

ROAD TRIP

SRI LANKA FOR THE AUTOMATIC

Seven days, 700 kilometres: a young woman on discovering Sri Lankan grandness in a modest tuk tuk

By Edwina D'souza

700 k.m. | Tuk tuk | 7 days | Hikkaduwa, Weligama, Rekawa, Ella, Kandy



EFIMOVA ANNA/SHUTTERSTOCK



On a clear November morning I leave Bandaranaike International Airport for Mount-Lavinia, a bustling beach town on the outskirts of Colombo. Here, in the open grounds of a backpacker hostel from where my tuk tuk rental agency is operating, it stands, dazzling in the afternoon sun—my emerald-green-and-jet black autorickshaw. It looks and smells like one does after a good wash. I quickly leaf through a guidebook of dos and don'ts, and nod affirmatively when asked if I'd like to join a WhatsApp group of fellow riders. It's an active one. When not riding, members, I gather, after some scrolling, catch up over drinks to share tips, exchange anecdotes and relate stories of the road.

A quiet boulevard behind the hostel doubles as my training ground: how to switch gears, how to check engine oil levels, where are the tools stacked, how to change a flat tyre? I listen attentively to Vijayan, my enthusiastic 40-something instructor, while secretly praying for minimal mishaps. Now, I've laid my hands on cars and motorbikes. But a rickshaw? "A bit like the love child of Chetak and Nano, no?" Vijayan weighs in, laughing. It cracks me up.

Crash course over, my sister Noella and I hit the road with great gusto. However, embarrassingly enough, within the first 10 minutes itself I end

ALEKSANDAR TODOROVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK

RENT

A few operators give tuk tuks on rent. TukTuk Rental (tuktukrental.com) is fairly popular. It charges between \$14/₹1,000) and \$25/₹1,800 a day, and a refundable deposit of \$150/₹10,700). This is inclusive of insurance cover.

Surfers glide along seafoam in Weligama. Facing page: Tuk tuks are an intimate way to explore rural Sri Lanka.



up causing a minor traffic jam smack in the middle of Mount Lavinia's town centre. My stalled three-wheeler earns me exasperated looks from motorists who, unlike me, aren't holidaying, and have little time or patience to empathise with the woes of an amateur tuk tuk driver. To prevent the vehicle from stalling again I rev up the engine even when it's not in motion, just so that it remains on. The raspy grunt of a stationary auto becomes a source of great bemusement for many at the signal. Still, it's not as bad as those judgmental stares I had been inviting all this while. Smiling, I just let the engine run.

READY TO ROLL

On day one, braving unexpected heavy rains, I ride to the resort town of Hikkaduwa to visit the Community Tsunami Museum. Run by locals, maps and models here educate people on the 2004 natural disaster that affected the island. This leg also teaches me how riding in the rain is a lesson in multitasking: one hand on the handlebar, the other intermittently wiping splatters off

the windshield.

Next day the rain peters down as I set off 20 kilometres southeast in the direction of Galle. With Noella as my designated Google Maps navigator, I have a blast zipping around the heritage fort complex, admiring 18th-century Dutch churches and chapels, and braking only to gorge on some lip-smacking Sri Lankan fish curry-rice and chilled ginger beer. Later in the evening, I ride another 35 kilometres southwards to Weligama, a coastal town where we are to stay the night. When I vroom into the porch of our four-star hotel and bring my beast to a screeching halt, heads turn—and I gloat. A little. In Weligama, my real intention is to learn surfing but I miserably fail at it, bruising my cheek with the surfboard while catching a wave.

With surfing sessions now out of bounds, the next morning I ride three kilometres, about 15 minutes, to the Mirissa Harbour and set sail to see and (hopefully) photograph whales prancing about the Indian Ocean. It's a lucky day, says our guide, after we spot one blue whale, two sperm

THE ITINERARY SRI LANKA

whales and a pod of dolphins, all in under five hours. To celebrate this feat, we walk into a humble shack and devour a wholesome lunch of seafood fried rice that comes with an addictive mango chutney and a fiery red chilli *sambol*.

Noella and I decide to mark every 50 kilometres as a milestone to cool off the engine and replenish ourselves with whatever the region has to offer. Thembili, the bright orange Sri Lankan King Coconut, wins our heart. But it's a thali of short eats that stays with us long after we had polished off its contents: chicken and fish rolls, *parippu* (dal vada), *ulundu* (urad dal vadas) and beef samosas that melted in our mouths.

