

The heartlands of Sri Lanka - a Travel Guide

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Introduction and scope

As with most of the top questions, this ‘frequently asked question’ (faq) document tries to summarise material often asked and often given as reply in the forum. And hence is more or less ‘crowdsourced’, any forum contribution could be worth being copy pasted here and modification proposals or offers to help editing (using one’s own gmail address) are welcome with us Destination Experts.

This document complements another one, [TA Lankan beach travel guide](#). And together they cover almost all the touristically relevant towns/places of the island, insofar we find them worth recommending for a serious visit; hence e.g. Negombo and Colombo are absent.

The main reason for making this travel guide (nope, not a replacement for a full-blown book like Rough Guides or Lonely Planet) is being able to suggest sample itineraries. From the itinerary page then for each town in the route one can jump to its description in one of these two ‘travel guide’ documents. But of course usage is wider than that, and it’s also a TA top question.

For each of the three inland regions there is a brief rationale about the selection of towns, and often a few general guidelines. Like ‘when choosing between town X and Y, what is the best for me’? Then the towns are covered individually. The order is generally more or less following a main north-south direction; the indices at the top of the document help navigating quickly to an individual town.

Just as with the beach travel guide, some of the topics might need a bit of extra general explanation. And these are:

- Main areas for tourists: some detail of the areas most relevant for tourists, either for visiting as daytrip or for accommodation. Mentioning hotel names is rare though; for best recommendations of individual places use the TA reviews. We solely mention them here if a certain location/area is regularly asked in the forum, and relevant for tourists. In the map we use markers like [1], the text refers to those.
- Main sights in the town and suburbs: again this does not claim the completeness of the TA ‘things to do’ listings, though those also cover companies next to the real sights. But it tries to enumerate main sights, as that is relevant when including a town as base in a roundtrip route or not.
- Main sights for which the town can serve as a base: ditto but now the further-away options (often especially if those don’t have much of accommodation closer by).
- Seasonal influences: a brief indication whether the town has a strong no-go time or high season.
- (Dis)like it for: many towns have fans and ‘adversaries’ amongst past visitors. And often that is quite subjective - tastes differ. Here we try to summarise what is written by those that praise a town (and suggest to stay 2-3 nights there during a roundtrip) but also what is written by those that recommend to skip it.
- Eating out scene: if the town has one it’s mentioned here, often we will refer to a map marker.

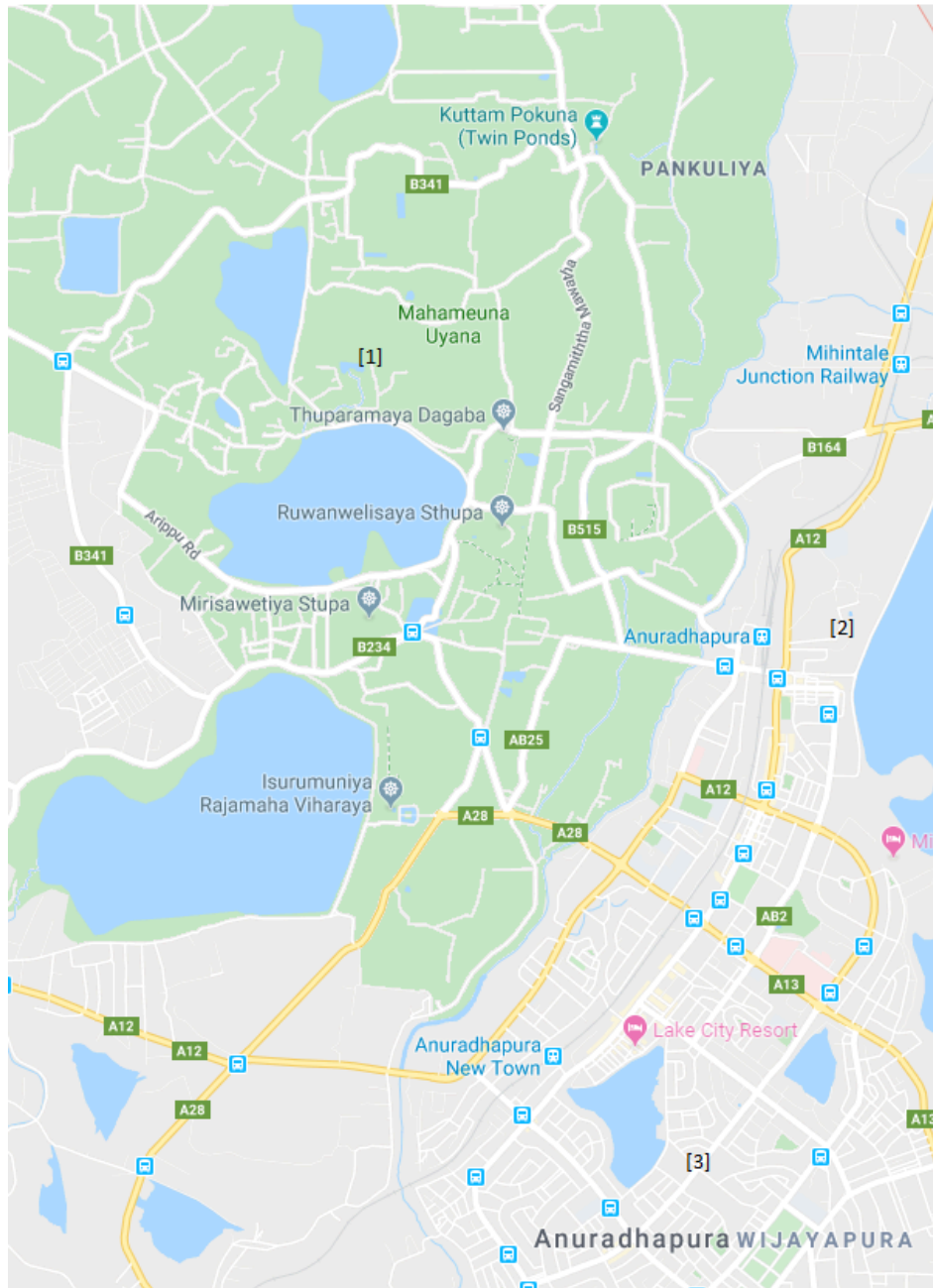
Just like with the sibling top question/travel guide, credits for the maps go to Google.

The Cultural Triangle

This is the area bordered by Anuradhapura on the northwest side, Pollonaruwa on the northeast side and Matale on the south side. (Some would say Kandy, but we declare that to be part of the Hill Country). We picked the most relevant towns here for a tourist itinerary. And first answer some often asked generic questions.

- 'Dambulla and Sigiriya I want to visit for sure, but Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa would each cost me a day and I have only time for one. Which to choose?'
Well we can only tell the qualities, your taste will decide. A'Pura is artistically a bit less impressive than the well-restored P'ruwa monuments like Gal Vihara. But it's very vibrant and alive as almost all monuments are actively in use by worshippers, whilst P'ruwa is basically a museum without e.g. evening pujas.
- 'I will stay 1 night at A'Pura because it's 1.30 hours away from the other towns, but want to pick one base for the eastern towns. Which is best?'
Good plan. Pollonaruwa-Giritale are least practical as they are on the eastern edge. Habarana and Dambulla are good central bases with frequent buses in all directions (Habarana also train). Sigiriya is less interesting if you need buses, but great for those with private transport - it's the sole town with a (smallish) restaurant scene.
- 'Which wildlife park to visit'.
Well this might determine your bases, but the information on all parks is in the top question on day trips. Very rough: Wilpattu if you want variety, the Habarana park trio if you want large herds of elephants.

Anuradhapura/Mihintale

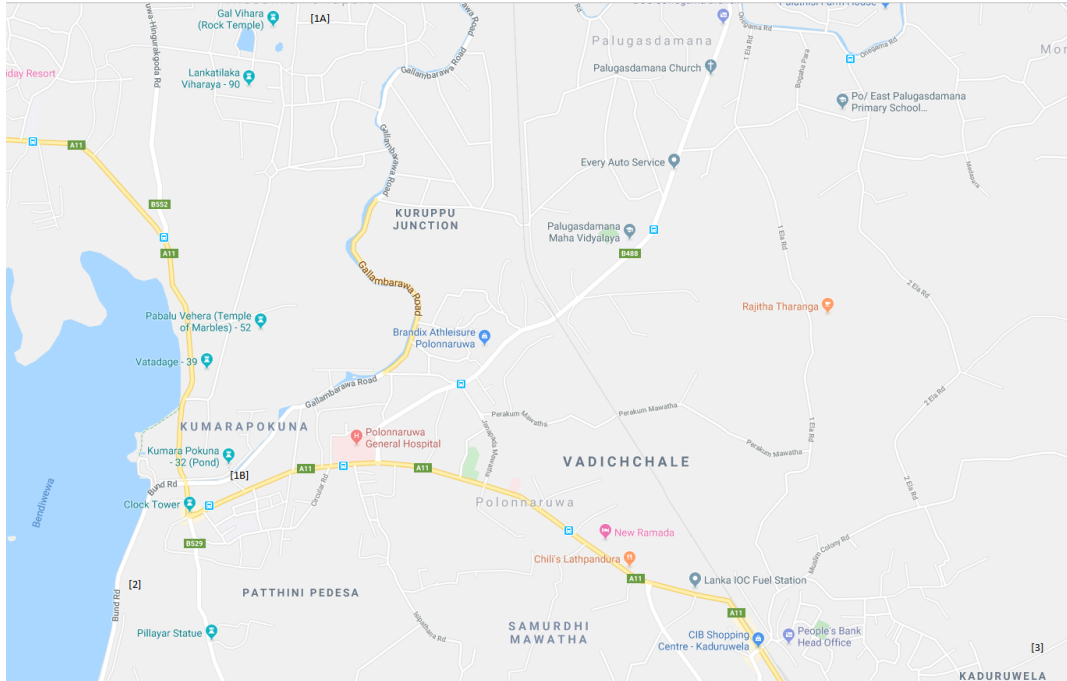


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | <p>We focus mainly on A'Pura here. But Mihintale is kind of smaller 'twin city' for it, only 45 mins travel away, so as a tourist sight it's good to do a half day the AP sights and then maybe 1-1.30 hours for Mihintale; sunsets there are magnificent.</p> <p>Back to A'Pura. It was the capital of the 'Anuradhapura kingdom' for almost 1300 years, from 3rd century BC to 10th century AD. As it's also the place of the oldest Bodhi Tree in the island, sacred for Buddhists, it remains an important pilgrimage site. Current population is around 55,000.</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] Is the 'Sacred Area'; gates at the edges make sure that tourists have paid the entry fee for the sights inside it. But a few important temples/palace ruins are outside of the area and charge a small fee separately: Sri Maha Bodhi, Ruwanwelisaya and Isumuruniya. And there are also a few interesting sights outside the Area that are free. Hardly accommodation.</p> <p>[2] Is the area close to the railway station. This is already of later time than the kingdom, with residential and shopping parts.</p> <p>[3] Is the 'New Town' which as the name implies is the more modern city, with all markets and main shops. Hotels located well for the city visits can be found in [2] and [3], but depending on travel plans a hotel more towards the outskirts can be perfectly okay. If the tourist wants to see the Sacred Area by rented pushbike, of course the distance to [1] needs to be taken into account.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | The Sacred Area, and Mihintale. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Wilpattu park is 0:45-1 hour drive to the southwest (near Wilpattu junction on Puttalam Road, with good bus connections). Do note however the safari times, 6-11 AM or 13-18 PM at least, hence bus would not work well for either the outbound or return trip. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35°, especially March-April can be quite hot in these plains. |

