



Headquarters

MYRIAD WAYS TO MEET IN

# SRI LANKA

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# AN EMERALD MEETINGS DESTINATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

When author and humourist Mark Twain was travelling to the legendary 'Galle Face Hotel' in Colombo, back in 1920, he wrote: *"What a dream it was of tropical splendour of bloom and blossom, and Oriental conflagrations of costume... Many travellers (reporter's note: that includes me) have been enthralled by this emerald teardrop in the Indian Ocean"*.  
*Marcel A.M. Vissers reports*



Colombo



Sigiriya Rock



MR. PREMA COORAY



At the Century International Quality ERA Award ceremony, from left to right: Prof. Dr. Alfonso C. Casal, Scientific Director of BID, Jose E. Prieto, President and CEO of BID, Sunil Dissanayake, Director & CEO of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike National Memorial Foundation (BMICH), Norman Ingle, President of the Quality Mix and Devin Savage (MEP).



**A**n emerald teardrop or raindrop: I am convinced this must be the nicest nickname ever given to what used to be Ceylon but what today is called Sri Lanka. The Dutch who occupied the island in the 16<sup>th</sup> century used less romantic vocabulary and described this land of tea as 'the smoked ham', in reference to its shape.

Today Sri Lanka is well on course to becoming a first-class meetings destination. It is a real joy to be able to spend some time here but then maybe I am a bit biased because I like being here so much myself.

### SAFE & IRRESISTIBLE

If you travel a lot you're often asked the question: *"What is the prettiest country you've ever visited?"* I have been close to 100 different countries but I have to admit that I've lost my heart to Sri Lanka. I can cite a myriad of reasons why this happened.

The people are so nice and delightful. Then there is the prevalence of Buddhist culture everywhere you go, not to mention the pristine quality and the abundance of nature.

First of all the people. They are so nice and delightful. Then there is the prevalence of Buddhist culture everywhere you go, not to mention the pristine quality and the abundance of nature. Just imagine... a 1350 km long coastline with mostly virgin beaches, interspersed with simple fisherman's' dwellings or palm trees and tea plants swinging in the breeze. And all of this comes with pleasant weather conditions for most of the year.

Yet, the cherries on the cake are the spiritual values this country exudes. During my recent visit last June I was struck by the awesome beauty of this island. Colombo may not be the prettiest city in Asia Pacific

but then it is so clean and that's amazingly visible everywhere you go, even in the smallest countryside villages. There is no doubt that this is a major asset which has strong appeal for visitors and convention delegates in particular. Both safe and irresistible... I think that's a fair definition!

### COLOMBO, A BRAND-NEW CITY

I had an amiable conversation with Mr. Prema Cooray, Chairman of the Sri Lanka Convention Bureau, about Colombo's ongoing expansion as well as the development of tourism in general and the meetings industry in particular.



Colombo Port City



Mr. Cooray is a strong defender of the values his country stands for. He is against mass tourism because he believes it doesn't fit the island state's vocation. He believes Sri Lanka first and foremost has to defend its valuable natural beauty, its fauna and flora. He admits that he's always been fascinated by the principles of sustainability and commits to making sure that the country can remain at the forefront of innovation in that field.

"One of our iconic hotels", said Mr Coorey, "was designed and built in the 1990's by Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's famous architect. I was with him, when he chose the spot for the Heritance Kandalama hotel, his masterpiece. Here he created an austere building that derives its beauty from the surrounding landscape. This hotel has become an icon of sustainable architecture."

Mr. Cooray continued: "We have been through some difficult times. When our civil war ended in 2009 we barely had half a million visitors a year, now we have reached the two million mark. We are currently witnessing a real explosion. All the major international hotel chains are present in our country and many corporate headquarters are being set up in the capital."

Take Cinnamon Life for instance. It is a large integrated resort consisting of a 800-room luxury hotel, a large high-end retail mall, luxury residencies, state-of-the-art office space and convention, ballroom and banqueting space. Cinnamon Life is not merely an architectural icon but a 'life capital', an architectural heartbeat in the



BMICH

city that is expected for completion by 2019. Worth noting also is that Shangri-La, Hyatt, ITC, Sheraton and Movenpick are scheduled to be inaugurated within the next two years, and they all will boast conference facilities.

And there is a bigger project still: the Port City of New Colombo which is to be built on reclaimed land adjacent to the Galle Face Green. The city will use resources from the Colombo Harbour Expansion Project, currently under construction near the site of this proposed city. The construction was set to begin in March 2011 but then the project was stopped, mainly because of the high costs as well as several environmental issues. A scaled down programme has

# 1,600

## THE MAXIMUM CAPACITY OF THE HALL AT BMICH

recently been approved and expectations are that it will be completed by 2018.

There is also speculation about a new congress centre but much still remains to be answered for. The first step should be to get consensus about an appropriate location and then to hope that the rest comes together because a new purpose-built centre is needed very urgently.

