

The East

Researched 17–22 February 2005

NOTE ON THIS CHAPTER

This document provides updated information for pages 258–71 of Lonely Planet's 9th-edition *Sri Lanka* guidebook. Information is presented in the same order as that found in the book; unaffected inland places are not covered. Information on specific places to stay is usually limited to those covered in the book, although, sometimes other establishments are present and may be open. As conditions change rapidly, it is best to verify the situation before you travel, especially if you hope to stay at a specific property. Note that even places that are open may not yet have had their land telephones restored, although mobile telephones and email are good alternatives. Also note that some places that claim to be open for business are not yet fully functional. Be sure to verify conditions before your visit. The places we list as open generally had most of their facilities intact or repaired by 1 March.

For updated information on Sri Lanka, see www.lonelyplanet.com/tsunami/srilanka.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

The tsunami damage to the East of Sri Lanka was significant. The first part of the country to be hit, with the greatest direct force, was the full coastal stretch of the districts of Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. This area suffered some of the worst disruption in terms of people killed and displaced, homes destroyed, and emergency camps established. Few communities (if any) escaped unscathed and many were so utterly demolished that everyone was evacuated. Much of the land along the east's coastal roads is sparsely populated and undeveloped; the little visible evidence of forceful flooding in these zones becomes overwhelmingly clear when you pass through rubble-heaped ghost villages and sun-scorched tent communities.

Fortunately, the traveller services of the larger coastal population centres such as Batticaloa and Trincomalee escaped the full punishing blow of the tsunami. Markets and shops are open, and electricity, water, gas delivery, telephones (thus Internet) and petrol stations are all operating. It is the smaller centres, most of which provided no travel amenities, where little can be found. The few small resort areas suffered differently: Arugam Bay, Uppuveli and Nilaveli are working hard and fast to repair themselves, and they're already fully able to support limited tourism; however, Kalkudah and Passekudah were practically wiped off the map.

In general, where services still remain you will not have a hard time finding a place to sleep or eat, but note that some of the better places are booked out by NGOs and charitable organisations. Despite this, prices have not gone up dramatically, although expect some increases as hoteliers attempt to recoup their losses and pay back private loans. Look for a brown water line on surviving walls and buildings to see the shocking depth of the tsunami flood waters.

An enormous number of aid groups are operating throughout the affected area. Sometimes it seems as though every other vehicle on the road belongs to an NGO. The largest organisations play lead roles in maintaining welfare camps, guaranteeing the provision of essential goods and services to the needy, and establishing new semipermanent transitional housing for the mid-term. At the time of research, very few foreign faces in the region were not somehow connected with relief and redevelopment work.

TRANSPORT

The train lines from Colombo terminating in Batticaloa and Trincomalee suffered damage near the two terminal stations, as did the stations themselves. Although full service has not yet been restored on either line, the tracks are passable. At present, there is only one train a day in each direction between Colombo and both destinations, a morning train to Trinco (arriving in the evening and returning overnight) and a night train to Batti (arriving in the morning and returning during the day). Regular service should begin again in April, which is when repairs to the stations should also be complete.

Bus service continues to reach into every corner of the island. This is even true south of the damaged bridge at Arugam Bay (service is limited and infrequent) and along the government-controlled day-only coastal road between Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Three-wheelers are as ubiquitous as ever.

Road quality is a major concern in the East. Between Trincomalee and Batticaloa, a long section from before Sunkankuli (south of Muttur) to just north of Batticaloa is controlled by the Sri Lankan Army (locals must register when entering and exiting) and is only open from 6am to 7pm. The road itself, number A15, is more often than not a single paved lane (always yield to larger, faster vehicles) in terrible disrepair, which makes for very slow going. Some long stretches are so deeply rutted that traffic moves at a crawl. Count on an average of no more than 20km/h. At Verugal, the government-run ferry (free in principle but not in practice) is a fun, two-vehicle, flat boat pulled by hand (yours included) across the narrow river. A new temporary bridge replacing the one swept away at Panichchankeni means through traffic is now possible. At Valaichchenai, all traffic in both directions and the train line share a single-lane bridge. The coastal road from Trincomalee to Muttur via Kinniyai is still off limits, forcing everyone to go via Kantale.

