

Jaffna & the North

Researched 28 February to 1 March 2005

NOTE ON THIS CHAPTER

This document provides updated information for pages 272-282 of Lonely Planet's 9th edition *Sri Lanka* guidebook. Information is presented in the same order as that found in the book (inland places unaffected by the tsunami 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. Since conditions change rapidly, it is best to verify the situation before you travel, especially if you hope to stay at a specific property. Be sure to verify conditions before your visit. The places we list as open below generally had most of their facilities intact or repaired by 1 March.

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

GENERAL CONDITIONS

The North of Sri Lanka includes the Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Vavuniya and Mannar districts. Of these, only Jaffna, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, the coastal districts facing east and north, were touched by the killer waves. And of these three, only Jaffna is easily accessible to travellers. Mullaitivu was certainly hit very hard - 3,000 dead or missing and more than 22,000 displaced in 23 welfare centres - but its location, with Kilinochchi, within LTTE-controlled territory and requiring special passes for entry and overnighing, has placed it well outside the standard travel circuit. Thus, of the northern areas, the Jaffna peninsula is all that will be considered here.

Fortunately for Jaffna town, it lies sheltered on the south-western edge of the peninsula, further protected by the scattering of islands in the Palk Strait to the west. It was, with the exception of some flooding, untouched by the tsunami. Markets and shops are open, electricity, water, gas delivery, telephones (thus Internet) and petrol stations are all operating, as they are throughout the peninsula interior and even where tsunami damage was worst. Only the settled northern coastal areas, from Point Pedro west to the islands, really suffered from direct impact. The low-lying eastern shoreline was also hit, but it is sparsely populated, heavily mined, and part of an LTTE-controlled area. Verification of conditions and beaches there was impossible.

Of the affected communities along the north coast, only Point Pedro, Velvedditturai and their nearby suburbs can be freely visited. The considerable damage still visible here is in the form of hardy buildings felled and fields of wooden shanty towns scoured as far as two hundred meters from the water. Similar damage extends into the vast no- or limited-access, high-security army and navy garrisons west of Point Pedro, around Palali and Kankasanturai, and further west along the often-blocked beach road. There are still no traveller accommodations and few traveller services outside of Jaffna.

The islands in the Palk Strait west of the peninsula bathe in extended shallows. Although the tsunami had finally lost its force by the time it reached them, the water displacement was still significant, especially given the minimal water depths. There was not much major structural or infrastructural damage reported.

As with elsewhere in the country, there is a stunning number of UN agencies and aid groups operating in the Jaffna district. Many of these groups had already established offices in the post-conflict years, so workers live in special quarters and haven't overwhelmed the traveller resources. Jaffna was an increasingly hot destination prior to the tsunami for vacationing Sri Lankans (in-country residents and visiting expats) eager to see the North after years of insecurity, and the influx has been even more impressive in the aftermath, with many Tamil emigrants returning with relief money and material. These were the bulk of the travellers at the time of research, although several foreign faces not immediately connected with an aid organisation were also noted.

TRANSPORT

The train line from Colombo still terminates at Vavuniya before the LTTE checkpoints 150km to the south. There is absolutely no rail service in Jaffna district, much of the track having long been pulled up or damaged during the many years of fighting.

The tsunami disrupted almost no bus services around the district, all of which have returned to normal and are very good, covering all open areas as well as a few restricted ones (open sites within army camps). The main bus station, in Jaffna town between Hospital Road and Power House Road, right at the edge of the market streets, is the departure point for almost every line. Ask locals which bus will get you where. Except on the north coast, where water damage was added to general neglect, most of the district roads are easily passable with any vehicle. Some causeways and bridges that didn't fare well after the flooding are currently being repaired, but open. Vans, cars and trishaws (the latter known locally as "autos") can be hired for movement around the area.

JAFFNA

Jaffna town was, for all practical purposes, not directly affected by the tsunami.

Things to See & Do

A recent newspaper article tells that foreign experts will soon be arriving in Sri Lanka to review the damage to any World Heritage sites, like the Dutch-built fort in Jaffna. However, no harm seems to have come to its exterior and the interior is still an off-limits military base.

Getting There & Away

The shallow lagoons south and west of the Jaffna peninsula were partially flooded after December 26, a situation made slightly worse by January rains, but no more than usual. The Elephant Pass causeway remains open.

AROUND JAFFNA

The northern coastal attractions are the only sites that experienced temporary service or access interruptions. They are mentioned below. All other places on interest, if not mentioned, are fine.

LTTE Sites

The beach-front properties of the village of Valvedditturai were mulched by the tsunami. Most of the structures between the road and the beach were levelled and the land-side buildings suffered heavily. The beaches, once apparently wide and sandy, are now uninviting exposed rock wet with tidal pools. Unconfirmed word has it that both the Prabhakaran family house and nearby *kovil* sustained no damage.

Beaches

The beach 2km east of Point Pedro is currently inaccessible, behind LTTE checkpoints. The beaches just to the east of the lighthouse are today, again, busy with fisherfolk and littered with nets. There is plenty of fine sand, but the devastation to the surrounding property (and all along Beach Road), as well as frequent razor-wire-enclosed army bunkers doesn't necessarily make for a comfortable beach-blanket environment.

Palm Beach at KKS is still completely unreachable, lost behind the barriers of a high security zone.

Springs

The Keerimalai spring, a large, walled-in, sunken bath a few steps off the beach, was swamped and corrupted by the tsunami. The pools were siphoned out and are now back as they were. There was no damage to the cement structure. The high security zone controlling access to it is still intact. Cameras and phones must be checked at the control point, but an escort was not required as the road is now signed and under the careful surveillance of armed soldiers every 50 meters or so.

Islands

The low-lying islands fared well, despite the very shallow surrounding waters. Although the tsunami did come ashore along the northern beaches of Karaitivu (known locally only as Karainagar) and sent a strong flooding swell across the causeways and down the channels between the islands, little information was available about the enduring effect of the flooding. Nor was much evidence of disruption visible at the time of research, with the exception of several small collapsed market stalls in the parking area of Casuarina Beach on Karaitivu. The beach itself looks fine.