

Sri Lanka

(formerly Ceylon)

**“The finest island in the world”
- Marco Polo (1292)**



Introduction

We have just returned from our first visit to Sri Lanka, an island about the size of the state of West Virginia, where our son, Jim is posted at the US Embassy as Deputy Chief of Mission. We were seduced by the loveliness of S.L.'s weather, the friendliness of its people, the intriguing history of the island, and by the generally marvelous hospitality we received.

Surrounded by the Indian Ocean, the coast is fringed with idyllic – and often refreshingly underdeveloped – beaches, while the interior boasts compellingly varied landscapes ranging from wildlife-rich lowland jungles to the misty heights of the hill country, dotted with immaculately manicured tea plantations. Sri Lanka boasts over two thousand years of recorded history, and the remarkable achievements of this island's early Sinhalese civilization can still be seen (and we did) in the sequence of ruined cities and great religious monuments.

The glories of early Buddhist civilization continue to provide a benchmark of national identity for the island's Sinhalese population. There's more to Sri Lanka than Buddhism however. The island's geographical position at one of the most important staging posts of Indian Ocean trade laid it open to a uniquely wide range of influences, as generations of Arab, Malay, Portuguese, Dutch and British settlers subtly transformed its culture, architecture and cuisine. The long-established Tamil population in the north has created a vibrant Hindu culture which owes more to India than to the Sinhalese south. In fact, it is this diversity which has, over the last twenty years, threatened to tear the country apart. Much of the optimism over the 2002 ceasefire agreement between Sri Lanka's government and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) is fading. There were two bus bombings during our visit: one on the road from Colombo to Kandy (on which we had traveled only a few days before) and one just south of Colombo. Clearly, this activity threatens the future of, and opportunities for this magical island.

As always, Jim Moore planned and executed a perfect trip, down to the last detail. He is the consummate host and an extraordinary son of which we are most proud. In a few short months, he has created a new spirit and work ethic at the American Embassy in Colombo. At the time of his posting in late July, senior Embassy staff was almost non-existent. He stepped immediately into the post of Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) as well as donning a lot of other hats and has gained immensely from the experience.

As usual, Judith and I planned to get ourselves out to the "new" place as soon as possible to see where Jim has landed this time. Following is the account of our story.

Air Transportation

You can approach Sri Lanka from the East or West. On Susan's recent trip, she flew around the world – going out to the east over Europe and returning east over Japan. We flew east and reversed that flight on our return, spending a total of 38 hours in the air.

Virgin Atlantic took us from JFK to London in 6 hours and 40 minutes, starting on New Year's Eve, and Sri Lankan Air completed our next 10 hour and 35 minute jaunt by 4 am on January 2. Our route from London to Colombo was quite interesting. We flew over Frankfurt, Vienna/Salzburg, Budapest, the Black Sea, Mosul/Tabriz, the edge of the Caspian



Sea, Tehran, Karachi, Koschakk, Mumbai, the Arabian Sea and finally arrived in Colombo. At roughly 37,000 feet, it was pitch black as we flew over Iraq. I was fascinated with the eerie patches of bright lights on the desert below.

We discovered on our return to the Sri Lanka International Airport to fly home on January 9, just how modern and attractive it is. I guess on arrival we were somewhat brain dead at 4 am after the long flights. In any case, this airport is the only major airport on the island and serves it well, complete with a variety of shopping opportunities.

Flying home via Sri Lankan Airlines (12 hours) and Virgin Atlantic (7 hours, 40 minutes) was largely uneventful but we elected to spend the night at Heathrow before tackling the last leg of the journey. We arrived at 7:45 pm, spent the night in the airport's Hilton Hotel, and resumed our journey the next morning at 9:30 am.

We were happy to be back home by 2 pm on January 10th. Judith spent the rest of the day doing laundry and reading tons of mail. I went to the office for a few hours.

Ratings: Virgin Atlantic = C- ; Sri Lankan Airlines = B

Service: Mostly poor on both, recognizing that we were traveling in "steerage"

Ground Transportation

Judith is reading a book "Monsoons and Potholes" by Manuka Wijesinghe, which Jim and Richard gave her for Christmas. We didn't run into any monsoons but Sri Lanka offers a whole new set of criteria for potholes! Their roads are the worst, even in the relative comfort of Jim's car!

