

Anuradhapura, 13th March

Welcome to the new readers - just delete if you're not interested.

I'm sitting in the lobby in the evening with lots of insects around; an old computer in front of me is loading some photos very slowly, but the tablet is much efficient for this email.

Arrangements have gone very smoothly so far. The flight from London had only a minor delay because of the incoming flight from Sri Lanka being delayed but we were only half an hour late arriving at Colombo where customs and immigration were efficient, and soon we were in a taxi heading to our apartment in the southern suburbs of Colombo, very near to the ocean front, with a sea view, if rather oblique! We turned out to have a large three bedroom flat to share between the two of us (Phillip and I), which was well appointed. After unpacking we headed off for a walk along the beach to find a drink in a beach shack and then supper in a very good South Indian restaurant, dining on dhosas.

After a good night's sleep we were ready for Colombo and its sights. We travelled in by the suburban railway, not too crowded with even a seat for part of the way, and found the Pagoda restaurant for breakfast of 'short eats' or snacks with spicy vegetable fillings, and a pot of Ceylon tea. The city doesn't have too many tourist sights, but the National Museum was interesting, and set the scene for the days to come. After a longish walk through the city and park we found the Palmyra restaurant for a selection of Sri Lankan curries. The hotel above it had rooms for our return visit to Colombo before our return flight, so that's sorted. Afterwards the museum and the walk back to the apartment and the chance to catch up with the sleep not gained on the overnight flight. Tuesday was our day to move on, but not until the train at tea time, so there was a chance for more sight seeing, this time in the chaotic old town. First stop was at the Dutch Period Museum (Colombo was Portuguese and Dutch before the English came along), which is in the Governor's house and is a haven of peace with a garden in the centre of a mayhem of traffic, mosques and street stalls.

The map in the guide book was not really good enough to find the two churches that we wanted to view; but passers by were ready to help and we found the eighteenth century Dutch church on top of the hill and the more modern RC cathedral, both of interest and the appetisers for another lunch of exotic Lankan curries, including such delicacies as sliced and deep fried garlic, cashew nut curry and Jackfruit curry.

Soon it was time to go back to the apartment to collect our luggage and get a taxi to the station for our train to Anuradhapura in the north. It started on time at 4.20pm but got slower and slower on the wretchedly ill maintained track and arrived an hour and a quarter late at 9.15. It was comfortable enough but the journey was rather tedious after dark. The hotel three wheeler was waiting for us and we were soon checked in, watered and retired for the night helped by the remarkably efficient air conditioning. The temperatures are into the low 30s with high humidity, but there are beautiful blue skies. (What's the temperature in Britain?)

Today we rented the rickshaw for the day and did the many interesting Buddhist sites, with help from our knowledgeable driver Muhammed. And of course a break for lunch and a siesta.

So, it's going well. There are four photos to view at

[201303SriLanka | 102347834716042008511](#)

(They took an hour). I trust that I'll find a quicker computer!

Martin

Kandy, March 20th

I found a faster computer, and so there are now more photos at:

[201303SriLanka | 102347834716042008511](#)

Anuradhapura continued to be interesting, and after the full day sightseeing on Wednesday we had an easier day, using Muhammed and his rickshaw for the twenty minute drive to Mihintale and spent the morning exploring the temples, stupas and ponds there, with lots of steps to climb in the hot sun. Sorry to mention the latter again, but it's not freezing here. Then more lunch, siesta. A pattern seems to be developing!

Our next destination, Dambulla, is not on the railway and so we had to catch a bus. Muhammed dropped us at the bus station and found us an air conditioned midi bus that took us there in about two hours, getting to the hotel in time for lunch. The rooms were large, air conditioned and with terraces where we ate our breakfasts overlooking the veg garden, but sheltered from the sun. In addition to the usual omelettes and toast we can have hoppers - a sort of pancake, with treacle or with curry of various sorts.

One of our outings was to Sigiriya, to climb up the steps in the rock to the eminently defensible summit. The lunch at the local rest house was not so good, with several cold veg curries that I suspect had been sitting around for a while... But they did have EGB, Ginger Beer from Elephant House, very gingery and very refreshing, and something of an institution.

Another bus, another city, this time Kandy at 500m in the beginning of the hills. It's a little drier but still warm. There's a fine lake in the centre which suffers from noisy and smelly traffic all around and the hills rise from it.

We're staying at a typical travellers' guest house, surrounded by many of the same. Very friendly, but no AC. I've become the owner's IT expert, sorting out her hotmail, and showing her how to send visa forms for Austria to her daughter, who I was able to Skype, goodness knows where! We've been to the fabulous Botanic Gardens, just out of town, and to the temple of the tooth, where the tooth of the Bhudda is kept. And this afternoon I went on the 3km walk up to the Tea Museum, with all the apparatus from England, and an excellent cup of local tea. The views of the hills from the tea gardens were fine.

Tomorrow we go up to 'little England', a hill station where it's rumoured to be cold!