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| Seasonal influences | The Cultural Triangle does not have strong monsoon influence; parts of A'Pura district can suffer from rains and flooding in the June and November intermonsoons. |
| People like it for: | The devotional atmosphere at e.g. the main Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi temple next to the Sacredd tree, combined with other impressive palaces and temples - though their maintenance level varies. |
| People dislike it for: | As the intro to the Cultural Triangle already says, artistically the city is of a bit lower level than Polonnaruwa with e.g. Gal Vihara. |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Hardly, though [3] has a few local 'family restaurants'. Most people have dinner in their own accommodation. See note on HEC (Human Elephant Conflict) under 'Sigiriya'. |

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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | Together with Ohiya this town shares the honour of being just a small hamlet, with maybe 1000 inhabitants. However it's close to the historic Yapahuwa rock fortress, a smaller sibling to Sigiriya, and also handy in certain routes. Hence its place in this faq. |
| Main areas for tourists | [1] is Maho town with a few shops and rice & curry 'restaurants'. [2] is the Rock area, with a good 3-star hotel (Yapahuwa Paradise) and nearby an ayurvedic resort. |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | The rock fortress, see the top question on day trips. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Not really, though the train station connects to both Anuradhapura-Northern lines and the Trinco/Batti eastern lines hence it can be a useful stopover for those travelling by train. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35' |
| Seasonal influences | Nothing special |
| People like it for: | Location, 'mini-Sigiriya feeling' |
| People dislike it for: | Being boring except for the Rock |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None |

Polonnaruwa



| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | <p>The history of Polonnaruwa continues where Anuradhapura stopped; when A’Pura was invaded in 10th century, the Sinhalese kings fled and built a new capital here. Which managed to be in power of this central Lankan region for only a few centuries. But still what they built is impressive, and generally better preserved than A’Pura partly because it is younger.</p> <p>The ‘museum city’ aka ‘old town’ got deserted for centuries, and was only rediscovered and partly restored from the 19th century onwards. Southeast of it the modern P’ruwa (‘new town’) developed, but it is not a huge town populationwise; 15,000 only.</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | The ‘museum city’ with all the, sometimes restored and sometimes not, temples and |

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| | <p>palaces. It's quite a big area, roughly from [1A] to [1B] marker; some wheeled transport (e.g. pushbikes) helps to shuttle between the places, though inside the main monuments like Gal Vihara it's always on foot. Unlike Anuradhapura there is only one place where the tickets are sold, being the Museum; but all of the individual buildings have fences and checkpoints asking for the ticket.</p> <p>Area [2], lakeside, is one of the best for accommodation and has lots of it. And [3] is New Town with its Kaduruwela bus stand and train station (it's quite rare in Sri Lanka for these to sit together!) for all long-distance travel. Giritale is not in the map; it's kind of Western suburb to P'ruwa, has its own large 'tank' lake and a few upmarket hotels.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | The whole museum city. Main sites are Royal Palace, King Nissanka Malla's Palace, Alahana Pirivena Complex, Lankatilaka Gedige Temple, Gal Vihara, Demala Maha Seya Temple and Thuparama. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Well technically one could visit e.g. the Habarana wildlife parks from here, but as the Triangle introduction says the other way round is more logical; pick a base centrally in the area and visit P'ruwa as day trip. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level. |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28'-35' |
| Seasonal influences | It's quite on the east side of the area, hence has most influence from the East Monsoon. October to March hence will be likely wet at times, and summer quite dry. |
| People like it for: | The museum city |
| People dislike it for: | Location is not very central for other sights. |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Hardly, though in [2] there are a few independent restaurants near the hotels and [3], being a developing local city, offers a few 'family restaurants' which might suit tourists |

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| | <p>too.</p> <p>See note on HEC (Human Elephant Conflict) under ‘Sigiriya’.</p> |
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Habarana

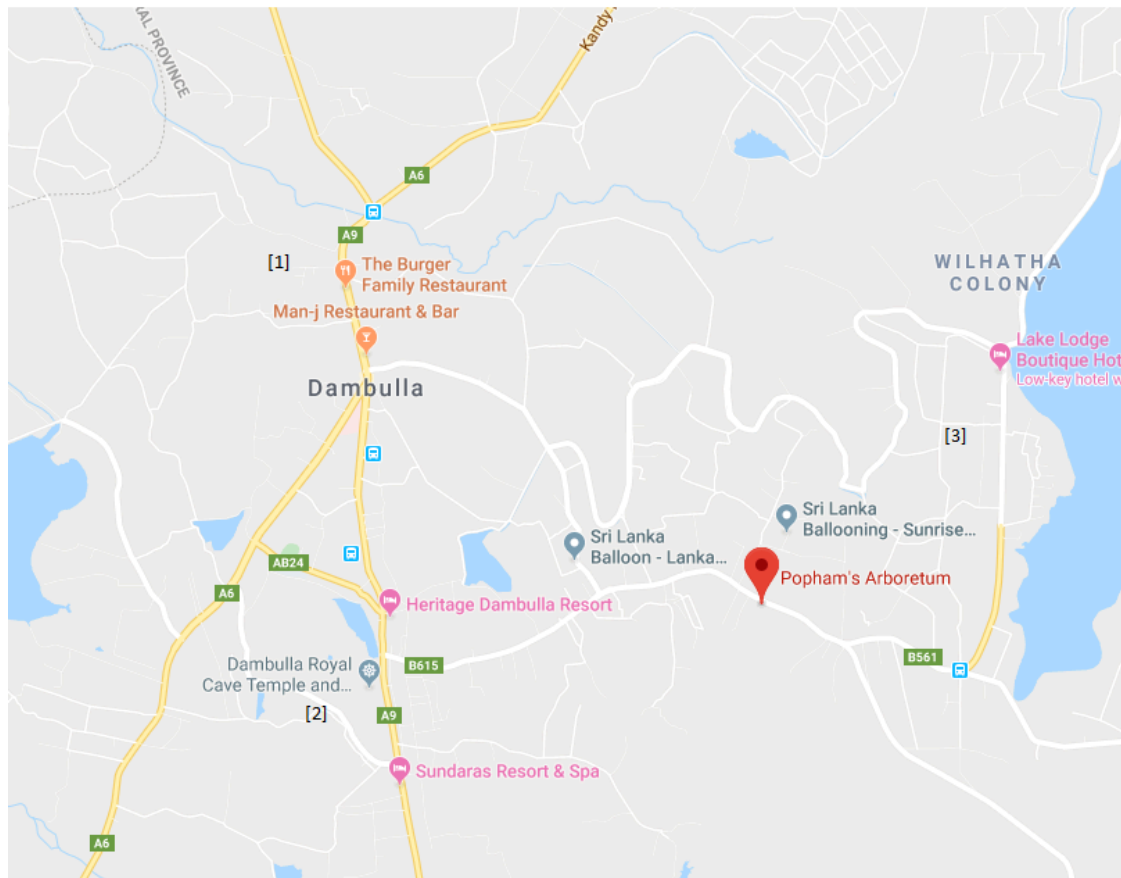


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | <p>Habarana is a farmer’s village which got quite some tourist places due to the proximity to the ‘wildlife park trio’: Minneriya, Kaudulla and Hurulu Eco park share the same herd of elephants and are connected with elephant corridors, but jeeps pick one park and cannot traverse the corridors.</p> <p>Moreover it grew out of being on the crossing</p> |

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| | of major roads: towards Anuradhapura the northwest, Trinco in the northeast, P'ruwa and Batti to the east and Dambulla-Kandy in the south. It also has a railway station about 2 km out of town on the lines to Trinco and Batti. Population around 5,000. |
| Main areas for tourists | [1] is the station, no buildings nearby. [2] is the village centre with bus stand and most main hotels, e.g. the two Cinnamon establishments west of the main road. And [3] is the road towards Minneriya; the other two parks lie on other sides of the town.. |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | The safari parks. (And elephant rides but those are now deemed unethical). Also the three villages in the east triangle offer village tours: bullock cart ride, a lake trip in a fishing canoe, and a village lunch with cooking instruction. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Due to the central location on bus trunk routes, people using public transport can stay in Habarana and visit P'ruwa, Dambulla and Sigiriya from there. However note that there is a direct road to Sigiriya but that is not served by buses; if you use bus you must use the detour through Dambulla. The area also has lots of smaller historic sites and monuments, like Ritigala and Aukana. And the Giritale Elephant Transit Home Medical Centre; a jumbo hospital, where sometimes you can see a few patients closeby. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35' |
| Seasonal influences | Most from the east monsoon, hence more rain chances in November-March. However in that season (actually upto April) the Dambulla-Habarana atmosphere is most stable and suitable for ballooning, while in the dry season May-Oct it's unsuitable. So there is not a strong pattern. |

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| People like it for: | Its calmness, and the abundant wildlife also outside the parks; e.g. the hotel gardens tend to have monkey troupes and lots of lizards upto huge Land Monitors ('varans'). |
| People dislike it for: | Too boring at night for those seeking some thrills. |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None. |