Ground transportation includes diesel-powered trucks, automobiles, bikes, tuk tuks, (motorized rick-shaws), motorcycles and bicycles. Sri Lankan drivers make New York City cab drivers look like cream puffs! The roads, all riddled with potholes, are two lane, one lane or "shared" lane. Vehicles dart in and out, on blind curves and without regard for the solid line in the middle of the road. In fact, the middle of the road is everyone's favorite position (sound familiar?). The gas-powered tuk-tuks are three-wheeled and mostly used as taxis. Motorcycle drivers and passengers are required to wear helmets; motorcycles carry at least two passengers while darting in and out of traffic. It was not uncommon to have three vehicles in one lane going in one direction, and three more doing the same in the other direction!



We spent a lot of time in the car and through most of it I had my eyes closed, not because I was sleeping but because I was totally scared! Jim's personal driver, called Jack, was great but I was still scared to death. We traveled through some beautiful country, dotted with rice paddies, live stock and trees but I didn't see any of it. That's a shame, but at least I missed the ubiquitous billboards that pepper otherwise beautiful countryside.

The Residence



The US Embassy in Colombo maintains 22 residences and owns 11 of them. The largest, the Ambassador's home, is under renovation, so the Ambassador and his family is occupying the residence normally assigned to the director of USAID. Jim's residence is, therefore, the largest in service and is used for most entertaining functions.

Built in the early 20th century, Jim's house is quite grand. On the first floor are a formal living room, sun room, dining room, guest room, large kitchen, pantry and laundry room, 2 baths, sweeping circular staircase, mammoth covered veranda and quarters for help. On the second floor are a big den, a spacious office, Jim's room, Richard's room, a lovely guest room, 3 baths and storage areas. The grounds are extensive and beautifully planted. Our favorite specimen was the Temple tree with its lovely waxy, white blossoms. There is a 2-car garage, a security gate house and a high wall surrounding the property.



Much of the furniture belongs to the Embassy but there are also a lot of Jim's and Richard's things collected from all over the world. Framed photos of family and friends are everywhere and lots of book cases house a myriad of books and "global" memorabilia. I slept under a blanket crocheted by Susan! When we arrived, the house was festively decorated for Christmas. Of course, Whipple rules the place and has turned into quite a gentle canine.

Staff consists of four men inside the house, a gardener, 2 drivers (one exclusively dedicated to Embassy runs) and round-the-clock security guards. They are all very congenial. The two dinners we had at the residence were beautifully served in the dining room and were delicious. My favorite thing about breakfast was the wide assortment of local fruits.



Background

Sri Lanka's past is sunk in an inextricable mixture of the historical and the mythological, exemplified by the curious legend of Prince Vijaya, from whom the Sinhalese people claim descent. According to Sinhalese tradition, recorded in the Mahavamsa, the Sinhalese people trace their origins back to the union between a lion ("sinha," hence Sinhalese) and a rather disreputable (but very fair and amorous) North Indian princess. The princess is said to have been traveling in a caravan when the lion attacked. The princess's companions fled, but, as the Mahavamsa touchingly relates:

"When the lion had taken his prey...he beheld her from afar. Love laid hold of him, and he came towards her with waving tail and ears laid back. Seeing him...without fear she caressed him, stroking his limbs. The lion, roused to the fiercest passion by her touch, took her upon his back and bore her with all his speed to his cave, and there he was united with her."

In due course, the princess gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl, who subsequently married one another. The fruit of this incestuous union was sixteen sons, the eldest of whom was Prince Vijaya. Growing to manhood, Vijaya made such a nuisance of himself that there were calls for him and seven hundred of his male companions to be put to death. Instead, the lion packed them all into a boat and sent them off into exile. Vijaya and his entourage arrived on Sri Lanka sometime in the sixth century BC. Later, the writers of the Mahavamsa (ever eager to boast Sri Lanka's Buddhist credentials) changed this date to 483 BC, the year of Buddha's death. There's more to the story, but you can see that this colorful legend provides some real "flavor" for a very magical island.

From around the fifth century BC, waves of Indo-Aryan immigrants began to arrive in Sri Lanka from northern India. Buddhism arrived from the subcontinent around 300 BC and spread rapidly. Buddhism and a sophisticated system of irrigation became the pillars of the classical Sinhalese civilization (200 BC – 1200 AD) that flourished in the north-central part of the island. Invasions from southern India, combined with internecine strife, pushed the Sinhalese kingdom southwards.

