



Sustainable Serenity: Exploring Sri Lanka's Luxurious Eco- Friendly Wonders



By
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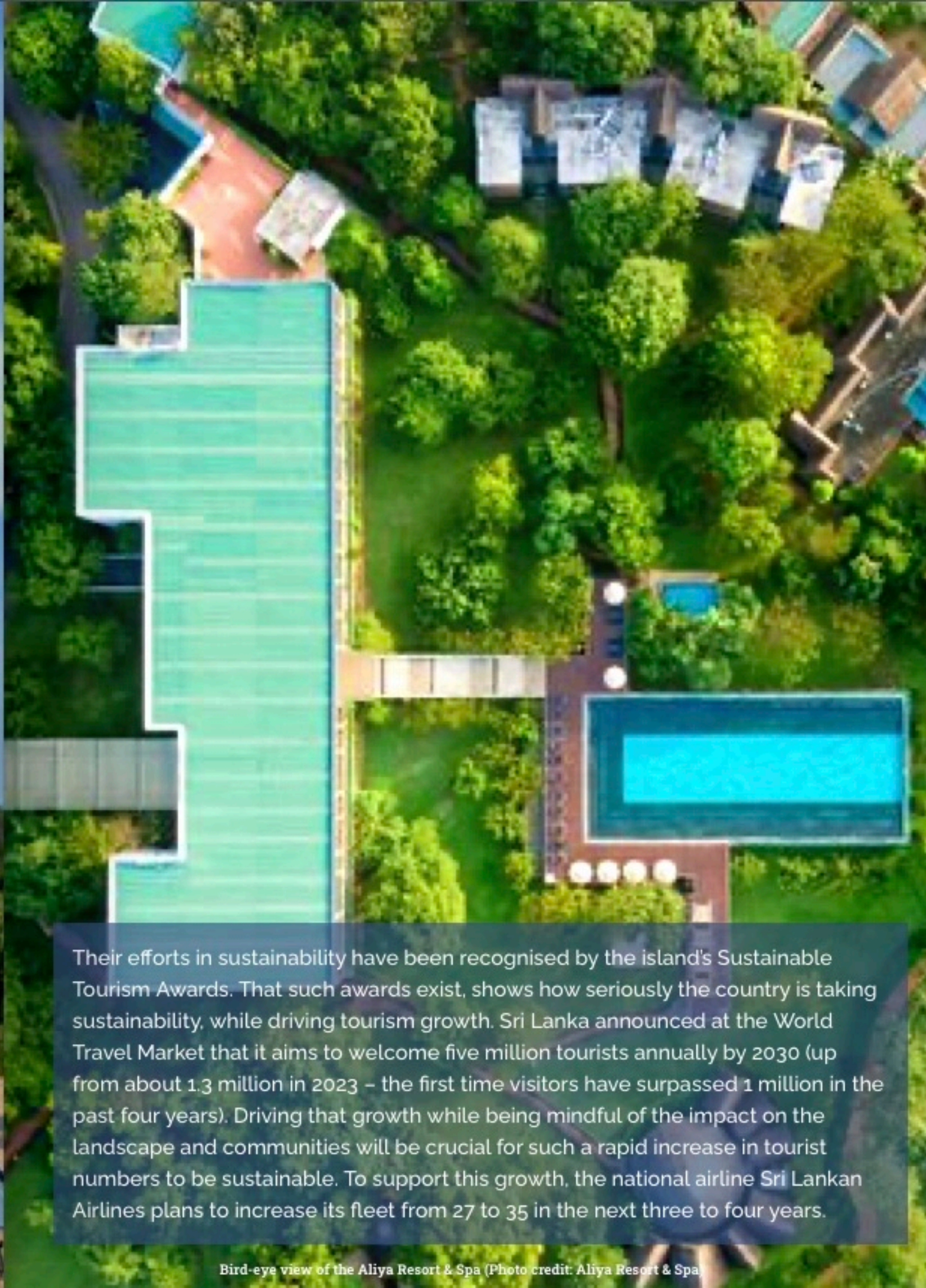
Photo credit: Canva

I didn't notice the paper name tags being attached to our luggage as we entered the five-star Aliya Resort & Spa. That's because I was wowed by the view of ancient Sigiriya Rock Fortress, one of Sri Lanka's most important cultural sights, which was perfectly framed beyond the oversize infinity pool, and I was distracted by the flame I was being handed as part of a ceremonial lamp-lighting welcome.

