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Travel and Security in the north and east of Sri Lanka



In September and October 2008 we travelled extensively in the lesser visited government controlled areas in Sri Lanka. We went as far west as the island spits in Puttalam Lagoon, as far north as Wilpattu National Park and Trincomalee and as far east as Batticaloa and Arugam Bay - which used to be a famous surfing resort but is now practically deserted.

The picture below shows the military patrolling the beach - which maybe explains why it is quiet - though we found it a lovely place with great waves!



Security, as you might expect given the 24 year long civil war, is intensive and you will in these areas be constantly stopped at military checkpoints, both on land and across water, where the navy take over. Here

they have boats positioned, with machine guns and a tarpaulin to protect the navy personnel from the unrelenting heat and sun but unfortunately the isolation and languid atmosphere of a placid lagoon can have its other effects. When we approached one of these naval checkpoints to present our papers we had to waken them all up as they were asleep on the bottom of the boat!

The frequency of checkpoints, usually tight chicanes made of anything from improvised log obstacles thrown across the road to full scale military steel barriers and sandbags, varies in the regions and in the most vulnerable areas soldiers are stationed every few hundred yards at the side of the road.

However, it has to be said that the level of scrutiny westerners come under is nothing compared to the detailed questioning, searches and delays experienced by Sri Lankans. There is a myth that westerners, especially women, cannot be terrorists and therefore you are largely waved through every form of checkpoint. Whilst we know this is an unwise assumption, nothing seems to budge their thinking, and believe me we have tried!

For example, even though we were in high security zones and travelling in the same vehicle, Sue has only been asked for her passport twice in two years (by officers who were highly embarrassed to do so) whilst Sid has had to produce his personal papers, vehicle papers and fill in countless forms and answer many questions.

And when we were stopped in December 2007 in a hire car which, as it turned out was on the Police hit list as it had been stopped there three months previously and discovered to have twenty kilos of drugs on board, Sue was not even asked to get out of the car, produce a passport or subjected to any scrutiny at all and indeed the officers apologise profusely for even searching the boot!

You will find the military are innocently interested in you as a westerner and whilst your guide may be delayed by them at checkpoints for what seems a long time, you will be approached with a wide smile, whatever English they have or Sinhalese you understand and engaged in a pleasant chat about where you come from, how many children you have and what you think of Sri Lanka. It is rare for a Westerner to be seen in any of these parts and you are can attract quite a crowd of soldiers who just want to talk, so be prepared.



The Home Guard in the picture above at a Buddhist site in the north, invited us into their shelter, shared their water for we were parched and talked for hours about their lives, their duties and the satisfaction in their work, but they too had not seen any visitors for a long time, due to perceptions of the security situation.

But nowhere did we feel any sense of threat, aggression or oppression, just some irritation at one point on our part when we were driving down the North East coast and were stopped thirty times in as many miles by bored soldiers just wanting some relief from the monotony of routine duties.

We also gave lifts to a variety of military personnel, some returning from leave, others going off for a few days to see their families and they were very eager to talk about the 'situation' and the latest news about the civil war. Without giving any secrets away, this was by far the most interesting part of our encounters with the military, ranging as it did from a conversations with the army, the police and the air force who all variously travelled with us for miles across roads full of subsidence and potholes.

Some advice

Be patient with the security measures. Nothing will speed them up and you have to take it as it comes.

Don't react to rumours, wait for substantiation. When we were there in September 2008, the news flew around about the water supply being poisoned in Kandy killing at least six people. It turned out to be just a rumour but before it was squashed many people reacted and in some ways the results were as effective as if it had been true.

Make sure you have all the right documents as it is too late when you are in the middle of nowhere and find you are missing something.

This happened to us at a particularly bureaucratic checkpoint where a complicated piece of paper had to be filled in to give us passage for the next sixty miles. It involved recording the chassis number and engine number of our hire vehicle. But, nobody could find the engine number. We all knew where it should be but the combined military might of that checkpoint, plus the local police and the local garage could not find it!



After one and half hours of futile searching, in scorching heat, under the van, the seats, along the bottom of doors, every bit of the engine compartment too, defeat was acknowledged and we got special dispensation to travel onwards but only after the military had rung every checkpoint on our route to warn them there would be a missing item on our piece of paper!

Travel in general

Travel in Sri Lanka beyond the main cities is a challenge not to be underestimated due to the condition of the roads. This is especially true during the monsoon period when many routes are flooded, dangerous or impassable.

To the uninitiated, driving in Sri Lanka can be a frightening experience. Rules exist but it is hard to see what they are! The only one I have witnessed is the one that says any space on the road is fair game. But, it has to be said, given the chaotic nature of the roads, the constant harassment you experience from cyclists, taxis, buses belching black fumes and the miraculous TucTucs, I have never felt in danger.

That is due in every respect to the fantastic driving ability of Sid, who never gets stressed, angry or even appears to notice what we would consider to be a near miss and floats around the road as if under divine protection. He even gets on well with traffic wardens!



Always expect the unexpected!

You never know what is going to happen so be prepared for anything. On one trip our van used more oil than diesel and we spent a part of every day in a local garage, being unclogged. As you are a foreigner, they drop everything to help and watch you shyly from behind piles of tyres and engine parts.



And you find the most unusual things on the side of the road....



One day, driving across a narrow causeway in the monsoon rain, we passed a cyclist in a sarong, or rather we thought we did. One moment he was parallel to the van, the next he had gone. Alarmed, we stopped, got out and he was nowhere in sight. We could not understand how he had disappeared so quickly, until we found him upside down in the ditch by the causeway. When we fished him out it appeared he was drunk, had weaved off the road, got his sarong tangled up in the bicycle chain and could not move until we got to him! We unbent his bike, he got on, and wobbled off down the road – the wrong way!

And sometimes vehicles break down, but if you ignore them, have cup of tea in a wayside boutique, pass a pleasant hour eating mangoes and oranges and listening to the local gossip then sometimes you find the car works first time. If not the locals will come to the rescue and if you thought you were in a remote area then think again. It is miraculous how quickly word gets around that a strange vehicle is stranded.

We sank in the sand in the distant north, mainly due to one of us needing an emergency stop for a toilet after a bout of food poisoning, and in seconds six men appeared on two scooters and a lorry and were soon pushing and shoving our van back onto hard ground!



The roads

On the main roads travel, notwithstanding the driving practices, is quite bearable, but do not think that because a road is labelled an A or a B road, that it will have a tarmacked surface or that you can estimate how long it will take you to get to a place. Potholes are everywhere and on one stretch of main highway it is so bad it is if the surface has been bombed into many craters.

Then there are the other roads, which are more like sandy tracks. Below is a busy intersection, a main crossroad and an important place to pass when you wish to go east.



The sign said 'Road Improvements 2006' – and it was 2008 before we noted any improvement!

The more remote you want to be the more necessary is a four wheeled drive. Not least because of the surface but because of the water you are likely to encounter when the road has collapsed and you have to drive through streams which swell to rivers in times of the monsoon.



It can rain for days without stopping, or just for the afternoon but enjoy it – everyone else does!

You have to be prepared to improvise and if the worst comes to the worst and your vehicle gets flooded, then the only option is to dry out....



Or walk - as we did last Christmas!



Thunuruvan Saranayi!

(May the Triple Gem Bless You!)

Happy and Safe Travelling!