

COVER STORY SRI LANKA

North by Northeast

FROM JAFFNA TO TRINCOMALEE, **SOITY BANERJEE** VENTURES INTO ONCE-FORBIDDEN TERRITORY—BEFORE THE WORLD GETS THERE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SANJOY GHOSH**

*The Myliddy Church near
Jaffna's Palali Air Base*

It's a Y12—a compact fifteen-seater turboprop with a drone that drowns out thoughts and the possibility of conversation. Laboured and low, the flight takes off from an air force base at the Bandaranaike International Airport and turns its nose north of Colombo. A predictable cast, we're a bunch of journalists, international aid agency workers, a curator-facilitator of exhibitions for the British Library and a large family of Sri Lankan expats on its first visit to Jaffna after the war. A long, ear-muffled hour, and the narrow airstrip, licked by the sea and lined with kerosene gooseneck flares for night landings, comes hurtling into view. It's a homecoming for some. And a chance to plot the unknown in an overexposed, over-mapped world for the rest of us. Either way, it's the arrival of change.

For a place not 200 miles from Colombo (and not 20 miles from Rameswaram), Jaffna seems distant. Two years is not nearly enough time to recover from thirty years of strife—I can see the signs of inertia even as a first-timer. Yet, Yazhapanam (Tamil for Jaffna city) is beginning to pick itself up, dust itself off and start again. So are Trincomalee and several other beautiful villages and towns, beaches and small islands in the north, north-central and east of Sri Lanka. With fewer checkpoints and fewer restrictions on travel, the Colombo-Kandy-Galle tourism hegemony might be over.

Guidebook-less (the new editions are yet to arrive and, mercifully, so is the backpacker), Sanjoy and I make our way to Jaffna by air, and follow the tardy A9 and A12 roads to Anuradhapura and Trincomalee, before returning to Colombo. Joining us are busloads of local tourists from the south and the west. Our driver, Indurneel, tells us that they decamp daily in



High-decibel celebrations to mark the day's end at the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil

EVENING FINDS ME IN THE MIDDLE OF WHAT FEELS LIKE AN ENORMOUS WEDDING PARTY FOR MURUGAN



*Top to bottom:
a smooth landing
at Palali; sentry by
the moat at the
Dutch Fort; the A9
connecting Jaffna
to the south*



this season of school holidays and Hindu festivals, braving twelve- to fifteen-hour journeys on bumpy, pock-marked roads—especially in the north, where, for now, the words ‘work in progress’ are as native as the doughty palmyra trees.

I had done my homework. Trawled through reports online, read my books, badgered the Tourism Board reps with too many questions. And yet, I didn’t quite know what to expect. No one I knew, not even Mr Augustus, our guide from Negombo, had been up north in the recent years. Jaffna was a wormhole.

In war as in peace, the Jaffna peninsula has been singular. Almost a semi-arid moonscape hugged by salt pans and silvery lagoons, the outlying areas here are charming in a curiously aloof sort of way. And rattling into

town in a blaze of heat and dust, I can already see why British civil servant Leonard Woolf, who once declared that “all jungles are evil”, enjoyed his short stint in Jaffna. The Sri Lanka of branches and leaves spilling over the fences and onto the streets like a flood of deep green certainly isn’t to be found here.

The town (also called Jaffna) is a green oasis though, and has enough colours to compensate for many such bone-dry terrains. Jaya TV and a gyrating Kamal Haasan, for instance, keep me constant company—in hotel rooms, at restaurants, shops and homes. So do the many Tamil *kovils*; their bright bluegreen-pinkyellow gopurams marking territory next to whitewashed Buddhist shrines, and crumbling colonial churches and forts. And there’s colour of a different sort

to be found at the bustling Market Square on the arterial Hospital Road; especially if you don't speak Tamil and flail your arms about in the hope of being understood. A din of wicker baskets and jaggery, plantains and *kotte kalanga* (edible palmyra roots), and local mangoes and grapes (they even have a few vineyards near Point Pedro), it's a fantastic way to educate yourself.

Then there are the old bangers that still pound the Jaffna streets. Vintage Morris Minors, Austins and Fords, many of which were re-fitted to run on kerosene because petrol and diesel were scarce during the conflict years. I imagine they'll soon dwindle or disappear—as we speak, some canny businessman is perhaps plotting a mass export to countries where these well-buffed beauties could fetch a handsome price. In an otherwise ordinary small town day, this is an oblique reminder of how life here was frozen in turbulence.

