

# Sri Lanka

*Awesome history, wildlife and Buddhist culture – and all within the largest known public racetrack. Of special interest – what to expect if you're invited to a Big Girl's Party.*



**7<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

Barry-Sean Virtue and Steve Anyon-Smith

## **Short Summary**

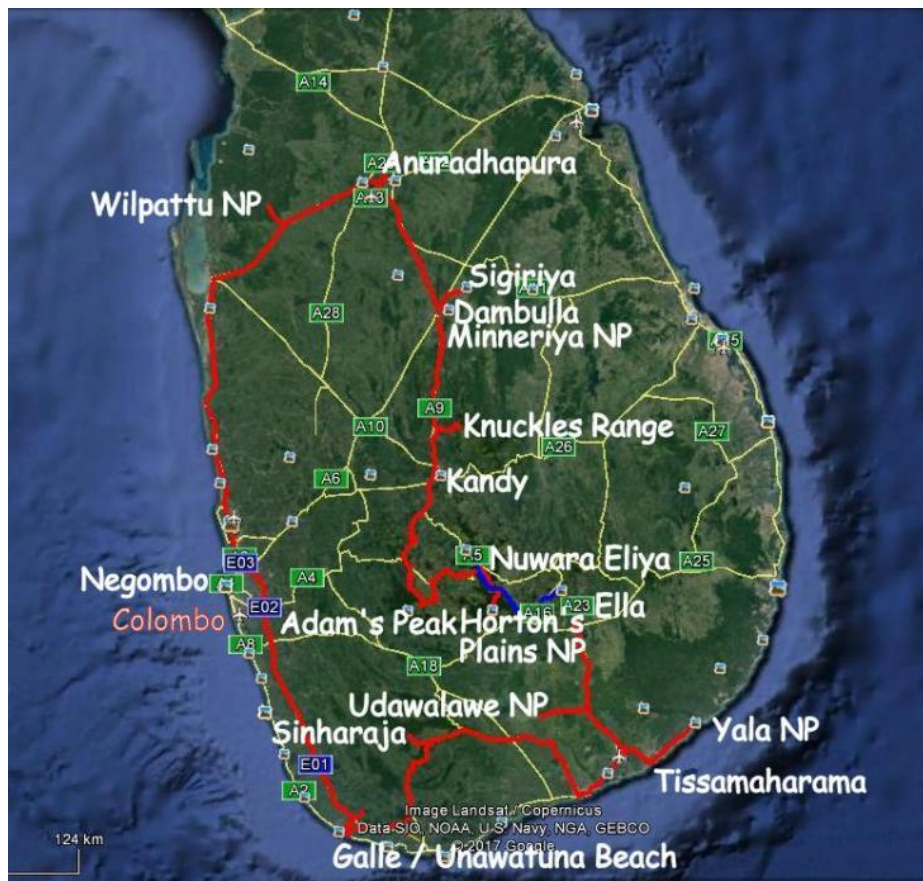
Sri Lanka offers something for everyone – verdant and varied landscapes, critters large and small, lots of watery bits, charming people, tasty food, and the opportunity to travel between wonderful places in a reasonable timeframe. Nevertheless – don't go during peak tourist season, expect to pay entry fees (often very high) for pretty much everything, and if pathetically mangy dogs don't do it for you, then stay at home.

## **The Plan**

There wasn't much of a plan. We had contacted a Sri Lankan driver / tour guide, Manju Madushan, who had proposed an itinerary based on "what normal tourists do". We took out a few of the beach, massage, tea plantation, elephant hatchery and herbal remedy visits in favour of a few more trees, and then just turned up at Colombo Airport. I made no attempt at learning anything about the country until I got there.

## Itinerary

- Negombo Beach, Suriya Arana Homestay, one night
- Anuradhapura, Margosa Lake Resort, two nights
- near Dambulla, Nice Place Hotel, three nights
- Kandy, The Change Hotel, two nights
- Dalhousie (Adam's Peak), Punsisi Rest House, one night
- Nuwara Eliya, Gregory's Bungalows, two nights
- Ella, Sky Green Resort, one night
- Tissamaharama, Peacock Reach Hotel, one night
- Tissamaharama, Lake Wind Resort, one night
- Sinharaja, Sinharaja Viwe(sic) Villa, three nights
- Unawatuna, Damith Guest House, three nights



## Notes on accommodation

Unlike many countries the location and amenity of accommodation in most of Sri Lanka is not critical – there is just so much of it to choose from. There are hundreds of providers servicing Dambulla/Sigiriya alone!

*Suriya Arana Homestay, Negombo*

Contact: [www.suriyaarana.com](http://www.suriyaarana.com) or [suriyaarana@sltnet.lk](mailto:suriyaarana@sltnet.lk)

Excellent facilities, small pool, delicious food, welcoming hosts / owners. Close enough to Negombo Beach and the town dismal swamp - which hosts a number of waterbirds.

Highly recommended.

*Margosa Lake Resort, Nuwarawewa (Anuradhapura)*

Contact: [www.margosalakeresort.com](http://www.margosalakeresort.com) or [thilakaholidayhome@gmail.com](mailto:thilakaholidayhome@gmail.com)

Excellent facilities, useful-sized pool, great food and staff. Opposite Lake Margosa and some scrubby forest with lots of good birds. Many birds in the hotel's grounds too. Cheap beer. Handy to attractions and good opportunities to meet locals near homes just outside the hotel.

