



Sri Lankan mahouts bathe their elephants near Sigiriya. Below, the dawn haze shrouds Colombo's Lotus Flower Tower.

Resounding rebirth of Sri Lanka

The island country in the middle of the Indian Ocean is rich in culture and history

Story and photographs by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

This mango-shaped island nation of Sri Lanka has become South Asia's symbol of rebirth, transitioning from a lengthy period of civil war to its current enjoyment of increasing freedoms as democracy is being restored. It possesses an intrepid traveler's trifecta: rich culture and history; a plethora of flora and fauna, and pristine coastlines.

Trade, cultures, great resources

At the southern tip of India, Sri Lanka — once called Ceylon — has always been strategically important due to its location along the commercial trade route.

The Portuguese arrived in 1505, followed by the Dutch in 1658, then the British in 1796. Independence came peacefully in 1948 but did not last. Its 22 million people are composed of four main ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors and Burghers (European-Sinhalese mixed) and four religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

The civil war began in 1983 between the Sinhalese majority government and the Tamil Hindu LTTE, known as the Tamil Tigers. It lasted nearly three decades with over 100,000 casualties. Then the devastating 2004 tsunami

Please see SRI LANKA, E7



IF YOU GO ... Sri Lanka

>> **Travel arrangements:** Scott Dunn Travel provides comprehensive, custom travel arrangements, including a knowledgeable English-speaking driver/guide, accommodations, meals, site tickets and activities. Based on a 10-night itinerary, rates start at \$4,000 per person, excluding airfare. Call 858-703-4709 or visit ScottDunn.com.

>> **Airfare:** From Honolulu the most direct and cost-effective way to Colombo is to fly to Hong Kong on United, American, ANA or China airlines, with round-trip airfare starting at \$647, then purchase a round-trip Hong Kong-Colombo flight on Air Asia, Cathay Pacific, China Eastern or Malaysia Airlines, which starts at \$382.

>> **Notes:** Tourist visas are required for U.S. citizens and can be obtained online at eta.gov.lk/slvtsa.



PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

SRI LANKA

Continued from E1

caused an additional 30,000 casualties.

When the war finally ended in 2009, change was imminent. With open elections in 2015, the reserved Maithripala Sirisena became president, and he has been instrumental in the effort to combat corruption and ameliorate ethnic strife. While there are still occasional ethnic flare-ups requiring intervention, the government quashes them quickly.

Colombo, commercial capital

Although Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte is the country's administrative capital, Colombo is its heart and its largest city. From the recently opened Shangri-La Hotel, Colombo, in the city's northern

Fort section—originally the site of the 16th-century Portuguese fortifications—was within walking distance of the area's main sites.

I joined a walking tour of the fort area and its Colonial-era buildings. The carefully restored Old Dutch Hospital houses quaint

restaurants and shops. Nearby, the Lighthouse Clock Tower at Chatham Street is touted as the world's only lighthouse clock tower, constructed in 1857. The red-facaded Cargills department store was once Colombo's retail grand dame. The Grand Oriental Hotel, known as the GOH, housed Anton Chekhov, among other notables, and boasted in its heyday it had "the best modern system of drainage."

In Pettah bazaar there are four main streets: textiles, flowers, bling and spices. It's a crowded, colorful, commercial mecca in all of its chaos. Our guide informed us, "One can have a suit made in two hours, but will probably last for just three!" The imposing Red Mosque (or Lal Masjid) can be seen from



most Pettah streets and accommodates 16,000 worshippers.

To go farther afield, I took a motorized three-wheeled "trishaw" with a covered rear carriage. My kind driver, who inexplicably went by the name Donald Duck, deftly negotiated Colombo's crowded streets.

Stopping at peaceful Seema Malaka Temple on Beira Lake, we continued to Gangaramaya Temple, one of Colombo's most important shrines. The main hall's intricate ceiling frescoes reflecting old Colombo make up for the cluttered grounds.

At Royal College park and in nearly every other public space, cricket is played. As much national obsession as sport, it's enthusiastically played even during steamy midday heat.

The impeccably restored Arcade Independence Square, a Colonial-era former mental hospital, now houses upscale shops. Another magnificent Colonial-era building contains the National Museum of Colombo. The best exhibits are in halls 7, 8 and 14, which bear paintings, textiles and traditional masks.

The fashionable Cinnamon Gardens area hosts Tintagel Colombo, the former prime minister's elegant Colonial-era residence, now a 10-suite boutique hotel. Dark wood, period pieces and gleaming balustrades allow visitors to contemplate their inner royalty.

The late Geoffrey Bawa is thought to have been one of Asia's premier architects. Once an attorney, Bawa had a long and distinguished architectural career completing more than 200 projects, including the new parliament. At No. 11 33rd Lane, one of his signature homes can be visited.

The day ended at Paradise Road The Gallery Cafe, Bar and Shop, once used as Bawa's offices. With installations that change monthly featuring talented Sri Lankan art-

ists, it's another lovingly restored Colonial-era set of buildings with a large courtyard kol pond.

Wilpattu National Park

From Colombo, Scott Dunn Private Journeys' driver/guide Kevin Cramer drove me to Wilpattu. Here I met up with Keith Wickramarachchi, a knowledgeable animal spotter and birder.