Really, it's hard to sieve politics out of the equation. But early in my trip, I decide to quit looking for scars of war in everything I see. It can be limiting; especially in a place where history dates back to the early Iron Age. The Silk Route dropped its anchors here. Sinhala and South Indian kings, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, have all sailed in and out of these shores for centuries, leaving behind a trail of facts and legends. There are stories here enough to fill the Jaffna Library—restored and reopened after it was razed to the ground twice in the early 1980s—several times over.

So if you delight in such knowledge that the roots of Vijaya, the first recorded king of Sri Lanka, have been traced to modern-day Singur (of Nano-infamy) or that Georges Bizet set his opera *The Pearl Fishers* in the Gulf of Mannar, near Jaffna, you'll have enough to absorb outside the

Clockwise from top right: a Portuguese pony at Delft; a young vacationer; and twilight at the KKS Jetty



barbed wires of the army garrisons. I was never really interested in the rubble of Prabhakaran's home, the yet-to-be-demined battlefields of Mullativu or the now non-existent LTTE monuments and cemeteries—all no-go zones for ordinary tourists.

After a hot, dry day, the melting evening finds me in the middle of what seems like an enormous wedding party for Murugan, or the Tamizh Kaduvul (god of the Tamils). Tens of hundreds of ullulating women with flowers in their hair and bare-bodied, veshti-clad men carrying the lord and his consort emerge from a cloud of camphor to circle the temple tank at the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil. The weight of the beams leaves a telltale hollow on the shoulders of the priests as they lower the deity next to the symbolic golden *vel* (spear) bathed in milk. The

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A pageant of vibrant trucks near the Dutch Fort; and (right) an early start at Jaffna's Market Square

benign rituals a stark contrast to the shocking tests of faith we witnessed on the streets earlier in the day—bizarre, itinerant tableaux featuring men strung on hooks. As I walk past the unfinished wooden jungle gym with casters that thousands will draw to mark the end of the month-long Ther (chariot) festival, the cadence of the drumbeats reaches a hypnotic crescendo.

My ears ringing with ancient shlokas, I make my way to another of Jaffna's strongest landmarks: the star-shaped Portuguese-Dutch Fort that was under the control of

the Tamil Tigers for over ten years before the army captured it in a fifty-day siege in the mid-1990s. Off-limits for civilians till two years ago, the fortress has recently flung its gates open to tourists. But there's little left to see.

Once home to a beautiful Calvinistic church called the Kruys Kerk and the old Governor's house, which Michael Ondaatje describes in *Running in the Family* as a curiosity with twenty-foot-high doors "awaiting the day when a family of acrobats will walk from room to room, sideways, without

dismantling themselves from each other's shoulders", the fort is an empty shell today. With walls riddled with bullets, a lone sentry by the rotting moat and a bunch of friendly conservationists hunched over piles of paper, it's a token pit stop; worth a visit, if only to get a sense of what it was.

An hour's drive from the fort, at the Kurikattuwan Jetty next morning, in a sudden change of plan, I demand to see the island of Delft. Nagadeepaya, another isle with yet another famous kovil and a Buddhist vihara, can wait. Hop-

ping onto the ferry just in time, I slide into the lower cavern and regret it almost immediately. To keep myself from throwing up, I strike up a conversation with Sainthan, a displaced Jaffna-ite now back in the city. Like everyone else I meet, Sainthan too is warm and friendly, though I can always sense a mental monitor ticking off what not to say. With enough practice, many do it flawlessly by now. He tells me he's heading to the island to plan the building of new roads and a jetty.

Once the tow boat deposits us from the ferry, I can see Sainthan



JAYA TV AND A GYRATING KAMAL HAASAN
KEEP ME CONSTANT COMPANY—IN HOTEL
ROOMS, RESTAURANTS, SHOPS AND HOMES



Two worlds meet on the road to Nallur Kovil; and (right) an offering of water lilies for the vihara at Nagadeepaya

has a lot of work ahead of him. Delft is the sort of place you have to have the stomach for. If you do, it'll reward you. If not, you'll be stuck there until the next ferry arrives three hours later. It's where the baking heat is a person. It's also where you have to ingratiate yourself with locals to find a proper loo or a plate of food and where there are no taxis or tuk-tuks to hail. Tourism starts from zero here. So

Well, that's the thing about the Jaffna region. You expect it to be somehow extraordinary. But it isn't. In its ordinariness, however, lies a more delicate charm. I wonder if it's just the lovely people or its untouristed naïveté. Because it's definitely not the roads.

