

Beaches, Buddhas, and Beaming Smiles:

Sri Lanka on the brink of peace

Story and photos by Shelley Wood



We set off at sunrise, leaving the key in the door of our cliff-top bungalow, hoisting our packs onto our backs, and heading down the broken road that winds through the thick tea bushes to the bus stop at the junction below. Yesterday we'd hiked Ella Peak in the sleepy tea-growing village of Ella, high in the craggy hill-country. Just a few days previously we were wandering the ancient ruined palace of Sigiriya rising like a lone molar out of the plains. By mid-day – and my husband can hardly contain himself – we will have descended by bus to the coast and will be basking on the southern beaches.

When we return to Canada a few weeks later, people will ask us how we spent our month in Sri Lanka, and we'll smile smugly and say we did everything we wanted to do, saw all the places we wanted to see. We got around, and we stayed put. The tight-for-time traveller's dream vacation.

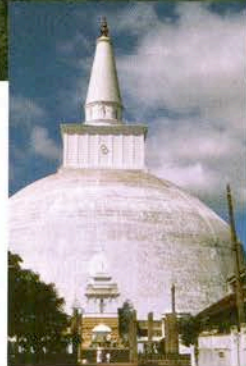
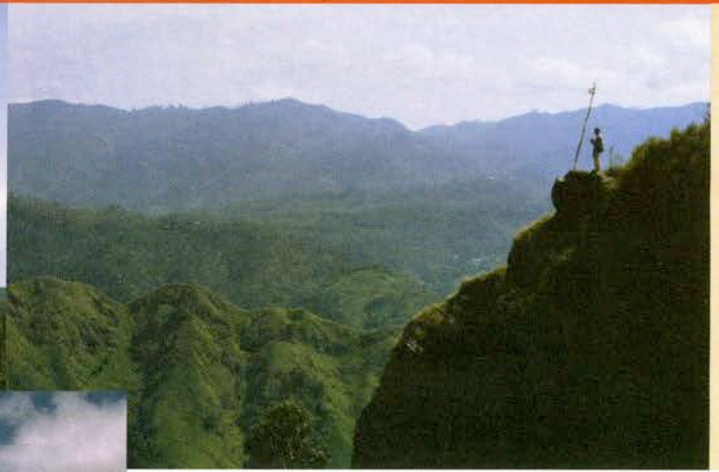
At 66,000 square kilometres – roughly double the size of Vancouver Island with a passable road system and aging Colonial-era railway – Sri Lanka is fundamentally navigable. Diverse terrain also insures that monsoon season or cool temperatures in one region are offset by a drier or hotter climate half-a-day's travel away.

Twenty-years of civil war between the government of the largely Buddhist nation and the militant Tamil Tigers representing the country's Hindu minority have devastated Sri Lanka's economy. The tourism industry has steadily dwindled, collapsing many of the once thriving hotels along the pristine beaches but, paradoxically, preserving some of the still-pristine beaches themselves.

Located off the south-east tip of India, Sri Lanka, (formerly Ceylon) offers a combination of ancient civilizations, unspoilt coastline, mountain hiking, and urban bustle, all the while maintaining a certain self-preoccupation that, along with war worries, has to some extent safeguarded it from the explosive tourism which has transformed some of its neighbouring countries and blighted their beaches.

In late 2000, a new round of peace talks began between the government and the Tamil Tigers, this time brokered by the Norwegian government. By the time we left Canada for our Sri Lankan holiday, the fourth round of these peace talks had passed without mishap, and media pundits were expressing cautious optimism that real change could come out of the ongoing negotiations.

We had no intention of visiting the conflict zones. Most of the ethnic clashes in Sri Lanka over the past two decades have taken place in the Jaffna peninsula to the north and in sections of the Eastern Coast, with the occasional suicide bombing rocking the country's capital, Colombo,



on the west coast. While North Americans have largely steered clear of Sri Lanka over the course of the civil war, British and European sun-seekers have continued to be drawn to the country, which, over the past 500 years, was occupied first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the British before gaining independence in 1948. The west coast beaches south of Colombo are splattered with high-end hotels, catering largely to these European all-inclusive vacation seekers who head straight from the airport to their package hotel and scarcely venture into the “cultural triangle” or the mountain country.

Cultural Triangle

Not us. We spent our first two nights in Sri Lanka in the now shabby tourist beach town of Negombo, north of Colombo. A mild anxiety about the frenetic press of Colombo itself spurred us to avoid spending any more time than necessary in the capital city, passing through only to catch our train inland and northwards to Anuradhapura, the northernmost point of the country’s cultural region.

The cultural triangle, spanning between the ancient Sinhalese capitals of Anuradhapura, Pollanaruwa, and Kandy, contains ruins of palaces dating back to the third century BC, the 2000 year old Sacred Bodhi tree, ancient Buddhist temples, called dagobas, and the first century BC “cave temples” of Dambulla, all of which are being gradually re-claimed from centuries of neglect, namely a plodding vegetative occupation by the surrounding jungle.

The more modern white-domed dagobas, similar but not identical to the stupas of India and Nepal and the wats of Southeast Asia, are found throughout Sri Lanka. Their ancient, massive predecessors, however, are concentrated in the cultural region where they are being coaxed back into their original condition, some still bristling with scaffolding and half-shaved of their centuries-old beards of dense greenery, thanks to restoration efforts by the Sri Lankan Government and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Everywhere we go we’re greeted by smiles. Our guidebook had told us that Sri Lankans were famous for their wide, white smiles and we are not disappointed. The smiles are often, but not always, followed by persuasive sales pitches pedalling an astonishing range of items, at negotiable prices. Coconuts, “guided” temple tours, sapphires, cinnamon sticks, tea, ayurvedic miracle cures: everything, at any time, is potentially for sale.