The island's contact with the outside world began early. Roman sailors called the island Taprobane. Arab leaders knew it as Serendib, the root of the word "serendipity" (i.e. the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident). Beginning in 1505, Portuguese traders, in search of cinnamon and other spices, seized the island's coastal area and spread Catholicism. The Dutch supplanted the Portuguese in 1658, and in 1796, the British ejected the Dutch. In 1815, the British defeated the King of Kandy, last of the native rulers, and created the Crown Colony of Ceylon. They established a plantation economy based on tea, rubber and coconuts. In 1931, the British granted Ceylon limited self-rule and a universal franchise. Ceylon became independent on February 4, 1948.

Colombo became the capital under British rule and remains so today. Colombo is Sri Lanka's largest city (1.2 million inhabitants in the metropolitan area) and commercial center with most of the country's major offices and hotels. The total population of Sri Lanka exceeds 19 million. The largest group is Sinhalese, making up 74% of the island's people (most are Buddhist). Tamils are the second largest community with 18% of the population (most are Hindu). The largest concentration of Tamils is in the north and east. Muslims make up 7% of the population, with the remaining 1% composed of Burghers (descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch), Veddahs (indigenous people living in small, rural communities on the eastern side of the central hills) and ex-patriates.

Sri Lanka's most dynamic commercial sectors now are transportation, apparel manufacture, telecommunications, tourism, insurance and banking. In 2003, agricultural products made up only 15% of exports (compared with 93% in 1970!), while garments now account for 63% of exports.

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka adopted its first republican constitution in 1972 and its current constitution in 1978. The country is divided into eight provinces. Sri Lankan politics since independence have been strongly democratic. Currently, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) heads a coalition government. The United National Party (UNP) is the main opposition party.

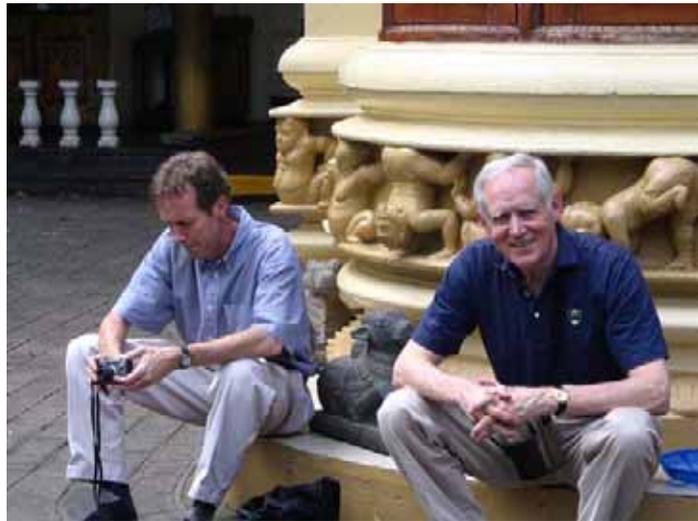
Historical divisions continue to have an impact on Sri Lankan society and politics. From the time of Independence, the Tamil minority has been uneasy with the country's unitary form of government and apprehensive that the Sinhalese majority could abuse Tamil rights. Since 1956, when Sinhala was declared the country's official language, Tamils have protested government education policies and agricultural programs that encourage Sinhalese farmers from the south to move to newly irrigated lands in the east. While there were intermittent outbreaks of communal violence and growing radicalization among Tamil groups, by the 1970s, Tamil politicians moved from support for federalism to demand for a separate Tamil state ("Tamil Eclam") in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. In the 1977 election, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) won all seats in Tamil areas on a platform of separation. Other groups – particularly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eclam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) sought an independent state by force rather than through the elective process. In 1983, angry Sinhalese mobs rampaged and burned countless Tamil businesses and homes, in retaliation for the massacre of an army patrol by Tamil secessionists. This anti-Tamil violence fed the demands of the Tamil parties struggling for an independent state in the north. Sinhalese people moved south out of Jaffna, and many Tamils moved north into Tamil dominated areas. The most extreme Tamil group, the LTTE, alternatively called "guerrillas," "terrorists," or "freedom fighters," received military and financial support from other Tamils who had migrated abroad. The Sri Lankan government has oscillated between political solutions and military offensives in an effort to quell the revolution, but the massacres, assassinations and acts of terrorism have continued. A ceasefire arrangement was signed in 2002 but this is being challenged now by almost regular incidences of violence. The US Government supports the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and a negotiated political settlement of the ethnic conflict. The European Union (EU) has listed the LTTE as a foreign terrorist organization.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has been providing assistance to Sri Lanka since 1956 and has managed a wide range of development programs based on the changing requirements of the nation. Over five decades, Sri Lanka has received approximately \$1.65 billion in development assistance from USAID. Programs in the early decades concentrated on school feeding programs, medical control, rural electrification, irrigation, reforestation, watershed management and training for hundreds of Sri Lankans in agriculture, public health and education. The last two decades have witnessed a different set of developmental problems as a result of the 20-year civil unrest and the devastating Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. Still, at the current annual \$15-20 million level being administered by USAID (not counting tsunami-related projects), which will be further reduced; this represents a small part of foreign aid to Sri Lanka. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Japan account for 80% of current foreign aid. Sri Lanka is also eligible for competitive grants of up to \$250 million from a program initiated by President Bush, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. The Mission rates eligible countries based on their needs and performance in human rights, environment, etc. Unfortunately Sri Lanka's performance, exacerbated by the civil unrest, is declining.

