

# 24 HOURS IN COLOMBO

By Caroline Phillips



Galle Face Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka

They're serving afternoon tea on cake stands with fans circling overhead and the Indian Ocean as a backdrop. There's a lawn for croquet. Beyond this — and framed by 19th century columns and palm trees — there are ladies sashaying in gold and purple saris to watch a wedding on the promenade. The sound of traditional instruments fills the warm air and the sun is setting, a crimson ball in the sky. Who would imagine that this is just steps away from a vehicle-clogged city of dust, concrete and bustle?

This is the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo, Sri Lanka. I've arrived on the island on a Sri Lankan Airways flight (an A330-300, since you ask) travelling horizontally on the flattest of lie-flat seats.





Business Class cabin on the Sri Lankan Airlines Airbus 330-300 on the London-Colombo route

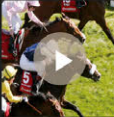
Danuska, a chauffeur (one from a fleet of super-safe drivers available through Gamen) spirits me off in a BMW. "No, ma'am," he explains. "This is Nissan car; just have a BMW badge on the steering wheel."

The Grande Dame of Colombo — as the Galle Face Hotel is known — was built in 1864 on the shoreline. Originally a Dutch villa, it now has 156 guest rooms. It's been owned by the Jardiner family for forever and longer. Its bar boasts black and white photographs of its equally historical guests. There's Che Guevara who rested his feet here in 1958. The astronauts of Apollo 12 being escorted from the airport in 1970. Cole Porter was here night and day in 1929. Plus Richard Nixon, Noël Coward and Indira Gandhi all checked in. I don't know whether one of the above slept in my bed (sadly probably not as the hotel has been extensively refurbished in recent years) but the style of bedroom décor still has its heart happily in its Colonial past, which is good enough compensation.

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The pool area of Galle Face Hotel

After another (longer) stretch of horizontal sleep, it's time to visit the highlights of Colombo. The hotel is one of its landmarks. So: tick. I can tick off another must-see instantly because to one side of the hotel is the Galle Face Green, a 12-acre promenade laid out by Governor Sir Henry George Ward in 1859. Here there's a performing monkey and a snake charmer sitting on the grass. It's also a place for picnics and where dozens of children fly kites.

Then I hit the traffic-clogged roads with Danuska and his wannabe BMW again. There are policemen instead of traffic lights, kamikaze drivers, and buses with faces three-deep peering from each window. In the middle of the fumes and tooting and beeping, Danuska tells me about William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth. But we don't get on to William Blake.



Galle Face Hotel's Sunset Flag Lowering Ceremony, held at 5pm with kilts and bagpipes

I visit the Colombo National Museum which was established in 1877 by the then-British Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Henry Gregory. The Colonial-style building alone is worth a long gawp (and its contents even longer). There's one man to take my cash for my ticket, another to hand me my change. By being there at opening time, I'm almost alone in its galleries — bar a security guard who's asleep. There's also a transfixing array of seated Buddhas, standing Buddhas and reclining Buddhas; and a particularly fetching pair of 9th century AD 'gold sandals' (feet) — belonging, no doubt, to Buddha.

As I leave, the police hurtle into the driveway of the museum, followed at speed by ambulances with their sirens blaring and 'Air Force' on motorbikes. They screech to a halt, get out — and then have an amiable chat in front of the museum.

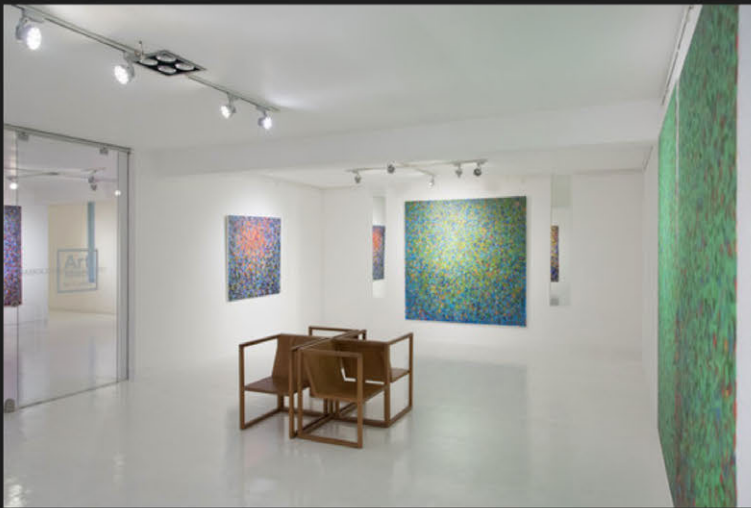




Galle Face Hotel – the grande dame of Colombo – faces Galle Face Green to the north and the sea to the west, with sweeping staircases and trademark checked-tile floors