After exploring some of the sites further north, we spent the last few days of our cultural submersion in Kandy, Sri Lanka’s second largest city. As the primary gateway to the hill country, Kandy is significantly cooler than Colombo and on the major rail routes to the coast and into the higher mountain towns. After several days in Kandy, we set out for the bigger terrain, braving the petrifying bus trips on narrow roads through precipitous mountains blanketed with tea bushes, all in the hopes of hiking in the high-country.

Hiking per se in Sri Lanka takes some forethought. Despite spectacular mountains easily accessible by bus or train, the only established hikes in the hill country are to vantage points more renowned for their cultural or religious significance than for the trails traversed to reach them.

The premier “hike” in Sri Lanka is probably Adam’s peak. At 2224 metres, Adams Peak or Sri Pada (“Sacred Footprint”) is one of the highest mountains in the country and a 1000-year-old pilgrimage site, believed, depending on your faith, to

host the footprint of Adam, Buddha, Shiva, or St Thomas. Traditionally, pilgrims, now joined by tourists, make the trek up the 5000-plus steps in the middle of the night so as to be at the peak in time for dawn.

Further east, Ella peak and the meandering plateau through Horton’s Plains to World’s End are the other popular hikes of the hill country. Informal tramps through the mountain tea plantations can also reward hikers with spectacular waterfalls and a first-hand appreciation of how Ceylon’s famous tea industry has transformed the indigenous forests into gleaming corduroy lines of dense tea bushes clinging to the red earth. The hill-country, like the hill stations of India, also offers year-round respite from the heat of the beaches and lower-lying plains.

Sun and Surf

It is the second half of our trip, spent hopping between beaches on the South Coast, that had been the most hotly disputed itinerary before we left home. To hear my husband tell people what we’d be doing in Sri Lanka was to believe we were going on separate vacations. He had his heart set on surfing, spending hours before our departure combing the Internet for Sri Lankan surf spots. I, by contrast, assumed that a country so close to India, and so superficially similar, would undoubtedly abound with yoga Ashrams and retreats.

In the end we pass a blissful week surfing and sunning on the lazy crescent beach of Mirissa, before moving on to two other beachside towns offering twice-daily yoga, a compromise that suits us both.

For our last few days in the country we decide to head to Colombo, our initial unease about the capital evaporated after four weeks of friendly people, relatively effortless travel, and no concrete evidence of the civil war other than the soul-blistering poverty in so many of the little villages. Colombo proves to be a vibrant city plump with good restaurants, shopping, and an arts scene said by many to be among the best in Southern Asia.

One question in particular followed us wherever we went throughout Sri Lanka, from the coast through the mountains to the sea again. Children would run beside us on the dusty roads, shouting it at top-volume. The shy proprietor at our guesthouse phrased the question the same way. An old man with a beaming tooth-scarce smile, wriggled through the crush of passengers on a mountain bus to ask: “What country? What country?”

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It is a favourite opener for the people of Sri Lanka, many of whom know no more English to extend the conversation further, but are unabashedly delighted that we have come from Canada and that we are enjoying their beautiful island country. The Sinhalese people are well-accustomed to the British, their sun-worship, and their umpteen cups of tea. They are equally familiar with German tourists spilling out of charter flights and hustling to the beaches where they, too, roll pinkly in the sun. Canadians and Americans, by contrast, are much less common in this country and therefore more novel to the local people. During our four weeks we met only a handful of other Canadians and one solo American traveller.

War and Peace

When we meet people with more fluency in English, we counter with our own stock question: Will the peace talks bring stability, at last, to Sri Lanka? The range of responses is off-putting. Many people are quick to point out

that the localized civil war has never touched their palm-lined stretch of beach or mountaintop guesthouse. Some express a pat optimism that seems more wishful thinking than considered response. Still others argue vehemently that the Tigers are asking for too much and not giving enough in return, that one side will eventually back out of the talks. Indeed, every time we get a hold of a local paper we read that the Tigers continue to abduct children from families in the north and east to serve in their rebel army.

Devinda, whose old colonial home in a coastal town too small to appear on most maps has been reinvented as a yoga retreat, points out that the current peace talks differ from previous ones. This time, he says, sipping thoughtfully from a cup of ubiquitous Ceylon tea, is the first time the wider world has taken a keen interest in the discussions.

"The prospects for peace look good," he says. "There's a new dimension to these talks because every time they had negotiations before, there was no powerful mediating party. Now with the involvement of the Norwegians the whole world is watching Sri Lanka to see whether conflict resolution can be adapted here. So the outcome of the talks looks brighter."

He admits that the future of his yoga endeavour, as with the tourism industry throughout the island, depends on the talks going well. "There have always been Brits and Germans in Sri Lanka who are used to visiting the south, where there haven't been problems anyhow. But the rest of the world thinks that peace in the whole of Sri Lanka will be a very key issue before they start coming."

I expect they'll come, slowly at first, but the secret will get out. It strikes us as we are leaving Sri Lanka that we are taking more home with us than we were cajoled into buying or bargaining for: that is, a sense of having been to an inadvertently preserved part of the planet at a priceless moment in history. Peace may come haltingly to Sri Lanka, bringing not only a gradual uplift to its economy and people, but also, inevitably, more visitors like us. ■

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