### THE OLDEST CONGRESS ISLAND IN THE WORLD

Until a very recent day, I had always thought that the oldest purpose-built congress centre was in Hong Kong. Wrong! However strange it may sound it is in Colombo. And the story doesn't stop there. The first conference space in the world was also conceived in Sri Lanka, in Sigiriya, a World Heritage site. Not far from the entrance to the rock, with the lions lying guard at its foot, there is a platform where the King held his meetings in the 5th century. There is still a bench there on which to this day it is prohibited to sit. I have a dream of organising a meeting there one of these days !

### A THREE-YEAR RENOVATION PROJECT

Sunil Dissanayake, the recently appointed Director General/CEO of the Colombo Congress Centre, defines the building as 'futuristic' for the day and age in which it is built. The Hall is still an iconic building in Colombo. After three years of renovation, the congress centre is again open for international congresses.

The original construction of the Hall commenced officially on 24 November 1970 and was completed in the first quarter of 1973. At the time, it was the product of a joint Sri Lanka and Chinese workmanship. A considerable portion of the exquisite building materials which have been used in the Hall were imported from China. These include a wide range of marble in delicate tints and hues, terrazzo tiles and mosaic tiles. These materials were blended together in what is acknowledged to be an outstanding architectural creation.

In 2007 the first announcement for renovation works was published. Mr. Dissanayake explained: "BMICH is a symbol of peace for Sri Lanka. We suffered a long time from internal problems and the congress centre was not that much active during that time for international congresses. The Chinese Government decided to invest millions of rupees in order to renovate the building completely. For the first time the congress centre underwent a major renovation in its 35 years' history. BMICH is the oldest congress centre in the Asia Pacific region, but after 3 years of massive renovation, we are proud to announce that we are ready to welcome again international congresses. For the time being 90 % of the congresses organised here are local and the remaining 10 % are Asian and international initiatives. This is undoubtedly bound to change in the coming years."

### BMICH AND THE ERA AWARD

Mr. Dissanayake continued: "This year we received the Century International Quality ERA Award in the GOLD Category at the BID Quality Convention in Geneva. The Award came as an ideal way to celebrate this past year's successes while looking forward to putting quality first in the years to come. I am of course very proud of all this because it immediately put Sri Lanka on the international meetings map. From now on we are reaching out to the international market, i.e. by being present at major international trade shows."

Another major key moment for the congress industry has been the winning of the bid for the 2016 French Travel Agents Congress (SNAV). This is considered

a landmark occasion for business tourism in Sri Lanka because of the opportunity to showcase the island to over 700 French travel agents when they are hosted for the event.

### BMICH CONFERENCE FACILITIES

- Capacity of the Hall: 1,600 delegates
- Seating for 640 in the Gallery and 960 in the Balcony
- Capacity of the Banquet Hall: 450 persons (ideal for luncheons, dinners or cocktails); 175 in the restaurant.
- 4 committee rooms, the largest of which for up to 400 delegates
- Seating for 200 participants at the BMICH Cinema.

MORE INFO ON [WWW.BMICH.LK](http://WWW.BMICH.LK)

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Cinnamon Life



the oldest conference room in the world, Sigiriya



Gangarama Temple, Colombo



# A NEW WAVE IN THE SOUTH



Cape Weligama

**I can still remember the days when one needed six hours to drive from Colombo Airport to Weligama in the South. Since the inauguration of the Southern Expressway in 2011 the duration of the trip has been cut down to three hours giving visitors full access to the Southern areas. Today many hotels and new roads are being built. Yet the biggest news of all is that a new harbour, an airport and a new convention centre, all are completed.**

## HAMBANTOTA IN FULL DEVELOPMENT

Hambantota is the capital city of the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. This is where all the major construction work is concentrated. It is bringing some degree of balance to government investment in the South compared to the Colombo area. This underdeveloped area was hit hard by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and is undergoing a number of major development projects including the construction of a new sea port and an international airport. These projects and others such as Hambantota Cricket Stadium are said to

form part of the government's plan to transform Hambantota into the second major urban hub of Sri Lanka, away from Colombo.

Let's take a look at the three major projects designed to further enhance the visibility of Hambantota in the near future.

## CONVENTION CENTRE

Sri Lanka is determined to boost the meetings industry in the country. I was really surprised when I first visited the Magam Ruhunupura International Conference Hall (MRICH), opened in 2014. It is

Sri Lanka's second international conference hall. The main hall has 1,500 seats and there are three additional halls with a seating capacity of 250 each. The conference hall is fully equipped with modern technical facilities, a parking lot for 400 vehicles as well as a helipad for helicopter landings. The conference hall was constructed by the Urban Development Authority and the Korean international Corporation at a cost of US\$ 15.3 million. The Commonwealth Youth Forum (CYF) that was held from November 10-14, 2013 was the first international conference that took place at the venue.