THE JOURNEY

January 2, 2007

After unpacking, a quick nap and something to eat, we toured the residence and grounds and set out on a tour of the city of Colombo. We visited the Embassy, a Buddhist temple (Gangaramaya), a very ornate Hindu temple (which was closed), the National Museum (directly across the street from Jim's residence) and Jim's own gym. The National Museum of Colombo, founded in 1877, is the oldest and largest museum in Sri Lanka. It is an imposing edifice designed in the Italianate style. Some of the most popular exhibits are the Gold Throne of the last King of Kandy, his Crown, Sword and Scepter, as well as the Footstool of King Sri Wickram Rajasingles' queen. They have a 3rd Century BC collection of ancient coins and some excellent bronze sculptures.



That evening we were privileged to have dinner with the Blakes and their 5-month old daughter. Ambassador Bob Blake graduated from Harvard and John Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). His lovely wife, Sophia, is from Bulgaria. They have three daughters. Jim and Bob have a wonderful working relationship; they are a management team, built on mutual trust and respect, that really works. They both finish their Colombo postings in the summer of 2009.

January 3

Our first serious driving experience, with one stop in Kurunegala to admire and buy handloomed products, was to the Dambulla caves. There are five cave temples cut out of an enormous granite outcropping. Archeological evidence suggests that these and other caves in the area were inhabited during prehistoric times, and were later used for pre-Buddhism religious ceremonies. Their present incarnation as Buddhist shrines dates back to the days of Vattagamani Abbaya, who reigned from 103 BC. The caves contain a total of 167 plaster-covered wood and rock Buddhas. Three kings and 53 Buddhas are presented in Cave #2. In order, we visited the caves known as Temple of the Lord of Gods, Temple of the Great Kings, Great New Temple, Western Temple, and Second New Temple. Outside, monkeys looked on with interest.



We then drove on to Kandalama and checked into the spectacular Geoffery Bawa designed Kandalama Hotel overlooking a beautiful lake, with monkeys everywhere. One even climbed up onto our private porch and picked up Judith's book, right in front of her, to see if there was anything under it worth eating! We had a wonderful dinner to celebrate our survival of the first day of this driving journey to the central hills. The full moon felt close enough to touch.



The most common holiday in the Sri Lankan calendar is "Poya" day, which happens every month on the day of the full moon. Duruthu, (full moon Poya in January), commemorates Lord Buddha's first visit to Sri Lanka and thus is a very significant event for Buddhists.

It's worth noting that Sri Lanka has more holidays (29 or more a year) than any other country in the world. All Buddhist religious holidays as well as those of the other three remaining faiths (Islam, Hinduism and Christian) are observed. In addition to religious festivals, there are special holidays, such as Independence Day, National Heroes Day, and May Day. While the US Embassy doesn't celebrate all these holidays, they have to honor many of them. Wait until John Batley gets wind of further "tax payer extravagance."

January 4

A day to remember! – early morning birding, archeological sites and an elephant hunt!

