

The *tuk-tuk* driver, steering his three-wheeled motorised taxi, swerves around a sacred cow lounging in the middle of Galle Road, horn blaring, as morning prayers echo from a nearby mosque. A woman in a brilliant purple saree (traditional garment) balances a basket of mangosteen on her head while waiting for the light to change. Someone's frying something incredible nearby - the smell of coconut oil and curry leaves cuts through the diesel fumes. This is Colombo at 7 AM, when it is most alive.

Welcome to Colombo. Everything here arrives at once - heat, horns, curry smoke, sacred cows blocking the traffic. The mess is part of the appeal. This is not a city that has been sanitised for tourists or Instagram. It is raw, real, sometimes demanding, yet absolutely worth every moment.

Colombo's sacred spaces

Gangaramaya Temple sits on the edge of Beira Lake, a sprawling complex that defies easy categorisation. Built in the late 19th century, it blends Sinhalese, Thai, Indian and Chinese architecture with the confidence of a place that is never worried about matching. The main shrine draws a steady stream of devotees lighting oil lamps and placing frangipani blossoms at the feet of Buddha statues.

The real curiosity is the museum. Calling it eclectic would be generous. Religious artefacts share space with vintage cars, collection of glasses, countless clocks, and enough donated objects to stock several warehouses. It is gloriously chaotic. You could spend an hour here and leave entertained.

Near the water, Seema Malaka sits on stilts above the lake - a meditation hall open to wind and sky. Worshippers sit cross-legged on simple mats, eyes closed, hands resting on their laps. Visitors are encouraged to observe in silence.

The Jami Ul-Alfar Mosque rises above Pettah in red and white stripes, one of the most striking buildings in Colombo and worth the trip to see it. Built in 1908 and visible from far out at sea, sailors once used it to navigate toward the harbour.

The streets around it pulse with commerce - fabric merchants, spice traders, electronics vendors packed into narrow lanes. The call to prayer sounds five times daily. Business never stops. The city just breathes around it.

COLOMBO

Unfiltered



Jami Ul-Alfar Mosque

The Pettah markets

Speaking of Pettah, you need to spend a morning getting completely lost in the markets. Not kind of lost, but properly, wonderfully lost. Leave your Google Maps open if it makes you feel better, but honestly, just wander. This is old Colombo, where generations of traders have hawked everything from saffron to cell phone cases.

The market organises loosely by product - textiles on one street, Ayurvedic medicines on another, hardware somewhere else. Main Street heaves with fabric merchants, bolts of silk and cotton stacked ceiling-high. First Street glitters with gold shops selling wedding jewellery. The spice section smells of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves - the spices that brought colonisers here three separate times.


The vendors often call out, "Where are you from? Very good price!" It is friendly, not aggressive. They are just as happy to chat about cricket or politics as they are to make a sale.

Bargaining is expected, though prices are generally fair. A vendor might inflate the opening offer by twenty percent, but there is none of the aggressive haggling that plagues some Asian markets. The real pleasure is wandering, discovering the vendor whose entire business is selling exactly three products - lime pickle, more lime pickle, and an alarming amount of lime pickle, or finding the stall that somehow stocks fifty varieties of dried fish.

Colombo food canvas

If Sri Lanka has a national dish, *kottu roti* stakes a serious claim. You hear it before you see it - clang-clang-clang, metal on metal, rhythmic as a drum circle. Two blades fly across a flat griddle, chopping and mixing shredded *roti* (flatbread) with accompaniments in constant motion. The preparation is the performance, and that metallic percussion echoing down the street means dinner is close.

The result - chopped *roti* mixed with curry, onions, chilies, and your protein of choice. The flavour - slightly charred from the griddle, spicy from the curry powder, rich from the egg, makes it utterly addictive.

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Then there is crab curry. Not the sanitised Western version with delicate white meat arranged on a plate. Sri Lankan crab curry means whole mud crabs - claws, legs, body - cracked and cooked in a thick gravy of roasted spices, coconut milk, curry leaves, and enough chili to make your scalp sweat.

The best versions come from Negombo or Ja-Ela, where crabs are served hours after being pulled from the water. Ministry of Crab in Colombo has achieved fame for its preparations. Their signature Crabzilla, an enormous two kilograms lagoon crab, lives up to the name - requiring a bib, special utensils and a healthy appetite.

The real experience is a neighbourhood spot with plastic chairs and fluorescent lights. They bring you a massive plate of crab curry, rice, and paper napkins that will not be nearly enough. You crack the shells. Curry gets everywhere - hands, shirt, possibly your hair. The meat is sweet and dense, the gravy rich with coconut cream and sharp with curry leaves. There is no elegant way to eat it. You commit to the mess, crack another claw, and accept you will smell like curry all day.

The broader food culture deserves attention. Rice and curry is the daily meal. Rice served with at least four or five different curries, some mild, some punishingly spicy. *Dhal* (red lentil curry), brinjal *moju* (eggplant pickle), chicken and fish curry, all eaten together, mixing flavours on the plate.

Hoppers, fermented rice pancakes with crispy edges, appear throughout the day. *Pol sambol*, coconut and chilli relish, accompanies nearly everything. Skip the fork if you can manage it. Rice and curry eaten with your hands taste different, better somehow.

This is Colombo on a plate - the clang of *kottu* blades, curry under your fingernails, flavours that stick around and impossible to forget.

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The cafe revolution

The city's cafe culture has evolved rapidly in the past decade. The better places are not trying to recreate London or Melbourne. They are building something that belongs here, mixing Sri Lankan ingredients and traditions with contemporary approaches.

