



West Coast

Sri Lanka's west coast has two personalities, split figuratively and literally by the behemoth that is Colombo. In the north, the old beach town of Negombo still welcomes travellers looking for a sandy respite near the airport. Head further north, however, and you enter a sparsely populated land of coconut plantations and fishing villages. Past the old market town of Puttalam is Wilpattu National Park, a remarkable place of elephants and leopards that is re-emerging as an important destination after years of war.

Going south from Colombo, the capital seems to drag on forever. But after about 40km the traffic thins enough to create a sense of open road, and you begin to see stretches of the beautiful coast, lined with rocks, sand or both. Simple guesthouses intermingle with resorts. Some visitors cleanse their bodies at Ayurvedic spas, while others use their beachside idyll to cleanse their soul.

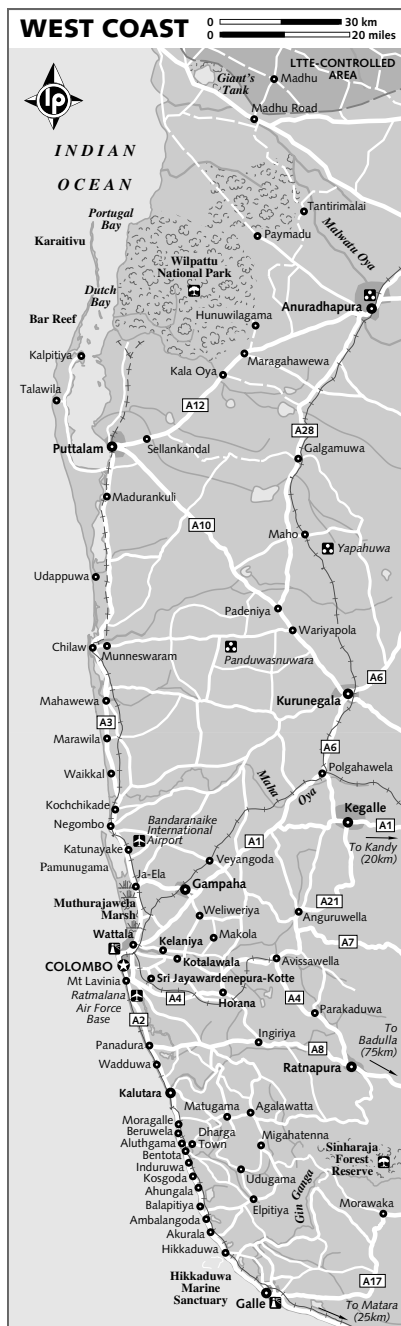
The tsunami hit hard here, especially in the low-lying areas beyond Ambalangoda, but the region is working hard on its long-term recovery and travellers are welcomed. Hikkaduwa was the country's original laid-back backpacker town, and it continues to exude a mellow vibe. Its long beaches inspire relaxation, while those looking for more activity can enjoy snorkelling and diving amid coral – or try riding some of the often-excellent waves.

Whether it's exploring the outer regions to the north or joining the sun seekers in the south, the west coast has much to offer travellers. If you're pushing on to the South, you may find your plans delayed by your discoveries here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering the animal treasures of **Wilpattu National Park** (p109)
- Escaping the modern age in the sparsely populated **North** (p108)
- Plunging – literally – into the pleasures of **Negombo beach** (p111) after a long flight
- Relaxing at the many resorts, grand and modest, around **Bentota** (p119)
- Releasing a baby turtle into the sea near **Kosgoda** (p121)
- Picking out the perfect devil's mask in **Ambalangoda** (p122)
- Seeing coral in the morning, surfing in the afternoon and making new friends at night in **Hikkaduwa** (p123)





THE 2004 TSUNAMI – AFTERMATH IN THE WEST

The tsunami caused significant damage at many places along the coast south of Colombo. However, the waters were fickle, and some beachside places were untouched while others were completely wiped out. Damage can be found around Beruwela, Bentota, Kosgoda and Ambalangoda. Between Ambalangoda and Hikkaduwa is where some of the most significant loss of life occurred. It was here that a train was trapped and thousands of people lost their lives. The land will look scoured and scarred for a long time to come, and it will also take years for many people to live in proper homes once again.

Expect more hotels and guesthouses to open each year as damaged places begin to rebuild. Initial efforts to enforce a buffer zone between the sea and developed areas have mostly been abandoned, though many beaches now sport highly unattractive protective berms.

Dangers & Annoyances

All along the west coast you have to watch out for dangerous currents, undertows and rip tides, particularly with the bigger seas during the wet season, which runs from April or May to October or November. Watch where other people are swimming or ask reliable locals about when or where to go for a dip. In some places sea pollution is another deterrent – the further you are from town centres, especially Colombo, the better.

NORTH OF COLOMBO

The A3 heads north out of Colombo, skirting old Dutch canals, sandy beaches and wildlife refuges. Close to the Bandaranaike International Airport, on the outskirts of Colombo, the pleasant beach town of Negombo makes a good first stop for many visitors to the country, while further north the west coast is rural and green – just watch out for coconuts falling in the many palm plantations. In the far north of this region the chief attraction is Wilpattu National Park and its myriad animals.

WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK

Covered in dense pockets of jungle scrub interspersed with small clearings, and tanks that shrink in the dry season and swell in the monsoon, **Wilpattu National Park** (admission per person Rs 600, plus per vehicle Rs 120, plus per group service charge Rs 600, plus 15% tax; ☎ 6am–6pm) is home to up to 50 elephants and 50 or more leopards, as well as spotted deer, sloth bears, wild pigs, crocodiles and more. At 1085 sq km, it is Sri Lanka's largest national park.

Like much of the country, recent history has not been kind to the park. At one time it was the most visited in the country, but it was closed due to ethnic violence in 1985. In the following years it was a base for rebels and poaching was rife. However, the park reopened with a new visitors centre and an enthusiastic staff in 2003.

Research on the park's animals is only just starting again, so animal counts are more speculative than factual. But visitors usually have a good chance of seeing some wildlife, especially from January to May. In fact, on the drive to the park from Puttalam, you'll see fences designed to keep marauding elephants out of farmland (you'll also see lots of abandoned homes). Peacocks and mongooses are everywhere.

This national park is definitely worth a visit if you enjoy animal spotting, albeit in primitive conditions. It still remains very uncrowded.

Information

The **park office** (☎ 025-225 7893; ☎ 6am–4.30pm) has helpful staff, a few displays and a snack stand. Elephants often visit the nearby tank at dusk. Be sure to pick up a copy of the excellent colour map.

Guides are essential. Fees for a guide and a 4WD vehicle (which seats up to four) are negotiable but should run to roughly Rs 2000 for a half-day and Rs 4000 for a full day. You can arrange them through your accommodation in Puttalam or Anuradhapura, or you will find some waiting at the turn-off from the Puttalam–Anuradhapura Rd.

Sights & Activities

There are 100km of very rugged roads inside the park, and another 200km of trails. In the park's centre there is a grouping of tanks and lakes that is the focus for most visitors, as it has the greatest concentration of wildlife. A

visit to this area can be accomplished in half a day. In a full day's journey you can cover a good portion of the park, including a visit to the remote beach at **Kudiramale Point**.

Throughout the park expect to see *vil-lus*, depressions in the ground that fill with water in the rainy season and then contract or disappear during the dry season (May to September). These are magnets for animals and numerous bird species. There's some good tropical forest near the entrance.

Sleeping

Many visitors base themselves in either Puttalam or Anuradhapura, where hotels can easily arrange guides and visits. Alternatively, groups of up to 10 can camp inside the park at one of five primitive sites for Rs 690 per night. Book at the park office. You'll need to bring your own gear.

Like Yala National Park, Wilpattu has some rather expensive bungalows. These are scattered around the park, but tend to be about 15km from the park office, and situated near water. Costs (after park admission) are US\$24 per person per night, plus US\$2 per person for linens and US\$30 per group for 'service'. These basic huts come with drinking water and don't have electricity. Reservations are made through the **Department of Wildlife Conservation** (Map pp84–5; ☎ 011-269 4241; www.dwlc.lk; 18 Gregory's Rd, Col 7).

At the park's turn-off on the Puttalam–Anuradhapura Rd, **Preshamel Safari Hotel** (☎ in Anuradhapura 025-225 7699, in Colombo 011-252 1866; preshamel@sltnet.lk; r per person incl breakfast Rs 1500) has five rooms that define 'basic'. There's food available at night. Management will organise all-inclusive two-day camping safaris into the park for Rs 10,000 per two people.

Getting There & Away

The turn-off to the park on the rough but paved Puttalam–Anuradhapura Rd (A12) is 26km northeast of Puttalam and 20km southwest of Anuradhapura. A further 8km of rough road leads to the park entrance and office at the barely discernable village of Hunuwilagama.

Buses on the main road between Puttalam and Anuradhapura stop at the junction (Rs 25, one hour), which is approximately halfway between the two towns. One of the waiting guides will be more than happy to take you into the park for a negotiable fee.

PUTTALAM & AROUND

☎ 032 / pop 42,000

The old trading, pearling and fishing town of Puttalam is a scruffy, neglected market town in its modern incarnation. You can use it as a base for trips into Wilpattu National Park, but you will probably prefer Anuradhapura.

A Portuguese regiment of soldiers from Mozambique originally settled the village of **Sellankandal**, about 10km inland from Puttalam. As late as the 1930s, Sellankandal villagers still spoke a version of Portuguese and sang Afro-Portuguese *bailas* (folk songs). You might see some people of mixed-African descent in Puttalam; there is also a large Muslim population.

The turn-off to the peninsula towns of Kalpitiya and Talawila is south of Puttalam, and leads past salt pans and a salt factory. The somewhat preserved Dutch fort on the peninsula road dates from 1670 and is still manned by the Sri Lankan army. To the

north of Kalpitiya a string of islands guards Dutch Bay and Portugal Bay. The salt pans and thin coconut plantations on the peninsula are home to a herd of wild donkeys.

At **Talawila** there's a Catholic shrine to St Anne. The church features satinwood pillars and is pleasantly situated on the seafront. Thousands of pilgrims come here in March and July, when major festivals honouring St Anne are held. The festivals include huge processions, healing services and a fair.

Accommodation in Puttalam is basic. **Senatilake Guest Inn** (☎ 226 5403; 81A Kurunegala Rd; r Rs 800-1800; 🚻) has 10 rooms, some of which are fan-only; the restaurant is good and the bus station is some 300m away.

It feels like the country at the 14-room **Dammika Holiday Resort** (☎ 226 5192; 51 Good Shed Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 1650/1000; 🚻), 1km south of the town centre off the Colombo road and 100m from the train station. Meals in the pleasant dining rooms cost about Rs 300.

