

SRI LANKA

variety is the spice of this "resplendent land"

words and photos by steve bunk

TWENTY YEARS AGO, Sri Lankans weren't allowed in the Hill Club, a pseudo Tudor mansion on a knoll above the crowded lanes of Nuwara Eliya. Now it's run by a Lankan, but male guests still have to wear a tie for dinner. The room-boy requests \$7 for the brown striped yoke he brings me. "I don't want to buy it, I just want to rent it."

"Red?" he replies. "The brown color is perhaps ratshit, sir?" "Hire," I explain, and manage to get an assurance that \$5 will be refunded on



Photos, from top left to right: cobra charmer puts on a show at the park in Colombo; coir, or fibre from the coconut's outer husk, is used to make matting, brooms, rope, etc; one of countless stalls at the pettah, Colombo's chaotic marketplace; the Neptune Hotel and (second row) the Catamaran Beach Hotel are two among many comfortable places to stay on Sri Lanka's west coast; near Ratnapura, a miner sifts gravel like a gold-panner, in search of rubies, quartz, tourmaline and a host of other stones; one of four giant statues all hewn from the same rock in the 12th century AD at Polonnaruwa; ancient frescoes painted in caves at Dambulla.



Top: a typical market scene, in Nuwara Eliya. Above: traditional dancers in Kandy, the capital.

safe return of the thing. In the drawing room the women come and go, talking of a plan to put toilets in the guest rooms. An Englishman with a gin and tonic in one hand and a goatee in the other, declaims among a coterie of deeply polite Lankans on the good old days, when women were only allowed in the club by a side door. "The baggage came in the front door," he concludes, and my companion Nirmala de Mel, a genteel travel agent, winces.

In ever louder tones, the Englishman, a long-time Sri Lanka resident, recites an anecdote about a Canadian who rebuked him for mistreating a Sinhalese national. "Who are *you*?" the Englishman says he retorted. "I'm Jack So and So from Ceylon."

Even 35 years after the end of British rule, this is the sort of legacy Sri Lanka still must erase. A country civilised for 25 centuries, yet occupied successively by the

Lanka is now working to attain self-sufficiency under a non-aligned, social democracy. Evidence of this struggle is everywhere.

Not far from Katunayake Airport, the fishing village of Negombo is a cultural pastiche. Bullock carts, rickshaws, pedestrians, a husband, wife and child sharing a one-speed bicycle, dodge the occasional 15-year-old Morris that weaves through the busy village square. This area is called "Little Rome", says Arthur, my driver and guide for the journey. His surname, Silva, is another legacy of the Portuguese, who encouraged Lankans to change their names and adopt Roman Catholicism. Negombo today is primarily Catholic and replete with Silvas and de Mels.

But the ancient traditions remain as well. Karavas, the fishermen caste, still ply the seas in their catamarans, lashed together (as the Sinhala word implies) by the fibre from

the plentiful coconut, with the aid of no more than half a dozen bolts. At the seashore, I take a snapshot of a couple of young fishermen and am badgered into the first of many promises to send a copy of the photo.

We cross the turgid Kelani River and head inland, past huts made of coconut poles and thatched with "kagans", the leaves of that versatile tree. Yet another use of coconut: sap from the flower is used to make toddy, which when distilled, becomes arrack. These, plus tea and the water inside the king coconut, are the most popular Sri Lankan drinks.

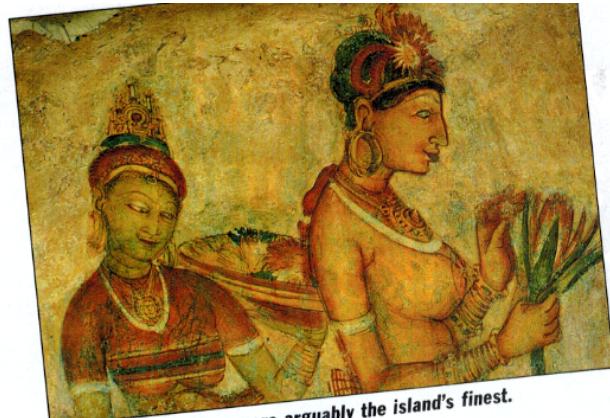
In the hamlet of Minwongoda, traffic is blocked by a funeral procession. Hundreds of mourners, cordoned off the street by armed soldiers, are throwing flowers on the upraised casket. Though the widow's wails of grief are drowned in the tumult, Arthur explains to me in the car that the dead man was a young air force soldier killed in Jaffna, homeland of the Tamils in the far north. His body has been brought home for the funeral.

