

John Sinclair and Tokiko Dawson's

# Diary for Sri Lanka

16<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> January 2014



**One of the many cultural heritage relics of Polonnaruva**

*We went to Sri Lanka to gain a better, more personal understanding of the people and cultures of this troubled country and to discover some of its World Heritage. We visited six sites all north and east of Colombo in the week we had there. We would liked to have seen more and left with a feeling that we would like to return soon.*

**Day 1****Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> January****The Longest Day — 27 hours**

Travelling from Australia to Sri Lanka was like stepping into Dr Who's tardus and travelling to another world.

I had been in a kind of mindless limbo land while I went through the rituals of the airports at Brisbane and especially Singapore where we had to wait in transit for 8 hours to get our Colombo bound flight. I normally feel something like being in a state of suspended animation for such periods, as I switch off into automatic mode but I awoke with a jolt in Colombo

I was snapped out of this stupor as we cleared Immigration and Customs at Colombo Airport. We were confronted by the adjustment of a new culture. This wasn't Australia with its "on-demand" supply of services, nor Singapore with its smiling, quiet super-efficiency. It was Colombo where only part of the population has attained the age of technology and where the lingua franca isn't English.

Our efforts to secure a window seat proved unrewarding because the cloud that has been absent over Queensland for many months blocked our viewing virtually 100% of the way across the outback. The Top End was turbulent with a heavy monsoon far below. There was no land visible until we started to descend for Singapore when some breaks below revealed lots of large scale digging, presumably mining, in Sumatra.

It was a long and tedious eight hours in transit at Singapore but eventually at 10.15 (later Brisbane time) we were airborne, landing in Colombo at 12.15am. We had no problems clearing customs and acquiring currency. Then we settled the matter of a driver/guide for the full seven days here in Sri Lanka. However, another company supplied the taxi driver to take us to our hotel. We knew that it was nearby but he couldn't find it and couldn't ring it and further couldn't speak English. So over the next 40 minutes we asked umpteen people all tried to be helpful were given umpteen unhelpful answers and misleading blind leads.

Finally we got the right advice that was available from the start and arrived at the hotel at 2.45am. Since we had risen at 5.00 am Brisbane time, we had been on the go for 26.5hours.

**Day 2****Friday 17<sup>th</sup> January****Colombo to Anuradhapura**

We awoke to a smiling, sunny, Sri Lankan day and the drama so far only a few hours earlier were soon overlooked as we began to enjoy Sri Lanka. It was a short night in bed and we didn't need the air-conditioning. We quickly started to acclimatize to the culture in this quiet, lovely little hotel so close to the airport, yet so hard for our driver to find. The breakfast was waiting for us at 9.00am. The sweetest pineapples and small bananas and delicious onion and ochra omelettes. It took a lot of finding to get to this hotel last night but it was worth the trouble.

Our driver, Sunil, arrived at 9.45 and we were soon acquainted and on our way. We headed off through Negombo a tourist city on the beach where seaside real estate and resort building are both booming. We also heard that it is referred to as Little Rome because of the number of Catholics and Catholic churches. Sunil is a Catholic and comes from Negombo. That was the first of many revelations, observations that we made on our trip to Anuradhapura.

At our only glimpse of the sea we were reminded by Sunil that 48,000 Sri Lankans lost their lives in the tsunami. That though was mainly in the south of the country. However Australians are kindly remembered because Shane Warne rebuilt the Gall test cricket arena that had been wiped out.



**Su enjoyed lunch Day 2**



We travelled north parallel to the coast passing many wetlands. Tracking north up the east coast we saw little of these but we got a glimpse of the huge Puttalam Lagoon that seemed to be a shallow estuary filled with wildlife. Kala Oya was a particularly large wetland expanded by very recent flooding and rainfall even within the last 48 hours. This turned out to spread across a large area of jungle-clad swampy coastal lowlands right to the coast and encompassing a large National Park that hosted leopards and elephants. Evidence of elephants were the road crossing signs that we photographed. The elephants are forced to cross there because electric fences keep them from endangering villagers and marauding their crops.

