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Sri Lanka Vegan Travel Tips

By Josh

Some people travel for culture, some for architecture and others for [exhilarating outdoor experiences](#). I travel for a huge culmination of reasons, but at the top of that list is food.

And not just any food — delicious vegan food! This hunger has taken me all over the world, and one of the places that will always stick in my memory is Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is home to some of the most fantastic vegan dishes you'll come across, from sizzling curries to tangy chutneys and exotic fruits. The food is everywhere, and it's out of this world.

Unfortunately, it's not a completely perfect picture. There are plenty of exquisite dishes, but as a vegan there are also a lot of things you need to watch out for.

To make sure you're a happy, healthy vegan across the whole of the island, here are some of my most important tips. I spent three months covering every inch of the country and chomping all the vegan food possible, so rest assured, you're in safe hands!

Sri Lankans are (generally) very friendly and



helpful, which makes life as a vegan a whole lot easier. If you have any queries about dishes or ingredients, then all you need to do is ask.



English is widely spoken, so asking is very straightforward. And even in the most remote places, it's rare to come across an eatery with no English-speaking workers.

If you're unsure about any of the foods, menus or dishes, then ask one of the workers. I was often taken into the kitchen and got to speak with the chefs, which was always a nice experience.

The vast majority of foods are made fresh and on-site, so kitchen staff are usually very knowledgeable about the ingredients and can add or take out bits and bobs to suit your preference.

Religions are Your Friend

The ease of ordering vegan dishes and communicating with kitchens is probably due to the fact that Sri Lankans are very used to dietary

restrictions as a [religiously diverse country](#). The biggest proportion of people are Buddhist, and there are also large communities of Hindus and Muslims.

Whilst they may not be vegan themselves, they all have their own dietary guidelines and are accustomed to fitting in with others. Because of this, around the island you'll find that all types of dietary choices are respected and honoured.

There is No 'Vegan Food' in Sri Lanka

Wait, there's no vegan food in Sri Lanka?

Despite what I just said, there is very little vegan food in Sri Lanka. If you go into an eatery and ask for vegan food, you'll likely be greeted with blank stares and confused smiles.

Before I put you off completely, this is only because the term vegan isn't widely used or

understood. The country IS filled with delicious plant-based food, but for the most part it's just food that doesn't contain meat, rather than a specifically Sri Lankan vegan dish.

Fear not! Remember the first two tips? All you need to do is explain the things you don't want to eat e.g. 'no fish, no meat, no dairy, no eggs'. Yes, it would be easier if things were labelled as vegan, but it's not the end of the world.

It is actually a nice excuse to start a dialogue with some of the locals and enquire about the food. Many people will be interested in your choice of morals, so expect some inquisitive questions!



Know the Nasties to Look Out For

And what are the things to look out for?

The main culprits are **ghee, shrimp paste, dried fish and milk powder**. As we mentioned above, all you need to do is ask if a dish contains any of these guys. Don't expect it to be labelled.

Unfortunately, [ghee](#) is sometimes used to fry breads and is occasionally used when making curries and other dishes. Cooking with ghee is more expensive than oil, so if you're eating local options you don't need to worry as much.

Shrimp paste is added to some chutneys, sambols and curries. However, it's rarely put into vegetable curries. Coconut sambol, which is eaten all over the country and is bloody delicious, is sometimes made with shrimp paste, so ask to be sure.

Dried fish is another frustrating one. However, it's normally added as a garnish and is therefore

easy to see and avoid. Most of the ingredients you'll be avoiding as a vegan are relatively expensive by local standards, so it's less likely you'll be given them by accident.

The last culprit, and probably the most frustrating one, is milk powder. As a vegan, you'll know that milk powder can get in the most unlikely of places. But in Sri Lanka they sometimes really spoil the fun by putting it in coconut milk! Coconut milk is used in a large number of curries and other Sri Lankan traditional food, so you need to ask to make sure.

Embrace Fresh Fruit

Sri Lankan food is rich and very filling, so unless you want to eat Sri Lankan rice and curry all day everyday (like me!), fruit can be your best friend. Nowhere is this best friend better than in Sri Lanka, as the exotic fruit on offer is diverse, cheap and beautifully tasty.

On the island you'll find huge amounts of

coconuts, pineapple, star fruit, jackfruit, mangosteen, rambutan, avocado... the list goes on and on.

As very little food is imported, most of the fruit you'll find will be seasonal, and the prices will vary. I travelled through Sri Lanka in the middle of mango season, and it was paradise!