Highly recommended.

*Nice Place Hotel, Inamaluwa (Dambulla)*

Contact: [niceplacebungalows.com](http://niceplacebungalows.com)

The second bed in our twin was dodgy; otherwise excellent facilities with bar fridge and great pool. Food was okay with dinners being buffet-style. Lots of birds and some mammals in the leafy grounds. Opportunities to walk to other birding sites. Good chance to meet villagers.

Highly recommended.



*The Change Hotel, Kandy*

Contact: *No need, as you would be an idiot to stay there*

Both beds awful. Facilities mostly broken. Small pool not tested. Seating anywhere uncomfortable. All meals quite dismal, with chances to eat chicken still capable of laying eggs. Owner and manager friendly but incompetent. Nice view but inconvenient location on narrow convoluted road network. Some birds could be seen if you jumped a barbed wire fence and into a nearby tea plantation.

To be avoided. If there is no other accommodation, then move to the next town.

*Punsisi Rest House, Dalhousie*

Contact: via Trip Advisor

Good, although cramped facilities. Great views of “village square” from 4<sup>th</sup> floor restaurant windows. Food okay. Very friendly and competent staff. No pool. Virtually no birds nearby as the whole area is invaded by eucalypts. The hotel and others like it only exist to service those climbing Adam’s Peak. Unless you are doing this – and not in the foggy season – then don’t go to Dalhousie.

Recommended as accommodation.

*Gregory’s Bungalows, Nuwara Eliya*

Contact: <http://gregorybungalow.com/nuwara-eliya/>

The facilities are mostly excellent except for the second bed. Cold interior. No pool (too cold anyway). Delicious food (the best fried rice I have ever eaten!). Very friendly and obliging manager and staff. Anyone who recommends that you buy your beer at a cheaper price outside the hotel and then put it in the hotel's fridge wins lots of points in my book. No birds around as there are no trees. Well situated for visiting Horton’s Plains National Park, Hakgala Botanic Gardens and other sites.

Recommended.



*Sky Green Resort, Ella*

Contact: <http://skygreenresortella.com/>

Excellent facilities, delicious food and great staff. No pool. Dicky location from town. Amazing views from rooms. This new hotel is pretty much faultless. Some common birds, monkeys and squirrels can be seen from the roadside above the hotel in house gardens.

Highly recommended.

*Peacock Reach Hotel, Tissamaharama*

Contact: <http://peacockreachhotel.com/>

Good rooms but cramped. Facilities good. Mid-sized pool. Food fairly ordinary although good boxed breakfast for jeep safaris. We had no daylight to explore on foot but seems to be in a leafy area.

Recommended.

Lake Wind Resort, Tissamaharama

Contact: <http://tissalakewind.com/>

Excellent facilities – the best room we had and the most engaging views across a bird-filled lake. Small pool. Food okay. Lots of birds in the surrounding streets, gardens and a small creek that drains the lake. Friendly staff and locals.

Highly recommended.

Sinharaja View Villa, Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve

Contact: *you can't and you shouldn't*

Manju hadn't booked anyone here before and won't do so again. We stayed in the owner's bedroom. He slept on the couch. The facilities were very ordinary – with, e.g. no toilet paper supplied. The food was okay until I ate the mixed fried rice and spent the next six days pondering my future. Enough said? Not really near any good forest. There are lots of other places to stay. Any of them would be better than this place.

Not recommended. If you can't find anywhere else to stay then go to Sinharaja as a day trip.

Damith Guest House, Unawatuna

Contact: <http://www.damithquesthouseunawatuna.com/>

Beds are good although the rooms are smallish. Rest of the facilities are good. Mid-sized pool. Satellite TV didn't work as the owner hadn't paid the subscription. We didn't eat here as we were the only guests. Not located anywhere near anything of any interest. Too far to walk to the beach. Owner allowed us a very late check-out time.

Nothing wrong with the place but not recommended as there are many other hotels on or near the beach.

**Sri Lankan People**

Most of the people we met were Sinhalese. These guys constitute 75% of the population and are pretty much all Buddhists. They are non-threatening, obliging and generally cheerful. Most of them seem to want to live in Australia but I'm not sure why. It is rare to find an annoying Sri Lankan. I try harder than most, and managed to find a couple – see Diary section, below. Barry-Sean posits that you can tell a Sri Lankan businessman's success by the degree of pendulousness of his stomach. Most of the locals are thinner than me.

I don't think I saw anyone get angry – even on the racetrack. Queerly, I didn't find a single annoying kid anywhere. They were mostly quiet, bordering on invisible. They are wonderfully respectful. In this regard Sri Lanka can never be compared with India. The

Buddhist culture “Sri Lankan style” has seen that wildlife is tame and obvious. There is much to like about Sri Lankans, except for ex-cricket captain Arjuna Ranatunga, who even the locals don’t like – as he is now a politician.



### Other people (also known as tourists)

In what was supposed to be the “low season” there were staggering numbers of Western and Chinese tourists. Those from the West were overwhelmingly European with French, Dutch, Belgian and German being the most common. Added to these guys were a few



rarities – with Andorra and Guadelupe (French West Indies) being added to my life list.... Most of the Chinese were part of tour groups, but there were a smattering of independents. Israelis, Arabs, Canadians and Scandinavians were in small numbers whereas there were no Americans and only one Australian.