Hurling down the A9 that goes all the way to Kandy, parallel to the uprooted railway

for some of the fiercest battles. As the driver struggles to keep pace with our impatience, I look out of the window for signs of life. There are none. Driving through jungles pushed back to create clear-fire areas on either side, there isn't a village in sight. Just an empty stretch of road, punctuated by a few checkpoints manned by soldiers racked by ennui. Before 2009, few people ventured this far



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off we go galloping in a jangling tempo with an open-top rear cargo area. A blitz through the island, in two hours we squeeze in more fortresses crumbling into the sea, old dovecotes for homing pigeons, a British hospital, some wild Portuguese ponies strolling by the sea, a giant baobab that travelled here with the Arab seafarers from Africa and a hole in the natural limestone ground (purportedly the footprint of Hanuman). It could be the heat and hunger that makes it hard for me to register things. But this haze of barren, dramatic plains is spectacular.

tracks, I'm regretting our decision to include Anuradhapura in the itinerary. A modest 150km from Jaffna, it's a tactical move to break journey here before heading out to the eastern port city of Trincomalee. What I haven't anticipated is a seven-hour journey on execrable roads. On the flipside though, we get to see some of the more recent 'sights': a reclaimed tank on an elevated plinth near the Elephant Pass and a victor's monument pierced by a giant bullet at Killinochi, once the headquarters of the Tamil Tigers and the stage

and fewer still were allowed to do so. Anuradhapura was the final frontier for tourism. Even a couple of months ago, travellers who came to Anuradhapura—a cultural stronghold with a large number of Buddhist ruins, the Maha Bodhi Tree and lotus-filled manmade tanks—couldn't simply carry on to Jaffna without a permit from the Defence Ministry back in Colombo. But situations have changed and so have the rules. At Anuradhapura, I immediately sense a shift in gear. It's like an old, unobtrusive butler who can please any guest by dint of habit.



Top to bottom:
fishermen in
tandem at
Uppuveli beach;
charms at Fort
Fredrick; and the
Trinco harbour



Accustomed to travellers from every part of the world, though not overly touristy, the smile is more practised and the English language less alien here. Arriving on the day before *poya* (full moon), I navigate my way from one vihara to another, saving the Maha Bodhi tree for dusk. Standing by, in a sea of people dressed in white, I find myself watching their faces, lips pursed, brows knitted in prayer. And then the Bodhi Tree rises, stretches its arms out and embraces the moon.

Trincomalee featured in Ptolemy's maps. A naturally deep harbour, Marco Polo was here. And so am I—back in what was a danger zone through most of the conflict years. Treading a sort of middle ground, Trinco, unlike Jaffna, was never really cut off from the mainland. The rebels had been forced to withdraw in 2006, yet the waters off the port city were often troubled.

I take a stroll down the beaches of Uppuveli and Nilaveli, just outside town—clean, quiet and with a handful of hotels, they seem

almost as untouched as they would have been two years ago. With the number of travellers swelling each day though, it won't be long before the well-heeled weekenders from Colombo or Kandy demand more cocktail umbrellas in their welcome drinks.

For now, I watch the tug-of-war with the sea. Waiting to land the day's catch early in the morning, a team of fishermen at Uppuveli are hauling the net like an efficient pulley. Halting briefly to let me cross under the taut rope-like mesh and to flash shy smiles, they go back to the synchronised tugging. It's business as usual. The scabs have formed over the scars of the 2004 tsunami and the "trouble times". Nothing like the Trinco of the early 1990s that a friend from Colombo had recalled. With empty streets and all of three shops with their shutters up—a grocer and two textile merchants—the tensions ran high back then. "You could cut it with a knife," she had said.

The air is light now, the beaches lie languidly and Trinco looks well-rested and festive. Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims line up for blessings, and tie miniature wooden cradles to a frangipani wishing tree, at the Koneswaram temple cinched by the walls of Fort Fredrick. Spotted deer loll about in the shade of the eaves of colonial buildings inside the Fort. Children play cricket on the beach.

