



# Smiles, Sun and Sightseeing

By Christina Fernandes

**As soon as you step onto your Sri Lankan Airlines flight, you feel the holiday spirit as the attendants' warm smiles and colourful saris set the mood.**

*Ayubowan* — *welcome* — is a word you hear a lot in Sri Lanka, from the moment you arrive until the time you leave. And the Sri Lankans say it with such sincerity that it makes you feel as though they really mean it; it's not just a phrase to please the tourists.

Our first drive in the country lead us through a vibrant hustle and bustle — cheerfully painted Ashok Leyland buses, buffalo-drawn carts, scooters carrying basket loads of live chickens, lorries, bicycles and rickshaws mingled in a cacophony of beeping horns.

A man was brushing his teeth on the corner

of the street while chatting to another through the foam around his mouth. A group of women in floral-print dresses strolled past a sarong-clad shopkeeper sweeping his front step, his fat belly jiggling merrily in rhythm with his strokes.

Children in white school uniforms were chattering as they ran down the street while a Buddhist monk in a bright orange robe walked along at a more dignified pace. Dogs napped lazily on the side of streets unimpressed by the flurry.

Every now and again a break in the throng of buildings offered a glimpse of vast green patches and rich red-brown soil dotted with palm trees, their round, leafy tufts rustling in the wind atop skinny trunks, clusters of yellow king coconuts bunched up beneath them.

Before we knew, it, we had reached the Sri Lankan capital for the first stage of our four-day media familiarisation trip.

## Quaint Beauty

Colombo does not seem like a large city. Most of the buildings are small and the few tall structures, most notably the World Trade Centre, stick out, looking about as comfortable as a giraffe in a crowd of bunnies. But this does not take away from the quaint beauty of the city, enhanced by charming colonial-style structures such as the Old Parliament House, the Central Clock Tower and the red and white Cargills and Millers department stores.

The Independence Hall, with its statue of Don Stephen Senanayake, the father of the nation, is a must-see, as is Viramahavadevi Park with its famous Buddha statue.

Colombo is a great place for shopping — brave the crowds for the best bargains at the chaotic House of Fashion or admire the stylish wares at Odel mall.



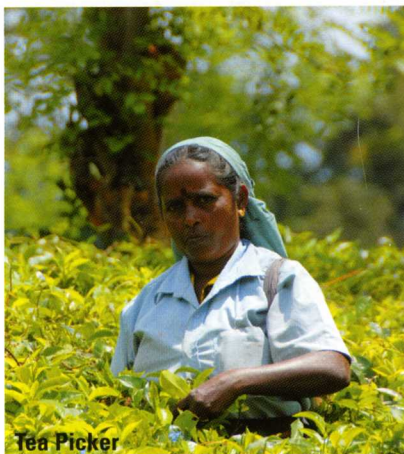
After only one day, we concluded our whirlwind tour of the capital and embarked toward Dambulla in the mountainous centre of the country.

Let me briefly address Sri Lankan driving conditions here. Be prepared for long journeys: roads are narrow and oftentimes winding, so overtaking is tricky — but that doesn't hold back local drivers. There was many a time when I found myself staring into the grill of an oncoming truck wondering whether this would be the last thing I'd ever see. Or I was staring down from the mini-bus into a scooter driver's face that clearly said he worried about exactly the same thing. Nevertheless, it took us a good six hours for the 150km from Colombo to Dambulla.



Painting at Tooth Relic Temple





Tea Picker

### Road Trip

Don't worry though, these road trips should be immensely entertaining. On our drive, we encountered an amazing array of wildlife, from a land monitor lizard crossing the road to a bright blue king fisher bird hovering over a creek and a peacock perched in a tree.

We also saw workers loading an elephant onto a lorry before we stopped to admire coconut peelers perform their back-breaking task — gathering about 1,500 to 2,000 of these fruits every day! The king coconut tree is a marvellously versatile and useful plant. Apparently, its juice cures everything from diarrhoea to hangovers, its oil is used to nourish hair, its husks are made into rugs and its leaves are used for roofing.