Dambulla

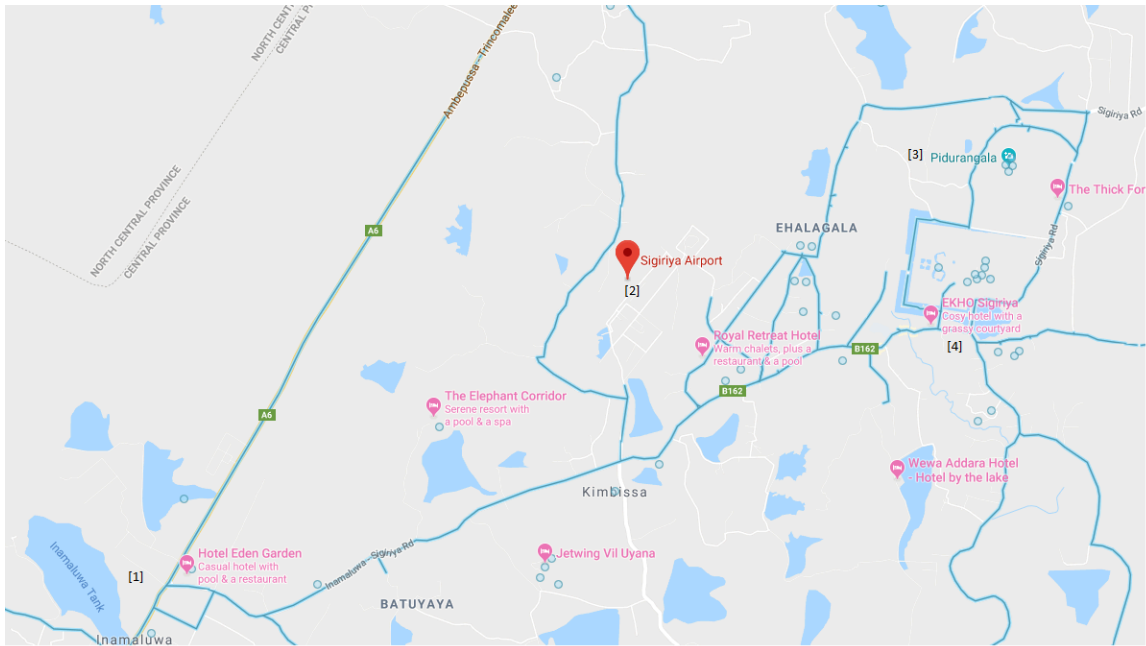


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | Dambulla is a trading post on the crossroads of the Kandy-Jaffna and Colombo-Trinco highways. But it is also the hub of a local farming area, hence e.g. there is a large farmers market with daily fresh veggies. Its landmark monument, the Golden Temple, also got partly funded by the wealth gathered by trading. Population is around 25,000. |

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| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] This is the north of the town centre, with also e.g. the bus stand and the farmers market complex.</p> <p>[2] The Golden Temple, the best preserved rock temple of the island.</p> <p>[3] The eastern suburb area towards Kandalama lake, with e.g. the arboretum and the usual airfield for ballooning.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rock temple Check the latest status before going: there are legal tussles between 2 owners of the cave and temple area, and even at points in time a situation where the Kandy road entrance (impressive gate and stairs) was free but did not allow entering the caves. For that there is/was another entrance on Kurunegala road. • Popham Arboretum. A nice botanical garden by daylight but also interesting for night safaris to encounter the rare Slender Loris nocturnal monkey. • Balloon flights Nov-April |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Sigiriya (direct bus, 30 minutes) but of course also adjoining sights like the Habarana safari parks. And smaller historic sites and monuments, like Ritigala and Aukana. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35° |
| Seasonal influences | Most from the east monsoon, hence more rain chances in November-March. However in that season (actually upto April) the Dambulla-Habarana atmosphere is most stable and suitable for ballooning, while in the dry season May-Oct it's unsuitable. So there is not a strong pattern. |
| People like it for: | The central location, and lively atmosphere by daytime. However beware that most hotels and guesthouses are at quite a distance to |

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| | the (unspectacular) centre. |
| People dislike it for: | Too boring at night for those seeking some thrills. |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | The town centre has a few ‘family restaurants’ which can suit tourists too. See note on HEC (Human Elephant Conflict) under ‘Sigiriya’. |

Sigiriya

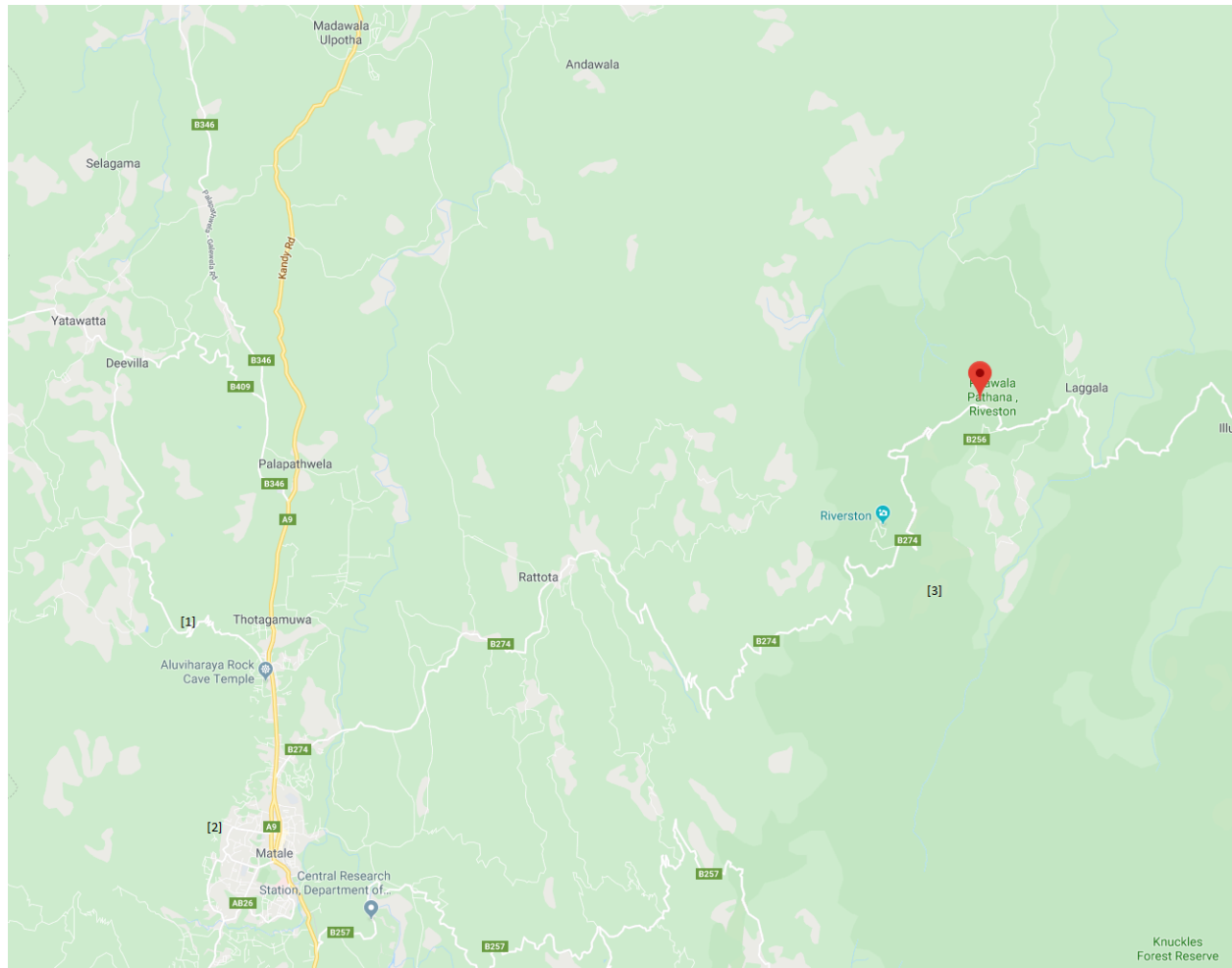


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | Sigiriya is unique. While A’Pura and P’ruwa started as a slowly developing group of |

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| | <p>temples and palaces. Sigiriya around the Rock was built like a Roman Empire city with a complete master plan!</p> <p>But that is quite a long way from the current mix of a small agricultural hamlet (maybe 1,000 inhabitants) and a large tourist infrastructure ;-)</p> <p>The rough phases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5th century construction as a fortress and palace for a 'runaway king' • Only 20 years later falldown as a palace. For next 1000 years (!) a rock monastery, supported by the farming village around it. • Abandonment and decay for 4 centuries • Since 19th century some restoration, and tourism from 1970 onwards helped a lot too |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>Only one area is really relevant for choosing accommodation:</p> <p>[4] Besides the Rock; on its southern side are the classic and still excellent Sigiriya Village and Hotel Sigiriya resorts. Here is also the smallish tourist restaurant scene.</p> <p>The other areas are however relevant for showing the full picture, and also estimating routes and whether to book halfboard:</p> <p>[3] Pidurangala Rock, about 1 km north of the Rock Fortress/Citadel</p> <p>[2] Sigiriya airport, about 5 km to the west</p> <p>[1] Inamaluwa junction, where Sigiriya road joins the main Dambulla-Jaffna road. The sole bus connection runs Dambulla-Inamaluwa-Sigiriya.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <p>The Rock and its smaller sibling Pidurangala. Avoid climbing either around midday due to the shadeless heat at the top; start before 10.30 AM or after 3 PM.</p> <p>And for the frequent question 'Is Pidurangala a cheaper and less busy replacement for Sigiriya?' the common answer is: 'Definitely it is quieter at peak times, though entering Sigiriya at 9 AM or 4 PM beats most crowds. But replacement - nope Pidunangala lacks the scale and grandeur (and frescoes) of the</p> |

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| | Real Thing, it's just a nice viewpoint.' |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Habarana wildlife safaris, Dambulla temple, traditional village tours, Polonnaruwa. But mind you that the shortcut road eastward shown on the map is a dirt track. Normal cabs cannot use it, only 4WD and some tuk tuks; all others travel through Habarana. And smaller historic sites and monuments, like Ritigala and Aukana. |
| Altitude | Almost sea level (but the Rock towers 200 m higher) |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35' |
| Seasonal influences | No strong ones, but Apr-Oct while being more dry and sunny also have a more unsettled atmosphere |
| People like it for: | The serene atmosphere especially at night, while still offering a restaurant scene. |
| People dislike it for: | The remote location especially if on public transport |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | <p>Yes around 10-20 near the Rock (area [4]) Note the HEC (Human Elephant Conflict). Elephants got displaced by humans, far more for agriculture than for tourism, throughout the whole Cultural Triangle; hence this is an area where tourists must be more aware of the risks than in other rural areas. Of course it applies mainly to people wandering outside their hotel grounds at night, e.g. for restaurant visits.</p> <p>General advice: ask both your own accommodation staff and your intended destination whether it's safe walking after dark outside, as then often elephants grab the roads back from the humans. If not safe, arrange different transport (e.g. walking in a group with torches and sticks, or tuk tuk pickup) with the locals.</p> |