It's hard to imagine now what John, a co-passenger on the flight to Jaffna from Colombo, felt when he travelled to the Nilaveli beach a few years ago. Growing up in Trinco in the '50s, before his father, a British naval officer, decided to move back to England, John had wanted his trip to be memorable. And memorable it was. Empty beautiful beaches and a driver who refused to refuel before he reached the hotel on Nilaveli, willing to risk an empty tank on a road where




THE ATMOSPHERE IS LIGHT NOW, THE BEACHES LIE Languidly AND TRINCO LOOKS WELL-RESTED AND FESTIVE

Clockwise from left: a view from the Koneswaram Kovil in Trincomalee; handicrafts at the kovil's bazaar; young islanders share a giggle; and on Pigeon Island

waiting for a tow truck was like waiting for Godot. He eventually, reluctantly, revealed the reason. Sneaking in to steal fuel from cars (and, perhaps, food) at the only hotel open through those years, the Tigers were on the prowl here.

No, I spot no tigers. But I do see a baby shark at Pigeon Island National Park, off the sands of Nilaveli; and I have excitable, hollering snorkellers to thank for it. Known for some of Sri Lanka's best coral reefs and named after its most famous residents, the blue rock pigeons, the island was officially reopened this summer to tourists. Barely three months after the ribbon was cut, speedboats huddle by its virgin shores flush with chalky white corals washed up by the sea. As they clank underfoot like pebbles of glass, I'm fascinated by how the sea has etched its fingerprint on each shard of coral. Delightfully long strokes; curly, abrupt strokes.

As I head out west, back to Colombo with its blinding city lights and urban air, my thoughts return to its very antipode: Delft. I'm reminded of a conversation I had with Sindhura, the driver of our open-top chariot. A young man with a fetching tobacco-stained smile and a pierced ear, who could have closed ranks with the rebels, had the war continued. But here he was driving his tempo imported all the way from Colombo, on an island with several fishermen, but not a single mechanic. Talking about his bitter-sweet life—he lost his two-year-old daughter to leukaemia and now has a toddling son—he tells me his wife is a school teacher. “So was it a love marriage?” I ask. “No, she my cousin,” he says, almost immediately adding in a stage whisper, “But sister, love marriage continuing!”

Sri Lanka's love marriage with its other half has just begun. I'm hoping it continues. 



THE INFORMATION



Malayan Café, an institution on Jaffna’s Grand Road

GETTING THERE

BY AIR **SriLankan Airlines**, **Jet Airways** and **Air India** have direct flights to Colombo from Delhi (from ₹12,700 return on economy class) and Mumbai (from ₹10,500 return). In addition to these airlines, **SpiceJet**, **Kingfisher** and **Air India Express** fly out of Chennai (from ₹5,000 return). SriLankan flies Bengaluru-Colombo non-stop (from ₹8,000). BY SEA If you have time to spare, you could also take **Flemingo Liners’** overnight luxury ferry which plies between Tuticorin and Colombo (from ₹3,128 one-way; flemingoliners.com).

VISAS & PERMITS

All Indian tourists can get a 30-day visa on arrival at the Bandaranaike International Airport in Colombo. Also keep an eye out for the introduction of advance online applications at newdelhi.mission.gov.lk or at immigration.gov.lk. Tourists with foreign passports **don’t require permits** to visit the north and east of the country anymore. Keep your passport on you at all times though because you’ll need it at all the checkpoints,

especially at points such as the causeway at Elephant Pass.

CURRENCY

₹0.42 = LKR 1
US \$1 = LKR 110

JAFFNA

GETTING THERE

The easiest and quickest way to get to Jaffna from Colombo is by air—the flying time is one hour. Currently **Helitours**, the Sri Lankan Air Force’s commercial operation, is the only operator with flights on this route (departs Colombo 8am; LKR 9,500 one-way; +94-113-144244/944, 110472, helitours@slaf.gov.lk). **Expolanka** is expected to resume its flights by October (0773788795, expolanka.com).

You could also hire a car and drive up from Colombo (12 hours); but driving overnight is not recommended. Most travellers break journey at Anuradhapura. Buses, however, mostly ply at night (8.30pm onwards) and can take 3-4 hours longer to reach Jaffna because of delays at checkpoints. Tickets can be bought at Colombo’s **Central Bus Stand** in Pettah (LKR 500-2,000).