The casket, raised high by the pall-bearers, will remain closed. The body was truncated in the style of killings done by Tamils. The Tiger Movement, a radical fringe of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) — the government's second largest political party — had been at work. In the past several years, the Tigers allegedly have murdered about 40 soldiers and policemen in the Jaffna area, to protest what they see as tardiness on the part of the TULF in forcing the issue of secession of the isle's northern section.

We leave the funeral and move on to Kadduganawa, where the main street is typical: wall-to-wall shopfronts of clapboard or cement, unpainted or peeling, with bits of bunting fringe dangling under a jumble of signs in English and Sinhala. Inside, the shops are no more than tin or thatch-roofed "carports", in the dim bowels of which furnaces are stoked or rolls of hemp, stacks of buckets, hand-made brooms and metal objects — the armory of the Third World — are displayed among the mangoes and green bananas.

Beyond the gates of the exotic hotels, of which there are many, this is the everyday Sri Lanka: women and children peddling needlework on country roadsides, farmers up to their knees in muck hoeing rice paddies with implements that haven't changed in 1500 years, ramshackle village centres crammed with shops offering the unglamorous stuff of life, people breaking stone with hammers under kagan lean-tos, kids waving bunches of raw tea and wildflowers as you drive by and running straight up the hill to sell you again at the road's next switchback.

The squeamish needn't worry: you can avoid discomfort if you don't stop often between resorts. But those who miss the people, miss much of the terrible, compelling beauty of Sri Lanka — for this is a



These Sigiriya frescoes are arguably the island's finest.

In Kandy, the hill capital at the centre of Sri Lanka, I visit the Temple of the Tooth, wherein lies a 2000-year-old molar that reputedly belonged to Buddha and is the most precious relic in a land rife with relics. The tooth, locked under seven caskets, guarded by three priests, is allowed to be seen by the people for 10 days every fifth year — and that was last year. I go past flute and drum players who perform for an hour, three times every day, in a vaulted anteroom containing a large, meditating Buddha. Then I queue to enter the tiny cubicule for a glimpse of a casket, hurriedly stuff money into a collection box, and am out. My temple guide says 10,000 people pass through here daily and it's not impossible to believe. Aside from the many tourists who visit, 69 percent of the country's 15 million people are Buddhist.

At night, I see traditional Kandyan Dancing at the Hotel Capricorn. It's athletic, with lots of flute playing, drum thumping, spangled costumes and not a few suggestive looks exchanged between the striking young girls and the male musicians. At night, the waiters hover uncomfortably close, their eyes opaque, teeth alight.

Later in the evening, talking about tourism, Nirmala sums it up brutally:

"Westerners still like to have a small brown man in their beck and call — especially one who's being polite about it." Is the curved sword of the Sinhalese warrior a threat underneath the sarong? The only clear reaction I could see to this latest invasion — the most insidious one, of us tourists bearing gifts — was a tremendous amount of hovering and sweeping up.

Perhaps it's all too new still. The culture shocks of Western ways are only beginning to cause reverberations of alarm. Nudity, for example, is strictly prohibited in this largely Buddhist nation, and foreign sunbathers have been prosecuted for pursuing a well-rounded tan. Despite the concern of some Lankans about erosion of their ancient values, the tourist represents a "cash crop" that serves as a vital element in Sri Lanka's drive toward self-reliance.

dissipated. In the fields, the walls of the mud huts are cracked and the petals of the wildflowers droop. The sun burns white.

We are at Dambulla, on the edge of the Cultural Triangle, where the ancient Sri Lankan civilisation was born and is being resurrected now, with the help of UNESCO funds. Five caves in a rock ledge 350 feet high served as refuge for deposed King Valagamba, who later built temples to Buddha as symbols of the king's gratitude for recapturing his throne.