It was only when I stumbled upon the hotel's paper recycling unit the next day that the luggage tags were brought to my attention. Through a process of pulping, pressing and ironing, the hotel transforms waste paper into their menus, coasters and tags. Colour is created by adding turmeric (yellow), bark (brown) or leaves (green). It's just part of a programme that includes crafting bricks to build extensions and growing herbs for their Ayurvedic spa. The hotel also provides e-bikes to cycle to Sigiriya instead of driving, reducing their guests' carbon footprint.



The beautiful view of the ancient Sigiriya Rock Fortress from Aliya Resort & Spa (Photo credit: Aliya Resort & Spa)



Their efforts in sustainability have been recognised by the island's Sustainable Tourism Awards. That such awards exist, shows how seriously the country is taking sustainability, while driving tourism growth. Sri Lanka announced at the World Travel Market that it aims to welcome five million tourists annually by 2030 (up from about 1.3 million in 2023 – the first time visitors have surpassed 1 million in the past four years). Driving that growth while being mindful of the impact on the landscape and communities will be crucial for such a rapid increase in tourist numbers to be sustainable. To support this growth, the national airline Sri Lankan Airlines plans to increase its fleet from 27 to 35 in the next three to four years.

Bird-eye view of the Aliya Resort & Spa (Photo credit: Aliya Resort & Spa)



Photo credit: Canva

Choose a good tour operator

A good place to start when planning a sustainable trip to this Indian Ocean island is to choose a tour operator with good credentials who can direct you to eco-friendly accommodation and activities. I booked with Hayes and Jarvis, a British-based company that's been creating memorable experiences for travellers for more than 70 years.

They create tailor-made itineraries, which means you can request that places such as Aliya, with good sustainability credentials, be included in your itinerary. The tour operator also works with www.southpole.com to ensure all the CO² generated by their trips is compensated for. When I was greeted at Colombo airport by their local operator Enchanting Travels, I was immediately issued with a metal water canister to reduce plastic waste during my stay.

Contribute to conservation

Included in my itinerary was a visit to Minneriya National Park to see the elephant gathering. Each year, hundreds of elephants congregate at the shores of the Minneriya reservoir as the country becomes drier elsewhere (from roughly June through to early October), creating one of the world's most dramatic natural spectacles.

Elephants are synonymous with Sri Lanka, and I found elephants depicted throughout the country; in temples, but also in carvings, key rings, wallpaper, bed linen and even a hotel-towel elephant sitting on my bed one evening. It was, therefore, not a surprise to discover it wasn't just tourists drawn to view these majestic beasts in their natural habitat.

My visit occurred on a full-moon national holiday, and the park was packed with locals coming to see the herds of elephants as they nosed around the safari vehicles on their way to drink. The fees tourists pay to enter these national parks are directly invested back into protecting the habitat as well as scientific research and monitoring of ecosystems and endemic species.



Photo credit: Canva



Sacred city of Kandy (Photo credit: Canva)

Eat at community projects

From Minneriya National Park, I headed to Kandy, the last capital of the Sri Lankan Royal dynasty and home to the Temple of the Tooth, a 14th-century temple within the former royal complex. The temple, known locally as Sri Dalada Maligawa, is the most revered site in Sri Lanka for containing the relic of the tooth of Buddha. Kandy itself is a pretty city with an artificial lake at its centre and a thriving craft market.

To ensure you give something back to the local community, head to Hela Bojun Gannoruwa for lunch. This government-run organisation supports low-income families by inviting women to cook and sell traditional Sri Lankan dishes, such as string hoppers (rice vermicelli) and Halapa (a sweet, sticky coconut mixture served folded into a kenda leaf).



Photo credit: Canva

Travel by train

Sri Lanka is a large island, about the size of Ireland, at just over 65,600km. To reduce the time spent in the car, consider using some of the island's train network. I chose to take the train from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya, a stunning journey that travels from the palm jungle around Kandy up into the tea plantations. The changing landscape is punctuated by villages, rivers and waterfalls, and you can sit at the open doors of the carriages to see it all without a dusty window marring the view.

On arrival at Nuwara Eliya, I visited the Pedro tea estate, home to the Lover's Leap Ethical Tea Boutique, where I toured the fields and factory and got an insight into Sri Lanka's most lucrative export (tea from this estate is served in Buckingham Palace).

For years, the production of fine Ceylon tea has bolstered the country's economy, generating £1.079bn in exports in 2022.

However, tourism is now overtaking tea (from January to November 2023, tourism contributed £1.4bn in revenue) in driving Sri Lanka's economic recovery. Perhaps your visit will be part of that growth.

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