Between Batticaloa and Pottuvil, although road conditions are better, the A4 is still not very good. Heavy damage to the narrow causeways bridging lagoon entrances doesn't allow for quick progress, but at least the causeways are passable. The bridge between Pottuvil and Arugam Bay is due to open in mid-March, reopening the way for travel along the potholed route south to Okanda and Yala East National Park.

TRINCOMALEE

Although Trinco town occupies a peninsula bordered on the east by the Bay of Bengal, it did not fare as badly as many smaller villages elsewhere in the district. Keep this in mind when people talk about the hurt inflicted on Trinco; they're talking about the whole district, not just the town. In town, some structures backing onto Dutch Bay and Back Bay sustained significant damage, but repairs have been quick. The Inner Harbour was mostly unaffected.

Things to See & Do

The sites of interest in Trinco, most specifically Fort Frederick, Koneswaram Kovil and Swami Rock, survived the tsunami intact, as they were perched high above the water or built solidly enough to withstand its force. Elsewhere near Trinco, the Commonwealth War Cemetery, Kannyai Hot Wells and Velgam Vihara were too far inland to have suffered. Muttur and Kinniyai are rumoured to have been hit, but the extent of any damage could not be confirmed.

Places to Stay & Eat

In Trinco town, all hotels but one escaped the tsunami. The one damaged hotel is newly reopened. Two others are now known by different names and one closed before the tsunami. Those not mentioned below are open. All restaurants described in the book are still in operation

Dyke Corner Inn – open after full renovation; check out the tsunami picture album

Jegas Inn – closed prior to tsunami

Trinco Caterers Restaurant – open, but now called Siva Restaurant & Hotel

7 Islands Hotel & Park – open, but now called Hotel Welcome

UPPUVELI & NILAVELI

Both Uppuveli and Nilaveli were savaged by the tsunami, which hit the beaches at an angle, coming in from the left as you look out to sea. The oblique sweep of the wave spared many noncoastal properties since the water didn't directly follow the access roads and paths, most set perpendicular to the shore. Only the establishments right on the beach bore the full brunt of the black wall of water that felled walls and carried jetsam up to 500m inland. There were many deaths, but even more harrowing tales of escape, rescue and tearful family reunion.

After having been stripped of their sand in many places, the beaches are returning to normal, reacquiring their fine white powder. However, many parts are still strewn with washed-up tree limbs, tangles of uprooted undergrowth, and small, poignant hints of homes dragged into the wake. In the areas where fishers have returned to the water, the coast is clear.

Offshore, Pigeon and Coral Islands apparently weathered the waves. The impact on the nearby coral, however, is still being assessed. Snorkellers report heavy damage around Pigeon Island where debris collided with underwater obstacles. Scuba divers are probing gingerly around Trinco bay, concerned about major shifts in the sand and changes to the shape of the bay-floor shallows.

Places to Stay

Most beachfront places were pummelled into rubble, but flood waters also chased people and carried away objects for hundreds of meters inland. The private land of anyone caring to move ahead with life is mostly cleared, but there is no mistaking the scars left behind. Some pockets of uncleared damage still remain.

Uppuveli

Hotel New Sea Lord – open; six of nine beachfront rooms already restored (the remaining three to be dealt with in due course); the rest of the hotel untouched

Anton Tourist Guest House – open

French Garden Pragash Guest House – Partly open, with three rooms. Six more and the restaurant currently under reconstruction and ready by early March; full service by April. Boat trips to Pigeon Island possible now. Plans for a permanent scuba centre are being explored. Ask to see the post-tsunami picture album.

Nema Beach House – open

Lily Motel – open

Golden Beach Cottages – upstairs rooms open; downstairs rooms and cabanas under renovation for use by May

Hotel Club Oceanic – open; note clear water lines on hotel garden walls

Nilaveli

Hotel Coral Bay – flattened; construction currently under way that should see 10 rooms and the restaurant reopened by April and the pool to follow a month later

Hotel Sea Yard – Structurally intact, but mauled. No repair work visible. Count on several months before anything will reopen, if in fact that is the owner's plan.

