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# Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka, known to many as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," is an island nation with a history and cultural richness that defy its modest size on the map. Located just off the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka has for centuries been a crossroads of trade, culture, and migration, shaped by the ebb and flow of civilizations, kingdoms, and empires. Its landscapes—ranging from misty highlands and verdant rainforests to sun-soaked beaches and bustling coastal cities—provide a dramatic backdrop for a story that winds through thousands of years.

At the heart of Sri Lanka's identity is its layered history, which spans from prehistoric settlements to ancient Sinhalese kingdoms, from the flourishing of Buddhism to the arrival of European colonial powers, and finally to the emergence of a modern, independent nation. The relics of this past can be seen in the island's colossal stone stupas, intricate frescoes, sacred temples, and colonial-era architecture. Yet, history here is not just a relic of the past but a living part of daily life, woven into customs, festivals, and collective memory.

Equally dynamic are Sri Lanka's people, an intricate tapestry of ethnicities, languages, and religions. The island is home to Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Hindus, Muslim Moors, Christians, Malays, Burghers, and the indigenous Vedda people. Each group brings its own traditions, stories, and flavors, contributing to a vibrant, sometimes challenging, but always fascinating cultural mosaic. Shared hospitality and warmth greet visitors at every turn, offering insight into a nation renowned for its friendliness as much as for its resilience.

Sri Lanka's recent history has not been without hardship. The 26-year civil war between the government and the LTTE left deep scars, reshaping national politics, society, and international perceptions. Yet, since the end of the conflict in 2009, the country has embarked on a difficult journey of healing and development—marked by moments of optimism and setbacks alike. Its economy, once hailed for its growth, has weathered crises and undergone significant transformations, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges faced by postwar societies in a rapidly changing world.

Environmental stewardship and the responsible management of natural resources have become critical priorities in a nation celebrated for its biodiversity. At the same time, issues such as deforestation, climate change, and coastal degradation threaten Sri Lanka's ecological heritage, underscoring the delicate balance between preservation and progress.

For readers interested in understanding Sri Lanka, whether as students, travelers, or

the simply curious, this book provides a comprehensive portrait. From its geographical wonders and complex history to its vibrant cultural life and contemporary realities, "Sri Lanka: Portrait of a Country" aims to illuminate the island's many facets. Through these pages, you are invited to journey into the heart of a country that is as remarkable for its endurance and diversity as for its enduring beauty.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Island and Its Landscape

Sri Lanka, often lovingly called the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," isn't just a poetic moniker; it's a geographical reality. This teardrop-shaped island, officially the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, nestles in South Asia, gracefully separated from the Indian peninsula by the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait. Historically known as Ceylon, its strategic position on ancient maritime trade routes, from the fabled Silk Road to modern shipping lanes, has always been its destiny, shaping its history and its people.

Measuring a total area of 65,610 square kilometers, with a mere 980 square kilometers of that being water, Sri Lanka offers a surprisingly diverse landscape for its size. Imagine a land mostly composed of low, flat to gently rolling plains, then, almost abruptly, a dramatic rise in the south-central interior – the mountainous upcountry. This geographical juxtaposition is one of the island's defining features, creating distinct climatic zones and a rich tapestry of ecosystems.

The island's extensive coastline, stretching for a remarkable 1,340 kilometers, is a testament to its oceanic embrace. From golden sandy beaches to rocky outcrops and bustling port cities, the coast plays a pivotal role in Sri Lankan life, influencing everything from fishing communities to the thriving tourism industry. It is along these shores that much of the island's history has unfolded, with invaders and traders arriving by sea for millennia.

Dominating the heart of the country are the Central Highlands, a spectacular region that forms the literal and metaphorical backbone of Sri Lanka. Here, you'll find the island's highest mountains, including the majestic Pidurutalagala, which proudly stands at 2,524 meters (8,281 feet). This elevated terrain isn't just about peaks; it also encompasses a high plateau, stretching approximately 65 kilometers from north to south, carved by the relentless forces of nature over eons. It's a place of breathtaking vistas, misty tea plantations, and cool, crisp air, a stark contrast to the humid coastal plains below.