Fruit is sold everywhere from large markets to roadside traders, but you will need to haggle to find a good price. My advice is to find the going rate from some of the locals or from your accommodation and never accept the first price!

Don't Judge a Book by its Cover

Although this is a good rule for all countries, this is especially true for Sri Lanka. If you judge any eatery by its appearance, you're going to miss out on some of the country's real treasures.

Don't expect Western-style cleanliness, fine dining or impressive interior design — that's

not Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is eating a plate of sensational curry from a small hut in the middle of nowhere, or tucking into a masala dhosa served up at a busy Pure Veg restaurant next to a Hindu temple in the North.

In complete honesty, the most incredible food I tried was normally from the most unlikely places. It made it all the more exciting!

Bearing this in mind, it's rather fortunate that food hygiene is actually quite good. It's not as good as parts of Europe or North America, but it's a damn sight better than parts of [India](#) and the [Middle East](#).

As a vegan, you're already avoiding most foods you would need to be wary of, but this is another reason to pick busy eateries. With a high turnover of customers, you can guarantee the food is fresh. Altogether you can relax and try everything on offer, so you won't be questioning every slight tummy grumble you get.

Follow Some Crowds but Avoid Others

Another rule that I tend to follow when travelling is to steer away from the tourist crowds and toward the local crowds. In my three months of adventuring in Sri Lanka, I ate in a touristy Sri Lankan restaurant just once, and it was by far the worst culinary experience I had.

Tourist-orientated restaurants may seem like a 'safe' option, but for the most part this isn't the case. Generally, the kitchens will be in exactly the same state as local places but will just offer a watered-down menu with watered-down Sri Lankan dishes. On top of this, the prices will be much higher.

If you want to experience real Sri Lankan food, then you need to follow the locals. They know where all the good stuff is. Pick a busy place, and the food will be fresh and filled with so much flavour you won't know what to do.

In my experience, there is also no benefit for vegans to go to a touristy restaurant. In some countries it can prove easier to explain dietary restrictions, but all the local spots in Sri Lanka were more than good enough in this regard.



Look for Temples and You'll Find Sri Lankan Vegetarian Food

I mentioned earlier that Sri Lanka is home to large communities of Hindus, and this is great news for us vegans! The majority of Hindus follow a Pure Veg diet, which is a vegetarian diet minus eggs.

In areas with larger Hindu populations, you'll find many Pure Veg restaurants. These are not completely vegan, but they have a huge variety of vegan options.

In the North and East of the country, there is a much bigger Indian influence, so this is where you'll find the [best Indian vegetarian food](#) in Sri Lanka. With these Indian communities come many more Pure Veg spots, and when you see a Hindu temple there will often be a Pure Veg restaurant close by.

These places are home to some of my favourite foods on the island, and I think you'll love it too. Dhosas, banana leaf thalis, blistering sambols, cooling chutneys and a baffling variety of curries.

Come here in the morning, and you'll find a traditional Sri Lankan breakfast of string hoppers (thin rice flour noodles compressed into pancake-like shapes), sambol and some dhal. It's the best way to start your day!

Make a Checklist of Sri Lankan Vegan Foods to Try

With all the delicious foods on offer, you really should make a list. Write down all of the examples of famous vegetarian food in Sri Lanka you really want to try, and don't leave the country without ticking them all off!

If I could give three suggestions it would be a masala dhsa, some jackfruit curry and fresh roti bread with dhal.

There's also kiribath, or "milk rice", which has

become an essential dish in Sri Lankan cooking and is eaten in just about every Sri Lankan household. Kiribath is a type of rice cake or rice pudding that's made by cooking rice with coconut milk.

All the Vegan Sri Lanka Travel Tips You'll Need

Now that you've got the knowledge, are you ready to go? I'm confident that if you try even a handful of the foods I experienced in Sri Lanka then you'll be blown away.

As a vegan, you will truly have a sublime time. If you follow these tips, you'll be able to explore every inch of the country. Just remember, when in doubt ask, and perhaps go with some loose-fitting trousers!



About the author...

Josh is the friendly face behind the vegan travel blog Veggie Vagabonds, which he runs with his partner Sarah. After quitting their jobs and selling all that they owned, they have embarked on a plant-powered cycling expedition from England to India. Together they document their travels providing expert travel guides and tips for the outdoor adventurer and vegan wanderer. To find a wealth of information about sustainable travel and ethical eating go to [Veggie Vagabonds](#)