Just to the north, Sigiriya, the "Hill of the Lion", is a 600-foot-high slab of rock atop which the usurping brother of King Valagamba built his palace. 1500 years later, only the foundations and some brilliant frescoes remain, but the panorama is worth the 1000-step climb, to all except the chronic smoker or otherwise faint-hearted.

Sigiriya Village, a resort hotel with a well-stocked bar, hot running water in the bungalows and a swimming pool ringed by frangipani under the shadow of the hill, makes recuperation a delight.

The Cultural Triangle is a sprawling oasis of giant statues and temples, sacred moonstones, palatial ruins and image houses. Dagobas (the "relic in the stomach"), the equivalents of pyramids in Egypt and South America, are each believed to contain a relic of Buddha concealed under the ancient brickwork. At the time it was built, one dagoba was reputed to be the third largest structure in the world.

In 240 BC, a sapling of the Bo tree under which Buddha received enlightenment was brought to Anuradhapura. We went to the temple where it still grows, thought to be the oldest documented living tree. We listened to an old woman explain to a monk that she had promised in her prayers to make a pilgrimage to the Bo tree if her sickness passed. And here she was. The monk nodded gravely; he had heard this story many times.

After anthropology comes wildlife. Wilpattu, in north-western Sri Lanka, is a wilderness park renowned for its leopards. In the south-east, Yala is best known for the elephant herds. Both parks offer a multitude of deer, antelope, water buffalo, some of the 400 species of birds in the country, the odd iguana or crocodile; you'll be certain to find something to shoot, with the long lens.

Wilpattu entertained 133 visitors in 1951 and 30,000 three decades later. Get there well before the morning trip departure time at 6.30. It's a three-hour jeep ride, cheap at 150 rps (\$7.50) per person.

Although Colombo is a noisy and unclean metropolis, it offers at least two attractions that shouldn't be missed. The National Museum is an excellent introduction to this many-sided culture, and the Pettah is a market-place with color and excitement, bargains and cheats, sheer energy probably unsurpassed anywhere. The sadness and

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exuberance of this area constantly pull you from one extreme of reaction to another. Try not to give things away to undeserving people.

After the interior, the coast unwinds you with beachfront settings that are difficult to match in any other single jet trip. The majority of this area's tourists are German, though there are strong contingents also of Japanese, French and Swiss. The seas are calm and the weather fine on the west and southern coasts at this time of year. These also are assuredly the most sophisticated regions of an unpretentious land. Have an arrack daiquiri. Enjoy. Then, go on home.

GETTING THERE, AND THEN...

The only airline that flies direct from Australia (Sydney via Melbourne) to Colombo is KLM, the excellent Royal Dutch Airlines. Business/economy class cost is \$1958 return, with a flight leaving Australia every Friday and coming back every Thursday. For the frugal, a special excursion fare of \$989 return is available to those who fly KLM only, and will stay a minimum of 10 days and a maximum of nine months.

Once you're there, driving a hire car is akin to insanity, especially near Colombo, where the lane dividing line seems to be

more of a conceptual symbol than a law. Travel and tour agencies can arrange an itinerary, accommodation, and provide a car with a driver who often is also a storehouse of information. Quickshaws (5 Kalinga Place, Colombo 5, Sri Lanka) is a long-established company that specialises in developing itineraries tailored to individual tastes, and we can recommend them most heartily.

Hotels, especially in the interior, often have ceiling fans and mosquito nets rather than air-conditioning, and not all of them offer hot water in this year-round warm climate. West coast hotels with all mod cons range from \$40 to \$60 for a double room, plus a 10 percent service charge and often another 10 percent for the travel agent. A few luxury hotels throughout the country go up to \$85 to \$100 per double, but on the lower end of the scale, many clean and reasonably comfortable rest houses are available in the roughly \$35 range for two. (It's not cheap, but for a country where a hotel employee can earn as much as a young doctor, it's not too outrageous.)

Note: room prices are often half-rate in the low season, which ends October 31. In high season, be sure to get reservations.