GETTING AROUND

Jaffna town is best navigated in tuk-tuks (LKR 100-300): almost everything is a 15-minute ride away. Morris Minor or Austin taxis can be hired from the taxi stand on Hospital Road (LKR 300-500). If you’re planning to go sightseeing outside the city though, ask your hotel to arrange for a car (LKR 3,000 + fuel for half-day; LKR 5,000 + fuel for full day; petrol costs LKR 115 and diesel LKR 75).

WHERE TO STAY

> HIGH-END We stayed in garden-facing rooms at the eight-month-old **Tilko City Hotel Jaffna** (from LKR 8,750 doubles; 021-2225969, cityhoteljaffna.com), right next to the main Post Office and a stone’s throw from the arterial Hospital Road. Another new property, **Expo Pavilion** on Kandy Road (LKR 7,500; 0773788795, expo.lanka.com), has seven elegant rooms and a charming veranda. Their second property, near the Palali airport, **ExpoMargosa**, is scheduled to open this month. Just outside town, the army-run **Thal Sevana** (LKR 5,000; 077349794) on the Kankasanthurai beach is an

excellent option too.

> MID-RANGE **Manattrii** (LKR 3,900; 3207665, manattrii.com), set in a pretty nineteenth-century building, is recommended. **Gyanams**, on Clock Tower Road, which has reopened after sixteen years, has clean, comfortable rooms arranged around a central courtyard (from LKR 3,300; 2220631). **Green Grass**, off Hospital Road, is another popular option with its own swimming pool and an open-air bar (from LKR 3,000; 2224385/1686). > BUDGET There are several cramped but clean establishments on Kandy Road and Temple Road. Try **Treat Ooo!** (LKR 4,000 for quadruple; 2220298/99) or the **New Bastion Hotel** (LKR 1,500; 2222605/7374). **Serendib Inn** on Point Pedro Road also offers basic rooms (LKR 2,000; 2223984/6242).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

The star-shaped Portuguese-Dutch **Jaffna Fort**, the Jaffna Public Library and the modest Archaeological Museum form the town’s historic centre. Several colonial buildings, including the charming Anglican **St John’s Chapel**, St Martin’s Seminary, St Mary’s Cathedral and the Italianate St James’ Church, lie in quiet, intersecting lanes east of the Fort. Outnumbering these are the several Tamil temples around town, of which the **Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil** is the most impressive and most revered. Thousands of pilgrims arrive through the month-long celebrations of the temple’s annual Chariot Festival in July-August. The austere **Sri Naga-vihara** is a key Buddhist shrine.

There are several islands around Jaffna. Visiting each of them can take a long time, so choose well. We drove to the Kurikattuwan Jetty and took a ferry to **Delft** (departures 8.30am, 10am, 12.30pm; the last ferry back is at 2pm; free of cost) and to the more touristy **Nainativu Naga-deepaya island**. The latter attracts local tourists who offer prayers

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at the Nagapooshani Amman Kovil and the Nagadeepaya Vi-hara. A 20-minute ride in a rustic, chicken-coop ferry (boats leave at 15-minute intervals; LKR 30) can get you there. **Kayts**, Punkudutivu, Karaitivu and Mandativu are some of the other islands you could visit.

WHERE TO EAT

Almost all hotels offer buffet lunches and dinners that are predominantly Tamil in flavour. **Mangos** near the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil is a local institution. The temple area also has a few homemade ice cream shops that are popular with the locals. **Malayan Café**, an old-world vegetarian eatery, is a perfect place to pile up your banana leaf with dosais, vadais, idiappams, rice and curries.

ANURADHAPURA

GETTING THERE

If you're travelling from Colombo, the most comfortable way to get to Anuradhapura is by **overnight train**. We drove down from Jaffna and it took us seven hours.

GETTING AROUND

Rental cars are the only option (LKR 1,000 + fuel for half-day), unless you're up for some serious exercise—most hotels can arrange for bicycles (LKR 250 per day).

WHERE TO STAY

> HIGH-END The fanciest addresses in town are the **Ulagalla Resort** (from \$375; 011-5671000, ulagallaresorts.com) and the **Palm Garden Village** (from \$110; 025-2223961, palmgardenvillage.com). > MID-RANGE The **Nuwarawewa Resthouse** (from \$61; 025-2222565, quickshaws.com), by the city's largest tank, is among the oldest hotels here. It's a bit musty, but the service is friendly and the food sumptuous. You could also try their sister property, **Tissawewa Grand Heritage Hotel** (from \$80; 025-2237806, heritagehotel.lk) and **Dulyana Hotel** (from \$66; 025-4932290, hoteldulyana.lk) are among the newer hotels. > BUDGET Try **Shalini Guesthouse** (from \$25; 2222425, hotelshalini.lk) or **The Grand** (from LKR 2,400; 2235173, thegranddami@yahoo.com), both on Harishchandra Mawatha.