Sorry about my it's in the last; it's the predictive text.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

All best wishes,
Martin

Ella, Monday

It's been interesting to compare Sri Lanka with India. The southern tip of India is very close to the latter, although there currently aren't any boats between them. The climate is very similar here to Southern India - tropical and humid with little change in temperature with the seasons. The Tamil people here are related to those in Southern India, with the same mix of religions. The troubles between the Tamils and the Singhalese isn't mentioned much, but it seems that human rights problems have not been solved. There seems to be a lot of confidence in the future and there is a lot of investment in infrastructure, certainly in the tourist areas. It seems rather more expensive than in India, particularly for foreigner entrance to sites, and hygiene seems rather better.

From Kandy we travelled by train to the hills. We treated ourselves to first class, where there is air conditioning and comfortable reclining seats, which swivel so that you can face either way. The track was a little better than the previous journey but progress was fairly slow, twisting and turning through forest and paddy, and then vegetable fields as we rose higher in to the hills. We were only twenty minutes late arriving. The station is six kilometres out of town so we finished the journey with a taxi to our Hotel Alpine, at almost 2000m, in Nuwara Eliya, a hill station with many memories and hotels from the British era. The climate is like a pleasant British summer, but with some thunderstorms which give considerable rain.

Instead of historical sites, we were walking in the hills, visiting another, smaller, botanical garden and of course a tea factory with demonstrations of the processes and a cup of tea in the gift shop. One day we rented a car to take us to Horton Plains National Park. Here one can walk through the grass lands to the forest on the edge of a seven hundred metre escarpment, looking to the mountains and the plains. We set off at six with a packed breakfasts, and were just in time to see the views as the daily clouds welled up in the valley before obscuring everything. N E claims to be little England.

From there it was a bus back to the station and the very entertaining 2.5 hour train ride through the hills, forests and tea gardens to Ella, where we could just see the view through the gap in the hills through the rain clouds. Hopefully tomorrow morning will be drier!

Martin

Colombo, Friday

Corrections and Clarifications

Sorry about the subject line; there was no part 3

Has/have got mixed up.

It's funny how I spot the errors immediately after I have pressed the send button!

Tomorrow was drier, and after a reasonable breakfast of omelette, fruit, toast, jam and coffee we spent the morning walking. Firstly we went through the tea gardens up to Little Adam's Peak, with its views to the south over the plains, below to the deep cleft of the valley called the Ella Gap and of the hills around, very rocky with all sorts of tropical vegetation. One of the delights here comes from the large number of exotic flowering trees. The main Adam's peak is some distance away and is a pilgrimage site; the sort of place you climb during the night up the steps to see

the dawn from the top. We had hoped to go there but the logistics were too complicated in the time available. After the peak and a ginger beer in one of the adhoc bars in the gardens, we walked down the road through the Gap to a reasonably impressive waterfall and returned by bus for a snack at the Nescoffee cafe, not risking coffee.

Wednesday was spent travelling from Ella to Galle on the south coast. I'm afraid that Phillip didn't enjoy it as I did; he isn't one for long bus journeys. I am continually entranced by the countryside and ordinary life passing by. It was an standard large bus to Matara and then a small air conditioned one from there to Galle. It's good to see this place buzzing with life and tourists after the Tsunami and the war. I talked to a businessman on the bus about the latter. His main take was on the waste of time and money which held back Sri Lanka's development, and the lack of people travelling and trading in those times. However where the roads are renewed they do seem to be better than in Buckinghamshire.

Our guest house in Galle Fort was very friendly with efficient AC but best of all we could sit on the terrace outside our first floor rooms with the ramparts of the fort and the ocean beyond just over the minor road. For breakfast we sat there looking at the ocean with a choice of Western or Sri Lankan. This morning I had hopppers - rice pancakes in the form of a shallow bowl - with egg curry and coconut chutney, fruit juice, fruit and coffee. The latter is home grown and strong. Within the fort there are lots of Dutch period buildings, some in a state of decay, and some refurbished. There seems to be a lot of money going into developing tourism.

Today we got the train along the coast from Galle to Colombo. It was busy with just 2nd and 3rd unreserved seats but we just managed to get seats. There were plenty of Westerners on the train along with locals, and there were plenty of people walking up and down selling anything from tasty looking, but probably lethal, snacks to children's toys. It was all very pleasant when the lavatory door was closed. We stay overnight tonight and fly home tomorrow.

Thanks for reading; I'll send an email when I've made the final selection of photos.

Martin

We got home safely!

The hotel in Colombo was very comfortable; a business hotel. On Saturday we got a taxi to the airport in good time for the 1pm flight and settled down to endure 12 hours in the air. Sri Lankan Airlines made it as comfortable as it might be - certainly better than the long haul BA flights I've been on recently. I was met by a friend at Heathrow and was home by nine pm.

I've added some more photos and the album is at

<https://picasaweb.google.com/102347834716042008511/201303SriLanka>

I've been working on a database of my photos, and the first public incarnation is at

www.martinberry.co.uk

Do look if you're interested and I welcome constructive criticism and suggestions.

Till the next time

Martin