We saw many signs with images of the very popular President. His popularity stems from the fact that he ended the 30-year War a very brutal civil war between some of the Tamils and the Sinhalese that ended very brutally. Despite condemnation by many Westerners for some atrocities that were committed to end the war, the President seems to be intent on making peace with the Tamils and better integrating them into the nation as a whole. The most demonstrable evidence for this is that now every Sri Lankan child has to learn three Languages, Sinhalese, Tamil and English and every road sign is now in the three languages and script. The War was something all Sri Lankans wanted to see an end to and they want no repeats. To this end there seems to be a lot of integration measures being enforced including religious tolerance.



The traffic on the road was interesting in variety. Most of the heavier vehicles were Tata or Mahindra made in India. Most cars are second-hand Japanese. However most vehicles are motorbikes that may be slightly outnumbered by

Tuk-tuks that are popular family vehicles and all seem to be driven most adventurously.

Sunil remarked on how few street-dogs were to be seen. He said that this is because they are being picked off and sold for black market meat with a demand from Chinese who are doing many large constructions in Sri Lanka. As we progressed further away from Colombo street-dogs became more noticeable. Then we noted how similar the dogs were to dingoes and other Asian wolves. Subsequently we noted that away from towns the dogs were almost pure Asian wolves while they became more mongrel-like as one came closer to towns. There were no pedigreed dogs that we could recognize.

We stopped for lunch at a roadside café and it was surprisingly exciting to have a very traditional Sri Lankan meal that tasted so good with all of its clever use of spices. I was impressed though to discover that all of the wood used in the structure came from coconut palms, even the roof support that carried a tiled roof.

We were most impressed by the emphasis on education. The children seem to be very well behaved with all uniforms throughout our route seeming to be the same. The teachers are well paid and highly regarded. All the female teachers wear saris to work (the equivalent of a male suit). School hours are 7.30am to 1.30pm. There are only five or six weeks break from school each year. All students wear a uniform and the only variation is between genders and junior and senior schools.



Our accommodation proved to be new and clean although the service is appallingly slow as we discovered when we went down to a special barbeque and buffet dinner attended by many businessmen. We went down at 6.30 but we weren't served until after 8.15 pm.

**Day 3**  
**Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Anuradhapura's World Heritage**

A beautiful clear sunny day got off to a slow start. Although we were ready and waiting at 7.00 am and had pre-ordered last night we weren't served with food until after 7.30am. However we did have time to see a lot of birds. It was an unexpected bonus because there are so few birds to be seen flying free in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. However during the day we had many reasons to reflect on the World Heritage sites in those three Buddhist countries. We were comparing the style of Buddhism and the World Heritage sites in each with Anuradhapura.

Our guide for the morning was Anil who explained much of the symbolism used in Buddhism. For example, the Buddhist flag was flying everywhere as tens of thousands of pilgrims mainly clad in white clothes were drawn to the sites. Anil explained the symbolism of the colours. Blue = Wisdom; Yellow = impermanence (maybe meaning mortality); Red = Reincarnation; White = Putity; Orange = well disciplined (the colour of the monk's robes.)

We had a warm interesting encounter with a Buddhist nun. She was sitting in serene meditation. We took her photograph. She asked us to post to her (which we subsequently did). She has invited us to stay with her when we next go to Sri Lanka.



**The oldest known living tree, this cutting from the original tree in India under which the Buddha sat to achieve enlightenment**

It was a normal weekend day for pilgrim traffic except that amongst the pilgrims visiting Anuradhapura today was no one less than the Sri Lankan President. As a result there was a strong military presence throughout the town at every

road intersection and in between and in all of the well-crowded sites. The Sinhalese Buddhists how during the War, the Tamils turned up with automatic weapons and sprayed mercilessly into the crowd killing 130 people.

That action virtually shut down Anuradhapura for tourism for the rest of the War. It is only now starting to return to its prior popularity. Now on the full moon in June 500,000 pilgrims swarm into the city that gave birth to Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Thus Anuradhapura is seen as the holiest place in this predominantly Buddhist nation.