The building of an airport and the new convention centre has given much needed visibility to the main development area in the South of Sri Lanka

I can imagine that many European cities would be quite jealous at the sight of this architectural masterpiece. Space, light and peacefulness are the key factors determining the atmosphere in and around this building. However, for the moment not much seems to be going on. I guess a lot still needs to be done to promote the convention hall properly.

## HAMBANTOTA PORT AND AIRPORT

The building of an airport and the new convention centre has given much needed visibility to the main development area in the South of Sri Lanka. And the construction of a new harbour is an integral part of that vision. The port of Hambantota will also house a new international port. It is scheduled to be built in three phases. When all phases are fully complete, it will be able to berth 33 vessels, which would make it the biggest port in South Asia.

Clearly this maritime project would be incomplete without a new airport close by. Some say that this investment came a little too early. It will be another few years before this airport will be fully operational. First of all economic activity will have to start growing. As you will have understood by now, there are already some encouraging signs, including a number of hotels, like a Shangri-La resort, which are now open and in operation. 



Magam Ruhunupura International Conference Hall



Hambantota Harbour today



the Stadiums projects in Hambantota

# ALL YOU CAN DO, ALL YOU CAN MEET IN SRI LANKA

**Sri Lanka was made for touring. One week is enough to provide congress delegates with ample opportunity to discover the colonial, spiritual and natural assets of the island... not to mention the culinary delicacies! Colombo is a good starting point for a tour taking you all the way down to Galle, Sri Lanka's colonial pearl.**

## COLOMBO IN FULL SAIL

Colombo has perfectly preserved its historic heritage whilst showing respect for its colonial past - visitors clearly appreciate that. For meeting planners there has been a few impressive new developments. If you are planning to use a convention hotel a visit to Bandaranaike Conference Centre (BMICH) is absolutely compulsory. The first full purpose-built convention centre in Asia has just received a major facelift; it has been transformed into a dashing (and exotic) location where I wouldn't mind attending a convention myself. Then there is the new Nelum Pokuna M.R. Theatre (the National Performing Arts Theatre opened in 2011). This building is shaped as a stylish eight-petalled lotus flower and has an auditorium with 1,288 seats.

Whenever I am in Colombo I am also always fascinated by the buildings designed by Geoffrey Bawa, Sri Lanka's most famous architect. A good example is the Gallery Café, a definite must when you need to organise a board lunch or dinner. The list of the World's Best Bars describes it as 'a unique fusion of gourmet, art and culture'. If you're looking for an inspiring place to hold a social function downtown you could consider the restored Old Colombo Dutch Hospital as well, a heritage building turned into a shopping and dining precinct.

## SPIRITUAL BLOSSOMING

Sri Lanka is the perfect incentive island with a unique array of spiritual options. The garden of Buddha and spiritual island of the Indian Ocean

may indeed be one of the few destinations where this can be achieved with professional guidance. Very famous for Ayurveda are the Barbery hotels. Top executives and managers wishing to use their leisure time to find more meaning to life, mindfulness to strengthen the harmony between body and mind as well as the levers to develop their inner self can now find all this and more in an Ayurveda resort on the south-west coast of Sri Lanka. The two Barbery hotels offer the most perfect combination of Ayurveda treatments, Mindfulness, Meditation, Coaching together with the pleasures of a seaside vacation. All treatments, meals, exercises and coaching conversations are perfectly synchronised and as a result they reinforce each other.

Sri Lanka is the perfect incentive island with  
a unique array of spiritual options

Also, the resorts offer many tailored daytrips or longer excursions to get to know the beautiful nature and abundant culture of this island. Moreover, Barbery Resorts through its unique development programme provides guests with an opportunity to support local initiatives (more info on [www.barberyhotels.com](http://www.barberyhotels.com)).

## ART AND JUNGLE HIDEAWAY

A few years ago the Barbery Group opened an Art and Jungle hideaway. It embodies that very special opportunity for those of you who love genuine 'close to nature' adventures. Diyabubula is a small luxury lodge located near the town of Dambulla, in central Sri Lanka. Renowned Sri Lankan artist Laki Senanayaka designed the place as a hideaway and water garden. It has only five special villas (three water villas, a tree house and a bamboo grove). Wood is the basic building material. What is truly remarkable about this destination is that you get to sample all the elements of nature at the same time: food, water, trees, wildlife, plants, art, music and the mountains of Sri Lanka in the nearby forest reserves.

## THE OLDEST CONFERENCE ROOM IS IN SIGIRYA

Sigiriya is a 'world heritage site' and the 5<sup>th</sup>-century 'Fortress in the Sky', which is perhaps the most fantastic single wonder on the island. You can visit the 660-foot high rock and admire the foundations of the Royal Palace. A must-do.