One of Sri Lanka's 12 national parks, Wilpattu is known for its leopards and sloth bears—we had several sightings of both from our open jeep—but also has a mind-boggling number of birds. Sri Lanka is an ornithological wonder with more than 440 species, 33 of which are endemic. During dawn and dusk game rides, we saw crested serpent eagles, green bee-eaters, blue-eared kingfishers, black-headed ibises, peacocks, jungle fowls, painted storks and many others. It's a constant cacophony of chipper chirping.

Accommodations at Leopard Trails, 3 miles from one of the park's two southern entry gates, had air-conditioned tents and good food and service.

The cultural triangle

Ancient cities of Anuradhapura, Kandy and Polonnaruwa make up a region that is home to five UNESCO World Heritage sites filled with historical wonders. These allude to the region's grandeur and refinement during its peak.

In Anuradhapura, the Sinhalese capital until the 10th century, I hopped onto a bicycle. It's the best way to see this ancient city given its layout and the heat. This remarkable complex has sophisticated irrigation systems, baths and its crowning achievement: the third-century stupa Jetavanarama Dagoba. Originally rising 328 feet, it was constructed of 93 million bricks, rendering it the world's third-tallest structure at the time of its construction, after two of Egypt's pyramids.

One of Buddhism's holiest sites is here, Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, a holy tree allegedly grown from part of the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment.

Following an hour's drive, I arrived at Water Garden Sigiriya, a splendid hotel with ethereal views of ancient Sigiriya Citadel Rock. Lying atop a massive granite column rising 600 feet, the rock formation is considered the heart of the brief, fifth-century Kassapa kingdom.

I commenced the 1,200-step climb at 7 a.m. to avoid the heat, and the rewards en route were plentiful: frescoed celestial nymphs, a wall so shiny it's dubbed a mirror and a gate bearing enormous lion paws. On top, resplendent valley views instilled deep gratitude that I am not acrophobic.

In Kandy's historical center, one of Buddha's molars rests in the Temple of the Tooth. I wondered what a dentist friend would think of paying homage to a tooth in a town called Kandy. I checked into Elephant Stables, a charming colonial hilltop bungalow that once housed elephants in its adjacent gardens. The Kandyan curries served here were outstanding.

In Peradeniya's 147-acre Royal Botanical Garden, I strolled amid 4,000 plant species and 10,000 towering trees, including giant Burmese banyans, Cook's plums bearing hordes of hanging fruit bats and Java fig trees. Several movies were filmed in the picturesque setting, including "The Sec-

ond Jungle Book: Mowgli & Baloo" (1997) and "Tarzan the Ape Man" (1981).

The medieval capital of Polonnaruwa gained prominence as Anuradhapura commenced its decline, and is guarded by a defensive system of ramparts and moats. The highlight is the Quadrangle, where the central dagoba is set atop an elevated terrace.

Teatime in the Hill Country

From Kandy a train ride climbing to 4,170 feet past miles of hillside tea plants brought me three hours later to Hatton. In tea country's heart I checked into Ceylon Tea Trails, one of five artfully restored bungalows, each with five guest rooms set amid stunning emerald-hued tea estates surrounding the otherworldly Castlereigh Reservoir. Within the estate are walking trails with plenty of leeches that happily found me boring.

Following coffee crops' failure to rust disease, Scotsman James Taylor introduced tea in the 19th century. Sir Thomas Lipton modernized production, and tea is now the most consumed liquid after water. Sri Lanka is the world's third-largest tea exporter.

Leaves are mainly collected by women who deftly maneuver steep trails. Bearing heavy bounties on their backs, they bring the leaves to be weighed at the processing plant. The Dunkled Tea Factory tour was informative, and the labor intensity of the process—from plant to cup—caused me to never view a little, aromatic tea bag in quite the same way.

The southern coast

Driving through the back roads exposed more tea—jade-green terraced agriculture—and countless dogs, cows and horses that meandered the road. At Nuwara Eliya's Hindu Sita Amman Temple, angry macaque monkeys guarded the entrance. Six hours later I arrived at the southern coast's Tangalle.

Here, swaying palms, white sands and an idyllic coastline beckoned. At Amanawella 30 enormous, Balinese-style rooms with an ocean-facing balcony graced a secluded, blissful setting.

In coastal Galle's historic fort area, the Portuguese-created and Dutch-improved ramparts withstood both time and the 2004 tsunami. Colonial-era churches, clock and bell towers, small shops and restaurants within thick walls make for an inviting stroll.

Reflecting on 10 remarkable days, I contemplated the writings of Sri Lankan Ramesh Gunesekera, who wrote that the destination is "a very special island that travelers from Sinbad to Marco Polo dreamed about. A place where the contours of the land itself forms a kind of sinewy poetry."

Perhaps this poetry imparts the optimism of democratic reforms and freedom it instills. If following decades of conflict, the Sinhalese and Tamils can break bread and

move peacefully onward, then I share the optimism that Sri Lanka will overcome its current challenges to prosper while delighting travelers fortunate enough to experience the pearl of South Asia and its generous, hospitable people.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, legal columnist and attorney based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty, the Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at Julie@VagabondLawyer.com.