Sri Lanka lists 233 resident bird species of which 26 are recognized as endemic by the Ceylon Bird Club. Kandalama has recorded 172 species and, with our guide, Sena, we were thrilled to spot 36 species in our morning walking tour starting at 6:30 am. We saw the Red-rumped, Black-crested, Red-vested, White-browed and Black Bulbul; Oriental White-eye; Yellow-billed Babbler; Pale-billed Flowerpecker; Paddyfield Pipit; Grey and Purple Heron; Great and Intermediate Egret; Black-headed Ibis; White-belted Drongo; Asian Paradise Flycatcher; Common Iora; Sri Lankan Brown-capped Babbler and Sri Lankan Jungle Fowl (the last two were our only endemics!), Alexandrine and Rose-ringed Parakeet; and Green Bee-eater to name just a few! And it wasn't all about birds; we saw many blossoms, including the country's national flower, the water lily, elk and elephants. Before concluding our morning walk, we stopped by at the on-site filter presses where they were making paper from elephant dung. As you might imagine, we were really ready for breakfast!



The history of Polonnaruwa stretches far back into the Anuradhapuran period (third century AD), so the great ruined capital is one of the undisputed highlights of the Cultural Triangle. The heyday of the city, in the twelfth century, represented one of the watermarks of early Sri Lankan civilization. The ruins of Polonnaruwa are scattered over an extensive

area of dry, gently undulating woodlands. The capital was originally enclosed by three concrete walls and filled with parks and gardens. At its center lay the royal residences of successive kings, comprising the Royal Palace Group and the Rest House Group. Today, they are exciting ruins and the subject of lots of our photographs. We also visited the Polonnaruwa Museum, with its fine collection of bronzes and sculptures.



The next stop, after another hair-raising drive, was the Minneriya National Park, whose centerpiece is the large Minneriya Tank (lake) created by the famous tank-builder, King Mahasena (274-301 AD). Minneriya forms part of the elephant corridor which joins with Kandilla and Wasgomuwa National Parks. Probably as many as 200 elephants live in the park, and must follow available water. When ground water is scarce, they flock to the “tank”. At the time of our visit, the rains had been plentiful so the elephants were not. With guide and jeep driver, we bounced through some incredible terrain, ranging from tropical forests to wetlands, grassland, and terrain previously used for slash-and-burn agriculture. The good news is that we, at least, saw lots of birds, particularly along the tank, including Cattle Egrets, male and female Indian Peafowl, Red-wattled Lapwings, and a Pond Heron. It was not until the very end of our elephant pilgrimage that we encountered a “humongous” male, snorting and crushing big hunks of the adjacent woods. Our driver veered off the road and onto a path that led us to five other elephants. We worried about how concerned “daddy” might be about our positioning ourselves between him and his family.

Back at the Kandalama Hotel, exhilarated and weary, we were surprised by an extraordinary treat – a delicious dinner served to just the three of us on top of a rock overlooking the lake, with a nearly full moon overhead and serenaded by a flutist perched on a nearby rock. It just doesn’t get any better than this January 4!

January 5

We considered driving to Sigiriya for an early morning two-to-three hour climb up the Sigiriya Rock but in the face of a four hour drive and given all we had done the day before, we settled on going directly to Kandy, Sri Lanka's second largest city. Kandy owes its existence to its remote and easily defensible location amidst the steep, jungle-swathed hills at the center of the island. The origins of the city date back to the early thirtieth-century, during the period following the collapse of Polonnaruwa, when the Sinhalese people drifted gradually southward. Kandy's unique cultural heritage is everywhere apparent – in its music, dance and architecture – while the city is also home to the country's most important religious shrine, the Temple of the Tooth, as well as its exuberant festival, the Esala Perahera. Kandy maintains a somewhat aristocratic air, enhanced by its scenic highland setting and its pleasantly temperate climate.



We checked into the Mahaweli Road Hotel in time for a quick lunch. The hotel is big and is built along the (muddy) Mahaweli Ganga. Before the tsunami, hotel occupancy ran over 80%; today, they're struggling to achieve 40% (their breakeven point is 32%). As it turned out, this was not the hotel Jim thought he had booked; we visited the intended one the next morning. Still, we had lots to do and see in Kandy. We first drove through a wonderful residential section with incredible hill-side homes. We walked the grounds of the Temple of the Tooth, along the banks of an artificial lake. The Temple of the Tooth originally lay at the heart of the sprawling Royal Palace, and some sections of the original palace complex have survived. There are also a number of small temples on the grounds, and we must have had our shoes off and on a half-dozen times. A major attraction is the Bodhi tree, where the Buddha sat to achieve his enlightenment. Jim walked three times around this famous tree carrying water and then poured it on the tree, as is customary.

