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Interesting people and 'unusual' places

In February and March 2009, we travelled extensively throughout the central, eastern and southern regions of Sri Lanka. As ever, we followed our instincts and synchronicity took us to some pretty unusual places by some rather surprising routes.....





It began in Ella, with the shriek of a train whistling up a single gauge track and the clank of an engine as it strained for the stiff pull up the mountain. It was 6.30am and at the Green Sky hotel perched high on the rocks above a magnificent valley on the edge of the central highlands, the day got off to an early and explosive start with fire crackers spitting in the valley below to mark a celebration.

We were aiming to visit the impressive Buddhist sites around Buttala, including the biggest stupa in Sri Lanka at Udaganava. But, it is not easy in an area where there are few road signs and little distinguishes the official main roads from sandy tracks. These wind round fields of tall grass higher than the vehicle so it is easy to lose your sense of direction. But we are nothing if not persistent and after stopping many times to ask people in the fields and getting lots of wide gestured directions issued in staccato Sinhalese, of which I could only make out dakuna and wama (right and left), we pulled up into a calm green parkland.

Deserted yet expansive, it had obviously been built to cater for more prosperous times. Very English with a winding path through the heavy canopied trees, by noon it was a welcome cool and hushed approach to a understated yet impressive site. Udaganava, the biggest stupa in Sri Lanka, was under renovation and there was nobody, literally nobody, there.



This building, 2,216 years old, is a symbol of enlightenment and is one of the most ancient icons of Buddhist art. Stupas are also the oldest and most prevalent forms of Buddhist architecture. But more than this, these holy monuments were designed with deep symbolism and sacred geometry. Filled with Buddhist relics and other holy objects, stupas emanate blessings and peace. Their foundation, symmetry, orientation and contents create incredible power for those who look upon it. It has the potential to transcend the limitations of language to activate enlightened knowledge. 'A stupa is a place where all the Buddhas are abiding. Those beings who don't have the karma actually to see Buddha need the holy objects of body, speech and mind - statues, scriptures, stupas - as a field for accumulating merit.'" - *Guhyasamaja Root Text*



We certainly felt the power of the place, probably because the hush was undisturbed. We moved softly through the trees, careful not to disturb even a root on the path and sat in the shade of the delicate wooden scaffolding taking it all in. It was timeless, tranquil, ineffable – and I never thought I would find an appropriate use for that word but it really was inexpressible, overwhelming, indefinable.

It is perhaps best shown as a picture. The creature below, perched contentedly nearby, says it all:



We left, reluctantly, after a timeless amount of time, and gradually re entered the world via the car park, which still only hosted our vehicle. At the top end a woman gestured for us to come over and offered a cooling drink of freshly made lemonade. It was delicious.

As is the way of life in the remote areas of Sri Lanka, conversation was innocent and curious: 'Where had we come from?' 'Where were we going?' Questions about our families, children, relations and homes followed and then when Sid went to get some change to pay for the drinks I was left on my own to manage with my limited Sinhalese. A challenge to be sure as within seconds we were joined as if by magic by her aunt, uncle and mother with other people who hovered at the fringes of our group.

It is always surprising to find how mysteriously people appear when I am on my own, even for just a little while. It is as if a silent signal is passed and everyone comes out to look and speak and touch hands with the Sudu Nona – white woman. For many it is the first time they have seen someone from the western world and it is not only the children who stare but the adults too, who marvel you have come all this way, in their minds just to see them.

