

Kataragama Hindu Pilgrimage

In July and August 2009 we walked the last part of the Kataragama Annual Hindu Pilgrimage - a mere 110km from Okande to Kataragama. It had actually started a month before with people walking from the north of Sri Lanka but we couldn't get that amount of time off work!



It took six days in all, days of intense heat and an unrelenting dry wind which sucked all the moisture out of your throat and lungs. Pilgrimage's are not supposed to be comfortable but whilst this one was arduous and extreme it did not matter. The spirit of the people shone out through all the discomfort - bad stomachs, heat exhaustion and for some, extremely painful feet worn raw with abrasive sand, thorns and rubbing sores.



The senior Hindu priest arranged for us to walk with a group of ethnic Tamil families who themselves were part of a much larger group which got bigger, then smaller as the days went by. Sometimes we slept overnight with two thousand people, other nights we walked and talked with dozens on the way as we carried on in the moonlight to avoid the relentless heat of the day.



But regardless, everyone cared for each other without question. Water was shared, plasters and witch hazel for blisters, food was passed out literally from hand to hand and at night we all huddled together on a tarpaulin sheet, our 12 family members and us, to sleep under the stars and the endless skies.



It was an unimaginable experience, one which we lived every second in excitement and anticipation. There were glorious conversations with people in English, bits of Sinhalese and our pidgin Tamil as we trekked the desolate trail. There was the joy of the antics of children as they ran what must have been twice as far as the rest of us and then crashed out senseless whenever we stopped for some shade. Then the curiosity of boy soldiers who would appear from behind trees and demand photos on their mobile phones of me, the only white woman in the entire 20,000 pilgrims who had passed that way in one week in August. The memories will be with us forever.



It is impossible to capture the feeling, the caring, closeness and achievement of those on the pilgrimage and reaching the Hindu temple site at Kataragama was celebrated in style. Pilgrims transformed themselves wearing colourful saris and sarongs and made offerings to the god's for their safe journey.



For detailed information about the pilgrimage see: www.kataragama.org

And if you want to hear more about our experiences, let us know!

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