When we stopped for a quick "T and T" (tea and toilet), as our guide Victor called it, we met a man dressed in a loin-cloth who was sitting on a tall wooden structure playing his flute. Fascinated, we all stopped to take pictures. With a smile, he handed us a small piece of paper — his business card! On top, the words "Flute Man" loomed in capital letters, followed by his address. He then showed us an entire picture album of himself with various tourists. They had sent these photos to him from Australia, the USA, the Far East and Europe. We also met a chap with a king cobra and a monkey in a cute costume, but he didn't attract half the atten-

tion that Flute Man got.

On our arrival at the Amaya Lake Hotel, we were welcomed in style: three elderly ladies were beating a huge welcome drum, incense smoke billowing from underneath it. The hotel itself is spectacular, situated next to the lake with a view of the rose quartz mountains across the water.

The plan for our first day in Dambulla was an elephant track through the jungle at Habarana and a jeep safari in Minneriya National Park, but things would not turn out that way for me.

### Downpour

On our way to the elephants, Sally, a fellow journalist, looked at the clouds remarking "I really hope it rains." She got what she wished for — and then some! About five minutes into the track, the monsoons began pouring down and we were drenched within seconds. When we returned to the camp an hour later I was shivering uncontrollably. Our kind bus driver Opul quickly found me some dry clothes and even fetched a shot of Arrak (Sri Lankan coconut liquor) to warm me up.

Since it was still raining heavily, several of us chickened out of the open jeep safari and only a few brave souls carried on their quest for a glimpse of wildlife. I was later assured that the wild elephants and antelopes were worth defying the elements for. But I'm not too worried about having missed the experience — after all I had already encountered a giant lizard, an elephant on a lorry and a monkey in a dress earlier that day.

The next morning we watched a glorious sunrise over the lake, casting the mountains in a bright orange-red as steam floated skyward out of the surrounding grass.

Then we visited Sigiriya, a massive rock rising out of the jungle near Dambulla. It was used as a hermitage by Buddhist monks in ancient times and boasts a monastic complex with caved temple ruins, pools and ponds amidst Asia's oldest surviving landscaped gardens. Sigiriya is famed for its frescoes painted into the rock and the "Lion stairway" of which only the giant paws remain.

### Sacred Tooth

After this, we progressed to Kandy, the picturesque old highland capital that houses the Temple of the Tooth Relic, where a canine tooth of the Lord Buddha is kept. The sacred site is bursting with Sri Lankan and foreign visitors. School children on a day trip mingle with praying grandmothers and spellbound tourists amidst the mighty sound of the

sacred drums.

As Sri Lanka is famed for its tea, a visit to a plantation is well worth your while. We toured Geragama, where we watched tea pickers and factory workers and got to taste our own delicious cup of broken Orange Pekoe. You will learn to appreciate all the work that goes into one little cuppa — just have a look at the pickers' chapped hands or stand for a minute next to the ovens where they dry the leaves.

Sri Lanka has many attractions, from its rich cultural heritage to its breathtaking landscapes. But the country's biggest asset is its genuinely nice people. As you walk down the street, they will make eye contact just to give



Camelion

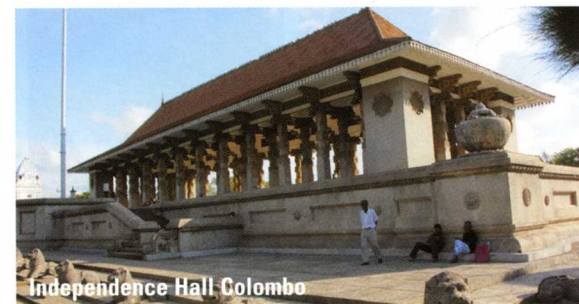
you a smile. Once, we were stuck in a traffic jam in Kandy and decided to walk. As we passed a packed public bus, we did not see the frustrated, annoyed faces you would expect. Instead, people were smiling at us and waving hello. The entire bus was singing, someone was beating a drum and others were clapping their hands. It must have been incredibly hot and uncomfortable in those crammed conditions, but nobody complained.

The Sri Lankans' cheerful disposition is particularly impressive when you consider the tumultuous times they live in; facing political instability and the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami.

It was with a heavy heart that I said goodbye to Sri Lanka and its people. I will most certainly go back. ●

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*Sri Lankan Airlines flies from Bahrain to Colombo four times per week.*



Independence Hall Colombo



Sigiriya