



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.

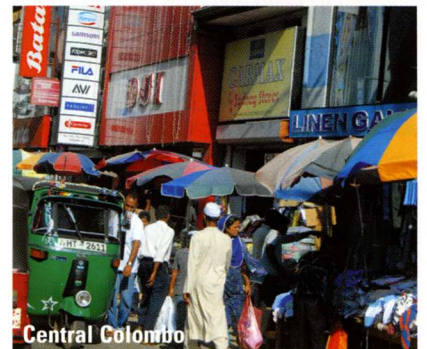
Before we knew, it, we had reached the Sri Lankan capital for the first stage of our four-day media familiarisation trip.

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