Matale/Riverston



| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | Matale is a trading town between Dambulla and Kandy with about 35,000 inhabitants, and at the end of a local train line from Kandy. But |

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| | <p>this guide is not really about that town; despite its impressive Aluvihara historic site (2 km north of town) and also impressive Hindu Kovil. Both are nice for a stopover visit, but do not make Matale worth staying (and don't even talk about the string of spice gardens all along Dambulla-Kandy road :-). Nope, the reason for including it in some route suggestions are the mountains nextdoor - the Knuckles.</p> <p>The top question on day trips already says about the southern entrance of this nature reserve</p> <p>'Vistas, e.g. 'Mini World's End', are as impressive as those in the more well known trekking areas in the Hill Country around e.g. Hatton/Adam's Peak, Nuwara Eliya/Horton Plains, Haputale and Ella.</p> <p>And to be complete: the other main entrance is near Matale but a few hundred meters higher. And hence having a totally different climate compared to e.g. Dambulla or even Kandy. (There is a third entrance near Wattegama, but not much accommodation there except Hunas Falls hotel).</p> <p>Riverston is the small hamlet, but the nice trekking area (with e.g. another Mini World's End) starts east of it, and it has both boutique hotels, guesthouses and even campsites.</p> <p>And in routes where it's hard to spare time for the area south of Kandy, Riverston area can be a great alternative for trekking and seeing tea plantations.'</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] - Aluvihara, a historic monastery</p> <p>[2] - Matale town with e.g. the kovil</p> <p>[3] - Riverston</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | See above, Matale has some but it's not the reason for basing yourself there for 2 nights at least. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Knuckles. Also consider high tea at Hunas Falls hotel which is a bit to the south also in the Knuckles, and impressive views and garden. Lots of other nice waterfalls, e.g. Bambara Ella falls (with suspension bridge) |

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| | on the Rattota-Riverston road. There is a tea factory with tours and shop further on this road, plus viewpoints near Riverston tower and of course Pitiwala Pathana with the other Mini World's End. |
| | Matale town 350 m, Riverston upto 1100 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | Again quite different per altitude. For Riverston same like Ella-Haputale, 5-15' in winter and 10-20' in summer.. |
| Seasonal influences | In winter 5' colder than in summer. No predictable rain patterns, it can be sunny and rainy in regular alternation. |
| People like it for: | The, less spoilt than Ella, natural beauty |
| People dislike it for: | Too quiet for some |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None in Riverston area |

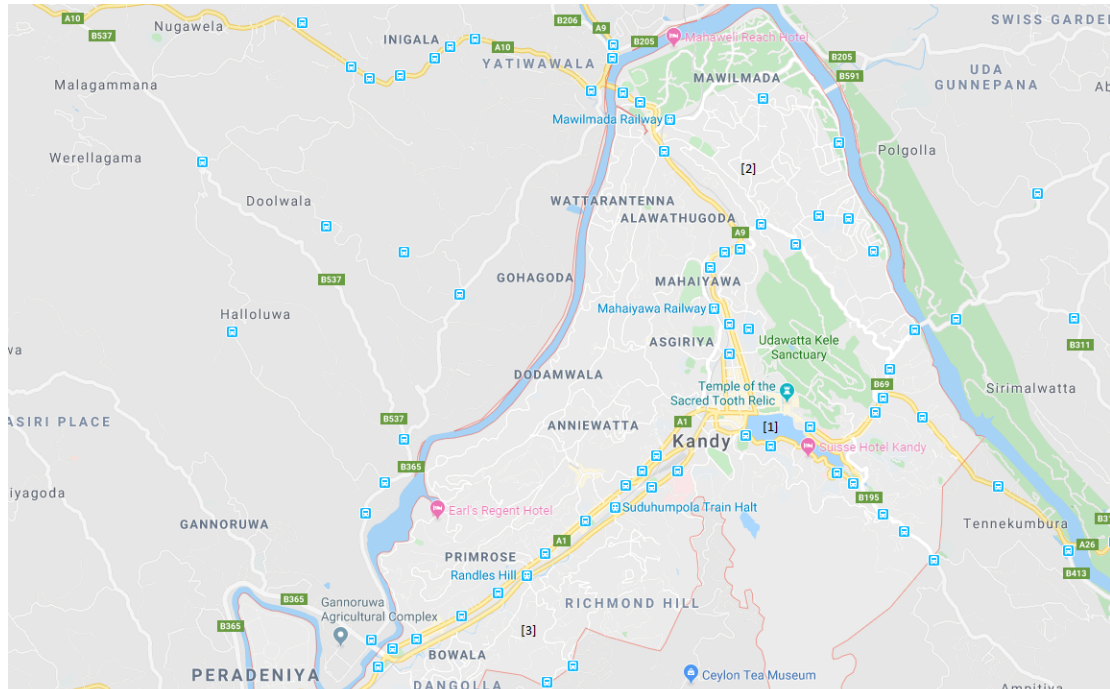
The Hill Country

Officially this is all of mountainous Sri Lanka, but we covered the relevant part of Knuckles mountain massive under the Cultural Triangle. So the definition here, which is also the most common for tourists, is 'anything between Kandy and the southern plains'. For this region too we answer some often asked generic questions.

- Which towns to choose?
Well actually this is four different questions. The first one is 'why visit Kitulgala' and 'why visit AP'. We'll cover these under the description of the towns, and both are quite focused answers: only for fans of activities XYZ, and for AP even fans travelling during a 5-month season, they are recommended. The other towns are for people with a general interest in trekking, vistas, waterfalls and tea plantations. And first they have to choose between two main regions, assuming their time and/or budget is limited.
- Should I stay in the cold hills (Nuwara Eliya and Ohiya) or the moderate hills (Haputale and Ella)?
This is totally subjective, as the sights of both are similar. The temperatures however differ upto 10 degrees, so your taste and e.g. country of residence will influence which type of 'hill station' you want.

- If I want the cold hills, which town to choose?
Ohiya is a tiny hamlet with only two 'key advantages': it's on the railway line Kandy-Ella, and it's much closer to Horton Plains park than Nuwara Eiya (15 versus 45 minutes). Next to that it has stunning walks around, but so has - with some transfers - Eliya itself. Hence people coming primarily for trekking including HP might prefer Ohiya; people with a broader interest will prefer Eliya.
- If I want the moderate hills, which town to choose?
Haputale and Ella have similar climate and impressive vistas, as they both lie on the southern hill ridge with on the one end Bandarawela valley and on the other end the southern plains. Haputale however is far more authentic and quiet, but then don't expect a restaurant/bar scene; Ella is 'Hikkaduwa-in-the-hills' and that attracts its own crowds. Up to the point that luxury-segment operators even don't put tourists in Ella anymore, except in outlying places like 98 Acres Resort. However also check your route. This may influence the choice, as they lie both at the top of the main 'gaps' (mountain passes with S-curves) from the hills down into the plains. Haputale Gap leads to Ratnapura (and UW park), Ella gap leads to Hambantota and Tissa, (Note that Badulla can also be considered as alternative for Haputale, though due to far lower altitude its scenery is less impressive. As it's not on main tourist routes we leave it out of this faq for now.)

Kandy

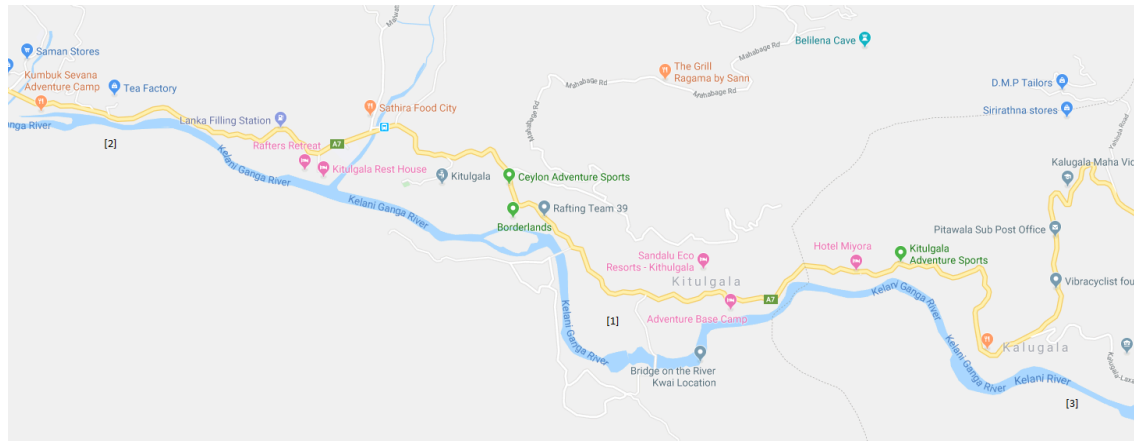


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | <p>Kandy is the largest city in this list, and hence could deserve a loooooong story. Useless, as every guidebook will teach you the history - its role under the old Kandyan kingdom, which also brought us the artificial lake in the heart of town, is well described. In a tour through the heartlands of the island it’s almost impossible <i>not</i> to pass Kandy, but everyone’s individual decision is whether to stay overnight or not, and if so for how long. The Temple of Tooth (Dalida Malawaga) dominates the lake, and seen in isolation (and early morning) it can look quite picturesque. However with the current 125,000 inhabitants and many major traffic routes going straight through the city, which also does not get too much fresh air due to being a valley between mountain ranges, modern-day pests like noise and air pollution also have heavy impact for the city centre (hardly for the, mountain slope-situated, better hotels). This, plus the fact that most of</p> |