I think Sri Lanka in the peak tourist season would not present a lot of fun.

### Weather

We thought we were visiting in the monsoon season, or, at least one of them – there are two. Interestingly there was widespread disagreement among the populace on whether any

particular area was in a “wet” or “dry”. The only day that there was any rain at all was Day 2 of the “Stomach Aliens From Hell” episode at Sinharaja, so it was counted as a blessing.

Daytime temperatures ranged from ~18 in the higher mountains to 32 or so on the coast. Winds were constantly fresh on the coast and in the north, increasing to “get the dog a stronger chain” in the mountains, particularly around Nuwara Eliya. The breeze / gale never really stopped anywhere, day or night. The best we could hope for was to hide on the lee side of a mountain.

### **Safety and Security**

There were no safety or security issues that we could identify in the areas we visited. Sri Lanka is a very safe country in which to travel – even for single women, or so I’m told. I’m not sure about gay and lesbian travel – our limited sampling of local views on same sex couples did not give us the impression that there would be a “gay and lesbian mardi gras” in Colombo any time soon – or ever.

### **Food**

The fruit – paw-paws, bananas, rambutans, pineapples, watermelon et al, was delicious, cheap and widely available at fruit stalls and complimentary hotel breakfasts. Local fresh bread was also inexpensive, tasty and everywhere.



Restaurant food ranged from reasonable to delicious, with the average being very good indeed. Servings were generous. Sri Lankan curries were a favourite – normally chicken or fish. Fried rice, noodles and sandwiches + chips were always available.

It is probably a good idea never to eat seafood if you can’t smell the sea. I failed to remove the prawns from a mixed fried rice at Sinharaja and still pondered the effects of this incredibly stupid decision six days later (a new personal best).

### **Beer and wine**

There is beer. Most tourist hotels sell it. The most common is Lion Lager. The best that can be said about this rather insipid brew is that it has a nice label. Lion and other brewers market a “strong” version – 8.8% alcohol. This tastes better (not surprisingly). A couple of

500ml strong in quick succession after a hot day of birds or temples can have an interesting locomotive effect.

Beer and wine can be purchased in shops of the same name. They are like brothels in Australia – they cannot be near schools, any advertising must be minimal and you feel like you are doing something barely legal as you negotiate your purchase through a hole in the steel; although I have no experience with brothels on this last point. Beer costs anything from \$A3 to \$A6 for a longneck depending on whether you buy it at a shop or a restaurant.



Barry-Sean bought a bottle of local wine. It is testimony to his constitution and perseverance that he managed to finish it, being possibly the first person ever to do so.

## Roads and Transport

With the exception of the motorway leading south from Colombo, almost all of Sri Lanka's roads are narrow and winding. Villages and towns are regular or at times constant. Although many of the tourist sites are close to each other, travel times can be longer than you might expect by consulting a map.

The mix of motorcycles, tuk-tuks, buses, trucks and cars – all with their own official speed limits – sets the scene for some hairy driving stunts. Manju seemed to live for this sort of stuff. He wasn't alone. Everyone starts the day "three laps behind". Extra credit is given to drivers for brazenness, undertaking, overtaking while talking on the phone and for making bold assumptions on the intelligence and intent of government bus drivers. My right calf



muscle is now bigger than its mate for constantly pressing the passenger brake.

That we failed to hit anything in three weeks in our Honda Hybrid is miraculous.

There are two types of buses – government (slow and awful and coloured red) and private (slow and awful and coloured mainly blue). They use the same routes. Whilst you might learn something useful by using buses – like not

drinking any fluids for two days beforehand – life and finances should never be that desperate.

Trains are well represented (the British were good at this sort of thing). Trains have the advantage that they don't have to swerve constantly around tuk-tuks. Wide gauge railroads are widespread (golly, I didn't see that one coming!). You might think that express trains travel faster than the others but this is not the case, or at least not when we caught the



train from Nanu Oya to Ella. Our train moved at a jogging pace. The slow train actually travels backwards when the driver thinks nobody is paying attention.



### **Insects and other pests (aside from dogs)**

Not too much to report. There were very few mosquitoes – never enough to bother with repellent. The leeches at Sinharaja were thought not to be thick enough to obscure views of ground-dwelling birds, but as we didn't see any ground-dwelling birds, they may have been. They were bloody hungry (just had to say that).

### **The Environment**

A mixed report card for Sri Lanka here. We didn't see any recent native forest clearing, although there is not much left to sustain such an activity. Many European visitors to Sri Lanka might not realise that much of the forest they are seeing, particularly at higher altitudes, is almost exclusively Australian in origin. Eucalypts are particularly abundant with swamp mahogany (*E. robusta*) sometimes forming monospecific stands that cover huge swathes right up to the highest peaks and on seemingly impossible slopes. Other eucalypts, wattles and grevilleas are very common, particularly within tea plantations and surrounds.

In general terms the dominant (Buddhist) culture offers a measure of protection to the country's mammals and birds. Unfortunately dogs are mammals too.