You can sit on the shady verandas of the **Rest House** (☎ /fax 226 5299; Beach Rd; r with/without air-con Rs 1500/1000; 🚻) and watch cows graze on the grounds. The eight large rooms in this old place are gloomy but clean. The bar-restaurant is popular; the bus station is 500m away.

There are frequent buses to Colombo (regular/air-con Rs 71/140, three hours). For Anuradhapura (Rs 45, two hours) you may have to change at Kala Oya, on the boundary between Western Province and North-Central Province.

There's infrequent train service to and from Colombo (2nd/3rd class Rs 127/68, 3½ hours). The station is 1km south of town.

PUTTALAM TO NEGOMBO

Although the A3 stays close to the coast, there are few ocean views from the road. Rather, when heading south to Negombo you pass through an endless series of coconut plantations, which have their own rhythmic beauty. Look for the coconut harvesters using knives mounted on sticks as tall as the trees. Other sights include numerous large rivers and lots of green countryside. The road itself, which lacks the killer traffic found between Negombo and Colombo, is in excellent condition.

Udappuwa, south of Puttalam, has an important temple and also features a complex of three shrines. A colourful festival is held here in August, when devotees test their strength by walking on red-hot coals.

Twelve kilometres to the south of Udappuwa, **Chilaw** has a strong Roman Catholic flavour, and has elaborate statues to religious figures and local cardinals in the centre.

Munneswaram, 5km to the east of Chilaw, has a rather interesting Hindu temple that is an important centre of pilgrimage. There are three shrines at this complex; the central one is dedicated to Shiva. A major festival, also featuring fire walking, occurs here in August.

Thirty kilometres north from Negombo is **Mahawewa**, a village renowned for its batiks while, further south, the towns of **Waikkal** and **Marawila** have a few package-tour beach hotels. Just north of Negombo, **Kochchikade** is home to numerous large roof-tile factories, whose smoky furnaces are fuelled by a dwindling supply of firewood.

Buses are frequent all along the A3.

NEGOMBO

☎ 031 / pop 125,000

Negombo is a modest beach town located close to Bandaranaike International Airport. In many ways it is a more salubrious introduction to the country than Colombo, and it's a pleasant alternative to the monster traffic into and through the capital. In fact, some budget-conscious sun seekers just stay here, although doing this means missing the much nicer beaches to the south.

Bustling Negombo town is a historically interesting place, strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. The narrow strip of land to the south of the lagoon and the many canals make for good exploring.

The Dutch captured the town from the Portuguese in 1640, lost it, then captured it again in 1644. The British then took it from them in 1796 without a struggle. Negombo was one of the most important sources of cinnamon during the Dutch era, and there are still reminders of the European days.

Orientation

The busy centre of Negombo town lies to the west of the bus and train stations. Most places to stay, however, line the main road that heads north from the town centre, running almost parallel to the beach. Closer to town, the road is called Lewis Pl; going 1km north of the centre, it becomes Porutota Rd. Called Ethukala, this neighbourhood has cafés, restaurants and tourist shops. As you go north the hotels become generally pricier and nicer. Along most of road are footpaths that are good for relaxed strolling.

A breakwater divides the beach; to the north, hotels regularly clean the sand and it's all very neat. To the south, the beach is a bit more natural; it's not as clean and is often covered with various weeds.

Information

In the centre of town you'll find the post office (Map p112), a **Bank of Ceylon** (Map p112; Broadway) and a **Vijitha Yapa Bookshop** (Map p112; 135 Broadway), which has English-language novels, magazines, guidebooks and maps. There are numerous Internet and telephone offices scattered along Lewis Pl and Porutota Rd, as well as near the bus and train stations. If this is your first stop in Sri Lanka, hotels can fix you up with guides and drivers for trips elsewhere in the country.

101 USES FOR A COCONUT

Sri Lankan cuisine wouldn't be the same without the rich, white flesh of the coconut kernel. Grated coconut is made into *pol sambol* (*pol* means coconut in Sinhala), a fiery condiment laced with chilli. But minus the chilli it can be sprinkled over a curry to reduce it to something less explosive. Dried, the scrapings are known as *copra*, which is exported and used to make confectionery. Coconut oil is extracted from *copra*, and *poonac* (the desiccated residue) is used as fodder for animals.

The flesh of a newly opened coconut can be squeezed to produce a creamy white milk that adds a silky richness to curries; *pol hodda*, for example, is a spicy gravy made from coconut milk. Delicious *kiri bath* (rice cooked in coconut milk) is traditionally the first solid food fed to a baby and is essential at weddings and other celebrations.

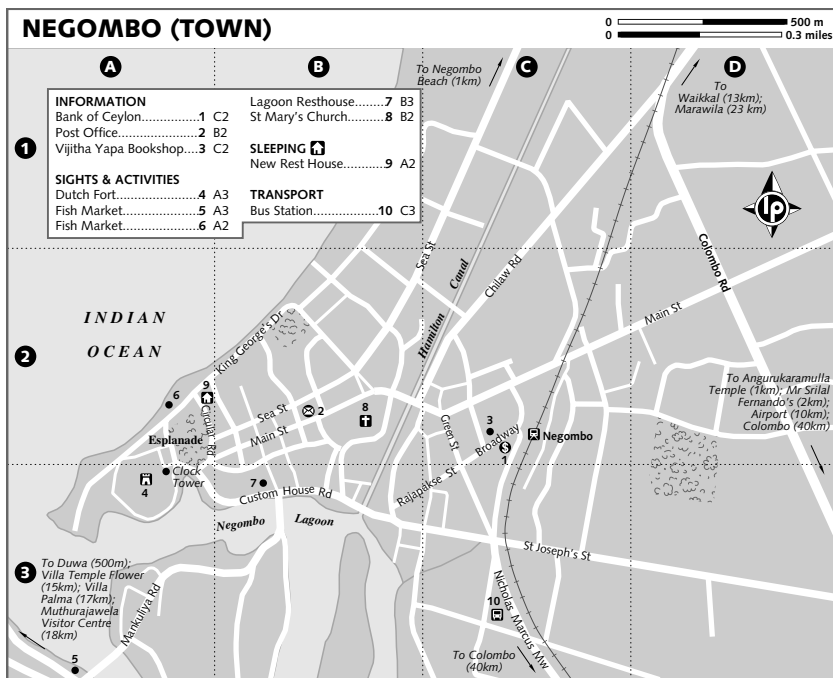
The bud on top of the coconut's stem, called the *bada*, can be pickled and eaten.

Piles of *thambili* (king coconuts) are a familiar sight along roadsides. The liquid they contain is sweet and refreshing, and cheaper than a soft drink. *Kurumba* (young green coconuts) are slightly less sweet.

To make the drink known as toddy, agile toddy tappers move from coconut palm to coconut palm like tightrope artists, extracting the trees' sap. Toddy trees are not permitted to bear fruit; the opened flowers are bound and bent over, and their sap is drawn off after about three weeks. Every morning and evening the toddy tappers go from flower to flower, changing the pots. One palm yields an average of 270L of toddy annually, and a good tapper can get about a month's sap from one flower. Fermented and distilled, toddy becomes arrack, a popular honey-coloured alcoholic drink that causes many a curse the morning after.

In rural areas you can still see *cadjan* (coconut-frond matting) roofing, fencing made from dried coconut palm branches, and roof supports made from coconut wood. The coconut's fibrous husk yields fibres that can be woven into rope, matting and upholstery, while *ekel* brooms are made from the tough mid-rib of the coconut frond.

The shells are sculpted into tacky souvenirs such as monkeys and elephants, and bowls made from polished coconut shells are widely available. The versatile shells also fulfil a spiritual role – they're often smashed at temples to bring good fortune.



Sights

Close to the seafront near the lagoon are the ruins of the old **Dutch fort** (Map p112), which has a fine gateway inscribed with the date 1678. Also here is a green, called Esplanade, where cricket matches are a big attraction.

Several old Dutch buildings are still in use, including the **Lagoon Resthouse** (Map p112; Custom House Rd).

Each day, fishermen take their *oruvas* (outrigger canoes) and go out in search of the fish for which Negombo is well known. They're a fine sight as they sweep home into the lagoon after a fishing trip. Fish auctions on the beach and sales at the **fish market** (Map p112) near the fort are common – the shark catch is brought in to the beach in the early afternoon. The catch is not all from the open sea: Negombo is at the northern end of a lagoon that is renowned for its lobsters, crabs and prawns. Across the lagoon bridge there's a second **fish market** (Map p112). If you can stagger out of bed at 6am it's a good place to watch the fishing boats return with their catches. If you're hanging

around the markets you won't have to wait long before you're invited to go out on an *oruva* or another kind of vessel; expect to pay around Rs 700 per boat per hour. A **Fishers' Festival** is held here in late July.

Negombo is dotted with churches – so successfully were the locals converted to Catholicism that the town is often known as 'Little Rome' (and another reason for the moniker is that many of the residents receive money from relatives working in Italy). **St Mary's Church** (Map p112), in the town centre, has very good ceiling paintings by a local artist. East of town the **Angurukaramulla Temple**, with its 6m-long reclining Buddha, is also worth seeing. A three-wheeler from Lewis Pl should cost Rs 400 return. The island of **Duwa**, joined to Negombo by the lagoon bridge, is famed for its Easter passion play.

The Dutch showed their love of **canals** here as nowhere else in Sri Lanka. Canals extend from Negombo all the way south to Colombo and north to Puttalam, a total distance of over 120km. You can hire a bicycle in Negombo from various hotels and

ride the canal-side paths for some distance, enjoying the views and small villages. The road over the lagoon bridge continues as a small coastal road between lagoon and ocean almost all the way to Colombo.

Sleeping

There are plenty of places along the beach in the budget and midrange categories. You can also find a couple of higher-priced places here and in Waikkal. Generally the closer the accommodation is to town, the rougher it is around the edges. Beware of a couple of places with hourly rates.

BUDGET

Ocean View (Map p112; ☎ 223 8689; oceanview@wow.lk; 104 Lewis Pl; r Rs 700-2200; 🏠) This place has 13 neat and clean rooms. The more expensive ones, all with balconies, are in a newer wing; some have air-con. There are views from the rooftop, and the family that runs the place is charming and helpful.

Jeero's Guest House (Map p113; ☎ 223 4210; 239 Lewis Pl; r Rs 800-900) The four clean and cheery rooms at this family-run place are enlivened by wooden ceilings. The cheaper rooms face away from the sea. Potted plants abound.