The number of sites was amazing as is the extent of the area covered. Anuradhapura was reminiscent though of the decay and ravages of weather and time. It reminded us so much of Sukothai and to a lesser extent Angkor Wat where curators seem to be battling to preserve what has already been overtaken by degradation.

The most important relic in Anuradhapura though still continues grow and is regarded as the oldest authenticated tree in the world. It is the Bouddhi Tree a fig. This particular one was brought here in about 300BC and continues to grow although that part of the original tree is nurtured and propped up. There are always huge numbers of pilgrims but this being a Saturday and with the President of Sri Lanka visiting the adjacent stupor it was larger than usual. However every June on the anniversary of Buddhism coming to Sri Lanka 2300 years ago 500,000 or more assemble around this site. Anuradhapura, which was previously on the frontline of the conflict is deemed safe again.

The relics of 1200 years when Anuradhapura was capital rage from temples and caves carved into solid granite are cover over 2,500 ha. It is impossible to see it all but we were impressed to see some marvellous relics such as this moonstone sitting amongst ruins with only a handful of people even being aware of it





Anil explained the symbolism of the moonstone. These huge semi-circular carved rock slabs are laid out at the foot of the stairs in to any temple between the guard-stones. They are beautifully and elaborately carved. On the outer perimeter there are symbols of fire representing pain and suffering. Inside that are a series of animals. The elephant representing birth, the horse youth, the lion old age and the bull death. The third semicircle includes vines and flowers representing desire. A fourth still smaller semi circle is carved series of geese. These represent intelligence. However the centre of the semi-circle is a lotus flower representing purity, a state of enlightenment and the removal of desire. It is amazing that so many messages are transmitted from the stone that everyone must stand on to go into the temple or other important site

We went to the very first Buddhist temple Isumuni Raja Maha a temple carved into a Granite cave. Iron tools had been used to chisel out loose rocks and to enlarge the caves, create beds and sleeping nodules and even channel water. It was quite impressive to have occurred so early in history. This was evidence of the widespread use of iron tools in Anuradhapura as early as 300 BC. Without iron Anuradhapura civilization would never have flourished.

In the afternoon after lunch we went to a temple out of town where we didn't need a guide. We did though need a lot of puff. Unaccompanied we ascended 1800 stairs to see this temple on a mountain with an imposing view of the countryside. From the eyrie lookout on top of the granite tors we had a 360° view and we could appreciate the many surviving relics of ancient Anuradhapura, the huge man-made reservoirs.



## Day 4

### Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> January Polonnaruwa's World Heritage

This morning we awoke in a fog and had to rush to be ready by 8.00 am. With a lot of urging the breakfast wait was minimized and we had finished breakfast by 7.35 am. Then it was on the road for Polonnaruwa. The mists lifted little as we drove and the sky cleared by the time we reached our destination.

We made a couple of stops along the way. The first was to buy some "pears" that seemed to be large green guavas with white and firmer flesh. With a sprinkle of chilli and salt the relatively bland taste improved. The second stop was fortuitously beside a reservoir and we got closer views of the prodigious bird life inhabiting these wetlands.



The third stop was to see some habituated large water monitors come out of a creek to be fed. We also passed through a very impressive National Park straddling the road.

Our discussions along the way ranged across religions (it was Sunday) Sri Lanka's military, mixed marriages, the rate of divorce (very low here) smoking (an amazingly low percentage of the population and sundry side topics that gave us more insight into the social structure. Our observations were mounting up as we drilled into some key differences between our cultures. We saw no liquor outlets and although alcohol (except for home brews) isn't banned it doesn't seem to be consumed much. Perhaps it is because there is no advertising of any form of alcohol that we have noticed. Whatever the reasons this deserves more examination if Australia is to get better management of its alcohol-fueled problems.

