

Breaking News

“Good morning, thank you for listening to CNN. We have breaking news from Colombo, Sri Lanka. A bomb blast has killed at least three people including an important Sri Lankan general. The Tamil Tigers have claimed responsibility as Sri Lanka continues to spiral towards civil war.”

Hearing breaking news about terrorist bombings and civil war in a country minutes before boarding a plane to that country is never welcome. This set the tone for my time in Sri Lanka. In addition to the deteriorating political situation, I had to deal with persistent beggars and schemers, delayed trains, and birds who defecated on me three times in one week (this had happened to me only once in my entire life). However, life can be a struggle at times and so can traveling. One must perceive and upon doing so I found the charm of Sri Lanka.

Bandaranaike International Airport is located closer to the city of Negombo than the capital of Colombo, making Negombo a nice alternative. The flight into the airport is also notable as passengers view the impressive vegetation and rice paddies. The city of Negombo certainly has the feeling of the subcontinent, with the smell of curry and the sight of a variety of Hindu gods. However, there is a variety of seafood to sample and due to Portuguese and Dutch colonization, many Catholic churches including the most famous, St. Mary's. Most of the tourist accommodation is located in the Negombo Beach area, which is located next to the Indian Ocean. Though a relaxed city, plenty of people were asking me for money after telling me their tsunami story. The tsunami of 2004 struck on the east side of the island so some of the stories may have been true, others false.

Kandy is the main city in the central hill country and is useful as a transit point in addition to having several points of interest. Lake Kandy is a large lake in the middle of the city and it's enjoyable to walk in this area. There are a couple of museums, but they are overpriced. Also overpriced is the Udawattakelle Sanctuary, which has ample trees but few animals. Of more interest are the numerous *devales* (shrines) and *viharas* (monasteries) which illustrate the intermingling of Buddhism and Hinduism. One can see orange-robed Buddhist monks walking with their umbrellas among the Bodhi trees on the *devale* grounds. Other shrines have worshippers lighting candles, praying to their gods and then cracking coconuts as part of the ritual. Depending on one's level of spirituality, there are several meditation centers that can be attended. Also worth a visit is the nightly traditional dance show, which culminates with walking on fire.

The Temple of the Tooth, however, is what lures most people as it houses the sacred tooth of the Buddha. It is difficult to see the tooth as it is housed in a gold casket and protected by a couple angry-looking Buddhist monks. The tooth itself may be a replica, as it might have been taken by the Portuguese and then lost. The *pujas* (prayers) are held three times a day and include a lot of beating on drums and religious people praying and offering lotus flowers to the Buddha. There are several objects dedicated to the Buddha and Buddhism in the temple as well as the stuffed Maligawa Tusker, a famous work elephant, located in the temple complex. An exhibit is also devoted to the 1988 truck bombing of the temple, part of the ongoing civil war.



Although it is not hectic, getting out of Kandy is worthwhile. The Peradeniya Botanic Gardens are just a few miles outside of the city. There are several types of orchids, a giant fig tree, and coconuts that weigh over 40 pounds. Also, in the area were several bats. The gardens are a good place to relax.

A temple loop around Kandy can be taken to see the country and three temples.



The loop requires a lot of walking, but meeting people and cows along the way is pleasant. The Embekka Devale dates from the 14th century but its carved wooden pillars are showing their age. Passing another small village and talking to some people processing tea, is the Lankatilake Temple. This temple is more imposing as it is located on top of a hill and gives a view of the surrounding rice paddies. Passing through another small village which has several brass businesses, is the

Gadaladeniya Temple. This temple is probably the most attractive of the three with lotus

flowers and a Hindu annex. While the temples are intriguing, so is talking with the rural people as they don't mind taking some time to chat and seem sincerely interested in the conversation.

Sri Pada, or Adam's Peak, is a legendary place for several religions. This is supposedly Adam's first footprint after being cast out of heaven, where Buddha stepped as he ascended into paradise or a footprint belonging to Lord Shiva. Most people want to arrive at the summit when the sun rises which requires leaving at about 2 a.m., as it is 5,200 steps and over three hours to climb. The ascend starts from the small village of Dalhousie, which we (two Slovenians and me) reached via the local school bus. We were accompanied by the dog from our hostel, the Green House, and sheets of rain and wind. Reaching the top, we found two guards who were sleeping but woke and offered us tea. However, the area to see the foot was closed as it was off-season. I felt like Chevy Chase when he arrived at Wally World in the movie Vacation. The rain cleared and the sun shone as we completed our descent.

There were other disappointments in Sri Lanka. Nuwara Eliya is also in the hill country and is close to the attraction of Horton Plains National Park and World's End. This area is known for its natural beauty. However, the touts and scammers were so aggressive and annoying that the trip was cut short. Returning through the numerous tea plantations to Kandy by delayed train, we saw what looked like a dead person at the train station. He was lying on the ground, covered by a sheet with a pool of blood near his head. The people were at a distance because they believe if they touch the dead body, the negative, death spirits will enter them.

On a more positive note, is a visit to Dambulla. The city is dusty and bland, but it has a couple of places worth a visit. At the southern side of the city are the cave temples, containing 150 different Buddha statues in five different caves, some dating to the 1st century BC. Descending from the caves, one can view the 100-foot-high Buddha statue, which is the world's largest Buddha in the Dharmachakka posture (seated, with legs crossed and hands joined). A museum below the big Buddha contains information and relics of Buddhism.



Near the city of Dambulla is the rock fortress of Sigiriya. The fortress was built in the 5th century AD as a protective fort by the son of King Dhatusena, after the king was overthrown. Kasyapa, the son, had taken the throne but feared that the legitimate heir would attempt to overthrow him. Visitors enter the fortress through the moat and then walk past the remains of water and boulder gardens. Of more interest are the attractions that are part of the actual fortress. About halfway up the rock are a

series of frescoes – The Sigiriya Damsels. They are paintings of women dating from the 5th Century AD and are the only nonreligious paintings from that time that can still be

seen in Sri Lanka. Closer to the top are the lion's paws, the only remnants of the sculptured lion that guarded the summit. Finally, there is the summit but only few of the original buildings remain.

Traveling in Sri Lanka requires some patience, but so does living there due to the war and other conditions. I remember talking to the genuinely nice Buddhist woman who owned the hotel I was staying in at Kandy. She brought up the civil war and was adamant that the government should wipe the Tamils. It was surprising to hear this from an old Buddhist woman. However, as she explained there is a lot of good in Sri Lanka and a lot of good people, but the bad people hold the country back. This is true; there are many good things in Sri Lanka, unfortunately the breaking news does not indicate that.