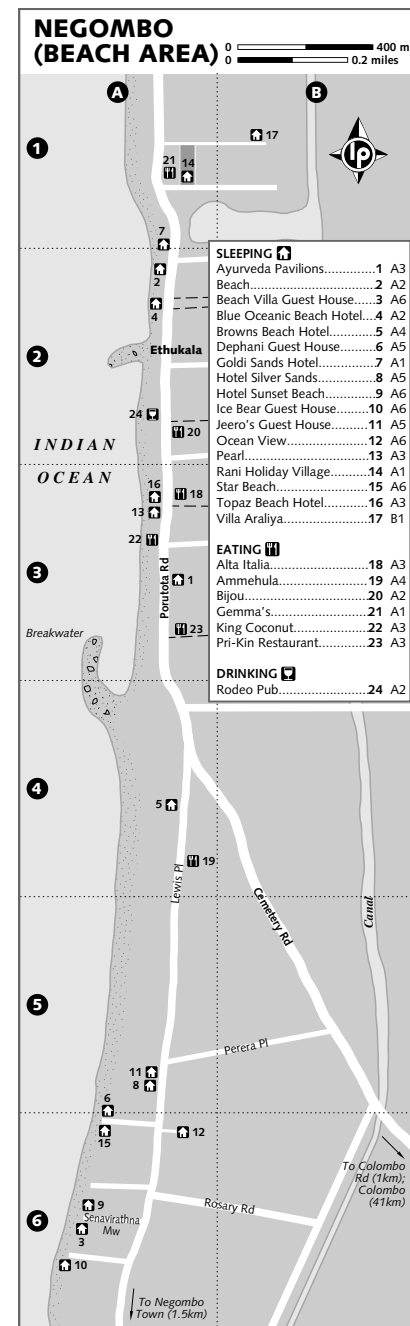
Hotel Silver Sands (Map p113; ☎ 222 2880; silver.sands@dialogsl.net; 229 Lewis Pl; r Rs 750-1200, with air-con Rs 1700; 🏠) This hotel has a Moorish touch with its arched walkways and central courtyard garden. The 15 rooms have their own balcony or patio. There's a nice area by the beach for a beer.

Beach Villa Guest House (Map p113; ☎ 222 2833; www.beachvillasrilanka.com; 3/2 Senaviratna Mawatha; r Rs 500-1700; 🏠) On the beach near a spot popular with cricket-playing local kids, this place has cheerfully gaudy décor, and a bar and restaurant downstairs. The 16 rooms are clean, if chaotic. Cheaper rooms are fan only.

Dephani Guest House (Map p113; ☎ 223 4359; deph.anie@stl.lk; 189/15 Lewis Pl; r Rs 880-1200) This spot has 12 clean rooms, some with colonial-style furnishings. Upstairs rooms have a balcony and more light. There's a garden opening onto the beach, and a restaurant.

Star Beach (Map p113; ☎ 222 2606; 83/3 Lewis Pl; r Rs 700-1200) A decent, if dated, guesthouse on the beach. The 14 rooms are clean and three of these face the sea; some have hot water.

New Rest House (Map p112; ☎ 222 2299; 14 Circular Rd; s/d with fan Rs 900/1500, with air-con Rs 1000/1600; 🏠) In the old part of town, this atmospheric



relic has lots of history and colonial charm (Queen Elizabeth II stayed in no 7 in 1958). The 25 rooms are bare and simple, but some have balconies looking over the sea – and the fish market.

Mr Srilal Fernando's (☎ 222 2481; 67 Parakrama Rd, Kurana; d Rs 750-1250) There are six clean rooms in this handsome family home that has a vaguely Pompeian courtyard and garden. The genial owner does a good Truman Capote impression, while the name may put the ABBA tune in your mind. It's in a quiet neighbourhood near the airport. Pick-ups from the airport cost Rs 550; you can also take a Colombo–Negombo bus to the RAC Motors Kurana bus stop and walk 700m east. Dinner costs Rs 450, breakfast Rs 250.

MIDRANGE

Ice Bear Guest House (Map p113; ☎ 223 3862; www.icebearhotel.com; 103/2 Lewis Pl; r incl breakfast US\$14-35; 🍷) A gorgeous traditional villa with lots of colour and flair (or 'Swissness', as the sign says). The beautiful gardens face the beach and there are regular tastings of produce from the coconut tree. The décor is delightfully funky, and the more expensive rooms have fridges and air-con. Muesli in the morning is home-made; elaborate seafood dinners (Rs 545) feature at night.

Villa Araliya (Map p113; ☎ 227 7650; villa.aralia@wow.lk; 154/10 Porutota Rd; r Rs 2200-5000, apt Rs 8000-11,000; 🍷 🍷) Run by a charming Dutch–Sri Lankan couple, this tidy guesthouse has 12 rooms and five apartments in two-storey brick buildings away from the beach. The smart décor includes nice tile floors. The restaurant is good and features pasta.

Pearl (Map p113; ☎ 487 2824; www.pearl-negombo.com; 13 Porutota Rd; s/d US\$36/50; 🍷) A great little beach hotel that belies its concrete exterior. The six spacious rooms are excellent; room 6 has a tub with a spectacular beach view (others have showers). All come with a CD player and fridge. The restaurant serves excellent seafood.

Browns Beach Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 222 2031; www.aitekenspenchehotels.com; 175 Lewis Pl; s/d US\$70-80; 🍷) This 1970s place is so well-preserved that in a couple more years it will be stylishly retro. The 140 rooms all have views, balconies, satellite TVs and fridges. There's a private beach area with a bar on the sand, a popular lunch buffet (Rs 750) and, on many nights, live music and DJs.

Goldi Sands Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 227 9021; www.goldisands.com; Porutota Rd; s/d US\$50/55; 🍷 🍷) A remodelled lobby complete with jellyfish mural fronts 70 standard rooms. All have a fridge, a satellite TV and a balcony with garden or beach views. The swimming pool boasts an all-top-rare water slide. Breakfast is US\$5.

Topaz Beach Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 227 9265; topaz@sltnet.lk; 21 Porutota Rd; r US\$25-60; 🍷 🍷) The plain exterior of this four-storey L-shaped block hints at the 30 clean but bland rooms inside. Some have air-con; all feature balconies, views and an earnest staff.

Hotel Sunset Beach (Map p113; ☎ 222 2350; www.hotelsunsetbeach.com; 5 Senavirathna Mawatha; r US\$40-48; 🍷 🍷) The rooms in these three-storey blocks enjoy a beachfront pool (though avoid the rooms hidden by the pool structure). Most rooms have balconies and terraces with sea views. It's a sparkling white, busy place, but it lacks character.

Rani Holiday Village (Map p113; ☎ 074 870718; ranihv@sltnet.lk; 154/9 Porutota Rd; r Rs 3500-5000; 🍷 🍷) Off the beach, this place has modern studio apartments set around a small pool. The double-room villas have hot water and kitchens with a fridge; the 33 units each have satellite TV, hot water and a fridge.

TOP END

Ayurveda Pavilions (Map p113; ☎ 487 0764; www.ayurvedapavilions.com; Porutota Rd; villas from US\$250; 🍷 🍷) There are 12 villas in this walled compound that's across from the beach. The units are large, with minimalist yet luxurious furnishings and huge bathrooms. Rates include various treatments and spa sessions, yoga and cooking classes.

Beach (Map p113; ☎ 227 3500; www.jetwinghotels.com; Porutota Rd; r US\$90-200; 🍷 🍷) The décor here is as minimalist as the name. The priciest place in Negombo may be a bit too pricey unless you get a deal. Still, the 73 rooms at this massively rebuilt older hotel are attractive, with beige and natural wood décor. Luxuries include DVD players, a library, high-speed Internet and balconies with views. There's also a good spa.

Blue Oceanic Beach Hotel (Map p113; ☎ 227 9000; www.jetwinghotels.com; Porutota Rd; r US\$85-180; 🍷 🍷) This standard resort hotel of early-'80s vintage has 108 rooms with balconies or terraces in three-storey blocks. The décor is an attractive mix of gold and blue. The grounds are shady.

Eating & Drinking

There are lots of restaurants and cafés of varying quality along Porutota Rd and Lewis Pl. Some are rather good.

Alta Italia (Map p113; ☎ 227 9206; 36 Porutota Rd; meals Rs 300-1000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The best restaurant in town, this Italian-run place is a tropical trattoria complete with lovely rattan chairs and a long menu that includes fresh pasta, seafood grills and pizza. Try the authentic risotto and finish with a *limoncello* or grappa. Or sample from the espresso machine, steaming behind the counter.

Bijou (Map p113; ☎ 531 9577; Porutota Rd; mains Rs 300-1000) You'll know this place is Swiss-owned when you see fondue on the menu. But the real star is the massive lobster platter (Rs 850). There's a long list of Western and German specialities.

Pri-Kin Restaurant (Map p113; ☎ 227 8646; 10 Porutota Rd; mains Rs 250-450) Chinese cuisine is the real focus of this open-air place, although you can also get Western and local meals. For dessert, don't pass up the fried bananas and ice cream.

Ammehula (Map p113; ☎ 487 3065; 286 Lewis Pl; meals Rs 200-400) The young owners of this café create a delightful and playful vibe. They claim the name means 'Go Away!' and the menu features a cartoon turtle cussing about how all the good fish come here. Besides seafood dishes there are sandwiches and a long breakfast menu that includes Dutch pancakes. The bar stays open as late 2am some nights.

Gemma's (Map p113; ☎ 077 627 7852; 154 Porutota Rd; dishes Rs 150-400; 🍷 10am-6pm) A bright and airy coffee-and-tea shop with home-made cakes and sandwiches.

Rodeo Pub (Map p113; ☎ 077 774 6474; 35 Porutota Rd; dishes Rs 300-700) Blathering expats quaffing cheap brews are the highlight of this cheery open-air dive. 'Riders on the Storm' seems to be on continuous loop, and the small menu includes steaks and breakfasts. Go for one of the pavement tables near the cactus out the front. Depending on the condition of the patrons, this place can stay open past 1am.

King Coconut (Map p113; ☎ 227 8043; 11 Porutota Rd, mains Rs 300-1000) This is a lively, popular spot beside the beach. There's a menu of curries and seafood, but this place is probably best just for enjoying a drink and the view.

The larger hotels have standard resort fare. For excellent food try the restaurants at the smaller **Ice Bear Guest House** (Map p113;

☎ 223 3862; www.icebearhotel.com; 103/2 Lewis Pl; mains Rs 300-1000), **Villa Araliya** (Map p113; ☎ 227 7650; villa.aralia@wow.lk; 154/10 Porutota Rd; mains Rs 300-1000) and **Pearl** (Map p113; ☎ 487 2824; www.pearl-negombo.com; 13 Porutota Rd; mains Rs 300-1000).