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| | <p>the sights are in suburbs and quite spread out, gives Kandy a mixed reputation; most tourists after their visit (or even before...) either love or 'hate' Kandy ;-)</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>Here too we don't go into the level of detail of most other towns, as then we'd have to split into maybe 10 areas.</p> <p>[1] The city centre with the lake and all tourist restaurants.</p> <p>[2] Northern half of the suburbs; even areas west of the centre like Bahirawakanda, south of Asgiriya on the map, would fit under this.</p> <p>[3] Southern half of the suburbs, including Peradeniya valley.</p> <p>As it's an often asked question 'which hotels allow walking to/from the centre' we give a list of popular midrange places, more or less in clockwise order around the lake: Hilltop, Queens (mind its reviews!), Thilanka, Serene Gardens, OZO, Suisse.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <p>Very short, as each could justify a long description.</p> <p>[1] City centre: Temple of Tooth, one of the two Kandy dance shows, and finally the lake but only on clear and not too traffic-heavy days (boating and a nice walk-around it). Near the lake is Helga's Folly, a hotel that is more like a museum, and rightly so asks a small fee for a tour.</p> <p>[2] Northern half: The impressive Uduwattekele reserve (a 'city jungle'), Bahirawakanda Buddha statue on top of the hill viewpoint, Mahaweli river boat rides off Katugastota bridge.</p> <p>[3] Southern suburbs: The Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya, the Ceylon Tea Museum in Hantana and a few live tea factories/estates in the same area.</p> |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victoria Lake and dam (viewpoints, no boating yet) • Knuckles mountains, also see Matale/Riverston section though the central (Wattegama-Panwila) and southern (Deanston-Hunasgiriya) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <p>entrances are slightly closer to Kandy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinawala with its elephant zoos • The 'Temple Triangle':Gadaladeniya Lankathilaka and Embekke are very different historic temples located in a kind of 'triangle' to the southeast side of town • Ambuluwawa mountain viewpoint, near Gampola • Ramboda Falls, halfway the tea country road towards Nuwara Eliya • Suiyakantha Centre for Art and Culture, an old mansion (Wallawa) converted to a museum |
| Altitude | 500-600 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 10-20' winter and 15-25' in summer. |
| Seasonal influences | Hard to predict, as Kandy can be both struck and exempt from influences of the Southwest and Northeast monsoon. But if it rains it's often more in the afternoon than in the mornings. |
| People like it for: | The sometimes idyllic lake scenes, and the variety of sights spread in and around the centre |
| People dislike it for: | The air and noise pollution, and at times near the Dam and Temple also too pushy tourist scene with snake charmers and beggars. |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Quite a lot, spread over the city centre |

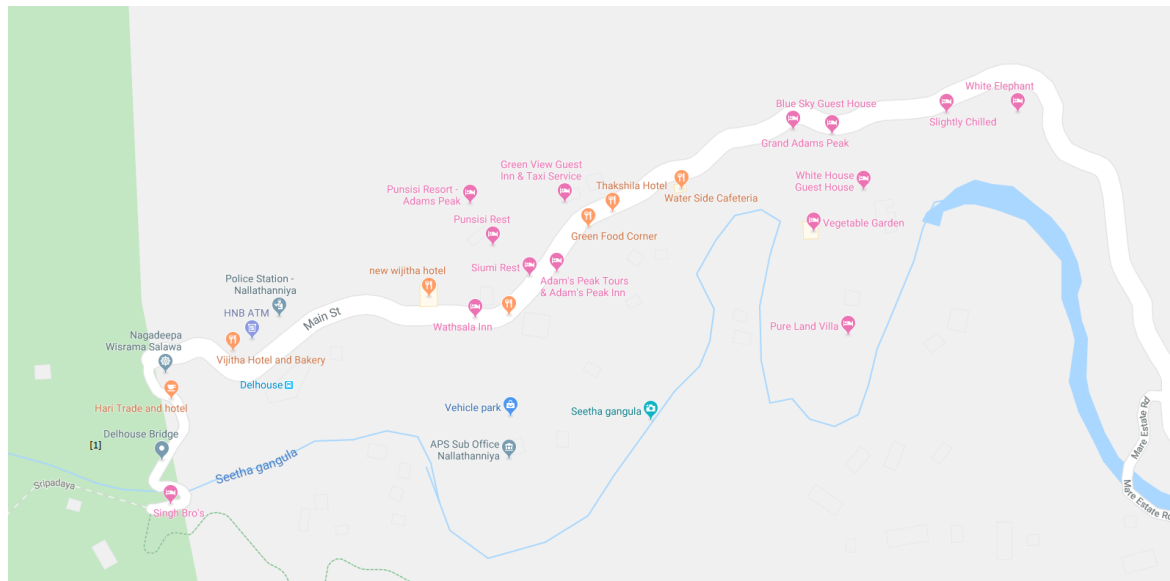
Kitulgala



| Topic | Content |
|--|--|
| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | <p>Kitulgala is a small town, only a few thousand inhabitants, which serves the local plantation industry. And got a huge boost when tourism was developed there 20-30 years back. For travel routes it's in rare cases recommended to break a longer drive (e.g. if Nuwara Eliya-airport is too long to do in one go for a family with small kids), but for 90% or more of the advices people are suggested to come for the 'adrenaline sports'. From the top question on day trips:</p> <p>Kitulgala offers rafting in the Kelani River and 'other 'wild sports' line ziplining and canyoning. And it also hosts the site where the movie 'Bridge over the River Kwai' was shot, with some small souvenirs still visible near the Kitulgala Rest House. There are several companies offering rafting trips lasting a few hours on the Kelani river. Best in a season with more rainfall in the mountains, and also inquire in advance about weekends as often one day a week the river dam closes making rafting impossible. Rainfall does also influence the other activities, canyoning often with inverse patterns (heavy rain is good for rafting but blocks some of the canyoning paths).</p> <p>Next to this it also has access to Makandawa</p> |

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| | Forest Reserve. This is a smallish rainforest, only reachable by canoe or in dry periods by crossing a river on foot. It's a smaller version of what is available in Sinharaja, hence might fit people that are in Kitulgala for the sports anyway. |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] The village centre, and the iconic Rest House</p> <p>[2] The area to the west (Colombo direction). The river here is not suitable to start rafting, but due to the small distances you can still get good accommodation and 'outfitter shops' here too.</p> <p>[3] The area to the east, closest to the rapids.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | Sports |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Nothing really |
| Altitude | Around 100-200 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 20'-27' nighttime-daytime |
| Seasonal influences | Wettest in June and Oct-Dec, which hence are good months for rafting and bad for canyoning. But do inquire locally as weather patterns fluctuate a lot. |
| People like it for: | The guesthouses and sports crowd that they attract. |
| People dislike it for: | Except for sports rather boring, and often wetter than most other areas. (Watawala, a little bit to the east towards Hatton, is the wettest place of the whole island.) |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Hardly, though some guesthouses advertise also their restaurants to outside visitors. |

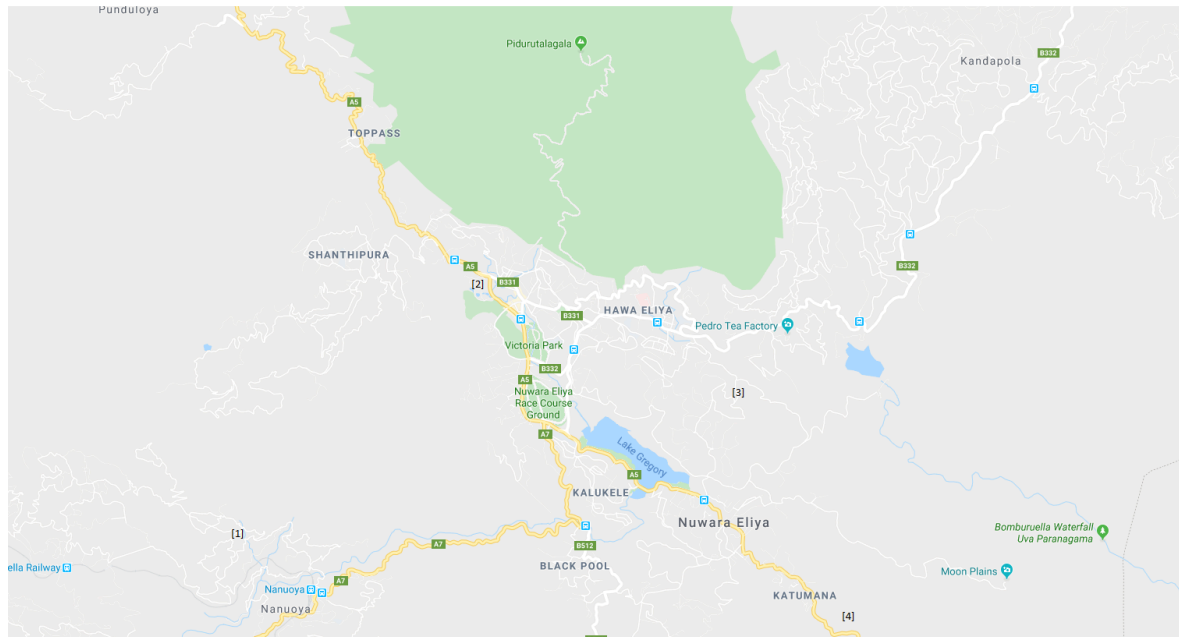
Nallathanniya/Delhouse/Adam's Peak



| Topic | Content |
|--|---|
| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | <p>This is quite a tiny hamlet, but next to serving the local plantation economy it has a secondary business for many centuries: the pilgrimages to the sacred-for-all-local-religions peak of Siri Pada or Adam's Peak.</p> <p>(Actually Delhouse subsection of Nallathanniya is the gate to the easiest of the paths, the 'Mother Path', with only 5000 steps and 1200 m altitude to conquer. On the south side of the mountain is the Father Path of about twice the length, ending in Cairney-Ratpapura. And the fact that two Scottish planters in India and Sri Lanka choose similar names for their estates, Dalhousie-India and Delhouse-Lanka, continues to create confusion even in official guidebooks).</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | It's a one-horse town, hence any |

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| | accommodation is close enough to walk to the gate where the trek starts, near [1]. |
| ain sights in the town and its suburbs | Let's just state that it is officially 'Open' during the pilgrimage season, which starts Full Moon December and ends at Full Moon day May also called Vesak. In the season the path is lit and full of tea and food stalls, and the monastery at the top is open. Outside the season for many reasons it's not recommended to climb, see forum discussions as regulations also change year by year. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Nothing really, it lies at the end of the Hatton-Maskeliya-Nallathanniya road. |
| Altitude | 1100 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 5-15' winter and 10-20' summer (but at AP summit it's generally freezing) |
| Seasonal influences | Rainy and slippery June-December, that is one reason for the Pilgrimage Season. |
| People like it for: | The adventurous and at the same time serene-sacred atmosphere |
| People dislike it for: | Boring except for those wanting to climb |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Quite decent, most guesthouses also have a touristy restaurant. However note that much is closed off-season. |