We also noted the good highway between Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa that has existed since the golden days of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. When Anuradhapura proved indefensible against successive invasions from Southern India the capital moved to Polonnaruwa. However the great road made it easier for the invaders to follow up a little further to attack and conquer this new centre. It seems that these invasions sowed a few seeds of distrust between Sinhalese and those who came more recently from India namely the Tamils. The Tamils in turn resent this mistrust when they regard themselves as a permanent part of Sri Lanka. We arrived at our first stop Potgul Vehera outside Polonnaruwa about 10.00 am. Here we saw a great statue carved into very hard sandstone and a former king's great library complex. I am not going to list the names of all of the sites we visited because they weren't introduced to us, or were unpronounceable (to us) or we just didn't get them and in many cases didn't fully appreciate their contextual role. (For example, what would "Vehera" mean? I think it may mean stupa but in Anuradhapura they use another name for stupas). It seems irrelevant except to record that we were impressed by everything we saw and it was all better interpreted than Anuradhapura.

We next drove across the wall of the largest area of water in all of Sri Lanka, a great reservoir built over 1500 years ago as part of an irrigation system that fed the population in and around this Royal capital at least for 250 years between about 950 AD and 1200.

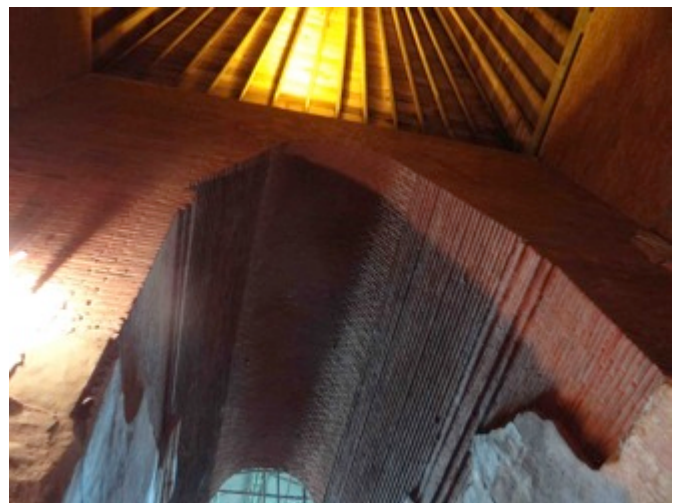


**Remnant of Polonnaruwa Royal Palace**

Our next call was the most enlightening, a visit to the Archaeological Museum and Information Centre. It was excellent and helped us get some grip but alas we were not allowed to photograph inside the building and thus the information is now

harder to recall and pass on. It is something sorely needed in a place like Anuradhapura that seemed to be lacking in both good signage and any sort of onsite interpretation.

Then it was into places like the Royal Palace and the Citadel. The whole World Heritage is very large and very consolidated with just one one-way road running through it. It enabled us to see at least 20 sites, huge stupas of great antiquity, palaces, the former mansions of monks, baths, libraries, magnificent huge sculptures carved out in situ, cisterns and more. The area has had to be reclaimed from the jungle, and it is interesting that the most interesting site was the last discovered only about 30 years ago. It had a less formal sculpture of Buddha and some frescos surviving but the richest treasure is the actual arched roof that remains intact. It was also home to two barn owls. A huge roof is now being built to preserve what is left of this once grand structure.



It was a rich rewarding full-on day, during which we missed out on lunch. Sunil compensated for taking us to a very nice restaurant where we had the most wonderful food in a buffet and then we went on to our accommodation that had been rearranged. We were right on the lake and saw a magnificent sunset, the fishers going out to harvest the lake as well as some great birds up close. A very good day but so tiring that Su was asleep by 8.00 pm.





**Day 5****Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> January****Sigiriya and Dambulla World Heritage**

It was a lovely misty morning at the Lakeside Hotel. We were out at 6.40 to be impressed by the variety of birdlife. This was enhanced by our encounter with a Dutch bird-watcher. If we could put a name to every species we would now have over fifty on our bird list in just four days to now. Our list of World Heritage sites from this trip would double today from two to four.

It wasn't so far to Sigiriya but the journey passed through a surprising amount of forest including Minneriya Giritale National Park. Much of the road (even the hotel where we were staying) was lined with electric fences to keep elephants in or out. Apparently elephants come in to drink at the lake and pose some risk for the hotel guests if not fenced out. I hadn't expected to see so much forest in such a heavily populated island. Sri Lanka's population is 21,000,000 (almost equal to Australia's and occupies an area of 65,600 square kilometres (almost the same size as Tasmania 68,400 square kilometres). It makes the rate of destruction of forest in Australia even in Tasmania look horrific.