Getting There & Away

Central Transport Board (CTB), private and intercity express buses run between Negombo and Saunders Pl, Colombo (regular/air-con Rs 28/42, one to two hours, every 20 minutes). Long queues form at the bus station on weekend evenings, when day-trippers return to the capital. There are also trains to Colombo (Rs 21, 1½ hours), but they're slower and rarer than the buses. You can get a taxi between Negombo and Colombo for about Rs 2500. Any hotel, guesthouse or travel agent will arrange a taxi for you.

For Kandy take a bus to Veyangoda (Rs 20, two hours) and change to a Kandy train.

Getting Around

Bus 270, for the Bandaranaika International Airport (Rs 11, 45 minutes), leaves every 15 minutes from about 5am to 9pm. A taxi costs about Rs 700; the journey takes about 20 minutes.

To get from the bus station to Lewis Pl or Porutota Rd, you can catch a Kochchikade-bound bus.

A three-wheeler costs about Rs 150 to the middle of Lewis Pl from either the bus or train stations.

AROUND NEGOMBO Waikkal & Marawila

☎ 031

The towns of Waikkal and Marawila lie about 3km inland of the coast on the A3. There are several mostly upmarket waterside hotels, which are self-contained and walled off from the local communities. It's a very different scene from the bars and tourist shops at Negombo. On the plus side, the nearby beaches are long and golden, and the terrain flat and palm covered.

On the coast near Waikkal, **Ranweli Holiday Village** (☎ 222 2136; http://ecoclub.com/ranweli/; r US\$90-120) is a spacious beach resort with an ecological bent; it boasts of its recycling and other ecofriendly practices. Reached by a short ferry punt across the old Dutch canal, the hotel arranges canoeing, bird-watching tours, nature walks and other environmental

activities. Most of the rooms are in separate bungalows with a small lounge, balcony, and lagoon or sea views.

Club Hotel Dolphin (☎ 227 8565; www.serendibleisure.com; r from US\$80; 📶 📺 🚿) is a vast beachfront resort near Waikkal, with 76 rooms and 50 cottages on spacious grounds. There's a gigantic pool and a palm-studded lawn. Activities include resort standards like karaoke, and there are buffet meals.

Heading north towards Marawila, **Sanmeli Beach Hotel** (☎ 225 4766; fax 225 4768; r from US\$30; 📶 📺 🚿) is an older 20-room place on a remote stretch of coast. It's a good place to come if you're on the lam or get a very good deal. Rooms are a bit tatty.

The hotel furthest north is massive, all-inclusive **Club Palm Bay** (☎ 225 4956; palm.bay@lanka.com.net; Talwilawella; r from US\$120; 📶 📺 🚿), about 3.5km off the main road (from Talwilawella junction). The resort's 104 rooms are on huge grounds flanked by beaches and lagoons. Many of the clientele seem to pass the day in the enormous swimming pool (in between bouts at the buffet).

Most people reach Waikkal and Marawila by taxi or car and driver.

South of Negombo

The narrow belt of land between the gulf and lagoon south of Negombo is sometimes called **Pamunugama**, after its biggest settlement. It's a lovely strip of coconut palms, old Portuguese-style churches, cross-dotted cemeteries on dunes, and pockets of tidy houses. There are some small hotels along here. The beach is steep, and swimming could be perilous – consult the locals before wading in.

This is also home to one of the best stretches of the old and straight-as-an-arrow **Dutch Canal** that runs along this entire length of coast. It's lined with small factories, fishing villages, mansions, nature areas and more. Hiring a bike in Negombo is an ideal way to tour this area.

Muthurajawela Marsh (which evocatively translates as 'Supreme Field of Pearls') is a little-known gem of a wetland at the southern end of Negombo's lagoon. The area had been a rich rice-growing basin before the Portuguese constructed a canal that ruined the fields with sea water. Over the centuries, Mother Nature turned Muthurajawela into Sri Lanka's biggest saline wetland, home to

purple herons, cormorants and kingfishers. However, the marsh is under pressure from encroaching industrial development. The **Muthurajawela Visitor Centre** (☎ in Colombo 011-483 0150; Indigaslanda, Bopitiya, Pamunugama; 🕒 7am-6pm) is at the southern end of the road along Pamunugama, next to the Hamilton Canal. It has displays and a 25-minute video show on the wetland's fauna; it also runs boat trips. A two-hour guided boat ride (Rs 650 per person) through the wetland is highly recommended. You can expect to see over 75 bird species, monkeys, crocs and more.

On the ocean side of the road, 15km south of Negombo, **Villa Temple Flower** (☎ in Colombo 011-223 6755; Pamunugama; r Rs 1600-2000; 📶 📺 🚿) has lush gardens, a swimming pool and an ebullient owner. The eight simple and comfy rooms each have a small veranda; two have air-con.

Eighteen kilometres south from Negombo, **Villa Palma** (☎ in Colombo 011-223 6619; www.villa-palma.de; Beach Rd, Pamunugama; r from Rs 3000; 📶 📺 🚿) is located right next to the sea. The 18 rooms are simple, although lurid statuary provides spice. There's a secluded area around the swimming pool that is popular with guests inspired by the statues.

A modern hotel close to the airport, **Taj Airport Garden** (☎ in Colombo 011-225 2950; www.tajairportgardensrilanka.com; 234-238 Colombo-Negombo Rd; r US\$60-100; 📶 📺 🚿) provides a good service for business travellers who don't want to make the journey into the heart of Colombo. It's nothing special, but it is good if you have a late or early departure or arrival. The hotel provides free transfers for the five-minute ride to or from the airport. Arrange in advance.

SOUTH OF COLOMBO

Driving south on Galle Rd (A2), you'll think that Colombo will never end. But about 30km from Colombo's Fort you'll feel you've escaped the capital and its hub-bub. Beginning with Wadduwa, there are beach towns big and small along the coast. Most travellers focus on Hikkaduwa, but at some point along the coast you should find a cove, bay or stretch of sand to suit you. Accommodation comes in all shapes, sizes and styles, and Ayurvedic health centres are common. The Galle Rd is generally in

good shape, but roads leading off it are often in miserable condition. Look carefully for signs marking tracks leading to hotels. Note that this entire stretch of coast was heavily affected by the tsunami (p108).

KALUTARA & WADDUWA

☎ 034

The town of Kalutara was an important spice-trading centre controlled at various times by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Today it has a reputation for fine basketware and for the best mangosteens on the island. The fine beaches along here boast some good hotels.

Immediately south of the Kalu Ganga bridge on the main road is the impressive **Gangatilaka Vihara**, which has a hollow dagoba (stupa) with an interesting painted interior. By the road there's a small shrine and bodhi tree where drivers often stop to make offerings to ensure a safe journey.

Kalutara and Wadduwa, located 8km to the north of Kalutara, have a number of resorts, but there's little to halt travellers who are en route to more laid-back beach spots further south. All the places below are well off Galle Rd, and are on the beach.

The slick **Siddhalepa Ayurveda Health Resort** (☎ 229 6967; www.ayurvedaresort.com; Samanthara Rd, Wadduwa; 1-week packages from US\$1200; 📶 📺 🚿) is run by Siddhalepa, the respected Ayurvedic hospital in Mt Lavinia. It offers everything from stress relief to detoxification, and sets the mood with piped sitar music. Prices include all meals, treatments and accommodation in plush rooms with satellite TV etc.

The following four hotels are near the 38km marker.

Tangerine Beach Hotel (☎ 222 2982; www.tangerinehotels.com; De Abrew Rd, Waskaduwa, Kalutara North; r incl half-board from Rs 3500; 📶 📺 🚿) is a busy, friendly place with 172 comfy modern rooms set around a large pool. The hotel's entrance is beautified by lotus flowers blooming in small ponds.

Run by the same company as the Tangerine Beach Hotel, **Royal Palms Hotel** (☎ 222 8113; www.tangerinehotels.com; De Abrew Rd, Kalutara North; s/d US\$100/103; 📶 📺 🚿) has 123 immaculate rooms. It has lavish gardens and feels a bit formal with its air-con lobby.

The great value **Hibiscus Beach Hotel** (☎ 558 2271; www.hibiscusbeachhotel.com; De Abrew Rd, Kalutara North; r US\$35-75; 📶 📺 🚿) has 56 smallish

rooms with satellite TVs and fridges. The hotel is 500m north of the Royal Palms.

Blue Water (☎ 038-223 5067; www.bluewatersri-lanka.com; Thalpitaya, Wadduwa; r US\$110-200; 📶 📺 🚿) Following the current fad for Asian minimalism, the Blue Water is serene and elegant. The 100 rooms are spare in décor and feature slick tile floors, although note that some face away from the beach. The pool is enormous, and facilities include squash, tennis and a health club. There's wi-fi.

There are frequent buses to Kalutara and Wadduwa along the main coastal road.

BERUWELA & MORAGALLE

☎ 034

Beruwela and Bentota have been developed into Sri Lanka's chief package-tour-resort zone. There's little to attract independent travellers here. Moragalle is technically slightly north of Beruwela, but the towns have practically merged. Throughout this area there is a lot of tsunami damage; many hotels are closed for good. Large fishing boats washed far inland are destined to become part of the landscape.

The first recorded Muslim settlement on the island took place at Beruwela in 1024. The **Kechimallai Mosque**, on a headland north of the hotel strip, is said to be built on the site of the landing and is the focus for a major **Eid-ul-Fitr** festival at the end of Ramadan. It's part of a fascinating collection of mosques, churches and temples out by the fishing port and beach.

Sleeping

The tourist hotels are all very much aimed at the package groups that come to Sri Lanka to escape from the European winter. The hotels have various facilities including tennis and water sports.

Ypsylon Guest House (☎ 227 6132; www.ypylon-sri-lanka.de; Beruwela; s/d €24/42; 📶 🚿) On a rocky patch of the shore, the two-storey buildings here house 25 clean rooms, all with sea views. The restaurant is good and many people come for the dive shop. It charges €25 per dive.

Hotel Sumadai (☎ 227 6404; info@sumadai.com; 61 Maradana Rd, Beruwela; s/d incl half-board €27/39; 📶 📺 🚿) Split in two buildings – one facing the ocean and the other a large lagoon – the 20 rooms here are spotless and basic. Four with air-con cost an extra Rs 500. Some have balconies with views.

Barberyn Beach Ayurveda Resort (☎ 227 6036; www.barberyn.com; Moragalle) This beachside Ayurvedic resort has bags of character. Mid-range in price, it was heavily damaged by the tsunami but should reopen during 2006.

Tropical Villas Hotel (☎ 227 6780; www.jetwing.net; Galle Rd, Moragalle; r US\$85-110; ☎ ☑ ☒) This place does not have direct access to the beach, but it has a good pool. The 52 rooms are stylish; set around a quiet, leafy garden, each has a separate lounge with satellite TV.