At 5:30 pm, we attended a performance of the Kandyan dancers at the Arts Association Hall. The programme included Blowing of the Conch Shell (with drum orchestra); Pooja dance, Cobra dance, Mask dance, Rabandance and Ves dances; and two other dances called Panteru Netum and Mayura Vannema. The singing of the Sri Lanka National Anthem was inspiring and the hour ended with low country fire dancing and last but not least, fire walking. Quite colorful – but noisy.

We visited Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist shrine, the Temple of the Tooth. This amazing temple houses the legendary Buddha's Tooth relic, which arrived in Kandy in the sixteenth century after various peregrinations around India and Sri Lanka. Nothing remains of the current temple (built around 1600). The main shrine of the current temple was originally constructed during the reign of Vimala Dharma Suriya II (1687-1739) and has been rebuilt and modified since then. The temple was badly damaged in 1998 when the LTTE detonated a massive truck bomb outside the entrance, killing over twenty people and reducing the façade to rubble. Not surprisingly, security today is extensive. The temple was very crowded on our guided tour but we did get a look inside the Tooth Relic chamber.



After all that excitement, we were eager to have a quiet dinner at our hotel and get to bed.

January 6

We visited Jim's intended hotel, hidden away on the narrowest road, and then headed for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, originally created during the eighteenth century by King Kirti Sri Rajasinha to serve as a pleasure garden for the Kandyan nobility. It was transformed into a botanical garden by the British in 1821 during the governorship of Edward Barnes, who had Sri Lanka's first tea trees planted there in 1824. Covering 150 acres, there are more than ten thousand trees in the gardens. We were especially drawn to the Royal Palm Avenue, Orchid House, Memorial Trees and a huge Queensland Hauri pine.



Then followed a crazy drive up the mountain: one track road, two-way traffic and all S-curves! Gratefully, we came to the beautiful Hunas Falls. Farther on, we visited the Hunnas tea factory (I can't explain the difference in spelling). Workers, who have recently been on strike, are expected to pick 16 kilos of tea leaves per day. The leaves are spread out on palettes to "wither" for 12 hours; then, they're ground up and allowed to "ferment" on tables for 30 minutes; dried at 200-250°F for 20 minutes and by conveyer, fed to the sifter (a vibrating machine with different screens to grade the tea; they have five sizes or grades. Tea is bagged for export and local distribution.



Our day's drive ended at Hunas Falls Hotel. At 900 meters above sea level, this is an eco gem. Their theme: "where time stands still." They have golf, tennis, a helipad (now we find out!) and all kinds of hiking trails. After checking out their beautiful gardens, we decide to tackle the Shaheen Mountain trail to its peak at 1043 meters. It was an uphill climb over some fairly rough terrain, and Judith did it with the help of her trusty cane! The views going up, and especially at the top were beautiful. There's a marker at the top, the subject of a photo or two. The Shaheen falcon, after which the mountain is named, is the

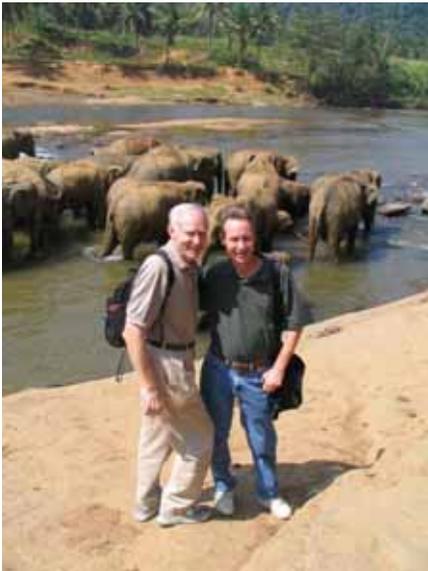
world's swiftest bird. While we were not lucky enough to spot one, this area is also home to the White-billed Fish Eagle (largest predatory bird in Sri Lanka) and the Pale-billed Flowerpecker (smallest bird in Sri Lanka, which we had seen at Kandalama). Following our descent, Jim found a leech attached to his ankle. Later, we learned that the hotel provides leech-proof socks for hiking.



Another exceptional day ended with a quiet dinner in the hotel's charming dining room overlooking a placid lake, which cascades down over the mountain and becomes Hunas Falls. This is a place you could stay for a week and really let "time stand still."

