

A Rock Fortress at Sunrise, Tea Country by Rail — A 7-Day Sri Lanka Itinerary

Sri Lanka in a week: a sunrise climb up the lion-carved ramparts of Sigiriya and an afternoon jeep safari among wild elephants in the Cultural Triangle, the gilded Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and a Kandyan dance show in the hill capital of Kandy, the hours-long scenic train through tea country to Ella, and a run down to the ramparts of Galle's 17th-century Dutch fort and a whale-watching boat off Mirissa — with real hotels, licensed operators, and 2026 prices for every stop.

DURATION

7 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

December – April

the driest, sunniest window across the west and south coasts and the Cultural Triangle (80–90°F / 27–32°C on the coast, cooler in the hills), before the southwest monsoon arrives in May (October–November is a shoulder season with fewer crowds and good whale-watching, but less predictable weather)

FROM

\$950 USD / person

for 2 people

DAY 1

Arrive in Colombo

Land in Colombo and settle in before a week that runs from ancient rock fortresses to tea-country rail lines and a whale-watching coast — the afternoon is loose, built around a first taste of Sri Lankan cooking by the sea.

Private Airport Transfer — Walkers Tours

~45 minutes · From \$35 USD, private car for 2

A Colombo-based destination management company meets arrivals at Bandaranaike International Airport for the drive into the city — easier than negotiating a metered taxi after a long-haul flight.

Overnight — Cinnamon Grand Colombo

From \$150–\$190 USD / night, for 2 people

A five-star tower near the Galle Face oceanfront promenade in the Kollupitiya district, with one of the city's largest breakfast spreads and a dozen in-house restaurants.

Cinnamon Grand Colombo | +94112497361 | cinnamonhotels.com/cinnamongrandcolombo

DAY 2

Colombo to the Cultural Triangle

A morning drive north to the island's ancient heartland, breaking at a 2,000-year-old cave monastery en route to two nights beneath Sigiriya's rock.

Private Transfer — Walkers Tours, Colombo to Sigiriya

~4 hours · From \$120 USD, private car for 2

The drive climbs out of the coastal lowlands onto the dry-zone plains of the Cultural Triangle, with a stop built in at Dambulla en route.

Walkers Tours | +94117311611 | walkerstours.com

Dambulla Cave Temple

~1.5 hours, self-guided · \$10 USD / person

Five caves carved into a 500-foot granite outcrop hold more than 150 Buddha statues and ceiling frescoes painted and repainted across two millennia — the largest and best-preserved cave-temple complex in Sri Lanka, reached by a short climb with views over the plains.

Overnight — Hotel Sigiriya

From \$120–\$160 USD / night, for 2 people

A low-rise resort in its own gardens directly across from Sigiriya rock, run by Brown's Hotels since the 1980s, with a rooftop pool framed by a straight-on view of the fortress.

Hotel Sigiriya | +94740626626 | brownshotels.com/hotelsigiriya

DAY 3

Sigiriya at Sunrise & a Minneriya Safari

An early start to beat the heat and the crowds up one of Asia's most extraordinary ruins, then an afternoon jeep safari through the dry-zone parkland where Sri Lanka's elephants gather in some of the largest wild herds on the island.

Sigiriya Rock Fortress

~3 hours, self-guided, 7am start · \$35 USD / person

A 5th-century royal citadel built atop a 660-foot volcanic column, climbed via a spiral staircase past a wall of 1,500-year-old frescoed maidens and through the paws of a giant carved lion — the summit holds the foundations of King Kashyapa's palace and a near-360-degree view over the jungle.

Minneriya National Park Safari — Minneriya Safari Tours

~3 hours, afternoon jeep · From \$70 USD, private jeep for 2

Roughly July through October, "The Gathering" draws several hundred wild elephants to graze the shores of Minneriya's reservoir at once, though smaller herds are visible in the park most of the year — an open-top 4WD safari with a local guide is the standard way to see them.

Minneriya Safari Tours | +94776487757 | minneriyasafari.com

Overnight — Hotel Sigiriya

From \$120–\$160 USD / night, for 2 people

Second night at the resort before tomorrow's drive south to Kandy.

Hotel Sigiriya | +94740626626 | brownshotels.com/hotelsigiriya

DAY 4

Sigiriya to Kandy

South into the hills to Sri Lanka's last royal capital, home to the island's most revered Buddhist shrine and a nightly show of traditional Kandyan dance.

Private Transfer — Walkers Tours, Sigiriya to Kandy

~2.5 hours · From \$85 USD, private car for 2

The road winds south through Matale's spice-growing hills before dropping into the Kandy valley, with a stop possible at a spice garden en route.

