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**Opinion**

*Brief Encounters by Ed Peters*

## What to do in Galle, Sri Lanka – a laid-back long weekend destination

- From crumbling colonial architecture to local fare like hoppers and sambal, the city on the southwest of India's tear has much to offer visitors
- Explore beyond the famous fort's walls and go whale watching in nearby Mirissa

 **Ed Peters**  
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Galle Fort, in the southern Sri Lanka city of Galle. Picture : Shutterstock

Never mind that Lonely Planet put Sri Lanka at the top of its 2019 list of “must-IGs”. Or that Galle – officially a city, but with the feel of a supersized village – has been lumbered with Unesco heritage status. Various under the thumb of Dutch, Portuguese and British colonialists, it’s been

a thriving little port since Ibn Battuta (the Arab world's answer to Marco Polo) passed by in the 14th century.

Galle draws its zeitgeist from its seaside fort, whose coral-and-granite walls encircle many of the best hotels, shops, sights and eateries. No bureaucratic busybody has thought to besmirch its ramparts with health-and-safety railings, vegetable hawkers squawk their way about the streets, children's poetry recitations waft beyond school walls: this isn't some preserved-in-aspic – cliché alert – historical gem, but a living, breathing community.

Pick somewhere to stay among the neat grid of streets, step out of the front door each morning and the whole of the fort lies waiting – a one-stop experiential travel shop that's grown up more or less of its own accord.

### **Where to stay**

First choice for weary heads in Galle has to be a private villa, combining privacy, luxury and perhaps even a soupcon of well-earned lethargy. In the heart of the fort and dating from the 17th century, The Ambassador's House serves up a generous helping of temptation – private chef, ditto pool, ditto rooftop garden – to go with its five en-suite bedrooms. May/June sees the lowest nightly rates: US\$378, including breakfast.

Hotel enthusiasts can take their pick of a dozen boutiques in the fort, headed by that grand dame, Amangalla. Staying at a stylish B&B costs a tenth of the Aman rate. In between, nights chez The Fort Printers (a mansion turned into a private hotel) start at US\$160.

## Where to shop



A colourful street in Galle Fort. Picture: Shutterstock

Happy the visitor with a morning to spare, a hankering to peruse and a modest wad of rupees. Sprinkled here and there about the fort, seemingly more by accident than design, a score of ateliers display their wares with an attitude that tends more to museum than mall.

Given Sri Lanka's extensive gemstone production, the sparkly stuff is conspicuous. Mimimango is one of the fort's founding retailers, displaying a classy and colourful range of kaftans, tops, trousers, sarongs, scarves and dresses. Shops tend to open at 9.30-ish, and what feels like no more than half an hour later, suddenly it's lunchtime ...

## What to eat

It's a rare street inside the fort that doesn't have some sort of pit stop for browsing and sluicing. At one end of the scale, smart yet fairly low-key international restaurants seem to have been

enrolled in a breeding programme; at the other, local fare – from mobile vendors or holes in the wall – is not to be sniffed at: hoppers (pancakes) and samosas usually cost no more than a couple of dollars. It's worth seeking out rooftop or first-floor eateries for a bird's-eye squizz at the fort's toytown aspects.

## Getting around



A tuk tuk enters the fort complex, which, despite drivers' insistence, is perfectly navigable by foot. Picture: Shutterstock

Heading west six hours non-stop, Cathay Pacific's flight leaves Hong Kong mid-evening, touching down in Colombo around midnight. The return journey is an overnigher. About US\$995 return.

Galle is two to three hours by car from the international airport; private transfer about US\$65.

Cinnamon Air's thrilling Cessna air taxis take 30 minutes: seats from US\$200 and up.

Galle Fort is eminently walkable, though tuk-tuk drivers will argue the case against strolling with some passion.

**Plus**

Galle? Gaul? Gale? Gull? Colloquially, Galle's rendered "Galley" – but then should you say "Pariss" or "Parree"? In short, everyone knows where you mean.

Pronunciation apart, Galle makes a neat southern Sri Lankan base camp. There's whale watching at Mirissa, surfing to both north and south, and leopards at Yala National Park.

Link : <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/travel/article/2186319/what-do-galle-sri-lanka-laid-back-long-weekend>