Getting There & Away

Aluthgama is the main transport hub serving Beruwela and Moragalle. See p121 for details. Local buses link all the towns along Galle Rd.

ALUTHGAMA, BENTOTA & INDURUWA

☎ 034

Bentota's beach is one of the best on the west coast, protected from Galle Rd by the broad sweep of the Bentota Ganga. While it is dominated by big package hotels, it also has a number of smaller places catering to independent travellers. There are more such places in Aluthgama, a small town on the main road between Beruwela and Bentota.

Aluthgama has a raucous fish market, local shops and the main train station in the area. Induruwa doesn't really have a centre – it's spread out along the coast.

Orientation

Just south of the town centre of Aluthgama, the main road crosses the Bentota Ganga into Bentota, where there's the Bentota resort centre on the seaward side, with tourist facilities, shops and a few restaurants. From the bridge, the river turns north to flow parallel to the coast for a few hundred metres, divided from the sea only by a narrow spit of land that is home to some resorts (they're reachable by boat across the river). Induruwa is 5km south of Bentota.

Information

There are Internet facilities in the big hotels, and others are sprinkled throughout the towns. A good one is the eponymous **Internet Cafe** (☎ 227 5003; 201 Galle Rd; per min Rs 4) in Aluthgama. Just north of the river, the **Commercial Bank** (339 Galle Rd) has an international ATM. At the Bentota resort centre there's a post office. The **Cargills Food City**

(☎ 227 1921; 331 Galle Rd, Aluthgama) sells a wide range of goods and has a pharmacy.

Sights

In addition to **beaches** that are as fine as those at Beruwela, Bentota and Aluthgama enjoy the calm waters of the **Bentota Ganga**, which are good for water sports.

Aluthgama has a bustling **market** every Monday, located across the train line, towards Dharga Town. A few kilometres inland on the south bank of the river is the **Galapota Temple**, said to date from the 12th century. To reach it, cross the bridge and take the side road to your left after 500m. The temple is signposted.

Fine beaches continue several kilometres south from Bentota. Induruwa has a small cluster of places to stay on a lovely, quiet length of beach, at the north end of which is the **Turtle Research Project**, one of the turtle hatcheries in the area (p121).

Ten kilometres inland from Bentota is the pretty **Brief Garden** (☎ 227 0462; admission Rs 125; ☎ 8am-5pm). It used to be the home of Bevis Bawa, brother of renowned architect Geoffrey Bawa. Bawa's house is the highlight, and it has an eclectic range of artwork on display – from homoerotic sculpture to a wonderful mural of Sri Lankan life in the style of Marc Chagall. The mural was created by Australian artist Donald Friend, who originally came for six days but stayed six years. Other, more short-term, guests included Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier, who stayed here during the filming of *Elephant Walk* in 1953. The beautiful garden covers 2 hectares. To get here follow the road south from Aluthgama to Matagama Rd and turn inland to the Muslim village of Dharga Town. From here you will periodically see yellow signs saying 'Brief', but as everyone knows this place, it's easy enough to ask directions. You do need your own transport, though – a three-wheeler from Aluthgama should cost about Rs 500 return and a taxi about Rs 700 return.

Activities

The vast lagoon and river mouth make this an excellent area for water sports. Windsurfing, water-skiing, jet-skiing, deep-sea fishing and everything else watery are offered by local operators. **Sunshine Water Sports Center** (☎ 428 9379; River Ave, Aluthgama) is an independ-

ent shop right on the water near the Hotel Sunil Lanka. Besides renting out a wide range of equipment, the shop runs courses include windsurfing (Rs 8500, six hours). There are also snorkelling tours.

All the large resorts have their own water-sports operators. **Club Inter Sport** (☎ 227 5176), in the Bentota Beach Hotel, is open to non-guests and offers everything from squash and archery to banana-boat rides (Rs 2000 per ride) and surfing lessons.

Boat journeys along the Bentota Ganga are quite popular. Tours travel through the intricate coves and islands on the lower stretches of the river, which is home to more than 100 bird species plus a wide variety of amphibian and reptile species. Most trips go for three hours and charge Rs 500 to 700 per person, with a minimum of five people per boat. There are also five-hour dinner cruises for around US\$20 per person. All hotels can point you to operators.

One attraction of this part of the coast is the huge variety of fish (including large specimens such as barracuda), which seem unperturbed by the presence of divers. Major hotels in the area can provide details of local diving outfits.

Sleeping

Accommodation is scattered all along the coast from Aluthgama to Induruwa. Budget places to sleep are not plentiful, but there are plenty of choices further south in Hikkaduwa.

ALUTHGAMA

Hotel Sunil Lanka (☎ 558 2535; http://www.boutique.srilanka.com/hotel-overview.php?HotelId=545; River Ave; r Rs 2300-2500; ☎) This river-side hotel has six sparkling-white rooms, four with air-con. One room has a waterbed, so you can feel the motion of the ocean. There's a nice grassy common area.

Terrena Lodge (☎ 428 9015; terrenalodge@sltnet.lk; River Ave; s/d Rs 1900/2000) Handsomely furnished, this place has five colourful, clean rooms. There is a pretty garden leading down to a river-side dining area, and the Austrian owners have installed a tiny but properly woody Austrian bar.

Hotel Hemadan (☎ 227 5320; www.hemadan.dk; 25 River Ave; r Rs 1400-2100; ☎) This nice, Danish-owned property has 10 large, clean rooms in an ageing building. There's a leafy court-

yard and prime river-viewing opportunities. Better rooms have balconies and/or air-con. There are free boat shuttles across the river to the ocean-side beach.

Hotel Ceysands (☎ 227 5073; ceysandsgm@sltnet.lk; r from US\$75; ☎ ☑ ☒) This large resort hotel has a prime position on the spit of land between the ocean and the river. It's popular with tour groups, who seem to never leave the sand. You arrive and leave via a five-minute boat ride.

BENTOTA

Midrange

Hotel Susantha (☎ 227 5324; www.hotelsusanthas.com; Holiday Resort Rd; r US\$24-40; ☎ ☑ ☒) This place has 18 clean, moderately sized rooms (some of which are bungalows) in a leafy garden setting. More-expensive rooms include air-con and fridge; older rooms have comfy rattan loungers. It's only a short walk over the train tracks to the beach. The restaurant is justifiably popular for its Western and local food.

Southern Palm Villa (☎ 227 0752; www.spvhotel.com; r Rs 1700-3500; ☎) Behind Taj Exotica (and across the train tracks), this simple place has 15 clean rooms (with linens for the 'Eden Hotel'), some with air-con. It's not the newest building around, but it's kept tidy and the grounds are spacious. Some rooms have balconies from which you can hear – but not see – the surf. It's a short walk to the beach.

Ayubowan (☎ 227 5913; www.ayubowan.ch; 171 Galle Rd, Bentota South; r €20-35; ☎ ☑ ☒) This place isn't right beside the beach but the four large, spotless bungalows are set in a pretty garden that has a large pool and views across rice fields. It's a good place for dinner, and has an interesting Swiss-Italian-Asian menu. There's a resident masseur, as well. One room has air-con, and all have fridge.

Lihiniya Surf Hotel (☎ 227 5126; www.thesurfhotel.com; r incl half-board US\$50-80; ☎ ☑ ☒) This is a middle-of-the-range package-tour resort, and the 86 rooms are clean but bland.

Top End

Hotel Serendib (☎ 227 5248; www.serendibleisure.com; r US\$55-90; ☎ ☑ ☒) Designed by noted Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa (p56), this hotel has 90 distinctive rooms. Some have vast terraces with trees bisecting the roof, while others have balconies. All have beach views and fridge, but none have TV – which is part of the charm. There's

dramatic sculpture around a pond off the entrance. All in all a good value package-oriented hotel.

Bentota Beach Hotel (☎ 227 5176; www.johnkeells-hotels.com; r from US\$150; 🏠 📺 📺) This is another Bawa-designed hotel. The 133 rooms are large and of top-end standard, and all have beach views from a balcony or terrace. The lobby has a dramatic entrance and colourful batik lining the ceiling. Nonguests can use the swimming pool here for Rs 275.

Taj Exotica (☎ 227 5650; www.tajhotels.com; r US\$140-250; 🏠 📺 📺) Although it lacks the architectural panache of Hotel Serendib or Bentota Beach Hotel, this 162-room hotel is plenty luxurious. There's lots of marble, fountains, and rooms with satellite TV, fridge etc. Brass and rattan abounds.

Club Villa (☎ 227 5312; www.club-villa.com; 138/15 Galle Rd; r incl half-board US\$65-150; 🏠 📺 📺) This is a spacious, elegant, 19th-century Dutch-style villa with a big coconut-grove garden, gentle fountains and a swimming pool. The 15 rooms are luxurious yet restrained; the best ones have balconies and air-con. It's located near the 63km marker of Galle Rd; the beach is a two-minute walk away.

Villa Mohotti Walauwa (☎ 428 7008; www.villa-mohotti.com; 138/18 Galle Rd; r from US\$195; 🏠 📺 📺) Next door to Club Villa, this is a stunning 19th-century villa done up in traditional style with discreet modern details. The 10 rooms are large, elegantly furnished and attentively cared for. This was the beach home of Geoffrey Bawa for a while, so his touches are everywhere. The swimming pool is tiny; the beach a short walk away.

Taru villas Taprobana (☎ 0777 748 064; www.taru villas.com; 146/4 Galle Rd; r from US\$120; 🏠 📺 📺) One of the best boutique hotels in Sri Lanka, this place has the *Hip Hotel* shtick down. There are nine designer rooms with classic black-and-white photographs hung on whitewashed walls. It's like staying at your publisher's tasteful beachside retreat.

Ayurveda Walauwa (☎ 227 5372; www.sribudhasa.com; 1-week packages from US\$1300; 🏠 📺 📺) Just south of Club Villa, this wellness resort is on the land side of Galle Rd – but the lack of a beach may help you concentrate on your Ayurvedic cure. The 20 rooms are basic, with tile floors and a good sitting area. Bathrooms have numerous rolls of toilet paper. This health centre tempers its regimen with extras like a large pool.

INDURUWA

Niroga Herbal Resort (☎ 227 0312; 14-day packages from €1000) As unadorned as your colon after a good enema, Niroga is easily the most intense and authentic Ayurvedic centre on the coast. The eight rooms are fan-only because air-con conflicts with the treatments. The staff are genial and caring, and you can take internally and externally cleansed body down to the beach out the front.