The Gangaramaya Buddhist Temple is another must, its foundations laid 'close to the last leg of the 19th century' according to its pamphlet. We park in the road that flanks it, by its old printing presses lining the street, and take off our shoes to enter. Inside its quirky museum, there are gifts on display that have been given to the Chief Monk over the decades. Furniture, curios, watches, cameras, and vintage cars set midst plastic seats, plastic flowers and offerings.

Shopping takes place at the Saskia Fernando Gallery. (Saskia is from 'Sri Lanka's leading design family,' in the words of Vogue India.) She represents exclusively 23 contemporary artists. "As long as there's a reference to Sri Lanka, any artist is welcome," she says. I can nab an emerging artist for £100 (on their online platform, Art Space Sri Lanka) or a Pintelon (a Belgian living on the island and one of its premier artists) for £9000. "Most of the work purchased leaves the country," says Saskia.



Saskia Fernando Gallery

Downstairs from the gallery is another cool space: it's PR (a shop owned by another member of the Fernando family) and sells everything from hip clutch bags fashioned from rice sacks to linen dresses (£90 upwards), silk PJs and batik skirts; and the family's own Maus clothing brand.

There's so much to see in Colombo, and so little time. A quick lunch at the Old Colombo Dutch Hospital, a former asylum turned venue for snazzy eateries. A sneak peek at the Pettah Market, the place to haggle for fabric, paper and jewellery. A drive past Beira Lake, surrounded and illuminated at night by a network of fairy lights and lanterns.



Galle Face Hotel

Back at the hotel, I could do with some rejuvenating in a Spa L'Occitane, the first of that brand to hit Sri Lanka. But its opening has been delayed, so there's only builders' dust. It'll soon be sort of grand hotel meets Provencal brand, apparently in tribute to the hotel's Hollywood heritage. There will be 12,000 square feet with eight treatment rooms, a couple's room, and

indoor and outdoor relaxation areas plus steam, sauna and Jacuzzis.

The hotel does, however, already boast a museum and art gallery which houses the first car that Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh owned, and several pieces of memorabilia from the hotel's history. I'd read about it. But I'm so jet-lagged that I think mistakenly that the black and white photographs in the bar must be said historical artefacts. (I'll have to return. I spend only one night there. Contrastingly, a certain K. C. Kuttan joined as a bellboy in 1942 and didn't check out until his death in 2014).



Galle Face Hotel

At dinner in the hotel's Sea Spray restaurant — with oceanfront view, and smiley and attentive staff — they offer fish in every guise: 'Raw, chilled, grilled, crispy, steamed, and hot-pot,' as the menu puts it. Piscatorial choices like 'chimichurri' and 'negombo curry' or 'seafood Ambulthiyal,' at least one of them being lobster. Cashew pesto with bread in the shape of fishes, which makes the Feeding of the 5000 look positively pedestrian. I'm offered an iPad at the end of the meal to rate the service, ambience and food with a sad emoji, a cheery one, or one who won the lottery. I go for the last emoji.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about Galle Face Hotel in Sri Lanka, visit [www.gallefacehotel.com](http://www.gallefacehotel.com).

Sri Lankan Airlines flies daily to Colombo with fares starting from £500 – visit [www.srilankan.com](http://www.srilankan.com) for more information.

For drivers in Sri Lanka, use Gameni – e-mail [gamenilanka@yahoo.co.in](mailto:gamenilanka@yahoo.co.in) or call 00 94 (77) 792 0602.

*Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to [www.carolinephillips.net](http://www.carolinephillips.net).*

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