Nuwara Eliya



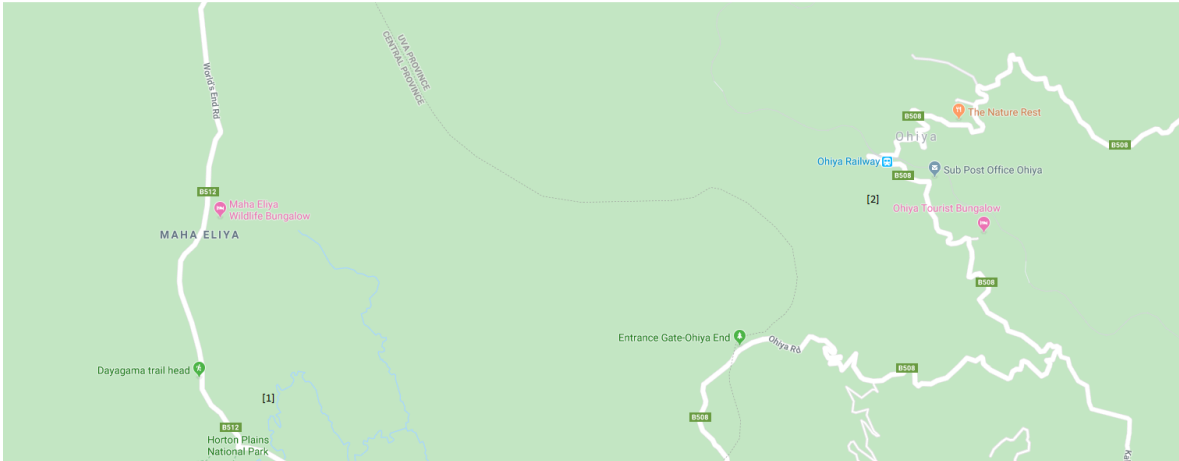
| Topic | Content |
|---|--|
| <p>Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population</p> | <p>This city, population around 25,000, is the heart of the ‘cold hills’. It is the main trading post, lying on the Kandy-Bandarawela highway but also the Eliya-Hatton-Avissawella-Colombo route. And since the 19th century has known a lot of domestic tourism; for the Colombo people, including the British Raj generation, especially March-May this cool ‘hill station’ is an escape from the lowlands heat. The rather cool climate (but still burning sun at times) leads to a Western-style agriculture with e.g. strawberry and dairy farms and a horse race course. And of course lots of colonial architecture (and yes hot water and room heaters are essential here whilst AC is nonsense.) There are now 4 hotels with pools and all need heated water: Langdale by Amaya, Araliya Green Hills and Blackpool</p> |

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| | hotel (all outdoor) and Grand Hotel (patio style). |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] Nanu Oya - Radella. NO is the railway station and lies at 1750 m altitude, considerably lower than Eliya proper. Here are some boutique hotels.</p> <p>[2] The city centre with e.g. bus stand, golf course, market (winter clothing!) and Victoria Park with its kiddies playground including toy train. Adjoining is Mount Pedro, the highest mountain of the island, with its forest reserve; most is off-limits due to Army presence.</p> <p>[3] Northern and eastern suburbs, with e.g. Galway National park (a lovely city park similar to Kandy's Uduwattekele) and Pedro Tea Factory (the closest one to town). A bit further away is Kandapola with its unique Tea Factory Hotel.</p> <p>[4] The Bandarawela road area, passing Lake Gregory, Hakgala botanical gardens and Seetha Amman temple.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First and foremost the whole 'scene' and the architecture of the colonial buildings. E.g. the Post Office, St Andrews Hotel and the Golf Course are pristine 19th century culture. • Victoria Park • Lake Gregory, for e.g. pedalos and boating on a sunny day • Pedro Tea Factory (tour the fields and the factory) • Eating locally produced strawberries (main season is spring) |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hakgala Gardens, the cool-zone botanical gardens of the island with no palm trees but plenty of roses and rhododendrons. • Seetha Amman temple, impressive kovil and a nice monkey troupe • Horton Plains national park including World's End precipice and vista point. Leave Eliya 6 AM to be at entrance by 7 AM and at WE (walking route) before 8.30 AM as then often clouds |

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| | <p>roll in creating thick fog. Note that since early 2020, last park entry is at 2.30 PM to make sure that tourists have left when the park closes by 6.30 PM.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moon Plains national park, a nice vista from the top of a jeep-accessible mountain; it's off the A5 near Seetha Amman temple • Visiting Eagle's Viewpoint at Shanthipura, a watchtower with 360' vistas • A trip to the Pidurutalaga mountain peak, which is the highest point in the island. Again doable by jeep - the army telecom tower staff allows free entry to the peak. Of course just like Moon Plains, mainly useful on clear days. • Lots of waterfalls, e.g. St Clairs/Devon Falls and the nice Mlesna Tea Castle near Talewakele on Hatton road • Ambewela dairy farm, especially for families where all that the kids know about dairy is that it comes from a factory. • On the road to Ambewela: Kande Ela reservoir (with boating) and pine forest. |
| Altitude | 2000 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 3-15 in winter, 10-20 in summer. As Eliya is in a valley surrounded by mountains the risk of long lasting fog (causing daytime temperature to remain lower than hoped) is relatively high. |
| Seasonal influences | <p>See above, quite a strong difference. Rains are harder to predict as Eliya can be influenced by both main monsoon winds. Landslides in bad seasons and hence blocked roads and train tracks are not uncommon.</p> <p>Another 'seasonal' influence is local NY in April. As top question on Accommodation also explains, avoid the city for weeks then unless you love inflated prices and a noisy</p> |

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| | lunapark-like atmosphere! |
| People like it for: | The totally different atmosphere, tea culture etc |
| People dislike it for: | The cold |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Lots available, mainly around [2] |

Ohiya



| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the | The introduction is given more or less in the |

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| town including population | general section on Hill Country: Ohiya is a tiny hamlet with only two 'key advantages': it's on the railway line Kandy-Ella, and it's much closer to Horton Plains park than Nuwara Eliya (15 versus 45 minutes). Next to that it has stunning walks around. Hence people coming primarily for trekking including HP might prefer Ohiya; people with a broader interest will prefer Eliya. |
| Main areas for tourists | The hamlet has no 'areas'. [1] On the map is the Horton Plains entrance. [2] is Ohiya, which is really smaller than a square mile... |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | Trekking |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | Horton Plains |
| Altitude | Around 1750 m, similar to Nanu Oya. |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 5-15 in winter, 10-20 in summer. But mind you that Ohiya is more or less on a mountain ridge, hence can be quite windy and then on a cool day it feels far colder than 15' |
| Seasonal influences | Roughly similar to Nuwara Eliya: 'hard to predict', though June and Oct-Dec have most risks for rain and then landslides. |
| People like it for: | Breathtaking views and lovely treks |
| People dislike it for: | Quite isolated, possibly boring at night |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None |

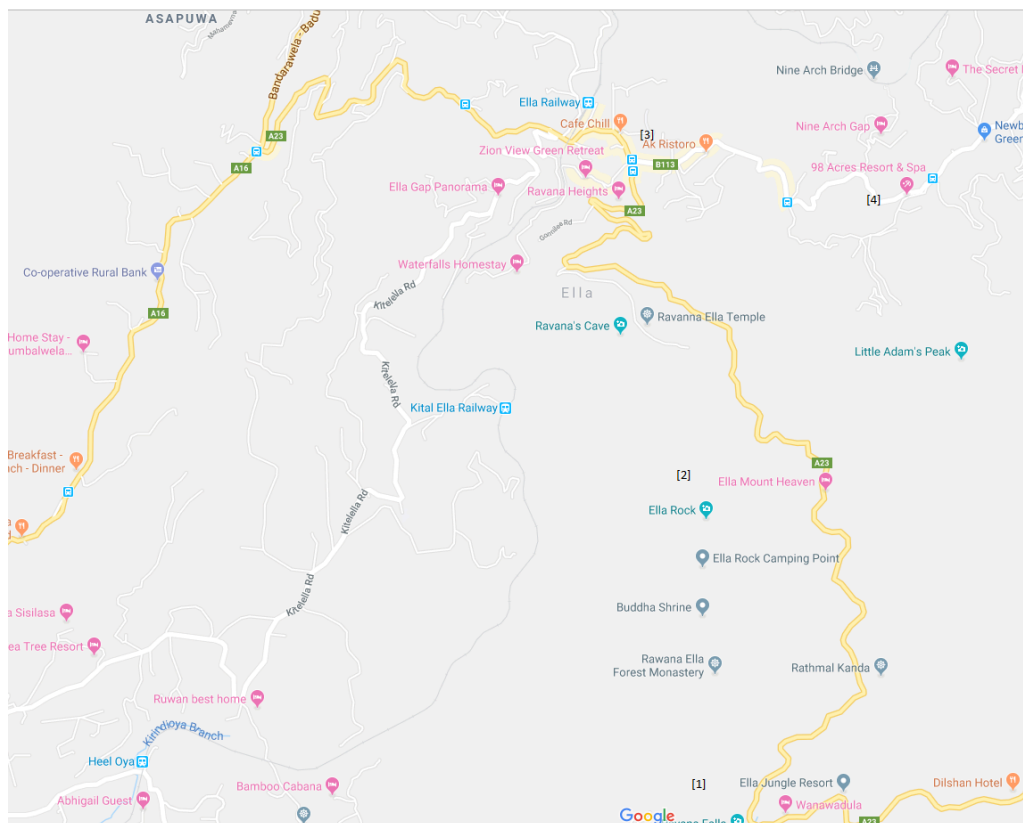
Haputale



| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | As written in the general section on the hills, Haputale is the start of the 'moderate climate' section. And it is far more authentic and quiet than Ella, but then don't expect a restaurant/bar scene. Another reason for recommending it can be the planned route, Haputale Gap (or Beragala Gap) is the gateway from the hills to the western roads to e.g. Ratnapura and Colombo. But also offers a shorter route from Nuwara Eliya to Uda Walawe park than through Ella-Wellawaya. |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] The higher forest-covered mountains around it, with e.g. Adisham bungalow/monastery</p> <p>[2] Beragala, more than halfway down the Gap and hence 300-400 m lower than Haputale and with considerably warmer climate</p> <p>[3] The town centre and railway station, with the majority of hotels and guesthouses</p> <p>[4] Dambathenne tea estate (origin of the</p> |