Walkers Tours | +94117311611 | walkerstours.com

Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

~1.5 hours, self-guided · \$7 USD / person

The gilded shrine at the centre of the Sri Dalada Maligawa complex houses what devotees believe is a tooth relic of the Buddha, brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century — the relic chamber opens for public viewing during the daily puja ceremonies, when drummers lead the offerings.

Kandyan Cultural Dance Show — Kandy Lake Club

~1 hour, evening show · \$10 USD / person

A nightly show of Kandyan dance in full regalia — the peacock and Ves dances among them — closing with a fire-walking demonstration in the courtyard, staged a short walk from Kandy Lake.

Kandy Lake Club | +94772260666 | kandylakeclubdance.com

Overnight — Earl's Regency Kandy

From \$140–\$180 USD / night, for 2 people

A hillside hotel on the edge of the Mahaweli River a few minutes from the temple, built around gardens and a spa wing, regularly rated the top full-service address in Kandy.

Earl's Regency | +94812422122 | aitkenspencehotels.com/earlsregency

DAY 5

The Scenic Train to Ella

The train ride many visitors call the best few hours of their trip — a slow climb through tea estates, tunnels and misty ridgelines to the hill town of Ella.

Kandy to Ella — Ella Odyssey First-Class Observation Train

~6.5 hours · From \$30 USD / person, first-class observation car

The line climbs more than 4,000 feet from Kandy through Nanu Oya (for Nuwara Eliya) and Haputale, past terraced tea gardens and pine forest to Ella — the Odyssey observation carriage adds glass sections and open-air viewing platforms to the standard reserved service; seats are released 30 days out and sell out fast.

Sri Lanka Railways, Kandy Station | +94812222271 | seatreservation.railway.gov.lk

Nine Arch Bridge

~1 hour, self-guided · Free

A colonial-era railway viaduct of nine stone arches spanning a tea-planted ravine just outside Ella — arrive in the late afternoon to watch (or photograph) a train cross, timed against the daily schedule.

Overnight — 98 Acres Resort & Spa

From \$210–\$260 USD / night, for 2 people

Timber-and-stone chalets terraced into a working tea estate above Ella, each with a private balcony looking out over Ella Gap — the resort's infinity pool and restaurant share the same view.

98 Acres Resort & Spa | +94572050050 | resort98acres.com

DAY 6**Tea Country to the South Coast**

A morning tea-factory tour before the long drive down from the hills to the ramparts of Galle's 17th-century Dutch fort.

Halpewatte Tea Factory Tour

~1 hour, self-guided · \$10 USD / person

A working factory a short drive from Ella walking visitors through withering, rolling and firing Ceylon tea leaves by hand and machine, ending with a tasting on a terrace over the plantation.

Halpewatte Tea Factory | +94572228530 | halpetea.com

Private Transfer — Walkers Tours, Ella to Galle

~5.5 hours · From \$150 USD, private car for 2

The route drops out of the hill country onto the southern coastal highway, with a possible stop at a roadside curd-and-treacle stall in the lowlands.

Walkers Tours | +94117311611 | walkerstours.com

Galle Fort Walking Tour

~2 hours, self-guided · Free to walk

A UNESCO-listed fort raised by the Portuguese and expanded by the Dutch in the 17th century, its ramparts, lighthouse and grid of colonial streets now home to boutiques, cafes and art galleries — walk the sea wall for sunset over the Indian Ocean.

Overnight — Galle Fort Hotel

From \$260–\$320 USD / night, for 2 people

A restored 17th-century Dutch merchant's villa inside the fort walls, its suites built around a courtyard pool — regularly named one of Sri Lanka's best small hotels.

Galle Fort Hotel | +94766658080 | galleforthotel.com

DAY 7**Whale Watching & Departure**

An early boat out of Mirissa for a chance at blue and sperm whales before the drive back to Colombo for the flight home.

Whale Watching — Raja & the Whales

~3.5 hours, 6:30am departure · \$30 USD / person

A Mirissa-based operator running small-group boats out to the continental shelf, one of the few places in the world where blue whales are seen with regularity alongside sperm whales, spinner dolphins and, in season, Bryde's whales.

Raja & the Whales | +94776953452 | rajaandthewhales.com

Private Transfer — Walkers Tours, South Coast to Colombo Airport

~2.5 hours · From \$95 USD, private car for 2

The final leg back up the expressway to Bandaranaike International Airport, with time built in after the morning's boat trip.

Walkers Tours | +94117311611 | walkerstours.com

Departure — Bandaranaike International Airport (CMB)

Self-guided

Closes a week that ran from a lion-carved rock fortress to tea-estate rail lines to whale-watching seas — check international carriers' recommended arrival times, typically 3 hours before departure.