View of the gardens at Sigiriya viewed from the top of the rock 200 metres above. Only the left-hand side has been explored and restored.



Buddha images and frescos in a Dambulla Cave

Almost as impressive as the rate of forest retention is the percentage of the wetlands one sees. Most of these are man-made wetlands with weirs and water storage for irrigation but all of the wetlands support an astonishing amount of wildlife. It appears that Sri Lanka was able to achieve so much as a nation because it developed the irrigation and water engineers so far back in history.

Another feature of Sri Lankan sustainability is that the only fossil fuel they consume has to be imported and they can ill afford that. Therefore they draw most of their electricity power from small hydro schemes.

We also learnt that Sri Lankans were addressing soil erosion 13 centuries before Australians thought it might be a problem. This enabled the development of great gardens around the Sigiriya Rock Fortress that is still retained today.

Our 200 metre vertical ascent to the top of this most formidable fortress had to wait while we went through the Museum and Visitor Centre nearby. This was a very impressive Visitor Centre although not called as such. It was a gift of the Japanese Government and must have been worth many millions. It has multi levels and stands in a wetland on the other side of the outer moat of this fortress. There were 1200 steps from the moat to the summit and it was a challenge, but we made it (although I demurred at climbing up and down the spiral staircase to view the gallery of frescos. Su though as ever was undaunted.

The story behind this grand Palace and fortification is most intriguing. The heir to the throne in Anuradhapura was cheated from his throne by a jealous brother. The cheated Prince escaped along with many of his loyal followers and found Sigiriya which he first established as a fortification against a possible invasion by his brother or others. Soon he and his queen were very safe. They then embarked on enhancements and embellishments around their impregnable home. During this process the king amassed 500 concubines and built this dazzling feature in 600AD. Despite being abandoned and falling into disrepair it survives

remarkable well and is the most applauded of all Sri Lankan World Heritage sites by international visitors. Perhaps it is having to ascend 1200 stairs to reach summit for a 360 degree view or the very daunting steepness of the rock but it is impressive.

I noted though that the haze surrounding the rock and from the top that marred photography seems to be evidence of the serious air pollution drifting in from India.

The entry fee to the rock was \$US30 per person and it was well worth it for the experience. We started our visit at about 9.00 am. We reached the carpark after our climb at about 11.45am. That seemed about the normal time for a visit and although the volume of visitors nowhere near match the peak visitation months of November into mid January there were hundreds of foreign tourists swarming around the site. There were between 500 to 1,000 visitors. This would have averaged in \$US150,000 to \$US300,000 for just one day to finance management, restoration and research around the rock. It suggests that Queensland is undervaluing the Fraser Island experience.

We were exhausted after the climb and we were happy to have a slow Sri Lankan lunch. However even then at 12.45 Sunil thought it was too hot for us to explore our next World Heritage site that again involved ascending another rock to see another World Heritage site the rock caves of Dambulla. So we killed some time going to a gem factory. I was a reluctant starter for this but I ended up coming away with something just as I later came away from the batik factory that Sunil took us to that wasn't on my agenda.



The Dambulla caves were worthy inclusions on the World Heritage List. They were hacked out of rock over a period of 1600 years and only stopped being

extended in the early 1900s. They included hundreds of Buddhas but the most distinguishing feature were the frescos right across the ceilings.

The UNESCO OUV states: *A sacred pilgrimage site for 22 centuries, this cave monastery, with its five sanctuaries, is the largest, best-preserved cave-temple complex in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist mural paintings (covering an area of 2,100 m<sup>2</sup>) are of particular importance, as are the 157 statues.*



Dambulla though is more famous in Sri Lanka as being the vegetable wholesale market for the whole island. It sits almost at the very centre of the island with major roads radiating from it to every major city. Truckloads of fresh produce roll in 24 hours a day. The loads are sold in situ and then off loaded to the buyer's transport to go off to wherever.