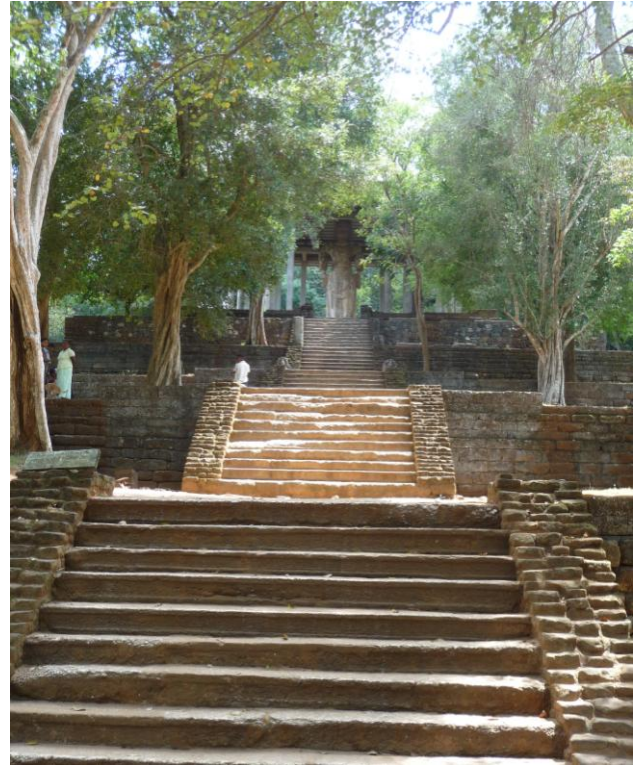
But I was quite proud of how much of my Sinhalese was understood for by the time Sid got back I had found out that Sujeera had two sons, her father was in hospital paralysed by diabetes, she herself was one of seven children of which she was the third and she had two brothers in the army. She lived nearby with her husband who was at work in the fields at that time.



It was hard to leave such unconditional acceptance, warmth and hospitality. But we have written since and in August we are going I back to see Sujeera and her family.

It was now mid afternoon and we drove in the relentless heat and glare south along more tracks to the next site at Maligawela where there are two huge Buddha statues. Again there were no visitors even though the site had obviously been built for coach loads of pilgrims and foreigners. It is a sign of the seriousness of 'The Situation' and the fear people have of terrorist attacks. Not unfounded, as we discovered later.

One of the two statues shows Buddha in a classic posture and is set into a sort of amphitheatre where ceremonies and piriths are held. The other shows a Buddha in warrior dress and stands at the top of a long staircase under a protective canopy.



In the golden light, both Buddhas were truly impressive. We sat on a low wall, silent, as the wind susserated in the trees, squirrels darted and geckos flitted into cracks in the rocks. A great white gnarled tree lay entangled with roots and lianas, like a giant sculpture.

Beyond and in the distance, the sounds of people on a day out. The extended family stretched out across the dusty ground, surrounded by plates of rice, meat, vegetables, bunches of bananas with shrouds of steaming tea boiling on their fire. A hunched achee (grandmother) was being served by the head of the family, his children sat respectfully cross legged whilst their amma's (mothers) aunts and sisters shared out the food.

As we left we walked through what would have been a crowded market place in better times. Now the sheltered chairs and tables, the stalls of icons and incense and flowers were deserted. Once again we were invited to sit and talk. People gathered, men, women and their children who had only that minute arrived on the school bus in their pristine white uniforms.

It was this same school bus in January 2008 which had been wrecked by a bus bomb not yards away from where we were sitting, killing 35 people from this village. One of the girls sat in our group looked at me shyly. She was about eight, her black hair tied back, big brown eyes wide, satchel at her feet. She had lost her father when the claymore bomb had been detonated from a tree as the bus went past. In some families, four members died.

The impact on this small village was profound and over a year later they were still stunned. For not only was this one of the poorest villages in Sri Lanka, its community, sense of security and innocence had been lost. More soldiers, Norwegian aid and a new school, whilst welcome will never be able to bring that back.

Subdued and thoughtful we journeyed further south to try and find an ancient site of stones. Sid had read about the place in an old book and was keen to see it. But finding it? As it was not on the map we asked a series of village people as they walked down the potholed road which had a precarious tendency to subside leaving us lurching in first gear and me clinging to the open window.

The area skirts Yala National Park, which has been closed for years due to 'The Situation.' Over forty cohorts of Tamil Tigers are still believed to be hiding in the park, Tigers who are blamed for the village bus bomb. The authorities have responded by ringing its perimeters with military checkpoints, contingents of home guard made up of local people and extra patrols. It was one of these which urged us to take a different route, and gently turned us round.

But further down the road we found a man with a machete returning to his fields after the worst heat of the day and he hopped on board and volunteered to take us to the stones. Chutti directed us past miles of paddy fields and we parked by a river we had to cross on foot using a rickety bridge.

Like kids we bounced across, swinging more than the original Millennium Bridge in London and delighted in the ancient iron and jumping the missing boards. Below, the river was little more than sludge in the heat.



The stones themselves were not that impressive but what came later for Chutti, knowing it was nearly dark, told us of an eco lodge where we might stay, which was only for foreigners and could only be found if you knew where it was.