Shahira Hotel – ten to 15 rooms and the restaurant, already under renovation, should be ready for occupation by end of April; cabanas will take longer

H & U – open after flood-prompted full renovation of rooms and restaurant

Hotel Nilaveli Garden Inn – Partly open; 15 of 25 rooms and restaurant unaffected. Boat available for trips to Pigeon Island.

Nilaveli Beach Hotel – restaurant and 40 of the original 85 rooms to be open by May; 23 rooms completely destroyed are eventually to be rebuilt

KALKUDAH & PASSEKUDAH

Nearly every one of the few structures still partly recognisable as buildings within a few hundred metres of the sea in both Kalkudah and Passekudah is currently being bulldozed into total nonexistence. The approaching tsunami was split by the promontory that divides Kalkudah Bay from Passekudah Bay, but behind the headlands it recombined with crushing force. The property damage and death toll here are heartbreaking. Within sight of the water there is practically nothing and no-one left, and there's nothing to support travellers. Even the beaches have been severely eroded in many places.

BATTICALOA

Keep in mind the difference between Batticaloa town and Batticaloa district. Batticaloa district, which stretches from the hand-pulled ferry crossing at Verugal in the north to the causeway just north of Kalmunai, is a low-lying area that encompasses extensive inland lagoons. It is also the location of a large number of villages with coastal housing situated either on the seashore or near the tidal end of the lagoons. For this reason, although the number of deaths is relatively low, the tally of affected families is almost twice that of other districts. Everyone in Batti district is related to someone lost or displaced. However, Batti town avoided the worst. With most of it set on a lagoon, it suffered severe flooding in some areas when the encroaching sea water forced the lagoon water to burst its banks. The residential coastal areas of Kallady were also hit quite hard.

Things to See & Do

The Dutch fort withstood the onslaught, however it and the approach to it are now entirely off limits (but with a little effort and a promise not to leave your vehicle, you may succeed in being allowed to drive to the front gate). Whether the surrounding lagoon's famous singing fish continue to sing remains to be seen.

Places to Stay & Eat

Hotels in Batti experienced serious flooding and ensuing damage to furniture and buildings.
Lake View Inn – open
Subaraj Inn – open
Riviera Resort – open after repaired flood damage; check out the photo album
Bridge View Restaurant – open after repaired flood damage
Hamsha Restaurant – open

ARUGAM BAY

Arugam Bay is in the south of Ampara, the Sri Lankan district that recorded the greatest number of casualties and displaced people and now has the largest number of welfare centres and refugee camps. The havoc wrought in Arugam Bay is equally visible north along the coast, where whole villages have been eradicated and all inhabitants transferred to camps. Although Arugam Bay was similarly savaged, the robustness of the community, which is camping out locally, and the tourist lure have inspired an impressive effort to rebuild swiftly. It will take at least two months to achieve a tolerable standard of welcome for the travellers expected to arrive with the surf season, but in a month enough rooms should be available to cover the first arrivals. In fact, even now, despite the tragedy, the village is able to extend its hospitality to nonresidents. For the latest about work under way in Arugam Bay, check out the Arugam Bay Hotel Association website at www.arugam.info.

Information

Most of the Bank of Ceylon office structure (and its sign) still exists, but no date has been set for it to resume services. The post office appears to have been completely demolished. There will be no Internet facilities until the phone service is re-established in April.

Things to See

The natural sites are as they were, including most of the wide sandy beaches. However, the roads giving easy access to Crocodile Rock and Elephant Rock are impossible to find if you didn't know where they were. Ask locals.

Surfing

The surf season doesn't begin until April and so no-one yet really knows what to expect. Did the force of the tsunami change the shape of the coast or the ocean floor in ways that will dramatically alter the breaks? Only time will tell. Time will also determine if the surfing supplies once stocked locally will be available to those who don't come fully outfitted. For example, the A-bay Surf Shop was smacked hard; the shell of the building is now, temporarily, the local police post. It's best to check the situation before you arrive.