The Central Highlands are also the hydrological cradle of the island. Nearly all of Sri Lanka's rivers originate in these elevated regions, embarking on a radial journey outward, ultimately flowing towards the sea. This natural drainage system has been ingeniously harnessed for centuries, with ancient civilizations constructing intricate networks of reservoirs, or "tanks," to irrigate the fertile plains, a testament to their advanced understanding of water management. These ancient engineering marvels continue to serve the agricultural needs of the country to this day.

Sri Lanka's climate is quintessential tropical monsoon, meaning warm weather is a year-round constant. However, the island rarely feels oppressively hot thanks to the moderating influence of the surrounding ocean winds and a generous amount of moisture in the air. The average temperature across the country typically hovers between 28 and 30 °C, making it a perpetually pleasant destination.

Yet, this generalized warmth belies the subtle but significant variations across the island. Venture into the Central Highlands, and you'll discover a dramatic drop in temperature. Nuwara Eliya, a charming hill station nestled in this region, experiences average lows of a brisk 16 °C (60.8 °F), where frost can even make a rare appearance - a surprising phenomenon in a tropical nation. In stark contrast, Trincomalee, on the northeast coast, can see temperatures soar to a high of 32 °C (89.6 °F), reflecting the diverse microclimates present.

The rhythm of life in Sri Lanka is intrinsically linked to its two primary monsoon seasons. The northeast monsoon brings its rains from December to March, affecting the eastern and northern parts of the island. Then, from June to October, the southwest monsoon makes its presence felt, drenching the southwestern regions. These monsoons are not just weather patterns; they dictate agricultural cycles, influence travel plans, and are deeply woven into the cultural fabric of the island, often celebrated with unique traditions and rituals.

These rainfall patterns further divide the country into distinct climatic zones. The "wet zone" in the southwest, encompassing much of the Central Highlands and the southwestern coast, receives an annual average of over 2500 millimeters of rainfall. This abundance of water supports lush rainforests, tea plantations, and a vibrant agricultural sector. It's a perpetually green and fertile landscape, often shrouded in a soft, ethereal mist.

Conversely, the "dry zone," covering the southeast, east, and northern parts of the island, receives significantly less precipitation, typically between 1200 and 1900 millimeters annually. Despite its name, the dry zone is not arid, but rather experiences distinct wet and dry periods. This region is characterized by thorny scrublands, ancient reservoirs, and a reliance on irrigation for agriculture, particularly rice cultivation. Intermediate zones, receiving rainfall between 1,750 mm and 2,500 mm, bridge the gap between these two extremes, showcasing a blend of characteristics from both the wet and dry zones.

The island's geology is predominantly composed of ancient Precambrian metamorphic rock, which has been shaped by millions of years of geological activity. This ancient bedrock is responsible for the diverse mineral resources found throughout the island, particularly its famous gemstones. The soils vary significantly across these climatic zones, ranging from fertile red-yellow podzolic soils in the wet zone, ideal for tea

cultivation, to reddish-brown earth and alluvial soils in the dry zone, suitable for rice.

This intricate interplay of geography and climate has profoundly influenced Sri Lanka's biodiversity, creating a multitude of habitats for a rich array of flora and fauna. From the dense rainforests of the wet zone, teeming with endemic species, to the dry zone's national parks, home to elephants, leopards, and a vast array of birdlife, the island is a recognized biodiversity hotspot. Conservation efforts are increasingly vital to protect these unique ecosystems, which are a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's natural heritage and a significant draw for ecotourism.

The island's position as a maritime hub has also meant that its shores are constantly shaped by ocean currents and coastal processes. The coral reefs that fringe parts of its coastline are not only vital ecosystems but also act as natural barriers, protecting the land from the full force of the ocean. However, these delicate environments are increasingly under threat from human activities and the impacts of climate change.

In essence, Sri Lanka's geography is far more than just a collection of landforms and climatic conditions; it is a fundamental character in the island's story. It has dictated settlement patterns, influenced economic activities, shaped cultural practices, and continues to pose challenges and offer opportunities for its people. Understanding this dynamic landscape is the first step in appreciating the complexities and enduring charm of this remarkable island nation.

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