COP STORY

On day four, along a gorgeous 60-kilometre stretch cradling the coast en route to Rekawa, I am stopped for a random check in Tangalle—an inspection I attribute to the policemen's curiosity. It's unusual to see two female backpackers gliding around Sri Lanka in an autorickshaw. After a courtesy paper check we set off again, reaching Rekawa around sunset. Fresh and fortified after a quick bath and meal, later that night I ride on a strip of road that runs parallel to the beach. A faint, synchronised rustle makes my ears perk up and when I brake and adjust my eyes to the darkness around me, what comes into view leaves me gobsmacked: a platoon of olive ridleys have gathered ashore to hatch eggs.

The next morning after a breakfast of egg hoppers, I start for Ella, 150 kilometres north. On the A2 coastal highway near Kalametiya, once again, I'm intercepted by cops. This time for speeding—wait for this—at 50kmph! Turns out in Sri Lanka the average speed limit for tuk



Lagoons in Rekawa (top) are a popular destination for tourists; String hoppers (centre) are a Sri Lankan breakfast essential; Coastal roads (bottom) bring out the best of self-driving in the island nation.





tuks is 40 kmph. More mindful now, I continue onward and when I enter Udawawale I nearly shriek with joy. There's a herd of wild elephants strolling on a fenced stretch across the bypass road.

THE LAST LAP

Once I leave the coast and move towards the central highlands, the views get prettier and the inclines steeper. I underestimate the terrain in Ella and almost run out of gas on the way to Demodara to check out the colonial-era Nine Arches Bridge. Fortunately, I am able to buy some fuel in empty beer bottles from a grocery store in the town.

Like a fitting finale, the last and seventh day prove to be the most scenic and challenging. Along the incredibly beautiful route of 150 kilometres from Ella to Kandy, I navigate sharp hairpin bends, some overlooking the Pidurutalagala range, Sri Lanka's tallest mountain, others winding past lush tea gardens—and it's here that I encounter my worst nightmare. The engine stalls on a 45-degree incline, 6,000 feet above sea level. I have to get the tuk tuk running without rolling

LICENCE

Get an international driving permit in your country. For the additional three-wheeler local licence from the Automobile Association of Ceylon, fill up a form at their Colombo office for about \$26/₹1,900. Else, go through your agency for an additional \$40/₹2,800.

The train route from Ella to Kandy (top) is wonderfully scenic; Tuk tuks (bottom) are a common sight in Sri Lanka, just not tourists driving them.

behind—a hurdle my one week of riding helps me overcome in, surprisingly, two minutes flat. Finally, I pull over at the Damro Labookellie Tea Centre on the outskirts of Nuwara Eliya. A cup of Ceylon tea and some divine mud cake... I reel in the warmth of my last meal on the road before I will need to turn in the tuk tuk in Kandy later tonight. And when I do, it sinks in: as stunning as Sri Lanka is, this trip wasn't about the destination but the highs and lows of exploring it in a mode of transportation that despite its tiny frame is monumentally liberating. ■

Stay

Hikkaduwa

Jasmine Garden Beach Guest House on Narigama beach (No 72, Galle Road, Patuwatha, Dodanduwa, 80240 Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka; doubles from \$40/₹2,800; Call +94 77 510 6406).

Weligama

22 Welligam Bay on Weligama beach (22, Modarawatta, Pelena, Weligama; doubles from \$100/₹7,000; Call +94 412 254 595).

Rekawa

Catamaran Lagoon House (No 63, Rekawa West, Netolpitiya, Rekawa Lagoon, Tangalle; doubles from \$40/₹2,800; Call +94 77 3620194).

Ella

Travel Rest Inn (No 42 main street, Ella town, Ella; doubles from \$25/₹1,800; Call +94 77 379 0501).

Kandy

Kandy City Hostel (74a B195, Kandy 20000, Sri Lanka; dorms from \$15/₹1,100; Call +94 77 444 9182).



SAIKOSHI/SHUTTERSTOCK (TRAIN); KATERYNA_MOROZ/SHUTTERSTOCK (TUK TUK)