



# THE SOUTH

The south coast of Sri Lanka, well connected to Colombo by a state highway that is among the best maintained on the island, was the first to undergo tourism development, especially in the stretch between Hikkaduwa and Tangalle.



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At Galle and Matara, the area's two largest cities, resorts, hotels and tourist villages of international quality started to appear at the end of the last century that managed to place Sri Lanka among the destinations marketed worldwide for seaside tourism, supplementing an already existing offer oriented around standards accepted by the locals and by adventure-loving tourists.

Before all this growth with its excessive spontaneous construction, the coast must have been magnificent: even today, travelling along all the roads that still separate one town from the next, the visitor is immersed in a tranquil landscape, with the sea coming almost up to the road on one side and the dense vegetation that surrounds the paddies and fields on the other, with coconut palms running from the edge of the beach to the start of the forest. Along the coast, inlets, bays, beaches and fishing towns invaded by boats, a few nature reserves, sea turtle refuges, stretches of coral reef still intact, temples, remains of a human presence here for millennia, until we come to Galle and Dutch Fort, listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. The three imposing bastions of the Fort enclose the old city with its colonial houses, antique and bric-a-brac shops, boarding schools and churches, restored and remodelled buildings and those more worn and dilapidated that tell of their history when it was the island's most important port and the most dynamic city on the entire coast. International tourist operators, the main investors, both lo-



cal and foreign, have found in this mix of resources, made in large part by nature but with that touch of history that makes any place more interesting, the necessary and sufficient ingredients to imagine a future for Sri Lanka not unlike that of other destinations like the Maldives or Mauritius. Before it became an attraction drawing large numbers of travellers, for centuries the sea here too marked the boundary between the lifestyle of many families of poor fishermen on the coast and those who lived on mea-

gre agriculture, stock-raising, unskilled labour, forest-related trades like fruit harvesting and the manufacture of baskets and rope using coconut fibre in villages far from the sea, These were often cabins and cottages scattered among the trees with no real community centre: they were set in clearings separating the fields and the forest, or on the banks of the many waterways that crisscross the area connecting the ocean to inland lagoons.

The tsunami struck here with great violence, because of the conformation of the seabed that raised the wave to dizzying heights and because of the characteristics of the coast, which often drops below sea level some way inland, creating areas where the tropical rains create swamps that extend for kilometres. Heading down from Colombo towards Galle, even before Beruwala, which is still several tens of kilometres from the





true south, the road, which to that point allowed only occasional glimpses of the ocean, comes to a turn, and after a grade crossing begins to run next to the railroad following the coastline. The place is called Paiyagala, and on the left there is a church, now rebuilt, but then open on the sea side because of the collapse of a nave: from there on, the tsunami overturned everything except for some especially solid buildings and those built on outcroppings of rock above the beach. Before reaching Hikkaduwa, near Telwatta, you come to an area that is still today littered with ruins and rubble, where an entire train was swept away by the wave. The three cars found, out of a train that had at least twelve, were parked on the dead tracks until a few months ago not far from the scene of the disaster. Now, in memory of the thousand-plus passengers who ended their journey at a destination different from the one on their tickets, a monu-







ment has been built, and the cars have been moved, pending some final placement, to the corner of a nearby station, more out of sight.

Farther down the road we find a large standing Buddha, somewhat incongruous, a recent gift from the Japanese government, some ten meters high, that seems to be attempting to tame the sea with a gesture of his hand, to convince it to be content forever with the devastation wrought on December 26, 2004. Just after Galle, one of the places where Civil Protection reached first to rescue the Italian tourists, isolated from



the rest of the world: Unawatuna, an area of strong tourist growth. The Advanced Medical Post operated here for months, providing medical care to the local population, to the survivors and the residents of the camps set up for the homeless, until the Matara and Galle health-care facilities were able to resume operations.

A significant part of the Department's aid programme was concentrated in this area, with projects proposed by many NGOs and

through the direct construction of three schools and a significant project involving the Matara hospital.



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projects

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