January 7

What goes up, must come down. And that was our challenge: to descend the mountain on that one-track curvy road with no side railings. Jack's solution was to race down it at full speed. I never opened my eyes until we were on the flat, facing only "normal" hectic Sri Lanka traffic. Our destination was the Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, one of Sri Lanka's most popular tourist attractions. It was set up in 1975 to look after orphaned baby elephants, though the orphanage's population has now mushroomed to around 65, making it the world's largest collection of captive elephants. The elephants range in age from newborn to elderly matriarchs. The elephants are fed three times a day. Twice a day, the elephants are driven across the road to Ma Oya river for a leisurely bath. Our visit coincided with their morning bath. What fun and fabulous photographic opportunities!



In a couple of hours, we were back in Colombo and getting ready for a dinner at the residence with Steve and Rebecca Cohen (she is director of USAID) and Pittman and Janet Orr (he is regional security officer at the Embassy and she is with USAID). Before dinner Jim and I had the most spectacular massages by Saman. I won't forget that workout for a long time. To top things off, we had a super scrumptious mango soufflé for dessert!

January 8

On our final day in Colombo, we went to the Embassy (to confirm reservations, etc.) and did some very successful gem shopping. We bought some loose stones and a beautiful sapphire ring – Sri Lankas' pride. We drove to Mount Lavina Hotel for lunch and to dip our feet in the Indian Ocean (hadn't done that since South Africa). It's a great place right on the ocean. After a little more shopping in Colombo, we returned to the residence to get ready for our evening with the Sri Lankan Athletic Association.





Sponsored by the UNDP Sports for Peace Programme and the Athletic Association, the event was billed as “An Evening with Charles Moore, an Olympic gold medalist and Humanitarian.” When we arrived at 4:55 pm (for the 5:00 pm event), we were politely asked to go away until they called us so the color guard/dancers could assemble and march



us in. After almost 30 minutes, we were allowed to return and were greeted by the dancers/drummers. I was given a lei of purple orchids, Judith a beautiful bouquet of flowers, and in we marched, stopping at an elaborate symbolic candle for its lighting. After welcoming comments and a history of Sri Lankan sports by the Chairman of Sri Lanka’s National Olympic Committee, I was introduced to speak on “Sports – A World of Partnerships.” After that (30 minutes), Q&A and lots of gifts, we adjourned to a nearby club, where refreshments were served. In hindsight, it was a good thing to do. We met a lot of dedicated people who are committed to helping the development of sports in Sri Lanka (they have only won one silver and one bronze since competing in the Olympics).

Our final dinner was at the 14-month-old “1864” Restaurant, located in the historic Galle Face Hotel, situated right on the beach. Established in 1864, this grand old hotel is “dedicated to yesterday’s charm and tomorrow’s comfort.” What fun, what tradition – and what a great dinner and conversation.

January 9

This day was all about packing, saying goodbyes to staff and getting to the airport (one hours’ drive) in time to do a little last-minute shopping and for some final quality time with Jim. It has been another incomparable visit, as we proudly follow our diplomat around the world.

Take Aways

Sri Lankans are some of the kindest and friendliest people in the world. They are hospitable and outgoing with a keen curiosity about the world around them. Religion and the family plays a major part in their lives, and tradition exerts a strong influence over both. By and large, Sri Lankans are a conservative people who have to judge for themselves whether a difference is automatically an improvement or not. Thus, change comes slowly in the country as a whole.

The people we saw were attractive (both male and female) and healthy (little obesity, for example). Literacy approaches 91%, the highest in South Asia. While we had read that Sri Lankans have the highest incidence of alcoholism in the world, we saw no evidence of this. Their eating habits are simple; rice, curry and fruit dominate their meals.

Twenty years ago, Sri Lanka was poised for explosive growth. Their civil war of the same duration has stifled that. Judging from the current political situation, there does not appear to be the leadership to pull them out of this dilemma. Until the current civil unrest is solved permanently, it is unlikely that Sri Lanka will attract the investment necessary to take advantage of the island's myriad natural and human resources.

The United States and Sri Lanka have been strong allies but our aid and investment appears to be faltering. I personally think foreign business should invest in Sri Lanka but this must be encouraged by our government, and we should be focused on sustainability.

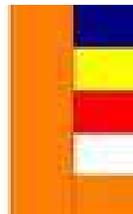
This is my account of an unforgettable seven days filled with great weather (Jim organized that, too), company and experiences. It is supported by both our photos and as always, edited/rewritten by the best traveling partner in the world.



Chare H Ma



Buddhist Flag



Hindu Flag



Sri Lankan Flag