Organised Tours

As fishers increasingly return to their trade they open the door for travellers to get back on the water. Dolphin-spotting trips are already being advertised by the United Deep Sea Fishermen Co-op Society and the United Fishermen Tsunami Rehabilitation Foundation. Call @0777 845266 for details. Locals expect the Pottuvil Lagoon ecotours to recommence as soon as canoes are made available. Unconfirmed word has it that mangroves survived intact, although the small Ecotour Information Centre and the Mangrove Seedling Nursery were destroyed. At the moment, no-one is running tours to Yala East National Park.

Places to Stay

Budget

Most of the hotels on the beach side of the road were extensively damaged, although most have begun the rebuilding process in anticipation of the April launch of the vacation and surf seasons. The few hotels on the land side of the road did not go unpunished, but have remained fully serviceable.

Beach Hut – by 1 April, three renovated rooms should be open, with more to follow

Sooriya's Beach Hut – open

Rupa's Beach Hotel & Restaurant – demolished; no sign of rebuilding

PH Siripala Palace – demolished; no sign of rebuilding

Sun Rise Beach Hotel – Five rooms currently under renovation will reopen on 5 April; five demolished cabanas and the restaurant expected to follow by 1 May. Well water is clean.

Arugambay Hillton Guest House – by April or May all eight rooms attached to the main house should be renovated and refurnished (the upstairs four are already open), the restaurant should be rebuilt, and clean drinking water should be guaranteed. Cabanas were demolished.

Hotel Sea Shore – severely damaged; no sign of rebuilding

Galaxy Beach Hotel – demolished; No sign of rebuilding

Mid Bay Hotel – three or four rooms survived and are currently inhabitable

Tsunami Beach Hotel – By virtue of its name, which will not change, this is probably soon to be the most famous hotel in Arugam Bay. In April or May, 10 newly rebuilt rooms, as well as a new restaurant, should be open for travellers. It may take longer for potable well water to become available.

Sam & Stu Beach Cabanas – demolished; no sign of rebuilding

Aloha – partly open; three damaged rooms should be ready by April or May

Midrange

Siam View Beach Hotel – Only two rooms survived, but the refurbishing of another five is almost complete and a few more are to be open by 1 April. The restaurant has been functioning by donation only, with all proceeds going to the community's homeless.

Chill Space Surf Café – By 1 May, after extensive renovation and rebuilding, six cabanas will be ready. The café is now better known as Mambo's Place.

Hideaway – Partly open. Two cabanas were lost, but the foundations are being prepared for rebuilding. All other services are normal. Heavily used by NGOs.

Stardust Beach Hotel – Three upstairs rooms open. By 1 June three more rooms and the restaurant should be open and clean well water available. The demolished yoga room, beach restaurant and cabanas will follow at a later date.

Tri Star Beach Hotel – open; all services functioning

Places to Eat

Food availability (for meals or takeaway packets) was confirmed at Siam View Beach Hotel, Hideaway and Tri Star Beach Hotel, although small meals may be available at other places. Many additional restaurants attached to hotels are being rebuilt, and all local eateries were either carried away by the water or are in the process of being overhauled.

Getting There & Away

Two segments of the bridge between Pottuvil and Arugam Bay were washed away by the tsunami. The Indian Army is labouring night and day to reopen the span to all traffic by mid-March. In the meantime, the Sri Lankan Navy has provided a free replacement boat-shuttle service from 8am to 6pm. Alternatively, a sand bar across the mouth of the lagoon allows for foot, bicycle and motorcycle traffic, although some wading, especially at high tide, may be required. There was unconfirmed but oft-mentioned word of a new 10km unpaved path

around the lagoon from Pottuvil to Arugam Bay that is passable by all vehicles. A limited and infrequent bus service is available from the Arugam Bay side boat-shuttle drop going south to Panama and Okanda. The bus service north from Pottuvil is back to normal.

AROUND ARUGAM BAY

All sites inland from Arugam Bay, such as Lahugala National Park and Magul Maha Vihara, sustained no damage. The coastal villages of Panama and Okanda also came through more or less intact. In Okanda, neither the Hindu *kovil* nor the Kudimbigala forest hermitage was caught. Yala East National Park was badly flooded, but the waters have receded.