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Village Life

Life in the remote villages in Sri Lanka remains largely unchanged. People live simply in harmony with the environment, responding to the seasons as they unfold. In the higher mountain valleys there is no electricity and the day begins and ends with natural daylight, water is drawn from rivers and streams families are almost self sufficient.

The Auspicious Time

Astrology plays a significant part in the lives of many people in Sri Lanka and drawing up a horoscope is practiced a lot. This can also affect the timing of events, such as appointments, festivals and annual celebrations such as the Buddhist New Year which is celebrated in April or annual pilgrimages. The dates and timings are set nationally and adhered to by those who take part so bear this in mind when you try to make arrangements.

Astrology also plays a large part in the system of arranged marriages and many Sri Lankans believe that unless a union is deemed to be favourable in the couple's astrological charts, that it will not happen or be successful.

Do not underestimate the villagers

Never underestimate village people. Their conversation ranges from people, politics, Buddhism, ecology, philosophy, the natural world and farming. They know the importance of spending quality time with each other and enjoy true communal living.



Gathering for a meal

Practically, village people make their own homes, fences, enclosures, huts and shelters, rope, tools. They are adept at thatching roofs with straw dried from the paddy fields, cooking vast arrays and a variety of food without modern appliances, refrigeration or electricity and have their own herbal health remedies which, from firsthand experience, we know work.



Village people have tremendous dignity, respect for each other and a level of tolerance which has to be experienced. They work extremely hard, from dawn to dusk which is usually over 12 hours, and have a true community life in harmony, not only with the natural world, but with themselves. You will be greeted with the utmost politeness and curiosity so it is well to be prepared and as open to their honesty as you can be.

Eating with local families

Sri Lankans are very hospitable and like nothing better than for you to join them for a meal and stay the night, if you are travelling or a visitor. Mealtimes are a family occasion and do not be surprised if you find yourself being served first and watched while you eat by a roomful of eager eyes, all keen to see how you respond to the spicy food!



Again, my experience in the remote mountain villages is that food will be prepared in advance and laid out on a table at one end of the room. The family gather around, and that includes the neighbours, local people teachers, shop owners and lots of curious and shy children who hide behind their mother's skirts.

If, like me, you do not like spicy food or are vegetarian then to avoid offence, you need to find out well in advance what is being cooked so that you are able to enjoy it in the public arena. If you are invited somewhere at 7pm to eat it is also likely you may wait a few hours before the food arrives, so don't go with an empty stomach.

Wait to be shown your seat. There is often a protocol to be followed and on many occasions I have found myself eating before the family in front of an invited audience.



In the villages there are no bathrooms so water will be brought to you in a bowl as you sit at the table so you can wash your hand - note the singular. In practice there will be two bowls. You hold your eating hand - usually the right if you are right handed, over the empty bowl and pour the water over it without dipping your hand into the water bowl! This is important as the next person at the table will use the same water and sometimes that water is what you also drink with the meal so don't put your hand in it!

You will be handed a cloth to wipe your wet hand and will be waited on usually by the most senior person in the family as you are an honoured guest. Sometimes the senior man will serve the male guest and the senior woman the female guest though it is by no means a fixed rule. Don't feel embarrassed by this as it is a great honour for you to be invited.

You will then either be served or expected to help yourself from the various bowls of food on the table. Start with a portion of rice add spooned portions of each of the bowls. Include a bit of everything unless you have been shown which ones to avoid if you have particular dietary needs. As a rough guide, the brighter the colour the more potent the spice!

Mix the food together with your fingers of your eating hand, never the other one, and you will find that by diluting each portion of food in this way you achieve a balanced taste which you would not get if you ate each one separately. This is a statement about balance, Ying and Yang, as well as advice for making highly spiced food eatable without tears streaming down your face.

Be aware that as long as your plate is empty Sri Lankan's will fill it up, so when you have had enough, leave some on your plate. That is the signal for your plate to be taken away. You can always say 'Epa' or 'No'.

At the end of the meal the same water bowl is used to wash your eating hand, or more will be brought if there is none left. Again, the remainder is for drinking so don't put your hand in the bowl.

Drink

In spite of being Buddhist, many villagers like to drink and there is usually a toddy tree nearby. Early in the morning, men known as toddy tappers climb high into coconut palms to collect the sap which has been slowly seeping out from the tapped flower inflorescences during the night. They collect the pots that have been left there and bring the toddy down the tree. It ferments quickly and becomes a sort of weak beer.