Colombo 7 has several spots worth finding. Some operate out of converted warehouses with art on the walls, serving *hoppers* with creative fillings alongside proper Ceylon tea. Others hide behind shops in garden courtyards, tables under frangipani trees, and handwritten menus that change daily.

These are not tourist traps. Locals occupy most tables - artists, writers, people having business meetings over tea and *wade* (lentil fritters).

In this spread, Clockwise from top left: A narrow canal mirrors Colombo's old quarters, where movement never quite pauses; Spice vendors display dried chillies, cardamom and produce, scenting the air; Rice and curry served generously, a daily staple that anchors the city's food culture; An A-frame bungalow nestled in misty highlands, offering quiet contrast to the capital's pace; The iconic train curves through emerald hills, one of Sri Lanka's most scenic journeys.



A morning in Negombo


Forty kilometres north of Colombo, Negombo retains its identity as a fishing community despite tourism creep. The beach will not win beauty contests - the sand is darker than the south coast, the water rougher, but the fishing fleet provides the real draw.

Early morning, hundreds of boats return with the night's catch. The fish market erupts by 6 AM - tuna, barracuda, prawns, cuttlefish laid out on the sand while buyers inspect and negotiate. The auction moves quickly, prices called in sing-song Sinhala, fish tossed into baskets. It smells exactly as you would expect, but the energy and scale make it worth an early alarm.



The Dutch canal cuts through town, a remnant of colonial-era engineering, now mostly used by local boats. Cycling the canal path reveals old colonial buildings, fishermen villages, and Catholic churches. The ride is shaded by palm trees, punctuated by small bridges where locals fish with hand lines. The Portuguese converted this region, and the faith remains. St. Mary's Church is worth seeing, a massive structure that draws pilgrims for its annual feast.

For food, the lagoon-side restaurants do excellent crab curry and prawn dishes. Nothing fancy - plastic chairs and wobbly tables. The seafood is hours-fresh, the curries properly spiced, and a feast for two costs less than an airport sandwich back home.

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Handunugoda Tea Estate

Handunugoda Tea Estate near Galle, two hours south of Colombo, offers a legitimate tea experience without the long drive. The estate produces Virgin White Tea, grown in jungle shadow and supposedly the world's purest tea.

The guide leads you from sunlit fields where workers pluck tender shoots to dim rooms heavy with the earthy smell of fermenting leaves. Tea processing in Sri Lanka has not changed much in a century. Leaves are withered, rolled, oxidised, dried, sorted by grade. At Handunugoda, they also experiment tea infused with cinnamon, ginger, and tropical fruits, all grown on the property.

The estate includes a tasting room overlooking the plantation. Multiple grades and varieties are laid out, each with distinct character. A proper Ceylon black tea, well-made, reveals what quality tea actually tastes like - bright, brisk, slightly astringent, meant to be drunk with a splash of milk. It pairs exceptionally well with the local coconut biscuits.



In this spread,
Clockwise from top left: Palm trees sway over busy canals; A natural pool framed by rock and forest; Stone Buddhas sit in stillness against Colombo's skyline; Hand-rolling tea leaves at a plantation, preserving a practice passed down through generations; Colonial-era architecture stands restored, a reminder of the island's layered influences.

The overlooked corners

The National Museum sits in a colonial building mostly ignored by visitors racing to the beaches. The main galleries cover Sri Lankan history from prehistoric times through independence. The second floor reading room is a real treasure. Old manuscripts, rare books about the spice trade and colonial history, antique maps showing the island as Europeans imagined it.

Mount Lavinia, just south of the city, has a colonial-era hotel worth visiting. The Mount Lavinia Hotel was the governor's mansion in the 1800s - high ceilings, verandahs, gardens that slopes down to the beach. Come for a drink on the terrace at sunset while the Indian Ocean puts on its daily show.

Something worth carrying home

Sri Lanka has mined gemstones for over 2,000 years. The island produces some of the world's finest sapphires, particularly the cornflower blue Ceylon sapphires and the ultra-rare Padparadscha Sapphire, in mesmerising pink-orange hues. It is also known for rubies, moonstones, and cat's eyes, still cut and traded through family-run workshops across the city.

In the city, reputable dealers cluster around Galle Road and Colombo 7. Look for shops certified by the National Gem & Jewellery Authority. Avoid any tuk-tuk driver offering to take you to a Special Gem Sale. That is how tourists end up with expensive blue glass.




For textiles, handloom cotton and *batik* (wax-dyed patterned fabric) work remain cottage industries. Shops stock handwoven textiles and locally made handicrafts without the hard sell. Government-run Laksala stores offer fixed prices on everything from wooden masks to woven baskets.

The best purchases are simple - practical ones, and distinctively Sri Lanka. A moonstone pendant, a handwoven table runner - little reminders that bring Colombo back to you,



Ready to go?

Colombo may not be everyone's cup of Ceylon tea. Arrive with an open mind and the city does not end at take-off. It lives in the muscle memory of cracking crab shells, in the phantom sound of *kottu* blades at midnight, in the way temple bells make you stop and breathe. You take it home with you, not as a memory that fades, but as something alive that keeps pulling you back to return.



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Shannim Mohd Sa'ad is an adventurous traveller with a deep appreciation for diverse cultures and off-the-beaten-path destinations. Along her journeys, she enjoys riding motocross, Muay Thai training, and snowboarding. Writing is her passion, compelling to share her unique experiences. Follow her on Instagram @epicadventuress and her blog epicadventuress.com