Litter is a problem. There is plastic rubbish almost everywhere you look and most places you don't. The existence of community roadside rubbish pick-up crews (seemingly always women) gives some hope for the future.



National parks are seemingly randomly dotted throughout. None of them are huge, although given the ability of most of the wildlife to misunderstand where they are supposed to live, the parks seem to do their job. The parks' management model is based on the Indian system. This means much bureaucracy, lots of rules and confusingly, at least one rule that appears unique to each park. So you can never be sure just which regulation applies to which park. The

most critical aspect of national parks as far as the Sri Lankan government is concerned is not the welfare of wildlife, rather than the amount of \$\$\$ that can be extracted from foreign tourists\*. The sight of 50^ or so jeeps blockading a leopard from crossing a road is one not easily forgotten.

\*In Sri Lanka there is a differential rate of entry fees for foreigners and nationals to any attraction. The difference is enormous. For each foreigner you could pay for 100 - 500 locals.

^There may well have been more than 50. Bends in the road and curvature of the earth make the true number impossible to estimate.

## Wildlife

The 21-day tour we signed up for did not have the words "birds" or "wildlife" in the title. We had a blend of culture, history, scenery and fair enough, national parks, beaches and forests here and there. We fiddled with the time and motion stuff as we went along. The possibility of contracting temple-fort malady was feared. Sampling cups of tea and staring at baby turtles didn't really do it for us either. While we spent quite a bit of our time looking in trees it wasn't too dedicated. Rarely did we have the chance to be in good habitat in the first few hours of daylight. We visited no good spotlighting sites, either because it was "against the rules" or we couldn't find any.

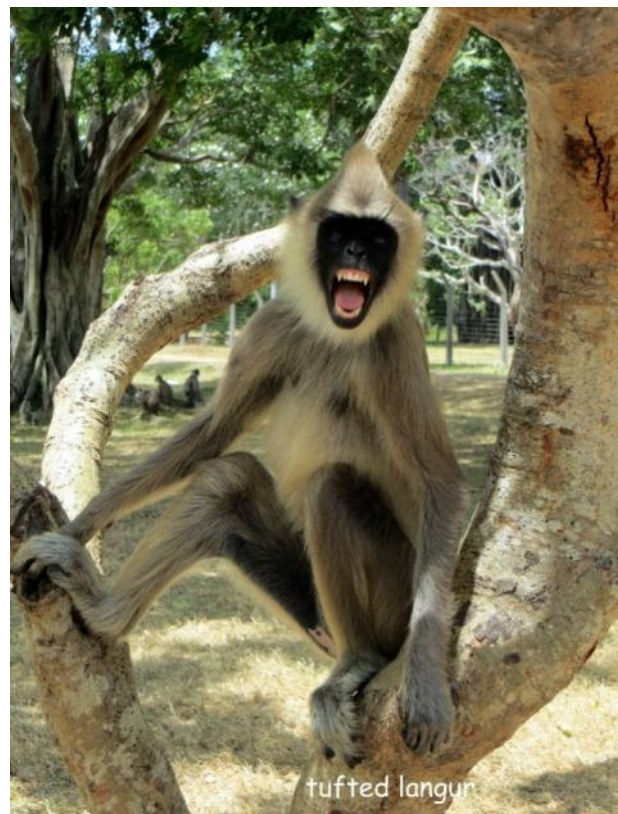




Plate		Wil	Anu	Dam	Knu	AP	HP	Uda	Yala	Sin	Gal
14	<b>Oriental Darter</b>	1						12	13		
15	<b>Peregrine Falcon</b>			3							
16	<b>White-bellied Sea Eagle</b>		2	4			10	12	13		
16	<b>Grey-headed Fish Eagle</b>	1		4	7						
16	<b>Brahminy Kite</b>	1	2	3	6	8	10	12	13		20
18	<b>Shikra</b>	1	2	4				12	14	16	20
18	<b>Besra</b>									16	
19	<b>Crested Serpent Eagle</b>	1	2	4	6					15	
19	<b>Black Eagle</b>				6					14	
20	<b>Changeable Hawk Eagle</b>	1		3				12	13		
21	<b>White-breasted Waterhen</b>	1		3			10		13	15	
22	<b>Purple Swamphen</b>		2	3							
22	<b>Common Moorhen</b>	1	2								
22	<b>Common Coot</b>		2								
22	<b>Pheasant-tailed Jacana</b>		2						13		
23	<b>Great Thick-knee</b>								13		
23	<b>Black-winged Stilt</b>	1	2	4				12	13		
24	<b>Yellow-wattled Lapwing</b>								13		
24	<b>Red-wattled Lapwing</b>	1	2	3	7			12	13		19
25	<b>Little Ringed Plover</b>		2	4							
25	<b>Kentish Plover</b>		2	4					13		
29	<b>Common Sandpiper</b>										19
32	<b>Little (Small) Pratincole</b>								13		
34	<b>Gull-billed Tern</b>		2	4					13		
34	<b>Greater Crested Tern</b>	1									20
35	<b>Little Tern</b>			4					13		
38	<b>Rock Dove</b>	1	2	4	6	9	9		13	15	20
38	<b>Sri Lanka (Wood) Pigeon</b>						10				
38	<b>Spotted-necked Dove</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13	15	20
39	<b>Orange-breasted Green Pigeon</b>							12			
39	<b>Pompadour (Sri Lanka) Green Pigeon</b>	1	2	5	6				13	15	20
39	<b>Emerald Dove</b>	1		4						15	20
39	<b>Green Imperial Pigeon</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13	14	20
40	<b>Plum-headed Parakeet</b>								14		
40	<b>Layard's Parakeet</b>				6					14	
40	<b>Alexandrine Parakeet</b>		2	3				12	13		
40	<b>Rose-ringed Parakeet</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13		20
40	<b>Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot</b>				8					15	
41	<b>Jacobin Cuckoo</b>							12			
41	<b>Common Hawk Cuckoo</b>				7				14		

