



Colombo

24 HOURS IN...

Sri Lanka's cosmopolitan capital **Colombo** is home to buzzy bazaars, serene sights, converted colonial hotels and smart rooftop bars

Words: **Emma Boyle**

09.00 After flying into Colombo's Bandaranaike Airport, take a taxi to your hotel to deposit your bags. Many of Colombo's hotels are striking transformations of historic relics of the city's rich colonial past. One of these is Residence by Uga Escapes, set in the 18th-century former home of Sheikh Salehboy Moosajee, a short stroll from Gangaramaya Temple, Colombo's principle Buddhist shrine. Surrounded by modern high rises in the heart of the city, this all-suite boutique hotel is an oasis of calm flaunting sophisticated modern interiors, some of Colombo's biggest suites and a handsome pool. For something a little edgier, opt for Casa Colombo, a 12-suite hotel that defies all rules of conventional design. Ensnared in a lavishly preserved 200-year-old Moorish mansion in downtown Bambalapatiya, the hotel's custom-made retro-chic interiors and rooms are glamorously indulgent, while facilities include a muralled

dining room (serving innovative Sri Lankan fusion cuisine) and the county's only pink pool.

10.00 Swot up on Sri Lanka's culture at the National Museum, located in the ritzy residential enclave Cinnamon Gardens a stone's throw from Vihara Maha Devi Park, the city's biggest green space. This mammoth whitewashed building is home to some of Sri Lanka's most treasured historic possessions, such as a ninth-century Buddha statue, porcelain artefacts from the ancient former capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, and even the throne of the last king of Kandy. Afterwards, make some time to explore Number 11 (+94 11 4337 335; www.geoffreybawa.com), the former home of Geoffrey Bawa Sri Lanka's foremost architect. The four adjoining terraced houses and the perfectly preserved rooms, some edged by courtyards, bulge with Bawa's books, artwork and architectural drawings, and offer insights into his creative mind.

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12.00 Colombo offers surprisingly good retail therapy if you know where to look. The contemporary design emporium Paradise Road (+94 11 268 6043; www.paradiseroad.lk) is the go-to place for home accessories, toys and gourmet goodies while department store Odel (+94 11 462 5800; www.odel.lk) is best for souvenirs. Those in the know covet PR (+94 11 2699921; www.pr.lk), a fashion concept store selling limited clothes and jewellery by sought-after local designers. It neighbours Saskia Fernando Gallery (+94 11 7429010; www.saskiafernandogallery.com), an exhibition space for contemporary local artists. For colourful handlooms, Barefoot (+94 11 258 9305; www.barefootceylon.com) has high-quality handcrafted products from tablecloths and cushions to sarongs, bags and toys.

13.30 Pause for lunch at Barefoot's Garden Café, a frangipani-shaded



Photo: Getty Images

Residence by Uga Escapes



Barefoot Garden Café



Casa Colombo



Sky Lounge

"SIT OUT ON THE STAR-KISSED TERRACE AND BE SERENADED BY THE IN-HOUSE FUNK BAND OR SHIMMY TO THE BEAT OF RESIDENT DJs"

flagstone courtyard sprinkled with sculptures and art. Fuel up on a bowl of pasta, a salad or local curry, or simply rehydrate with an ice-cool lime soda. Another pleasant lunchspot is the restaurant at the Park Street Mews (+94 11 230 0133 www.parkstreetmews.com), a bijou cobbled alleyway within strolling distance of the Gangaramaya Temple and the National Museum. The cushy sofas, ambient lighting and relaxed atmosphere perfectly complement the continental-tropical fusion cuisine. If you've time, drop into Spa Ceylon (+94 11 534 0011; www.spaceylon.com) next door for a soothing massage or a beauty treatment.

15.00 Late afternoon is the ideal time to explore the city's hidden corners on foot on the insightful Colombo City Walk (+94 77 301 7091; www.colombocitywalks.blogspot.com) with local experts Mark and Ruvi, who will arrange to pick you up from wherever

you are in Colombo. Lasting three to four hours, these personalised potters start at the Fort, the city's oldest enclave, and take you down roads lined with grandiose colonial edifices, into St. Peter's Church perhaps, and to the aged clock tower on Chatham Street before moving on to The Pettah. This vibrant, multi-ethnic open-air market district, famed for being notoriously difficult to navigate, is a chaotic crush of frenetic activity. The tour steers you down the area's most photographic streets, each devoted to a specific trade, past quaint mosques, and to key sites including the oasis-like Dutch Period Museum, set in a striking 17th-century mansion.

18.00 In recent years Colombo has seen an emergence of rooftop bars gracing the summits of some of the city's loftiest hotels, and some of the best views are enjoyed from the Sky Lounge of The Kingsbury Hotel (+94 11 242 1221; www.thekingsburyhotel.com).

Its position at the northern end of the Galle Face Green, a long seafront promenade, and between the high-rise towers of the city's banking district and the great expanse of the Indian Ocean promises photographic panoramas aplenty. Grab your seat at sunset to absorb the blushing city's nighttime illumination.

19.30 Book a table at Colombo institution The Gallery Café (+94 11 258 2162; www.paradiseroad.lk), housed in the beautifully converted former offices of Geoffrey Bawa. Tables spill from a tastefully designed monotone interior space onto a convivial courtyard and the international menu features delectable dishes such as pan-fried calves' liver, baked crab and Sri Lankan prawn curry. Their dessert menu is unrivalled (there are more than 25 options on the menu); go for the passion fruit meringue pie or the chocolate nemesis. For local cuisine, head for Kaema Sutra (+94

11 267 0722; www.kaemasutra.com), a contemporary Sri Lankan restaurant in Arcade – Independence Square, a shopping and dining complex. Some of the standouts include goat curry, black polos (jackfruit) curry and *ambuli thiya*, a southern sour fish dish, best enjoyed with hunks of bread, crispy hoppers and fiery sambols.

21.30 End your night at Clique (+94 76 725 4783; www.cliquecolombo.com), a slick baroque-themed venue adored by the city's young, fun and glamorous. The kitchen stays open until midnight, which means you can enjoy succulent *sous vide* steaks or sushi in the smart Supper Club restaurant before dancing the night away in the adjoining lounge bar, all without stepping outdoors. A more relaxed alternative is rooftop bar 41 Sugar (+94 11 268 2122). Sit out on the star-kissed terrace and be serenaded by their in-house funk band or shimmy to the beat of resident DJs mixing lounge, nu dance and disco. ☎