The ramparts of Fort Fredrick in Trincomalee town

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Anuradhapura is so strewn with secular ruins, monuments, statues and shrines that it's difficult to decide where to begin. The good news is that most of them lie relatively close to each other. A good place to start would be the **Archaeological Museum** where you can buy your entry tickets (LKR 1387.50 for visitors from SAARC countries). Then pay your respects at the Ruvanvelisaya Dagoba and walk on towards the **Sri Maha Bodhi** tree in the same complex; the latter is the oldest recorded tree in the world. Drive on towards the Abhaygiri Dagoba and the Samadhi Buddha statue, stopping en route at the Thuparama Dagoba. Among the most imposing dagobas though is the **Jetavanarama**, a massive dome which rises majestically in the skyline and is not painted over in white like most other dagobas or stupas.

WHERE TO EAT

If you tire of the food at your own hotel, take a stroll down Anuradhapura's main street, the **Dharmapala Mawatha**, to sniff out clean rice-curry dens. The night markets are a good bet too.

TRINCOMALEE

GETTING THERE

The road from Anuradhapura to Trincomalee is excellent, so it takes about three hours to get there by car. It is also connected by buses that ply from Jaffna, Anuradhapura and Colombo. If you're travelling from Colombo,

you could take one of the two overnight trains or a seaplane (srilankan.aero/airtaxi).

GETTING AROUND

Ask your hotel to arrange for vans (LKR 2,000 + fuel per day) or bicycles (LKR 200 per day).

WHERE TO STAY

> HIGH-END **Chaaya Blu** on Uppuveli beach (from \$350; 026-2221611, chaayahotels.com), and **Nilaveli Hotel** (from LKR 10,500; 2226294, tangerinetours.com) and **Pigeon Island Beach Resort** (from \$120; 2226294, pigeonislandresort.com) on the Nilaveli stretch are luxury properties. > MID-RANGE The two-month-old **Coconut Beach Lodge** is a wonderful find on the Uppuveli stretch. With elegant rooms and atmospheric public areas, including an open kitchen, it has a boutique air about it. Ask for a room in the main building (LKR 2,000-5,000; 2224888). The other more mainstream hotel on this beach is **Lotus Park Hotel** (\$100; 2225327, lotustrinco.com); book only if you get a room in the new wing. > BUDGET Try **Golden Beach Cottage** (from LKR 2,000; 7211243) or **Silver Beach Hotel** (from LKR 3,500; 3263750, silverbeachtrinco@hotmail.com), both located on Uppuveli beach.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Trincomalee town is often bypassed by tourists who head straight to the beaches of **Uppuveli** (5km) and **Nilaveli**

(12km). But save a day to savour this port city's few attractions. The **Fort Fredrick** area, which encloses the Koneswaram Kovil, and the Swami Rock, also offers some of the best views in town. While you won't be allowed to take a stroll on the grounds, you can admire many of the colonial buildings, now occupied by the military, from the car. Try asking the guards for permission to see a boarded-up government guesthouse in a quaint yellow building on a cliff. **Trinco beach**, a sliver of sand compared to Uppuveli and Nilaveli, comes alive every evening when families gather for picnics and kite-flying. At the Ashraf Jetty a few miles away, you can see exactly why the naturally deep harbour protected by hills on three sides has been a prized anchorage. Also stop by at the World War II cemetery.

On Uppuveli and Nilaveli beaches, the best thing to do is to do nothing. So unwind by the sea and sign up for **dolphin watching** or snorkelling trips if you're looking for some soft adventure. From Nilaveli take a boat to **Pigeon Island National Park** to see some of Sri Lanka's best reefs (LKR 1,900 for entry ticket + LKR 1,500 for boat journey).

WHERE TO EAT

You'll have to depend on your hotel for meals, though there are a couple of small shacks on the two beaches and a few hole-in-the-wall rice and curry houses on **Dyke Street** by the beach in Trinco town.

■ SOITY BANERJEE