Long Beach Cottage (☎ 227 5773; hanjayas@yahoo.de; 550 Galle Rd; r Rs 800) About 200m north of Induruwa train station, this has five slightly faded rooms (three upstairs with shared balcony, and two downstairs) with four-poster beds. There's a pretty, albeit chaotic, garden fronting the beach. The lovely hosts will arrange pick-ups in Aluthgama.

Induruwa Beach Resort (☎ 227 5445; www.villa-oceanhotels.com; Kaikawala; s/d US\$45/48; 🏠 📺 📺) Revel in this oxymoronic 'modern' hotel that's become old-fashioned. The 90 large rooms are comfortable.

Saman Villas (☎ 227 5435; www.samanvilla.com; Aturuwella; units from US\$180; 🏠 📺 📺) There are 27 luxury suites at this superb little boutique hotel, which has a Japanese-style garden with cascading ponds, great views and a superbly sited pool. The plush chalets have a private garden, open-air bathroom, CD player and satellite TV.

Eating

Hotel Susantha (☎ 227 5324; Holiday Resort Rd; mains Rs 200-1000) The restaurant at this hotel (p119) serves excellent Eastern and Western food. You can enjoy seafood specialities under the stars. This is one hotel restaurant that draws large crowds of nonguests.

Golden Grill (☎ 227 5455; Bentota; meals Rs 250-750) This traditional-style Chinese seafood place has a pleasant spot beside the river, near the resorts. Waiters in bow ties lend an elegant air. The best tables overlook the water.

Many places offer only half- and full-board packages, discouraging customers from seeking food outside their friendly confines. However, many of the hotels, especially the top-end ones, have great restaurants that feature evening buffets. **Hotel Serendib** (☎ 227 5248; www.serendiblei.sure.com), for instance, has a fine Italian buffet many nights. Among the more modest places, **Ayubowan** (☎ 227 5913; www.ayubowan.ch; 171 Galle Rd, Bentota South) has a good restaurant.

Getting There & Around

Beruwela and Bentota are both on the main Colombo–Matara railway line, but Aluthgama, the town sandwiched between them, is the station to go to as many trains do not make stops at these smaller stations. Aluthgama has five or six express trains daily to Colombo (2nd/3rd class Rs 64/32, 1½ to two hours), and a similar number to Hikkaduwa (2nd/3rd class Rs 35/23, one hour), Galle (2nd/3rd class Rs 64/32, 1½ hours) and Matara. There is also service to Kandy (2nd/3rd class Rs 90/170, 1½ to two hours). Avoid the other, slower trains.

When you get off the train at the unusual middle-platform station you'll hear the usual boring tales from the touts and fixers that the hotel of your choice is 'closed', 'washed away' and/or 'putrid'. Just ignore them.

Aluthgama is also the best place to pick up a bus, although there is no trouble getting off any bus anywhere along the Galle Rd. There is frequent service to both Colombo (regular/air-con Rs 32/60, one to 1½ hours) and Galle (regular/air-con Rs 40/70, 1½ hours).

Three-wheelers are available from Aluthgama; fees range from Rs 50 for a local trip to Rs 300 for the jaunt to Induruwa.

KOSGODA

The tsunami was hard on the coast around Kosgoda, which is about 5km south of Induruwa. Villages suffered but the impact on tourism was limited as this attractive stretch of beach and coast had seen little development. The exception to this was the grave damage suffered by the local turtle hatcheries, the area's one big tourism draw.

HATCHING TURTLES

Five species of sea turtles lay eggs along the coasts of Sri Lanka. The green turtle is the most common, followed by the olive ridley and the hawksbill. The leatherback and loggerhead are both huge, reaching 2m and more in length. During what should be long lives (if they don't end up in a net, soup pot etc), turtles make numerous visits to the beaches of the south coast to lay eggs in the sand. A few weeks later, hundreds of baby turtles make, as the many lurid nature specials will tell you, what is a perilous journey back to the water.

Most of the tiny turtles are quickly gobbled up by birds, fish, people and other critters with gullets. And many never hatch at all, since human egg poachers work overtime to satisfy the demand for turtle omelettes. The turtle hatcheries on the coast aim to increase the odds for the turtles by paying locals for the eggs at a rate slightly above what they fetch in the market (roughly Rs 5 to 10). The eggs are then incubated by the hatchery until they hatch. After a short stay in a tank (supposedly for protection against parasites), the babies are released under the cover of darkness to foil at least some of the birds.

The Kosgoda turtle hatcheries were all wiped out by the tsunami. But each is rebuilding with the help of volunteers. While some naysayers in the scientific community question the benefits of the hatcheries, there's no denying that turtles of any age are awfully cute and make for an entertaining visit. Three of the following hatcheries are in and around Kosgoda; the fourth is north of Kosgoda, near Induwara. They're sufficiently different from each other, so you could easily take in all four. Visits rarely last more than about 20 minutes. Expect to see babies, as well as veterans who have been injured by nets and other calamities.

Kosgoda Turtle Centre (☎ 077 683 5427; admission Rs 100; 🕒 8am-6pm) Located behind a group of new homes built by a German woman for tsunami victims, this very basic place is hands-on and has some charming staff. There's an old albino turtle that has survived both man (nets) and nature (tsunami). Look for a sign on the west side of the Galle Rd, 500m south of the 73km marker.

Kosgoda Turtle Conservation Project (☎ 226 4567; admission Rs 200; 🕒 8am-6pm) On the beach side of Galle Rd, just north of Kosgoda, this volunteer-run operation has been here for 18 years. It's a very simple affair.

Kosgoda Turtle Hatchery (☎ 225 8667; admission Rs 200; 🕒 7am-7pm) Turn down a small track at the 73km marker to find this operation, located in a quiet spot right on the beach. Arrive at 6.30pm and you can help release the day's hatchlings into the ocean.

Turtle Research Project (☎ 227 1062; Induwara; admission Rs 200; 🕒 6am-6.30pm) Undamaged by the tsunami, this facility feels more commercial and established than the Kosgoda operations.

AMBALANGODA & AROUND

☎ 091

Ambalangoda is a fair-sized town, but its touristy near-neighbour, Hikkaduwa, overshadows it as a destination. It does, however, have a beautiful sweep of sandy beach to its north, some famous mask carvers, local cultural centres and a bustling fish market. Crafts include hand-woven cotton and finely carved wooden doors, screens and lintels. If you want to see a traditional dance performance (p50), Ambalangoda is the place to go. Genuine devil dances – which drive out spirits causing illness – still occur irregularly in the hinterland villages. Visitors are welcome, though you do have to expect more curiosity and less English from the villagers. The real catch is finding one of these dances, but ask around and count on good luck from the gods.

This coast was hit hard by the tsunami. The proximity of the Galle Rd, with its villages and the railway along the coast, meant that the waves caused enormous damage and loss of life. Evidence of the tragedy is continuous from the 88km to 94km markers.

The barren land between the 94km and 96km markers was once densely populated and covered with thick foliage. One of the starkest reminders of the disaster is near the 95km marker: three cars from a train that was inundated by the waters, killing up to 1500 passengers. The area is now a staging zone for long-term relief efforts, and there are many refugee camps here. The battered red train cars are both a popular tourist attraction and a shrine. Desperate locals post signs, which include phrases like 'Need help rebuilding' and 'Entire family lost'. No-one questions their validity.

Information

In Ambalangoda town, the **Commercial Bank** (Galle Rd) has an international ATM.

Sights & Activities

Ambalangoda is the centre of much of Sri Lanka's traditional culture. There are two mask shops (with free museums) on either side of the intersection of Galle Rd and Main St, 800m north of the train and bus stations. Each is owned by a son of the famous mask-carver Ariyapala. The **Ariyapala Mask Museum** (cnr Galle Rd & Main St; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) is the better museum, with dioramas

and explanations in English. It also sells the booklet *The Ambalangoda Mask Museum*, if you want to delve into the mysterious world of dance, legend and exorcism, and the psychology behind the masks. **Ariyapala Traditional Masks** (432 Galle Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm) is the other shop. The pieces on sale at both are rather expensive.

MH Mettananda (☎ 225 8810; Galle Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm), who has a shop about 500m north of the stations, is one of the good mask carvers in Ambalangoda.

Dudley Silva (☎ 225 9411; 53 Elpitiya Rd; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) is a good place for batik – and the 140-year-old house is an attraction in itself. There's a signpost a little past MH Mettananda's shop as you head south towards the centre of town.

School of Dance (☎ 225 8948; bandu@sri.lanka.net; cnr Galle Rd & Main St) teaches the southern forms of dance such as *kolam* (masked dance-drama) as well as South Indian dance traditions. It's located across the intersection from the Ariyapala Mask Museum, with which it's affiliated. The school is run by Bandu Wijesuriya, a descendant of a long line of famous mask carvers. Anyone can join the classes; there's a fee of Rs 500 per hour for foreigners. Wijesuriya also teaches mask carving and painting, as well as traditional drumming and singing. Students can stay in hostel-style rooms for Rs 750 per night.

Sailatalarama Vihara lies 7km inland from Ambalangoda. This temple sits on a domed hill with broad views over plantations and lakes towards the ranges of the Province of Sabaragamuwa. The temple has a 35m-long sleeping Buddha statue, built by donations. Pilgrims approach the dagobas and *devalas* (shrines) via 208 steps, but there's also a road to the top. The statue is new and not the most outstanding example of its type, but it's worth coming here for the rural scenery and the views. A taxi from Ambalangoda should cost about Rs 700 return, plus extra for waiting time of an hour or so.

Sleeping & Eating

Most places are north of the centre – note that Main St is one block west of Galle Rd, but the streets also intersect at the very north end of Main St, where Galle Rd veers west.

Sumudu Tourist Guest House (☎ 225 8832; 418 Main St, Patabendimulla; r with fan/air-con Rs 850/1200;

☎) Near the intersection with Galle Rd, this large, cool, old-style house is run by a friendly family. There are six pleasant, clean rooms, one of which has hot water. Meals are available. It's a 10-minute walk to the beach; a three-wheeler to or from the bus station should cost Rs 70.

Piya Nivasa (☎ 225 8146; Galle Rd; s/d Rs 500/750) About halfway between Ambalangoda and Hikkaduwa, this 19th-century colonial mansion was one of the few structures in the area to survive the tsunami. It's opposite the beach. The six clean rooms are great value, and you can eat your meals in the family's sitting room. From the Ambalangoda bus or train station a three-wheeler should cost around Rs 100. Otherwise you can catch a Hikkaduwa-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at the doorstep (the house is easily spotted).

Shangrela (☎ 225 8342; 38 Sea Beach Rd; r Rs 750-1500) A modern, spotless place in an area of many refugee encampments. It has 25 rooms and sweeping views of the beach across the dirt road. Meals are available, and the manager can arrange boat trips and tours to waterfalls.