Plate		Wil	Anu	Dam	Knu	AP	HP	Uda	Yala	Sin	Gal
42	<b>Sirkeer Malkoha</b>							12			
42	<b>Blue-faced Malkoha</b>		2						13		
42	<b>Common (Asian) Koel</b>	1	2	3	6				13		20
43	<b>Sri Lankan Frogmouth</b>										20
43	<b>Green-billed Coucal</b>									15	
43	<b>Greater Coucal</b>	1	2	4	7	8			14	15	20
46	<b>Crested Treeswift</b>	1	2	4	6			12	13		20
46	<b>Brown-backed Needletail</b>		2							15	
46	<b>Indian Swiftlet</b>				6	8	10			14	
46	<b>Asian Palm Swift</b>	1	2	4				12	13	14	20
46	<b>Little (House) Swift</b>		2	4							
47	<b>Green Bee-eater</b>			4				12	13		
47	<b>Chestnut-headed Bee-eater</b>	1		3				12	13		
47	<b>Indian Roller</b>	1		3				12	13		
48	<b>Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher</b>				7					14	
48	<b>Common Kingfisher</b>			3				12	13		
48	<b>Pied Kingfisher</b>							12	13		
48	<b>Stork-billed Kingfisher</b>								14	16	
48	<b>White-throated Kingfisher</b>	1	2	3	6	8		12	13	14	20
49	<b>Malabar Trogon</b>				6					14	
49	<b>Brown-headed Barbet</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13	14	20
49	<b>Yellow-fronted Barbet</b>				6	9				14	
49	<b>Sri Lankan Small (crims-front) Barbet</b>				6						20
49	<b>Coppersmith Barbet</b>	1	2	3				12	13	15	
50	<b>Malabar Pied Hornbill</b>		2	3				12	14		
50	<b>Sri Lankan Grey Hornbill</b>	1	2	3						14	
51	<b>Black-rumped Woodpecker (less g/b)</b>	1		3	6			12		14	20
51	<b>Lesser Yellow-naped Woodpecker</b>				7						
51	<b>Greater Flame-backed Woodpecker</b>		2								
52	<b>Large Cuckooshrike</b>				7						
52	<b>Common (Sri Lanka) Woodshrike</b>		2								
53	<b>Small Minivet</b>			4	6						20
53	<b>Scarlet Minivet</b>				6					15	
53	<b>Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike</b>				6	8	10			15	
54	<b>Common Iora</b>	1	2	4	6					15	20
54	<b>Marshall's Iora</b>							12	13		
54	<b>Golden-fronted Leafbird</b>				6				13		
54	<b>Jerdon's Leafbird</b>	1		3					13		
55	<b>Black-hooded Oriole</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13	15	20

Plate		Wil	Anu	Dam	Knu	AP	HP	Uda	Yala	Sin	Gal
55	<b>Sri Lanka Blue Magpie</b>						9			14	
55	<b>House Crow</b>	1	2	3	6				13		20
55	<b>Large-billed Crow</b>	1	2	5		9	9	12	13		20
56	<b>Ashy Woodswallow</b>	1									
56	<b>Red-rumped (Sri Lanka) Swallow</b>	1		4				12	13		
56	<b>Pacific (Hill) Swallow</b>				7					14	
57	<b>Black Drongo</b>		2	5							
57	<b>White-bellied Drongo</b>	1		3	6	9					20
57	<b>Greater Racket-tailed Drongo</b>	1									
57	<b>Sri Lanka Drongo</b>									14	20
59	<b>Richard's Pipit</b>										
59	<b>Paddyfield Pipit</b>	1	2	4			10	12	13		
59	<b>Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark</b>	1						12	13		
59	<b>Jerdon's (Bushlark) Lark</b>			4							
60	<b>Black Bulbul</b>				6	8				14	20
60	<b>Black-crested (capped) Bulbul</b>	1		3							20
60	<b>Red-vented Bulbul</b>	1	2	3	6	8	10	12	13	14	20
60	<b>Yellow-eared Bulbul</b>					8	10				
60	<b>White-browed Bulbul</b>		2	3	6				13		
60	<b>Yellow-browed Bulbul</b>					8	9			14	20
61	<b>Zitting Cisticola</b>		2	4						16	
61	<b>Grey-breasted Prinia</b>			3							
61	<b>Ashy Prinia</b>			4							
61	<b>Plain Prinia</b>			5				12	13	16	
61	<b>Common Tailorbird</b>	1	2	3	7	8	10			15	
62	<b>Sri Lanka Bush Warbler</b>						10				
64	<b>White-browed Fantail</b>	1		3	6			12	13		20
64	<b>Black-naped Monarch</b>			3						14	20
64	<b>Indian (Asian) Paradise-flycatcher</b>	1	2	3					13		
64	<b>Indian (Sri Lankan) Scimitar Babbler</b>				6	9	10			14	
64	<b>Dark-fronted Babbler</b>		2	4						14	20
64	<b>Brown-capped Babbler</b>			4						14	20
65	<b>Yellow-eyed Babbler</b>				6			12			
65	<b>Tawny-bellied Babbler</b>				8					17	
65	<b>Yellow-billed Babbler</b>	1	2	3	6	8		12	13	14	20
66	<b>Common Myna</b>	1	2	3	6	8	9	12	13	15	20
66	<b>Sri Lanka (Hill) Myna</b>									14	
66	<b>(Lesser) Hill Myna</b>				8					15	
67	<b>Indian Blackbird</b>				6		9				
68	<b>Indian Robin</b>	1	2	3	6			12	13		