Meeting in a tree, on a rock or on a rooftop, anything seems possible these days. But meeting in the oldest conference room in the world is something else. That you can do at the enormous split boulder in Sigiriya, better known as the Audience Hall of King Kaspaya, the master builder (459-477 A.D). How they were ever able to split such a rock is still a mystery. I couldn't keep myself from sitting down on the five-metre long conference bench of the king and overlook the empty room. I believe you can have a meeting with 150 people in seating



Gallery Café, Colombo



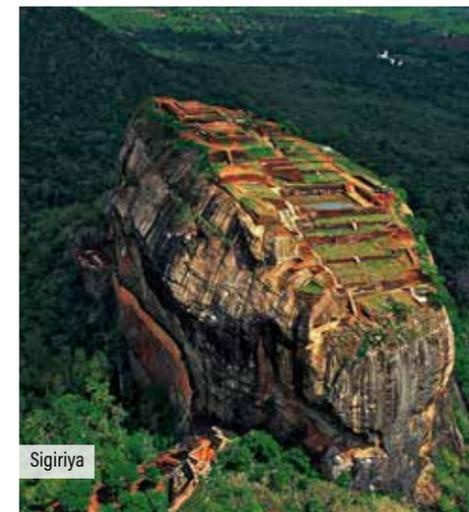
Barbery Beach Ayurveda Resort



Jungle lodges, Diyabubula



Nelum Pokuna M.R. Theatre



Sigiriya



arrangement on the platform of this meeting rock. Is there a PCO in Sri Lanka who can book me this rock for an entire day? I don't need any chairs or tables, comfortable cushions are more than sufficient. And provide some space for Ceylon Tea Time, please.

## NATIONAL PARKS

No trip to Sri Lanka can be complete without a visit to a national park. Take for instance the Minneriya Park, famous for his large population of elephants, or Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens, one of the finest of its kind in Asia. Another very famous park is Horton Plains National Park, near the colonial city of Nuwara Eliya, also renowned for its mountains and tea plantations. You will also see

many spice gardens at Matale in Amanwella on the Colombo-Kandy road.

## TEMPLES & TEA

Dambulla is a vast isolated rock mass 500 feet high and a mile around the base. It is the site of the famous Rock Temple with statues of the Buddha. The Temple of the Tooth is another famous one, a residual remnant of the past dating as far back as the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

But for me the most fascinating excursion is a visit to a tea plantation. Tea was first planted in Sri Lanka in 1824 at the Botanical gardens in Peradeniya. Tea will grow only on rolling terrain and is classified by elevation in three different groups. **HU**



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on your way around the world.

Service that makes you feel like you're royalty,  
no matter where you're going. Because wherever  
we are in the world, you remain our priority.

## CONFERENCE HOTELS IN COLOMBO

Colombo is booming. It even seems hotels pop up like mushrooms. Still there are two main conference hotels with a long tradition of service and excellence.



### CINNAMON GRAND COLOMBO

This is Sri Lanka's premier 5-star hotel, complete with two wings featuring 501 rooms, fourteen (!) restaurants and recreational facilities to provide travelers a unique experience. Just 35 kilometres from Bandaranaike International Airport, the luxurious facility is located in the heart of Colombo City's business, shopping and entertainment centre.

The fourteen restaurants provide an eclectic mix of international cuisines, including award-winning Sri Lankan seafood at the Lagoon Restaurant & Garden, and the best of European fine dining at the London Grill.

There are also two gymnasiums, a spa, a tennis court and two pools. Cinnamon Grand is also located right next to Colombo's high-end shopping mall, Crescat Boulevard. In terms of conference space, there are in total 11 meetings rooms, including the elegant Oak Room for up to 800 pax classroom style.

There is of course another handful of five-star properties located in the centre of Colombo that cater for conferences. They include **Cinnamon Lakeside Colombo** (for up to 600 delegates theatre style), **Galadari Hotel** (800 delegates), **The Kingsbury** (850 delegates), and **Taj Samudra Hotel** (500 delegates).

### HILTON COLOMBO

Hilton Colombo is located right next to Colombo World Trade Center, the foremost landmark building in the city, while the Central Bank of Sri Lanka is just a stone's throw away from the hotel. Set in seven acres of land, Hilton Colombo open up onto the Indian Ocean and Beira Lake of Colombo – the views are just breathtaking.

The 352 guest rooms are spacious and modern with a multitude of amenities, and an array of restaurants and bars – eleven in total – that altogether serve a wide range of cuisine bring in a fine variety of dining options.

A mere 45 minutes away from Bandaranaike International Airport, Hilton Colombo also boasts 25 on-site venues for business and social functions, including the city's only pillar-less ballroom, for up to 900 delegates. 



# MEET IN SRI LANKA

Choose the location  
for a true meeting experience