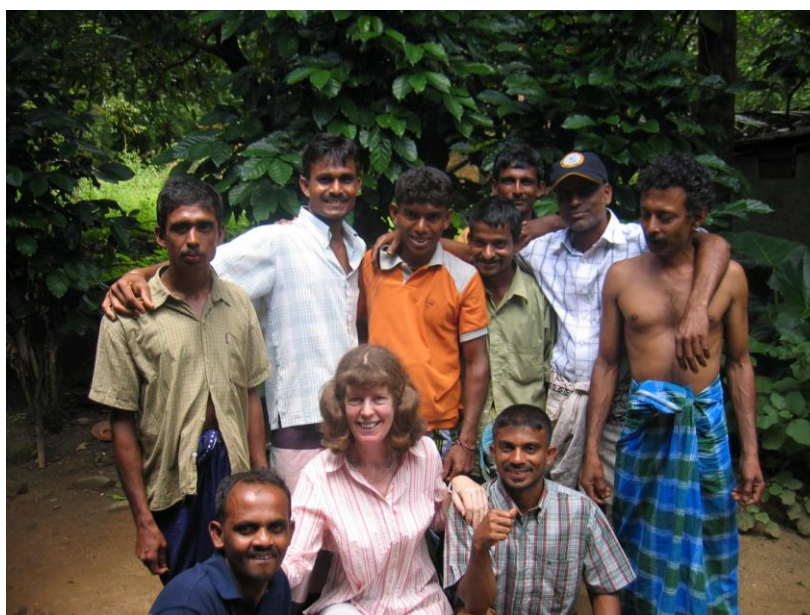
If it lasts long enough to be distilled it becomes Arrack and can be bought in shops as it is illegal to keep in the villages - but this does not prevent illegal Arrack being available - it is known locally as kasippu.

You have to get used to being of interest

First off, in the remote areas, you must expect to be the subject of intense curiosity. This does not just apply to foreigners (you have to get used to that title as you will hear it a lot and it is not meant to be offensive!) but is also applied to Sri Lankans who are not from that area. But being white or merely different, and in some places you may be the first white person they have seen apart from on TV, you will be the subject of much curiosity. And if you are a white woman travelling on your own (though with a guide), it is even more of an event than for a white man to be exploring.

You may then find that what might have been a quiet village when you arrived soon turns into a very busy place indeed as families bring their children to look at you, your clothes, your hair and the colour of your eyes. If you bear in mind most Sri Lankans have black hair and brown eyes, your ginger, blonde, brown hair and green or blue eyes will be a novelty. And your westernised dress, your hairstyle, and any jewellery or the modern appliances you carry such as complicated watches, mobile phones, camcorders, Ipods etc. Even your European style large rucksack is unusual in these areas and your boots or walking sandals as most people tie things they carry across their backs in cloth slings or balance them on their heads in sacks and walk bare foot or in flip-flops.

They love having their photographs taken and if you can arrange for prints to be sent to them on your return home, they will remember you forever!



People are very curious about you

Many people will want to know if you are married, especially if your partner is not with you, how many children you have, about your parents, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces and how many grandchildren you have. If you have photos with you, they will be very interested and reciprocate by bringing out their album and showing you all their family, the weddings, the new children and photos of sons in military uniform.

A word of caution for single females. In Sri Lanka one of the worst things that can happen to a woman is for her not to have a husband, either because she was once married and her husband has died, or in rare cases - much rarer than in the west - she is divorced. Therefore if you present as a single woman, for whatever reason, you may find that a series of potential husbands are put in your way. This has happened to me on more than one occasion and can be embarrassing when one of these would-be suitors addresses an entire room of people where you have gathered for the evening and enquires whether you are 'Looking for another husband.' Or even worse, asks the oldest man in your party who they see as a sort of surrogate father to you, if you are available for marriage. The first you hear of this is usually afterwards!

On one notable occasion I was treated to a tribal Tamil courting dance, the name of which had something to do with a flapping chicken – see below – but which brought laughter and smiles to everyone. Needless to say, I did not accept – or at least I don't think I did.....



A polite refusal along the lines that you are not currently looking for a husband but do appreciate the honour of being asked, is usually sufficient, but you can expect giggles and delighted shrieks from the assembled women as all this takes place in public. And the locals do not give up. I am still being potentially

married off after many visits and many refusals and regular after dinner chats around the fireside are invariably about when, not if, I will get married!