Plate		Wil	Anu	Dam	Knu	AP	HP	Uda	Yala	Sin	Gal
68	<b>Oriental Magpie Robin</b>	1	2	5	6	8		12	13	15	20
68	<b>White-rumped Shama</b>	1		3	6	8			13		
68	<b>Pied Bush Chat</b>						10				
69	<b>Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher</b>				6	8	9				
69	<b>Tickell's Blue Flycatcher</b>			4	7					14	
69	<b>Dull (blue) Verditer Flycatcher</b>						9				
70	<b>Pale-billed Flowerpecker</b>		2	3	6	8	10	12		15	20
70	<b>Purple-rumped Sunbird</b>	1	2	4	6	8		12	13	14	20
70	<b>Purple Sunbird</b>	1			7						
70	<b>Loten's Sunbird</b>		2	3	6	8	9	12	13		20
71	<b>Baya Weaver</b>			5				12			
71	<b>Cinereous (Great) Tit</b>				6	8	10				
71	<b>Oriental White-eye</b>	1	2			9			13	15	
71	<b>Sri Lanka White-eye</b>				6	8	9				
71	<b>Velvet-fronted Nuthatch</b>				6						20
72	<b>White-rumped Munia</b>		2	4	6					15	20
72	<b>Scaly-breasted Munia</b>		2	5		9			13	15	
72	<b>Black-throated Munia</b>			5	6						
72	<b>House Sparrow</b>					8			13	15	

Plate # is plate in Warakagoda

**red – new for me...**

**green - new; depends on taxonomy**

the number in the columns refers to the "Day #" of the holiday

**Wil - Wilpattu NP and surrounds**

**Anu - Anuradhapura and surrounds**

**Dam - Dambulla and surrounds**

**Knu - The Knuckles Range**

**AP - Adam's Peak**

**HP - Horton's Plains NP + Hakgala**

**Uda - Udawalawe NP**

**Yala - Yala NP and surrounds**

**Sin - Sinharaja**

**Gal - Galle and surrounds**

## Mammals

Sri Lanka is a good place for seeing mammals at close quarters. The lack of hunting pressure almost guarantees this. Although we spotted nothing rare, 26 different mammals (counting subspecies) were seen. All of the "tourist" mammals were seen in the national parks, with

various deer, wild boar, elephant, sloth bear and leopard. Monkeys are common throughout, as are squirrels and the occasional mongoose.



Yala National Park was the best mammal site and the only park where you have a good chance to see leopards.

<b>Mammal List</b>		First seen etc
Black rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>	Negombo
Lesser short-nosed fruit bat	<i>Cynopterus brachyotis</i>	Anuradhapura
Indian flying-fox	<i>Pteropus giganteus</i>	Kandy and elsewhere
Montane purple-faced langur	<i>Trachypithecus vetulus monticola</i>	The Knuckles and Hakgala Botanic Gardens
Southern lowland wet-zone purple-faced langur	<i>Trachypithecus vetulus vetulus</i>	Sinharaja
Tufted gray langur	<i>Semnopithecus priam</i>	Anuradhapura and elsewhere
Toque macaque	<i>Macaca sinica sinica</i>	Anuradhapura and elsewhere
Toque macaque	<i>Macaca sinica aurifrons</i>	Galle
Toque macaque	<i>Macaca sinica opisthomelas</i>	Nuwara Eliya
Common gray mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsi</i>	Wilpattu NP
Ruddy mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>	Wilpattu NP
Indian brown mongoose	<i>Herpestes fuscus</i>	Udawalawe NP
Grizzled giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>	widespread
Layard's palm squirrel or flame-striped jungle squirrel	<i>Funambulus layardi</i>	Sinharaja
Dusky palm squirrel	<i>Funambulus obscurus</i>	Horton's Plains NP
Indian palm squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	everywhere
Indian hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	Dambulla, Udawalawe
Sambar deer	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	Wilpattu, Adam's Peak, Yala
Spotted deer	<i>Axis axis</i>	National parks
Barking deer	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Wilpattu, Kandy
Asian elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>	National parks



Sri Lankan sloth bear	<i>Melursus ursinus inornatus</i>	Wilpattu, Yala
Common palm civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	Nice Place, Adam's Peak
Golden jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	Minneriya NP
Sri Lankan leopard	<i>Panthera pardus kotiya</i>	Yala NP
Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Adam's Peak, Yala

## Reptiles

Sri Lanka has 173 reptiles and many of these can be seen “accidentally”. We didn’t go looking for any of them.