After this site and topping up our fruit supplies at inflated prices we were taken to accommodation arranged by Sunil with some family connection. It was a very comfortable and very affordable B&B. Sunil celebrated by getting Su to polish off a large bottle of beer on her own and me to imbibe a fair slug of gin. They were really a knockout and we had to be wakened to have the dinner that we had ordered.



Sigiriya Rock as seen from the lower garden



**Day 6**  
**Tuesday, 20<sup>th</sup> January**  
**Knuckles World Heritage area**

It was another early start. After breakfast at our homestay we went to collect our laundry that had been cleaned and pressed overnight. 400 rupees (\$18 Australian) gave me cleaned pressed shirts (3) and trousers (3) to take home.

Then began the navigational challenge to find our way to the Mini World's End in the Knuckles Conservation Park that is listed as part of the World Natural Heritage. We went back through Dambulla and then followed a back road that ran parallel to a river from which countless truckloads of sand were being extracted. We discovered this as we avoided an endless procession of loaded trucks pounding potholes into the pavement and making a mess of this narrow ribbon of bitumen. However the sand is in huge demand for Sri Lankan construction.

We were glad to leave this dangerous strip of fractured bitumen for a narrower road with little traffic that climbed up into the forest. Soon we passed the entrance to the Forestry Training School and continued up through a lush forest which occasionally opened up to allow us to see a vista of mountains. It was a very winding road and Sunil was doubtless wondering where it would take us. Luckily Su was able to use the GPS on the iPad to help him navigate.

Then we came to another Forestry Camp near a big river. Suddenly Sunil felt reassured because he recalled staying overnight at this place ten years ago. Here we had our photograph taken.



Feeling more confident we ascended ever higher and eventually arrived at Mini Worlds End. Here we purchased a ticket for 600 rupees (\$Au25) each to take a walk to the edge of a cliff that is

often shrouded in mists. We also had to pay a guide to take us. His charge was 250 rupees (\$6.00) Unfortunately we couldn't avail ourselves of the information he may have had because of the language barrier. Still we discovered some interesting nature particularly some flowering sundews and a plant that looked like a melastoma.



The trip to Kandy was interesting because after we left the Conservation Reserve we saw many hectares of tea plantations. What was so interesting was that these tea plantations also supported many large Golden Silky Oak trees. At first I thought I was mistaken but then we encountered lots of other Australian timber trees. Most of the Australian trees were Eucalypts and they were growing straight and strong.

Perhaps it was the rarefied air but once we were back on the flatland and good pavement with few bends but lots of traffic I had trouble staying awake. It may also have been that it was after 2.30 and I was overdue for sustenance. However we negotiated the chaotic traffic of Kandy and Sunil took us to an expensive restaurant overlooking the lake and town and once replete we went to our accommodation, a lovely retreat.



**Our Kandy accommodation. Kandy Greenview Boutique**

**Day 7**  
**Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> January**  
**Kandy World Heritage**

The climate in Kandy is most benign. It is similar to Brisbane in April or September. So it set our mood for our final World Heritage destination. We were feeling relaxed with a 9.30 am start.

We went down to the Temple of the Tooth containing the most sacred Buddhist item. The tooth was apparently salvaged from the Buddha's funeral pyre. It didn't take long to take in this site because there wasn't that much to see. Further the crowd made it almost impossible to even get near the golden container that holds the tooth. There were so many pilgrims it was difficult to move.



The tooth is somewhere in side that window everyone is facing. Once through this throng we were able to go to the International Museum on Buddhism which was quite brilliant. Regrettably we had set noon to meet up with Sunil but we could have easily spent another hour there as it traced the philosophy and spread of Buddhism through southern and eastern Asia.

We emerged to join Sunil who took us to a remnant of Kandy's colonial past, Queens Hotel. Graham Greene, the author, stayed there and helped to immortalize it in the way Somerset Maugham had made Raffles Hotel in Singapore famous. After a drink in the Mountbatten Bar we headed for lunch at a hotel near the Botanic Gardens where we had another curry buffet meal.