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| | Lipton brand) and Lipton's Seat viewpoint near it. |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | Hardly except the vistas and the treks; the latter of course bring you further away from the town. One-way drop offs to the sights below and then walking back to the village are often used. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lipton's Seat (1970 m high, almost World's End level) and Dambathenne tea factory • Adisham cottage. A former monastery, now holiday home (also for spiritual stays) with a magnificent vista and garden. And a shop with organic local jams etc • Diyaluma Falls; the top can be visited from Haputale-Bandarawela road and with a climb from the A4 area, and the bottom from A4 Beragala-Wellawaya road. • Bambarakanda falls, the highest in the island. These are downhill not too far from the road towards Ratnapura, at Belihul Oya area. |
| Altitude | 1400 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 5-15 in winter, 10-20 in summer |
| Seasonal influences | Best during October-April, as it's quite shielded from the east monsoon. Southwest monsoon from May-June onwards brings some bad rain effects and generally also more chances for clouds and even fog. |
| People like it for: | The trekking and vistas |
| People dislike it for: | Can be boring in the evening |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | As the guesthouses are quite spread out, and generally serve dinner to their own guests who must preorder, unlike e.g. Nallathanniya there is no culture of guesthouses and hotels with 'public' restaurants. |

Ella



| Topic | Content |
|--|---|
| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | Ella was introduced as 'Hikkaduwa in the hills' in our general section, and indeed main street gives a very touristy feeling until late in the evening. But if you stay a little bit outside the centre and don't venture out for dinner it becomes a lot calmer, and allows you to see Ella's main treks and sights. |

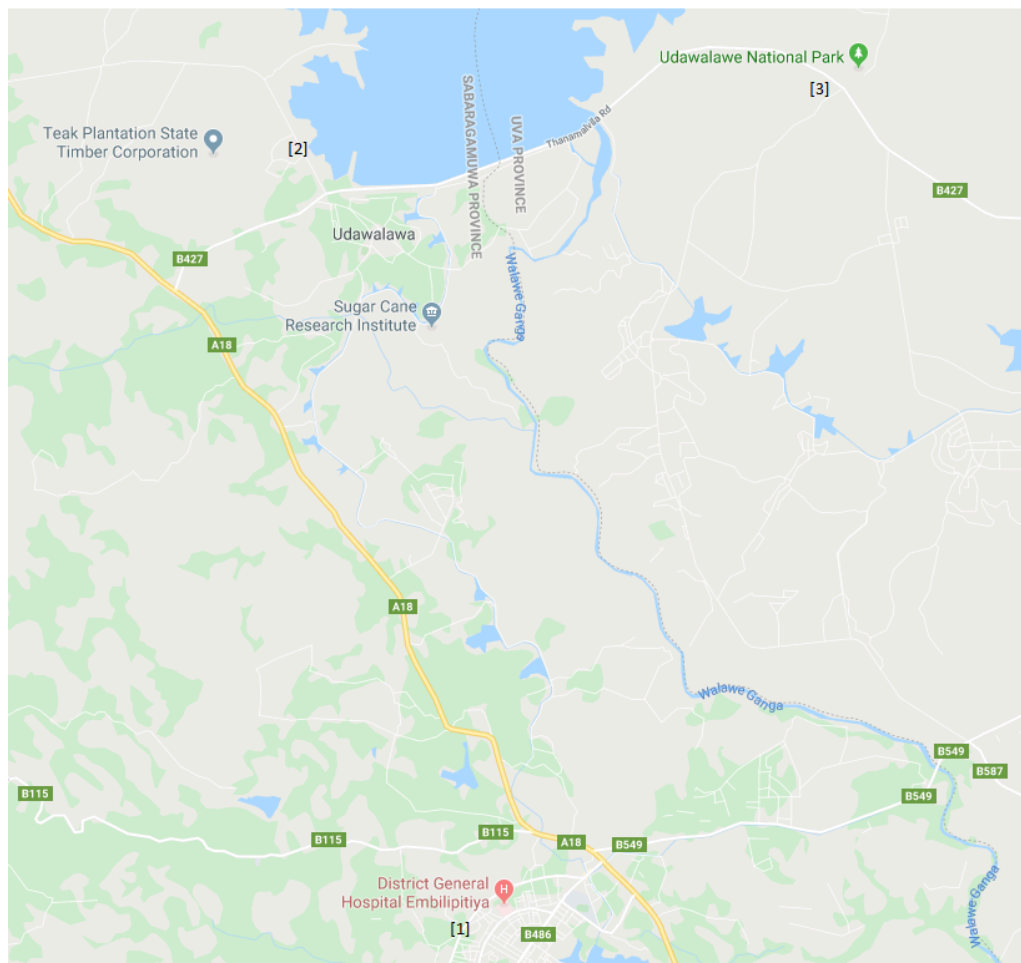
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| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] Ravana Falls, at 200 m altitude hence 800 m down the 'Ella Gap'. A good stop on your travel, but the odd guesthouse in that area selling itself as 'good for trekking' has learnt too much from Pinochio ;-)</p> <p>[2] Ella Rock area, a famous viewpoint and trek.</p> <p>[3] Village centre and train station</p> <p>[4] Passara Road. Roughly near the marker the path to the north leads through a pine forest to a viewpoint on Nine Arch Bridge, and to the south the climb through 98 Acres estate to Little Adam's Peak viewpoint starts.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | Whether Ravana Ella falls is in Ella proper is a discussion, but you see and hear the small river from everywhere in town. At the bottom are also Ravana caves, interesting to some. |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little Adam's Peak • Nine Arch bridge. Just like Demodara tunnel this is better enjoyed from a viewpoint than from inside a train. • Ella Rock trek • A little further out: Demodara looping rail tunnel, and Badulla with e.g. Dunhinda waterfall. • Buduruwagala old temple site is 1 hour away, southwest of Wellawaya • Ziplining, despite the views supposedly less impressive than at Kitulgala |
| Altitude | 1000 m |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 5-15 in winter, 10-25 in summer |
| Seasonal influences | Just like Haputale, a bit more under SW monsoon influence than East monsoon. However as it's a lot closer to the east coast it can also have lots of rain in Nov-Dec |
| People like it for: | Very lively and touristy in the centre |
| People dislike it for: | Hikkaduwa-in-the-hills is not for everyone |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Plenty along main street |

The Southern Plains

This is simply the area between the Hill Country and the South Coast. Mostly flat plains, though the Sinharaja mountain massive goes up to 1000 m altitude - but then it's a strict nature reserve so whilst you could trek Sinharaja also for the vistas, none of the accommodations outside has any impressive scenic vistas.

The sights here are partly cultural, but all important temple sites (MulKirigala, Katararagama/Situlpahuwa, Buduruwagala) are all doable as day trips from the coast or sometimes Haputale-Ella ridge. Hence the main reason to recommend people to make a stopover here in the plains are natural sights. And as nature listens to the Elements for proper visiting times and not to the whims of the traveller, generally visiting times of the sights are not midday. Safaris here in Uda Walawe or any Yala park need to be done from 6-9 AM or 15-18 PM due to the wildlife not liking the heat, and walking safaris in Sinharaja need to start 8 AM to avoid a similar siesta-pattern but also the quite common afternoon rains there. Hence our suggested bases all have to do with Nature; and for Sinharaja it's even two bases, each on totally different travel routes.

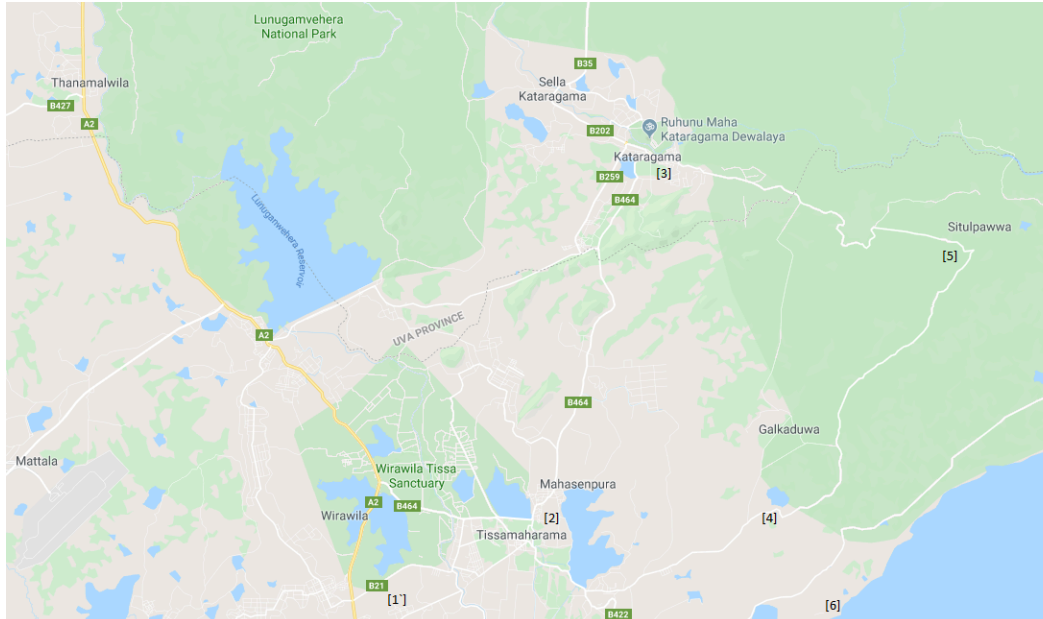
Uda Walawe/Embilipitiya



| Topic | Content |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Introduction, history and 'character' of the | When the UW Dam was created mainly to |

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| town including population | <p>create an irrigation reservoir, many animals were expelled from their habitat. As compensation this natural park was built in 1972.</p> <p>The Elephant Transit Home was built only about 15 years ago, and is the sole ethical orphanage in the island. Uda Walawe is solely an agricultural area without real villages. Nearby Embilipitiya however is a regional hub, housing around 50,000 people.</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] Embilipitiya town, which has some good hotels and better bus connections than the UW area. Surprisingly enough jeeps from here don't charge more compared to those from near the park entrance, though of course it's about 20 minutes extra travel time.</p> <p>[2] West of the lake including 'UW junction' (crossing of A18 and B427 roads). The Transit Home is near the [2] marker, many hotels and lodges in this area.</p> <p>[3] Park entrance, hardly hotels real closeby.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UW park, start your visit 6 AM or 2.30-3 PM • UW Elephant Transit Home; bottlefeeding times 10.30, 14.30 and 18h |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | None (all other sights, like the temples and botanical garden and the zoo, can as easy be visited from bases like Mirissa and Tangalle). |
| Altitude | Almost sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35' |
| Seasonal influences | Hardly; it follows the normal pattern in this area, which is more sun in Dec-April and more rain from May-June to November though Jul-Sept it's mainly in late afternoon |
| People like it for: | Being close to the park and the ETH |
| People dislike it for: | Boring in the evening |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None, not even Embilipitiya |