Easily the best place was Sinharaja where scaly things outnumbered their feathered cousins. The guides there have some reptiles staked out with many, eg pit vipers, not moving about too much. Our list is not exhaustive as many skinks and others were largely ignored.

Reptile List		First seen etc
Common garden lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>	widespread
Black-lipped Lizard	<i>Calotes nigrilabris</i>	Horton's Plains NP
Bengal monitor	<i>Varanus bengalensis</i>	Yala and elsewhere
Water monitor	<i>Varanus salvator</i>	Negombo and elsewhere
Indian rat snake	<i>Ptyas mucosa</i>	Near Sinharaja
Indian black turtle	<i>Melanochelys trijuga</i>	Udawalawe NP
Indian star tortoise	<i>Geochelone elegans</i>	Udawalawe, Wilpattu
Sri Lanka Green Pit Viper	<i>Trimeresurus trionocephalus</i>	Sinharaja
Hump-nosed lizard	<i>Lyriocephalus scutatus</i>	Sinharaja
Green vine snake	<i>Ahaetulla nasuta</i>	Sinharaja
Indian cobra	<i>Naja naja</i>	Minneriya NP
Sri Lanka kangaroo lizard	<i>Otocryptis wiegmanni</i>	Sinharaja
Black-spotted kangaroo lizard	<i>Otocryptis nigristigma</i>	Kottawa
Sri Lanka painted frog	<i>Kaloula taprobanica</i>	Nice Place, Dambulla
Marsh mugger crocodile	<i>Crocodylus palustris</i>	National parks

## Dogs



Dogs and people share Sri Lanka. The former don’t appear to belong to the latter. Rather they co-exist and do their own thing in their own space and time. Dogs spend much of their day contemplating suicide, or they would if they had any brains. Their bodies are riddled with mange and often had interesting-looking horrid projections extending from their nether regions. This at least gives them something to do, with tooth and claw in constant motion as they pursue their unseen demons. If a virulent pathogen or a sympathetic alien race wiped out

all of Sri Lanka’s dogs, the island would be a better place.

## Diary

### Day 1 – 7<sup>th</sup> July 2017

I've probably never been less excited about a holiday. This is no reflection on my tireless (and timeless...) travel companion, Barry-Sean Virtue.

The Sydney Airport processes were smooth enough, and it's always pleasing to see "your" plane arrive, which it did, ahead of schedule.

If I ever get to meet a Mr Chris Hall, purportedly flying from Sydney to Wellington, he'll receive the Blow on the Head. By the time his baggage was located on the plane occupying the gate where our Air Asia X A330 should have been parked, our flight was delayed by the best part of an hour.

Our pilot, Abdullah Hamad, sat with me and chatted about planes, the art or lack thereof of flying them, and the peculiarities of the owner of Air Asia X. Abdullah explained to me that our flight into Kuala Lumpur would be further delayed due to strong headwinds. He said he could fly the Airbus a bit quicker but was reluctant to do so as the boss would haul him into his office with a "please explain" for the extra fuel costs. Abdullah's flight instructor was the captain of the doomed MH370 and his best friend was the pilot of equally doomed MH17. Abdullah had eaten a meal with this guy just before they both flew west at almost the same time. What does all this mean for me? Lucky today's date has lots of sevens in it I reckon!

Bugger – just in case. I'd better write this – "I was sitting in Row 38G before the crash. Tell Mayette I love her and say hello to mum and dad."

Air Asia X is said to be a budget airline. Now I know why. I didn't think they made planes without video screens. The captain had earlier informed me that there was no alcohol on board. What? This was said to reduce the number of pissed idiots. I could see how that might work. On this critically important detail he was in error. You could buy cans of beer – but only in lots of three. Huh? Riddle me this – how would selling beer in batches of three cans (for \$A13) reduce the number of pisspots?

The cabin crew were young, very attractive and delightfully pleasant and organised. Just as well as there was nothing else to look at.

We arrived in Kuala Lumpur just in time for a quick bite before our 2100 departure to Colombo. The A320 flight was most uncomfortable. I'm sure Air Asia X had ignored the plane manufacturer's recommended minimum number of rows and jammed a few more in with the result that my legs were in the row in front of me.

Our passage through Colombo Airport was rapid. So much so that our driver, Manju, was nowhere to be seen. Did you remind him we were coming, Barry-Sean? No, you did not. Do you have his phone number? Not sure. I was tired, hot, sweaty and crippled. I collapsed on a bench amongst the throng of other drivers and considered my options, one of which being how quickly I could get back home. None of the options seemed very good.

Eventually a dude saunters into the terminal with a card reading “Barry Vulture”. Stuff it – he’ll do. We’ll go with him to wherever this Vulture person is booked.

Our driver / guide / travel agent doesn’t own a car – he’d hired a Honda Hybrid, an excellent vehicle actually, and took us to the Suriya Arana Homestay at Negombo, a short drive north from the airport. Days like this remind me why so many people don’t own a passport.