The Botanic Gardens though were so relaxing and so pleasant. We saw lots of orchids and Angiopteris growing as well as lots of other plants. Then while strolling through this beautiful area with lots of courting couples we were astonished to encounter a giant Kauri. It was bigger than any

other Kauri I have seen in Australia. There are a couple of fatter and shorter ones in New Zealand but the seed for this one came from Queensland and it couldn't have been even collected before *Agathis robusta* was even discovered by Europeans. I estimate that in less than 170 years it has grown to have a diameter of about two metres.



From the Botanic Gardens we went to have our photo taken with Sunil processed before proceeding to the dance theatre. It was the hall of the Young Mens Buddhist Association the equivalent of the YMCA). We got there early enough to secure a front row seat which was just as well because the hall was packed out and there were people standing. It was a brilliant show from 5.30 to 6.30 but it was so fast and exciting. I had expected something similar to the slow graceful movements of the Thai dancers. This though was much more athletic with male dancers providing the main items with tumbling juggling and balancing. The music was almost all supplied by drummers who used a style of drum I haven't seen before. There was also fire walking and some elegant female dancing but so much to cap off our last full day of exploring this amazing country.





## Days 8 & 9

Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> January

### Kandy to Colombo to Brisbane

It was another beautiful Kandy day but despite the scheduled later start we woke at 4.00 am. It wasn't a good start faraday when there was no overnight accommodation to look forward to.

Our first stop was the shop to buy a tablecloth. Alas they had nothing that suited but with some lesser purchases we moved on to collect our photos, finalize our entry in Sunil's much-prized Autograph Book. Su made her entry in Japanese. and then some other shopping in vain before heading out of Kandy. We stopped at a tea factory to buy some authentic Ceylon tea as souvenirs and gifts before heading for Colombo.

It was a slow tedious trip and it took until 1.30p.m. to reach Negombo but I can't remember much as I kept nodding off.

We ate lunch at Tastee's, a restaurant by the beach where we were waited on by Sunil's eldest son. Sunil was at a loss as to what to do with us but the ever enterprising Sunil discovered a nearby place where we could doss down until 8.30 pm and make up for that too early start by having a kip before heading to the airport at 8.15.

The rest of the evening was spent waiting and in queue to check-in and get our seating and flights first to Kuala Lumpur and then to Brisbane. We saw nothing except the little screens in front of us and after 20 hours arrived safely in Brisbane.

We both were surprised by our reaction to Sri Lanka. This truncated visit had revealed to us a country and a culture so different to our preconception of it.



70% Sri Lankans are Buddhists

## Reflections

What attracted us so much about Sri Lanka was just how natural it was just how natural everything was. We had not anticipated seeing so much wildlife. We hadn't expected as much prosperity as we did see. It is not a wealthy country but there seemed to be little appalling poverty. Having seen almost every vestige of Nature being progressively whittled away in Indonesia to feed and accommodate and exploding population and visiting Thailand, Laos and Cambodia where the countryside was so bereft of birds, Sri Lanka seemed like the Garden of Eden.

It wasn't just the nature alone. The apparent good health of the people was evidenced by a beginning tendency to plumpness. Australia could learn a lot about public health and the emphasis by noting that Sri Lanka labels its relevant department "*Health and Nutrition*". Public health is also reflected in the fact that despite the extensive wetlands that we saw, malaria is almost non-existent now although we were told that Dengue fever is on the rise.



This Sri Lankan family group epitomises so much

Another welcome surprise about Sri Lanka was how sustainable the country seems to be especially compared with Australia. It has abundant water reserves. It produces no fossil fuel and relying only on imported hydrocarbons Sri Lanka is very frugal with energy use and has very low carbon emissions. It is self sufficient in its food production and has an amazing percentage of its countryside covered with forest. How a country slightly smaller than Tasmania can sustain a population almost the size of Australia's and still retain so much of its culture and its natural heritage is something Australia could well learn from. Sri Lanka recently had a turbulent but it now seems to be enjoying the Peace.