Dream Beach Resort (☎ 225 8873; dbra@stnet.lk; 509 Galle Rd; s/d Rs 2200/2900; ☎) Close to a photogenic stretch of beach, this hotel has some truly strange mushroom-shaped lamps in the lobby. It also has a wide garden and a pool under coconut palms. The 25 rooms, situated in a multistorey building, are plain and spacious with balconies.

Getting There & Away

Ambalangoda is on the main transport route between Colombo and Hikkaduwa, Galle and the South. Buses to and from Colombo (Rs 36, two hours) are common. Trains to Colombo (2nd/3rd class Rs 66/34, two hours) stop here less often. There are frequent buses to and from Hikkaduwa (Rs 12, 15 minutes) and beyond.

HIKKADUWA & AROUND

☎ 091

Hikkaduwa has long been among the most popular of Sri Lanka's beach spots. Its proximity to the capital (98km from the Fort) helps – many people come here direct from the airport to start their classic Asian beach holiday. And it's got a definite fun vibe, especially at its southern end, where there

are dozens of affordable guesthouses built along a beautiful stretch of wide beach. At night, backpackers wander the sand from one café to the next, enjoying the sunset and the pleasures beyond.

This popularity has caused Hikkaduwa to swallow the villages south of it for a distance of more than 4km. The downside of this is that busy Galle Rd ploughs right through the middle of everything, which makes strolling amid the shops and restaurants along the road unpleasant.

People in search of watery fun will find many choices. There's a variety of beaches, sea-coral for snorkellers, and good waves for board- and body-surfers. During the May to October monsoon season many places close and the water can get quite rough.

Although Hikkaduwa was damaged by the tsunami – especially the commercial parts at the north end – it escaped the devastation of places further north.

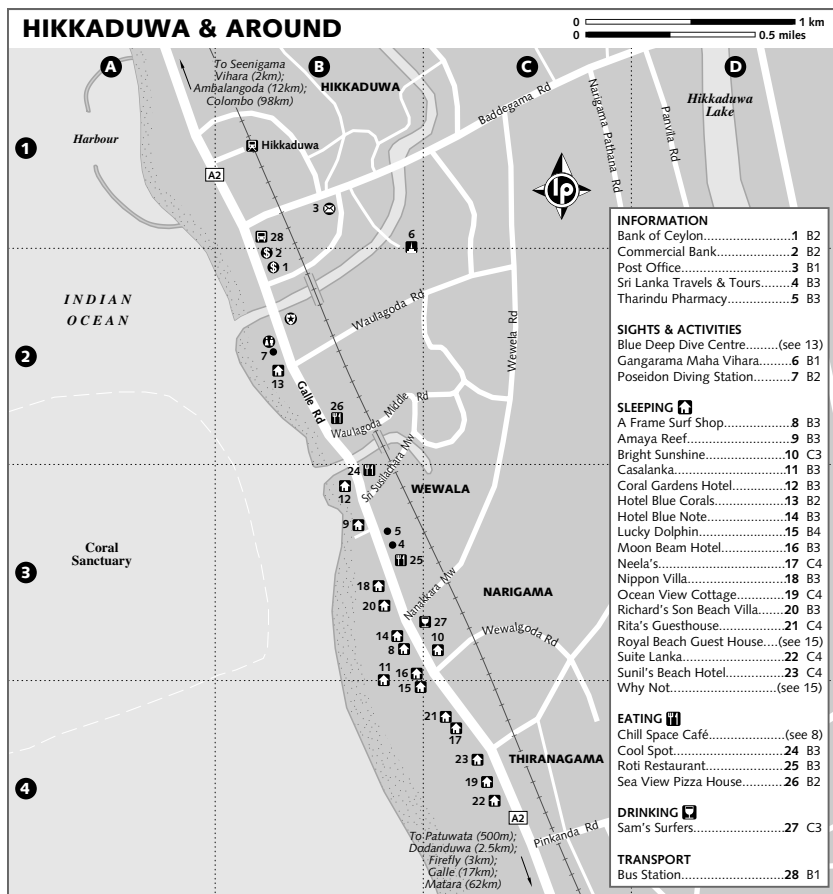
Orientation

Services such as the train and bus stations, banks, the post office and non-tourist-oriented shops congregate in the northern end of Hikkaduwa proper, which was the original settlement. Further south is where the first tourist hotels, guesthouses and restaurants opened up, but this area now seems overdeveloped and unappealing compared with Wewala and Narigama (around 2km south of the stations), where most independent travellers stay. These areas are more relaxed and spread out, and have better beaches than Hikkaduwa proper. South of Narigama the waters tend to be rougher and less safe for bathing – but there are even more guesthouses scattered along the beach and on the road as far as Dodanduwa, only 14km from Galle.

Information

Fittingly located in the commercial district, **Commercial Bank** (Galle Rd) has an international ATM, and you can change money or travellers cheques at the nearby **Bank of Ceylon** (Galle Rd). There are various money-changers along Galle Rd that are open daily, but it may pay to check the exchange rate in a newspaper beforehand, and to count your money.

The main **post office** (Baddegama Rd) is a five-minute walk inland from the bus station.



There are numerous IDD telephone bureaux on Hikkaduwa's main street, many of them with Internet facilities. **Sri Lanka Travels & Tours** (☎ 227 7354; 371 Galle Rd) offers Internet (Rs 2 per minute) and, like many other places in town, organises tours of the island.

Tharindu Pharmacy (☎ 545 1426; 238 Galle Rd) has a basic selection of medicines.

From tourist libraries along Galle Rd you can borrow books written in numerous European languages. There's usually a small fee (Rs 100) per read, plus a deposit (say Rs 300), which is refunded on the safe return of the book. Shops selling all manner of souvenirs and cheap cotton clothes can be found along Galle Rd.

Sights & Activities

For many people a visit to Hikkaduwa begins and ends on the beach – especially if they've just arrived from somewhere cold. The widest bit of sand extends north and south from Narigama. Here you'll find a few simple lounge chairs that you can rent – or even use for free if they're part of a café. But don't expect a chaotic scene – there are a few vendors but it's pretty relaxed.

The sands at Wewala are narrower and steeper, but this is where you'll see surfers in action.

CORAL SANCTUARY

Hikkaduwa's over-exploited 'coral sanctuary' stretches out from the string of 'Coral'

hotels at the north end of the strip to a group of rocks a couple of hundred metres offshore. You can swim out to the rocks from the Coral Gardens Hotel, where the reef runs straight out from the shore. The water over the reef is never more than 3m or 4m deep. Many visitors have been disappointed with the coral and the lack of fish; in many places the coral has died due to being disturbed or broken. Bleaching caused by oceanic and atmospheric conditions struck the reef in 1998, affecting about half the coral, but it is now recovering. The tsunami caused some further damage, but the real problem was the enormous amount of debris that ended up in the coral when the waters receded. Fortunately the local diving community spent months cleaning things up.

It's easy to see the coral. Dive shops and many hotels and guesthouses rent out snorkelling gear for around Rs 200 a day, or less. Stay alert in the water so you don't, say, get run over by a glass-bottomed boat (not a recommended vehicle for viewing the reef anyway, given the boats' running-into-coral proclivities).

SCUBA DIVING

The diving season runs from November to April. Both the companies listed here offer Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) courses for similar prices (open water for US\$320, advanced for US\$220), plus a selection of dives such as wreck dives, night dives and trips for those who just want to try out diving. The tsunami and the ensuing drop in business took a toll on operators, but as business returns there should be many more places than those listed here.

Because many people use Hikkaduwa as a base for exploring the country, dive shops also offer tours to other parts of Sri Lanka.

Blue Deep Dive Centre (☎ 074 383190; bluedeepdive@yahoo.co.uk; 332 Galle Rd) This centre, at Hotel Blue Corals, runs PADI courses and two-day discovery courses (US\$70, equipment included).

Poseidon Diving Station (☎ 227 7294; www.diving-sri.lanka.com; Galle Rd) This large school and dive shop has its own guesthouse and offers a full range of PADI courses. Single dives are US\$25.

WATER SPORTS

Wewala, south of the coral sanctuary, has good surfing from November to April. The action draws surfers – serious and beginner –

from around the globe. This, combined with the nice beaches and casually energetic nightlife, makes Hikkaduwa Sri Lanka's most popular surf spot. One note: be sure to find out where the coral lies before you head out – it's just centimetres below the surface.

A Frame Surf Shop (☎ 545 8131; www.mambo.nu; 434 Galle Rd), located in A Frame Surf Shop guesthouse (p126), repairs boards and has a large selection of surfing gear. It rents out a variety of boards in good shape from Rs 600 per day. It also offers surfing tours throughout the island under the moniker 'Mambo Surf Tours'. The staff here is quite friendly and in addition to the large shop, there's a cool café. Surfers: if you're heading anywhere in the south, this is the last place where you can get gear or essentials like wax.

Many places to stay, such as **Why Not** (☎ 438 3325; Galle Rd; r Rs 1000-1500), also rent out boards.

Body-surfing is popular through much of the year and you can pretty much seek out the waves of your choice all along the beach.

Kitesurfing is growing in popularity, especially in the months when the waves are mild. **Lucky Dolphin** (☎ 227 5272; info@kiten.n; 533 Galle Rd), a guesthouse in Narigama (p126), rents out kitesurfing gear and offers lessons (four hours for US\$50).

INLAND ATTRACTIONS

To take a break from the beach scene just walk or cycle along any of the minor roads heading inland. They lead to a corner, completely different, rural world. Just off Baddegama Rd is **Gangarama Maha Vihara**. This is an interesting Buddhist temple that has lots of popular educational paintings that are the work of one man over nearly a decade. The monks are happy to show you around. A further 2km along Baddegama Rd you come to **Hikkaduwa Lake**, home to monitor lizards and a lot of birdlife. Boat tours can sometimes be organised on the lake; ask around.

About 2km north of Hikkaduwa is the **Seeniigama Vihara**, perched on its own island. It's one of only two temples in the country where victims of theft can seek retribution. People who have been robbed visit the temple and buy a specially prepared oil made with chilli and pepper. With the oil they light a lamp in their homes and recite a mantra. Sooner or later, maybe within

weeks, the thief will be identified when they're struck down with misfortune, such as having a bicycle accident or being hit on the head by a falling coconut.

Sleeping

Virtually all of Hikkaduwa's places to stay are strung out along Galle Rd. The best way to find something to suit is simply to wander down the road (or beach) and look at a variety of rooms. All budget accommodation prices can be bargained over. Those given here are what you'd expect to pay in the high season; out of season the same room may go for half the quoted price. Prices also vary according to which stretch of the strip you're on – down the Narigama end, where the sands are wider, room rates tend to be higher. In the high season the best-value, smaller places fill up quickly; you may need to make a booking a few days ahead.