And he was not joking about obscurity! Even though we are used to remote tracks, twists and turns around fields and patches of trees, slewing through streams and up hazardous bankings, there seemed to be no real direction to where he was taking us. No signs, no houses, but two young men in uniform guarding track told us we were getting near to what looked like a barbed wire fence and a high hedge of bushes and thorn. Over a huge gate more like a stockade with a heavy chain attached and two padlocks the size of small safes, was this sort of grinning voodoo head.

This was Kumbuk River – a truly exclusive eco lodge with restricted access.



Stories of its origin vary according to who you talk to. According to Chutti, the land was bought by a manager in the Wild Life Service on his retirement and he developed it involving some of his former employees. When he died, they carried on running it.

But Internet articles written about the eco lodge tell another story. This one is about it being conceived by an advertising agency, The 7th Frontier, whose executives say they had no previous exposure to the tourism industry. "This is literally a story laced with blood and sweat and how this amazing eco-lodge took roots in an area not known for tourism and amidst huge strife and hurdles is a testimony to the spirit of youth in this country. True to our vision, the entire project was the handiwork of unemployed youth from the hamlet of Okkampitiya in Buttala who rallied around us."

So what is unusual about the eco lodge and why the secrecy?

Chutti banged on the gates and called out to gain attention and eventually the great doors were hauled open a crack. A swift conversation in Sinhalese got us grudging admittance but with conditions. We could not stay long, certainly not overnight, or take a camera or have anything from the site. Like what – we thought?

Escorted by two men through the natural grounds of stunted grass and bare earth we walked to a construction in the distance. It was forty feet high, made out of bamboo and stood on four legs. An elephant!

It seems the 7th Frontier Team wanted to attract the world's attention to Sri Lanka when they masterminded their eco resort so they made one which features a 40ft elephant as its primary villa. As we were not allowed our camera, the only picture we have is the one from their website, below. But believe me, it is just as impressive and huge as it looks!



We were shown around the under belly of the beast, which is a comfortable lounge with cane and rattan chairs, up the rickety stairs to the sleeping quarters. It is sectioned off with screens so the several double beds have some semblance of privacy and there is a chemical toilet in a bamboo corner of the upper levels.

It was amazing to stand there, gently swaying in the breeze as the motion affected the elephant, and I couldn't help wondering whether the honeymoon couples the place likes to attract found the motion an embarrassment or a turn on. And what about the elephant's trunk? Did it rise in their honour?

More down to earth, I wondered what people did here. The website says:

- *Just eat, sleep and relax in a haven of your own.*
- *Explore the fascinating riverfront and miniature island.*
- *Go trekking on the other side of the property which is Yala, Sri Lanka's most famous wildlife sanctuary*
- *Spot an elephant in the moonlight; on the resort itself if you're lucky, or catch a glimpse of peacocks roaming at sunrise.*
- *You may take a guided tour to the wildlife parks and historical sites or take a drive at night to spot a few animals.*
- *Relax at the herbal plunge pool.*
- *Tours to beach resorts, famous ancient cities, the world's eighth wonder and other places of interest, located elsewhere in the island could be arranged on.*

Then goes on to explain:

One of Sri Lanka's foremost ecologists has put together a participatory plan that makes you an integral part of our eco plan. You will learn about Sri Lanka's incredible bio-diversity, you'll learn things you never knew about wild animals and plants. You will receive hot tips on surviving the dangers of city life; coming your way in the shape of food, for example.

You'll go away fully convinced of your commitment to preserving our habitat.

But not before you have planted a tree or helped a rural economy reeling under the shackles of poverty, not before you have helped a poacher to remain in his new job of protecting the wildlife.

Not before you have lived the most poignant few days/weeks of your life!

And not before you have cause to wonder why there are mouse traps on each double bed

They gave us leaflets about the eco lodge but we had to give them back as they would not let us take them away. Despite having no guests, the staff they would not even let us enquire about staying there, saying we had to apply via the Colombo office or through the website. In an hour we were escorted away, still curious.

Still bemused, our imaginations running wild about the true function of this place, we asked Chutti about what sort of people stay there. He spoke of government officials who were brought by night in tinted window 4x4's, who stayed on site and were never seen in the village or ever ventured out to meet local people, and of very rich business men taking over the entire accommodation for a week.

It was obvious we did not fit either description. But if you want to know more, Google on Kumbuk River and see what you think.....