

Offbeat



QUIET KALUTARA



Experience a different side of Sri Lanka in the quietness of Kalutara.

Text & Photographs **Amrita Das**

With untamed forests in the centre, rich wildlife spread across, and pristine beaches in the west and south, Sri Lanka attracts diverse groups of tourists every year. However, there is a small city in its Western Province, which doesn't often find a mention on tourists' maps – Kalutara.

Nestled about 40 km from Colombo, Kalutara gets its name from Kalu Ganga River or Black River that flows alongside. This nondescript destination was once an important spice-trading centre and thus is home to colonial architecture. Along the A2 highway, there are pockets of quiet spaces where residents spend time by the river. There are also places where the river converges and blends in with the Indian Ocean, creating beautiful lagoons.



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Within Kalutara

Kalutara Bodhiya is the most popular sight in the town. The Buddhist temple is divided into two sections by Colombo-Galle Main Road. One side (comprising the upper and lower terrace) houses the revered Bodhi tree where most devotees offer lotuses and incense and say their prayers. This Bodhi tree is believed to have sprouted from one of the 32 saplings of the original Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi planted in Anuradhapura.

A pedestrian subway connects this part of the temple to the main shrine. This is one of the few hollow Buddhist stupas in the world. Visitors walk past the library and the trust's office to take a curved flight of stairs leading to the golden statue of the Buddha. The circumference of this shrine contains murals which narrate various stories of the Buddha's life. The entrance is adorned with engravings of various symbols depicting life, death, and nirvana.

A little beyond the Bodhiya, about three kilometres away, lies Richmond Castle, another highlight of the city. The mansion was built by Padikara Mudali Nanayakkara Rajawasala Appuhamilage Don Arthur de Silva Wijesinghe Siriwardena, who studied in Britain and wanted to live in a grand English mansion. The construction of Richmond Castle – a combination of colonial European and royal South Asian architectural styles – was completed in 1910. It has 99 doors and 34 windows. Some of the most striking features of this palatial residence are the window



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panes, which have been sourced from Scotland and Italy. Take a quick tour of the mansion with one of the representatives at the ticket counter.

At the end of St Sebastian Road, AVANI Kalutara Resort and Anantara Kalutara Resort are beautifully placed on a peninsula between the ocean and the Black River. Both properties offer guests water adventures such as jet skiing and kayaking.

Shopping within Kalutara may be limited to Craft Lanka (for local handicrafts) and Ranjith's Carving and Batik Museum.

Around Kalutara

Kalutara is surrounded by Sri Lanka's most-visited places such as Bentota and Galle. The former is a short 20 km away and Galle, a tourist magnet, is about 80 km away. A visit to the famous sights of Galle, including the Galle Fort, lighthouse and structures

Clockwise from above: Go kayaking in and around Kalutara; Kalutara Bodhiya is one of the few hollow stupas in the world; The staircase of Richmond Castle is made of imported Burmese teak.



Clockwise from left:
Vibrant masks on display
in Ambalangoda; Unwind
at AVANI Bentota Resort;
A craftsman in a workshop
in Ambalangoda.



of Dutch architecture, can be concluded with an evening drink at Bentota's The Loft or a relaxing spa therapy at AVANI Bentota Resort.

Those interested in art and craft, invest a few hours in Ambalangoda. Famous for its masks, Ambalangoda is about 60 km from Kalutara. Ariyapala Mask Museum here narrates the history and significance of traditional mask-making in the region. Masks have primarily been used for dance and drama performances, where each mask depicts a unique expression or character – from humans and gods, to demons and animals. There are also composite masks. The most fascinating (and perhaps the scariest) are the Sanni masks denoting the 18 demons associated with 18 diseases that affect humans.



This page: Feast on local cuisine at big and small eateries in and around Kalutara.

The museum has an adjoining workshop where craftspeople are seen carving and filing wood, drawing and painting masks. Visitors are encouraged to interact and take photographs. The souvenir shop above the museum is worth a stop. It has a variety of masks and painted wooden artefacts such as doorstoppers, knobs, magnets, keychains, etc.

For those who love the water, stop at Hikkaduwa, about 55 km from Kalutara. Hikkaduwa is known for its beach and water adventures – this is a haven for snorkellers and divers. For those who prefer to stay above water and yet witness its marine life, a glass bottom boat ride is a good option.

Fuel up

There are plenty of small eateries along Galle Road which serve basic local food. Sri Lankan 'rice and curry' comprises dhal, *wambatu moju* (brinjal pickle), *ambul thiyal* (sour fish curry), accompanied by crackers, pol sambol (coconut relish) and *bibikkan*, a sweet dish.

Restaurants like Red Lobster and Fresh Lobsters in Kalutara are known for their fresh seafood preparations. On the other hand, AVANI Kalutara's signature crab curry is deliciously spiced with Sri Lankan flavours and goes best with local red rice. The other must-try foods resplendent in Sri Lankan flavours are *kottu* (stir-fried bread spiced with vegetables and fish), and *watalappan*, a traditional sweet made with jaggery and coconut. ■



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Colombo from Mumbai. From here, Kalutara is about 40 km away and can be reached in an hour and a half.

Fact File

Currency

1 Indian rupee = 2.32 Sri Lankan rupees (approx.)

Upcoming event

January 16–20, 2019: The 10th edition of The Fairway Galle Literary Festival will bring together renowned writers from around the world.

For more information

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