Most plots of land along the strip are quite narrow, which means that guesthouses will only have a few pricey rooms with views of the water. In contrast, rooms closest to the road get a lot of noise, so be sure to get a room well away from the traffic. Many places are jammed right up against each other.

Finally, Hikkaduwa is not a place for those looking for a top-end resort. There's a collection of ageing resort-style hotels at the north end of the strip (all of which have 'Coral' in the name), but you'll have a more enjoyable experience at the guesthouses to the south.

BUDGET

Unless otherwise noted, expect fans, mosquito nets, cold water and private bathrooms at these places.

Richard's Son Beach Villa (☎ 227 7184; Galle Rd; r Rs 600-800) Unlike most places locally, this small one-storey guesthouse has a huge garden planted with coconut palms and other trees. There are hammocks hanging about, and an overall mellow vibe. The eight rooms are small but clean. There's no food.

Lucky Dolphin (☎ 227 5272; info@kiten.nl; 533 Galle Rd; r Rs 800-1500, apt Rs 1500-2500) You may well feel like a propitious porpoise at this good value place. The standard rooms are in bungalows and are large and have hot water. The apartment, however, is the real steal: it's huge, sleeps numerous folks (bring on the keg!) and has a full kitchen, plus good views.

Poseiden Diving Station (☎ 227 7294; www.diving.srilanka.com; Galle Rd; r US\$12-21) This popular dive school (p125) has 12 basic rooms. Those upstairs have views and nicely tiled bathrooms.

Bright Sunshine (☎ 077 902 1921; 501 Galle Rd; s/d Rs 800/1200) This place has six very clean and airy rooms. Although there's no garden and it's across the road from the beach, the owners are delightful and very keen to please.

Why Not (☎ 438 3325; Galle Rd; r Rs 1000-1500) Well, why not? This place is very good value. The five rooms are large and set in a mellow one-storey compound. There are whimsical touches about, like the elephant doorstops. Surfboards are available for rent from the surfer owners.

Neela's (☎ 227 7496; ritas@sltnet.lk; 634 Galle Rd; r Rs 1000-2000) The six rooms here are basic but comfortable and clean. The real draw, however, is the location in the heart of the Narigama beach scene. The café is popular.

MIDRANGE

Many places in the midrange category are not far removed from their budget guesthouse roots. Room quality can vary wildly as a result of years of piecemeal additions. Unless otherwise noted, expect hot water in rooms.

Moon Beam Hotel (☎ 545 0657; hotelmoonbeam@hotmail.com; 548/1 Galle Rd; r Rs 2500-4000; ☎) A friendly, professional operation. There are 20 rooms on the narrow site, with three having great beach views. More-expensive rooms have air-con, but ask to see a few. There's a big tree out the front, which provides some cover from Galle Rd. The restaurant is highly recommended.

A Frame Surf Shop (☎ 545 8131; www.wambo.nu; 434 Galle Rd; r 2000-4800; ☎) A growing empire of 15 rooms, this is also home to the popular surf shop and the even more popular Chill Space Café. The great variety of rooms are large and clean; more money buys you air-con and better views. Ask to see several rooms. There are cheap long-term rates available for surfers.

Ocean View Cottage (☎ 227 7237; www.oceanviewcottage.net; Galle Rd; r Rs 1500-4000; ☎) The large grassy expanse leading down to the beach is the real attraction here. There are 12 rooms in this three-storey, family-run block; six have air-con and all have fridge. Everything is spotless.

Suite Lanka (☎ 227 7136; suitelanka@hotmail.com; Galle Rd; r €50-70; ☎) This is a small, friendly hotel with seven very good rooms. The small pool is set in a shaded garden next to the beachfront. Rooms have colonial touches; those upstairs are brighter.

Royal Beach Guest House (☎ 545 8485; Galle Rd; r Rs 1500-2500; ☎) This low-key place has 12 rooms (six with air-con) in one-storey blocks set around an open yard. Although the place itself is quiet, you couldn't get more in the middle of the Narigama action if you tried.

Hotel Blue Note (☎ 227 7016; bluenote@eureka.lk; 424 Galle Rd; r Rs 1500-2000) Not as claustrophobic as the rooms in some other places, those here are in bungalows set around a sandy garden. Everything is clean, though nothing special, and rooms only have cold water and fans. The roadside café is popular.

Amaya Reef (☎ 438 3244; www.amayarresorts.com; 400 Galle Rd; r US\$75; ☎) The closest thing Hikkaduwa has to a top-end resort, the Amaya is an older hotel that was rebuilt and reopened in 2005. It features the currently *de rigueur* Asian minimalist style throughout. Rooms are good value and have flat-screen TVs, fridges, desks and stylish bathrooms. Fans of the original Star Trek series will note the pool's resemblance to the Starfleet insignia.

Rita's Guesthouse (☎ 227 7496; Galle Rd; r Rs 1800-3000) There are 28 rooms in two- and three-storey blocks on this rather tight site. Better rooms have little sitting areas outside. Budget rooms are not such good value, as they lack hot water.

Sunil's Beach Hotel (☎ 227 7186; www.sunilbeach.com; Galle Rd; r €18-25; ☎) This is a standard-issue package-tour complex with a fenced garden surrounding an L-shaped pool. The 62 rooms are large and have a balcony (air-con adds €8 to room rates). There is less character here than at the better family-run places.

Nippon Villa (☎ 227 7103; 412 Galle Rd; r Rs 2000-5000; ☎) This place has a small courtyard in a colourful, quite handsome building. The 23 rooms are airy and clean but slightly overpriced – especially the six with air-con.

Hotel Blue Corals (☎ 227 7679; bluecorals@itmin.com; 332 Galle Rd; s/d US\$40/50; ☎) A busy, older resort-style hotel with a pool and 42 rooms. The rooms with balconies are good value; the ones without aren't. This end of town is away from the groovy beach scene.

Coral Gardens Hotel (☎ 227 7023; www.johnkeells-hotels.com; s/d from US\$64/78; ☎) The rapidly ageing '80s décor goes with the package-tour vibe at this five-storey resort-style hotel. The only elevators in town serve 154 large rooms with views but, sadly, no balconies.

Eating & Drinking

Most of Hikkaduwa's best places to eat are connected to hotels and guesthouses. Down on the sandy shores of Narigama you can table-hop from one spot to the next through the night. Many places are good just for a drink and a few stay open past 11pm – but don't expect any raves here.

Moon Beam Restaurant (☎ 545 0657; 548/1 Galle Rd; mains Rs 300-500) This hotel (opposite) has the most attractive restaurant on the beach. It has a salty, open-air nautical décor, and tables where you can curl your toes in the sand. The seafood is excellent. It's also a good place for a sunset drink.

Hotel Blue Note (☎ 227 7016; 424 Galle Rd; mains Rs 300-800) The NASA-sized satellite dish on the roof tells you that this roadside café, located at the hotel of the same name (left), is a couch potato's dream. Enjoy over 500 channels of TV joy while you sample local and Western foods. As a bonus, there's draught beer on tap. Now you just need to get control of the remote.

Cool Spot (327 Galle Rd; mains Rs 200-800) This family-run place has been serving up fresh seafood from a vintage roadside house at the north end of the strip since 1972. There's a cool porch where you can peruse the blackboard menu and delight to specialities like garlic prawns and the bulging seafood platter.

Chill Space Café (☎ 545 8131; 434 Galle Rd; meals Rs 100-1000) This popular beachside café in the A Frame Surf Shop (opposite) features shakes, snacks, seafood and more. There are free beach chairs and showers for swimmers, while under the roof there's a pool table and a skateboard ramp. It's a fun, popular spot; some nights there's music.

Firefly (☎ 077 302 7559; 364 Galle Rd; meals Rs 300-1300) Set in an old Dutch colonial building, Firefly hopes to be Hikkaduwa's hippest joint. Of course, first you have to find it (between the 104km and 105km markers in Dodanduwa). Following the trend in distinctly trendier locales, Firefly is a place where you can get a meal, chill on sofas or

have a drink at the bar. Lunch sees paninis; dinner, a complex Asian-fusion menu.

Neela's (☎ 227 5312; 634 Galle Rd; mains Rs 150-400) The café here is as simple as the adjoining guesthouse (p126), but that doesn't mean it skimps on quality. Seafood treats like calamari are delicious. Many people laze away the hours here over snacks and beers.

Sea View Pizza House (☎ 227 7014; 297 Galle Rd; mains around Rs 200) This welcoming spot has a short list of pizzas, plus decent pastas and seafood. It's a real find at the north end of town.

Roti Restaurant (☎ 491 1540; 373 Galle Rd; meals Rs 70) A hole in the wall right on the road, it sells 59 kinds of *rottis* (doughy pancakes), ranging from garlic chicken to banana. There are also fresh, good shakes and lassis.

Sam's Surfers (Roger's Garage; 403 Galle Rd) A laid-back bar that shows recent movies every night at 7.30pm. At other times, conspiracy fans rejoice as Fox News is shown via satellite dish. There's a pool table, and cheap beer and snacks.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There are frequent buses from Colombo (regular/air-con Rs 54/110, two to three hours). Buses also operate frequently to Ambalangoda (Rs 13, 15 minutes) and Galle (Rs 13, 30 minutes). Buses to Galle or beyond will drop you south of the bus station along the guesthouse strip. When leaving Hikkaduwa you stand more chance of a seat if you start at the bus station.

MOTORCYCLE

Motorcycles are readily available for rent in Hikkaduwa. Depending on the size of the machine and your negotiating skills expect to pay roughly Rs 600 to 1500 per day; ask at your hotel or guesthouse.

TAXI

Most of the taxis in Hikkaduwa are minibuses able to hold about eight passengers, so they can be quite cheap if there's a group of you. Most gather in front of the top-end hotels. Some sample fares are Galle Rs 1000, Unawatuna Rs 1200, Tangalla Rs 2000 to 2400, Colombo Rs 2000 to 2400, and Bandaranaike International Airport Rs 2800.

TRAIN

The trains can get very crowded; avoid the really slow ones that stop everywhere. Check at the station for express departure times. Service on the coast line is fairly frequent; some destinations include Colombo (2nd/3rd class Rs 91/43, two to three hours), Galle (2nd/3rd class Rs 19/10, 30 minutes) and beyond to Matara.

There's one direct express to Kandy each day (2nd/3rd class Rs 200/107, six hours).

Getting Around

A three-wheeler from the train or bus stations to Wewala or Narigama costs about Rs 100. Once you're settled in, a bicycle is a nice way to get around; it's easy to hire a bike for Rs 100 to 150 a day.