the British took over and used the fort as their headquarters. Today, Galle Fort is the old part of the city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the best preserved colonial sea fortress in Asia. It is a cosy little town in its own right with narrow streets, churches, cloistered courtyards and shuttered mansions standing testament to their colonial past. Galle Fort has recently received a lot of investment from expatriates living in South East Asia and is now bristling with boutique



Fishing boats with Galle Fort behind

hotels, art galleries, tiny shops, cafes and restaurants. There are several museums as well as the Dutch Reformed Church and the lively Arab Quarter. The entrances to Galle National Maritime Museum and Fort are not included and can be paid locally. At the time of writing there is no entrance fees to visit Galle Fort and £4 to visit Galle National Maritime Museum.

Day 14

Friday

Mirissa

Today in the morning we will repeat the whale-watching excursion from Mirissa and with the ever-changing ocean will hope for further Blue Whale sightings as well as appearances by other whales, dolphins and birds. In characteristic fashion, the dolphins often swim in the bow-wave of the vessel offering spectacular views as they do so. The huge pods of Spinner Dolphins are not a predictable phenomenon but if we are fortunate enough to witness one of these there will be plenty of employment for cameras as the seas become a turmoil of activity and scores, or even hundreds, of dolphins progress across the ocean in a loose assembly, leaping out of the water at great speed as they pursue their prey. Sea conditions in March and early April are usually calm allowing the best chances for observations and making whale 'spouts' visible over a long distance. Seas may however be a little rougher in November and December.



Indian Flying Foxes



Koggala Beach Hotel



After lunch at the hotel we will spend the cooler end of the afternoon birdwatching in the local areas where a wide range of species is possible including Red-wattled Lapwing and White-breasted Waterhen, Purple Swamphen, terns and waterbirds as well as more forest inhabitants. Alternatively tour members may choose to relax or swim off the beach. Later in the day we can look for Indian Flying Foxes as the night settles and maybe witness enormous Indian Flying Foxes flapping off from their roost site to begin some nocturnal foraging. These huge, fruit-eating bats are widespread on the island but declining in numbers and colonies are always a welcome sight on our tours.

Day 15

Saturday

Katunayake

Our plans today are somewhat flexible depending upon the success of the previous days. If necessary, a further whale-watching trip could be taken at extra cost but hopefully we will have achieved our marine objectives and can conclude our tour. Eventually we can postpone the moment no longer and will set off on the southern highway for a three hour drive north. Upon arrival in Katunayake, we will check into our 4-star The Gateway Airport Garden Hotel Colombo for some rest and a good night's sleep!

Day 16

Sunday

London

We have a mid-morning transfer to Katunayake airport to catch our afternoon Sri Lankan direct flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by early evening.

Climate

Generally hot and sunny with temperatures in the low country ranging from 25°C to 35°C with high humidity, particularly in the Wet Zone. Temperatures decrease in the hills to a range of 10°C-22°C around Nuwara Eliya. Rain can occur at any time but is not usually prolonged outside the monsoon seasons, although showers are an almost daily occurrence at Sinharaja.

Accommodation & food

We use standard tourist hotels throughout the itinerary and these are of three or four star standard, some with swimming pools and other amenities. The exception, is the Blue Magpie Lodge near Sinharaja which is a simple but comfortable Rest House. Accommodation for this tour is in twin rooms with private facilities (single rooms being available on request).

All food is included in the price of the tour.

Entry requirements

All UK passport holders and most other nationalities require an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) visa for Sri Lanka, which is obtainable in advance by filling the ETA form on <http://www.eta.gov.lk/slvisa/>. No vaccinations are mandatory for entry, but as recommended in our brochure we think it is wise to also be protected against polio, tetanus and hepatitis A, and malaria. Please note that, although we are aware of a banner at Colombo airport which announces 'Welcome to a Malaria Free Country', there are cases of malaria each year in Sri Lanka, and we strongly recommend that you seek medical advice regarding any requirement for prophylactics for your visit to the island. MASTA Travel Clinics are located across the UK and provide a full range of travel immunisations. For your nearest clinic, visit www.masta-travel-health.com. You can also register on the website and fill out the details of your holiday to obtain a country specific 'Health Brief'.

Flights

We use scheduled Sri Lankan Airlines direct flights for all our tours to Sri Lanka. All these flights depart from London Heathrow. If you wish to travel from Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen there will be an additional charge of around **£295** and these flights will be with British Airways.

The sole disadvantage of Sri Lankan Airlines flights to Sri Lanka is that sometimes the service is slow and special requests for seats and meals are not easily available. If you would prefer to fly with Emirates or Qatar Airways, please note that these flights are not direct. If you wish to fly with Emirates or Qatar Airways, we will gladly arrange it for you, but please give us plenty of warning and you can expect to pay between £100 and £200 extra for these indirect flights. Due to a difference in arrival and departure times, you will also be expected to pay an extra £150 per person (minimum two people are required) for the additional transfer fees.

If you would prefer to travel in Business class (normally available at a supplement charge of around **£3,495**).

Return flights with Sri Lankan Airlines are scheduled to arrive at London Heathrow at 1900. Please note that, your return flight might not connect with British Airways flights to regional airports, and you may require an extra night in London.

If you would like to travel from one of the above regional airports and/or in business class, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.



Blue Whale with remoras

Grading

This tour is graded A/B. Most of the botanical walks are gentle and suitable for any age and level of fitness. There are also a couple of slightly more strenuous longer walks included in the itinerary.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Sri Lanka. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

Highlights from previous tour

We explored a vast area of the island's lagoons, forests, mountains and arboretums and identified many varieties of ferns, fruiting trees and flowering plants, including a few endemics. The journey through the dry zone to the wet zone via the intermediate zone displayed the changing stature of species such as *Calophyllum*. Although there were many changes to the island's weather patterns, we were lucky to see the Daffodil Orchid *Ipsea speciosa* in bloom in the Thangamale sanctuary. The beautiful herbaceous flowers of *Sonerila zeylanica* and *Scutellaria violacea* were also seen within this same sanctuary. A *Bombax ceiba* tree with bright red flowers decorated the bland surroundings of a waterfall near Belihul oya and was a welcome sight on our way to Sinharaja. After exploring the island for 12 days we were able to intensively identify 325 plant species along with 146 birds, 14 mammals and nine reptiles & amphibian species. The main tour was followed by a short whale watch extension.



Drosera burmanni



Exacum trinervium