Tissamaharama

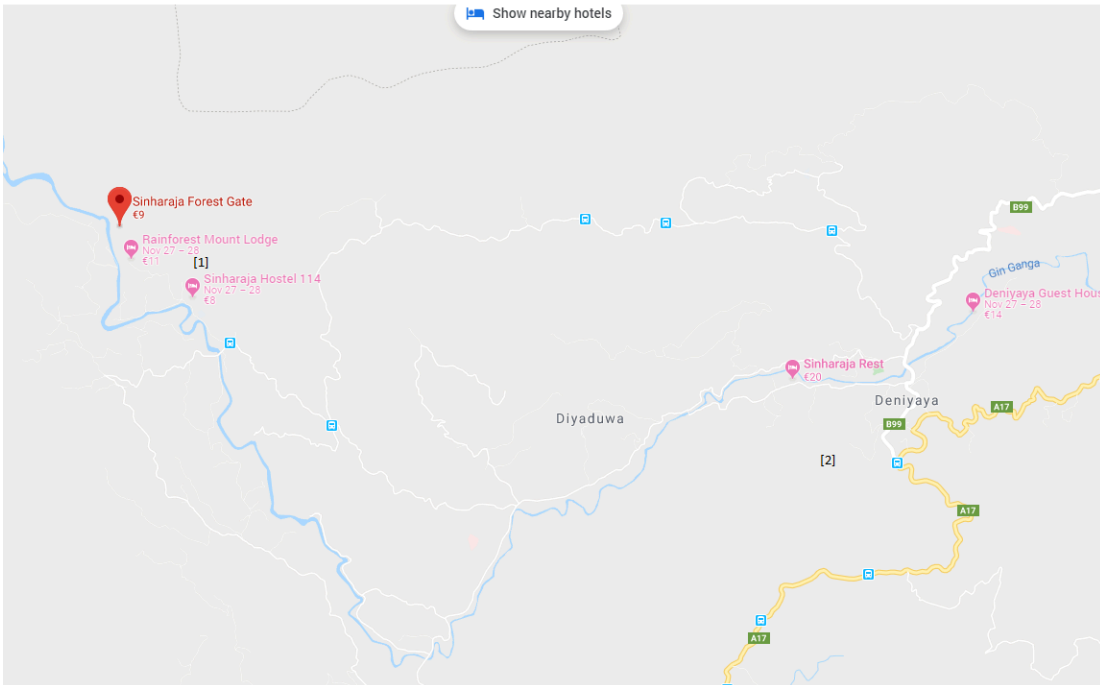


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | <p>Yala is about the oldest wildlife reserve in the island, and Kataragama one of the oldest sacred pilgrimage sites; originally mainly for Hindus (Tamils) but increasingly also for Sinhalese.</p> <p>Yala park(s) is described in another top question, with the several sub-blocks and options TA Sri Lanka: Yala game drives.</p> <p>Tissamaharama or in brief Tissa is the focal town of the area, and e.g. 95% of the visitors to Kataragama or K'gama travel from</p> |

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| | Colombo-Hambantota through Tussa. Population is around 80,000 for the section including K'gama. |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] Weerawila junction and airport. This is on the main Hambantota-Ella-Nuwara Eliya highway, and bus passengers from the north (line 31) will get out here. Bus line 32 however runs Colombo -Hambantota-Weerawila-Tissa-K'gama.</p> <p>[2] Tissa town centre, with bus stand. The safari jeeps gather at the square near the main lake to the west of town.</p> <p>[3] Katagarama; this has some good hotels too and is close to the 2nd and more quiet gate into the park, called Katagamuwa.</p> <p>[4] Main Palatupana gate (off Tissa)</p> <p>[5] Situlpahuwa, a smaller pilgrimage town with two 'corridors' through the park for free travel to/from Tissa and K'gama.</p> <p>[6] (Direction of) Kirinda, and idyllic but tiny beach town very close to the park.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yala park (see the game drive top question) • Katagarama temples; an evening puja is almost a must-visit if one stays in this area • Weddehitikanda vista hill at K'gama • Situlpahuwa temple site, with e.g. tamed deer |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | N.A., all sites for the area mentioned above |
| Altitude | Sea level |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 28-35' |
| Seasonal influences | Quite dry from April to October (it has similar influences as the East Coast) |
| People like it for: | Safari and temples together |
| People dislike it for: | No night life |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | Tissa centre has a smallish set of tourist |

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| | restaurants, partly consisting of guest houses having a restaurant open to the wider public. The scale is similar to that of Sigiriya. |
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Sinharaja-Deninaya

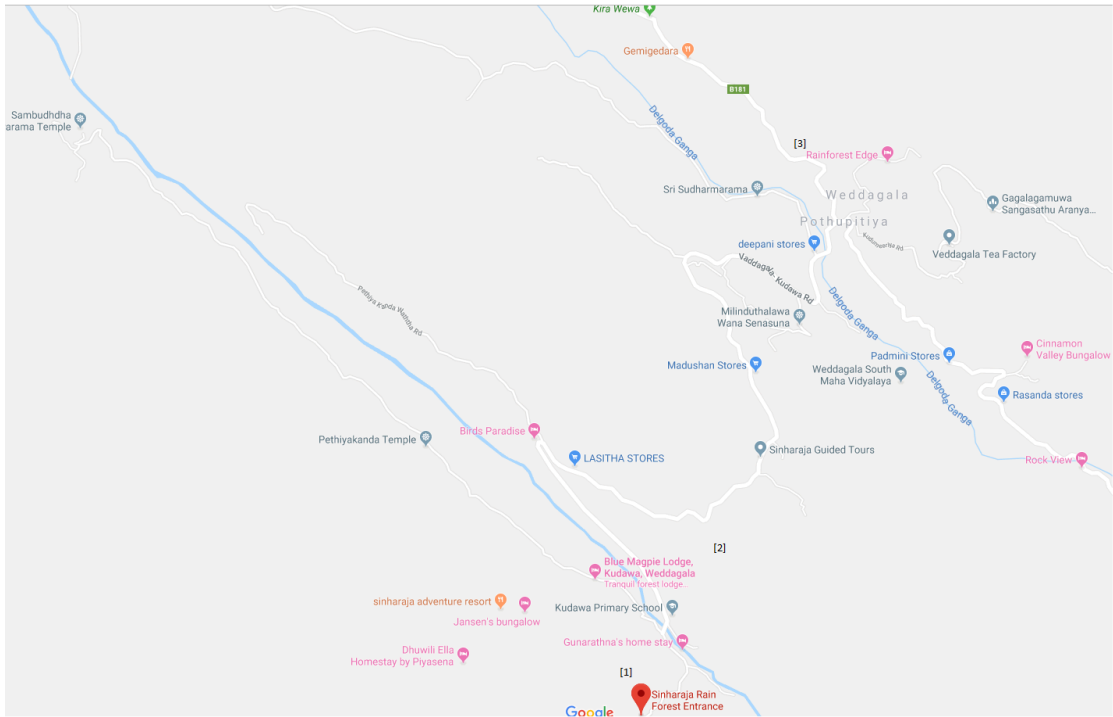


| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and ‘character’ of the town including population | Sinharaja forest reserve the last large rainforest left in the island, as this vegetation once dominated the whole hill country which now is mainly plantations. |

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| | <p>As written earlier: walking safaris in Sinharaja need to start 8 AM to avoid the animals siesta-pattern but also the quite common afternoon rains there. After all, how can a tropical rainforest be sustained without frequent rain? ;-)</p> <p>For the northern entrance (Kudawa) it could also fit into some routes as a good break. But Deniyaya is really only a detour from the south coast; but if the trek needs to start by 8 AM and it's 2 hours travel (cab, bus 1h extra) from places like Mirissa, basing yourself here for a night might be quite useful. Population of the town, the hub for the agricultural area, is around 5,000.</p> <p>(Note that since 2020 a 3rd entrance, near Neluwa, also got a proper access road and could be an alternative if your route is more on the West coast than the South. Details about accommodation there to follow at some point, with a separate faq section.)</p> |
| Main areas for tourists | <p>[1] The park gate; nearby are a few lodges. This area has only 2 buses per day from the town centre..</p> <p>[2] The main town, with decent buses to Akuressa and then onwards Galle or Matara and possibly even direct to Weligama. It has the majority of accommodations.</p> <p>Note that on the map there is a road Deniyaya to Ratnapura, but it is extremely narrow and potholed and hardly has buses. So this is generally not put in route advices.</p> |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | The park, a few km west of town |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | There are some plantations around, e.g. lowgrown tea and palm treacle. |
| Altitude | At entrance around 500 m (the park goes much higher) |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 20-25' |

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| Seasonal influences | Slightly worse in June and November than other months, but the mountains attract (afternoon) rain year round. |
| People like it for: | Good base for the park, a bit of backpacker vibe |
| People dislike it for: | Too isolated for some |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None except the odd guesthouse restaurant |

Sinharaja-Kudawa/Weddagala



| Topic | Content |
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| Introduction, history and 'character' of the town including population | Sinharaja was already introduced in the section above. Kudawa side (Google Maps has some difficulty finding this hamlet, it's also referred to as Weddagala entrance as that is the junction from the main road) is recommended in routes where people travel from e.g. Yala - Tangalle area to Colombo area, and have one night to spare. Kudawa/Weddagala is an even far tinier village than Deniyaya. But the accommodations here serve their purpose, and offer transport to be at Sinharaja northeastern entrance around 8 AM to start the trekking. They are about 1 hour from Ratnapura or 2.30 hours from the coast at Kalutara. |
| Main areas for tourists | [1] The park entrance, at a dead end road near Kudawa [2] The main area with budget guesthouses and lodges, along the road to the more populated areas. [3] B181 road with e.g. some lowgrown tea plantations and upmarket hotels like Rainforest Edge and Boulder Garden Resort, actually both close to Weddagala. |
| Main sights in the town and its suburbs | Sinharaja forest |
| Main sights for which the town can serve as base | N.A., though if you have not yet visited a tea factory than those in the area might be worth some time. Don't buy the tea as Ceylon tea however, lowgrown tea is far more bitter and used for Turkish-style sugared tea. |
| Altitude | At entrance around 400 m (Sinharaja has peaks above 1000 m) |
| Night and day temperature (if needed by season) | 20-25' |
| Seasonal influences | No strong ones; the Sinharaja peaks attract clouds and rain year round mainly in the afternoon. |
| People like it for: | Great rainforest park |

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|--|---------------------|
| People dislike it for: | Too silent for some |
| Eating out scene with tourist restaurants/bars | None |