## Day 2 – 8<sup>th</sup> July 2017

After a pathetic few hours of sleep I slipped into the homestay’s small swimming pool. Indian palm squirrels and a black rat started the mammal list. Yellow-billed babblers – the mellower equivalent of Australia’s noisy miners – busied themselves and competed with an Asian koel and some house crows at the homestay’s bird feeder.



A delicious breakfast and coffee fuelled us for an exploration of nearby Negombo Beach. The most intriguing thing seen were the wind-powered prawn trawlers. Apparently motorised trawlers are banned so if you want fresh prawns..... A small urban swamp had a good selection of egrets and gallinules and a large water monitor.

We intersected with a good few locals and they were all friendly and relaxed – this augured well for the next few weeks.

Saying goodbye to Suriya Arana, we visited the Negombo Fish Markets. Interesting to see that mostly pelagic types were caught, from black marlin down to whitebait.

Manju had planned to take us to an elephant hatchery but we preferred to try our luck at Anaiwilundawa Sanctuary, a RAMSAR site close to our route. Manju was happy as the slight route change would see lighter traffic.

It hadn’t rained for nine months apparently, so the monster wetland was reduced to a mud puddle. Never mind, we managed quite a long list of tame birds. Best were Jerdon’s leafbird and grey-headed fish-eagle.

Manju, another who is married to his mobile phone, advised that one of the national parks on our itinerary was suddenly bereft of mammals. He suggested we go to Wilpattu National Park for an afternoon jeep safari instead.

Barry-Sean and I wanted to stop at a local baker’s for lunch. Manju didn’t think much of this idea – something to do with different stomach designs, the quality of Saturday’s bread and the impact of the full moon were just a few of the reasons given. He took us to Leopard’s Den Restaurant, adjacent to the national park entry road. We soon worked out why he had

taken us here. Drivers get free food when they take tourists to “approved” lunch spots and at accommodation provided for foreigners. Otherwise they have to buy their own food.

Our 1430 jeep arrived at 1500. By the time we ground our way – the jeep seemed to lack a few forward gears – to the park entrance the office staff had gone to lunch. We were told to wait. I thought I might have been in India after all. Entry fees for foreigners to Sri Lanka’s national parks is a staggering \$A35 per person per entry. So if you visit twice in one day, which you might in some parks as they boot you out at lunch-time, you’re up for 70 bucks + jeep hire.

The ancient Mahindra jeep, aside from being challenged as it tried to move forwards also suffered a large degree of play in the steering department. Never mind. The park was a joy. The best was being charged by an elephant. A grey trumpeting mass came steaming out of the forest. I yelled “GO!!” This apparently means “Stop, suddenly” in Sinhalese, because that’s what the driver did. Hilarious.

Many other hephalumps were seen, along with good views of a Sri Lanka sloth bear, common grey mongoose, ruddy mongoose, barking, chital and sambar deer, toque macaque and grizzled giant squirrel. Best of the birds were Sri Lanka junglefowl and Sri Lanka grey hornbill.



As it was Full Moon Day, important if you are Buddhist, there were lots of roadside stalls where free food and drink was being handed out. There were ice creams at one stop, juice at another and bread rolls at the next and so on. I can’t imagine such orderly queues in Oz. In fact I can think of fifteen different ways that such events would quickly descend into chaos. Anyway, boys with flags would actively get passers-by to stop, just to give away more stuff! Beautiful.

We arrived at Margosa Lake Resort near Anuradhapura around 1930. The resort was perfect for our needs – air-conditioned and with cold beer! We ate some monster sandwiches before a cheeky malt whisky and bed. Great day!

### Day 3 – 9<sup>th</sup> July 2017

I fought my way out of the resort's rooms for a pre-dawn and pre-breakfast swim in the excellent pool. I then had to wake someone to open the front gate so that I could wander, as I am want to do. The lake across the road had many waterbirds – storks, egrets, plovers, larks and the like, along with a surprising number of forest birds in the fringing vegetation and scrubby gardens.

A delicious and hearty breakfast was followed by a day of Buddhist temple touring. It was excellent of course, although the \$A55 each in entry and guide fees had suggested that it would want to be.... Our guide was Tharanga, a Buddhist scholar of 17 years study and the fount of all wisdom when it comes to the temples of Anuradhapura. He also confirmed with us that Buddhism is not a religion.

First was Mihintale. It is believed by Sri Lankans to be the site of a meeting between the Buddhist monk Mahinda and King Devanampiyatissa which inaugurated the presence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It is now a pilgrimage site, and the site of several religious monuments and abandoned structures. It dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. More can be read here – including the likelihood that Mihintale had the world's first hospital -

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihintale>

Breaking our temple marathon was a visit to a massive vegetation-filled lake we had spied from, well, a temple. Massive numbers of waterbirds but none of our targets of watercock or spot-billed pelican.

Monastery at Mihintale (C3rd BC)



Next temple was Isurumuniya, a Buddhist temple built by King Devanampiya Tissa (307 BC to 267 BC) who ruled in the ancient Sri Lankan capital of Anuradhapura. After 500 children of high-caste were ordained, Isurumuniya was built for them to reside.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isurumuniya>



Isurumuniya temple - 307 BC

Then Ranmasu Uyana, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranmasu\\_Uyana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranmasu_Uyana)

A quick stickybeak in the massive tank above Ramasu Uyana revealed our first spot-billed pelicans along with some tufted langurs.

Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, a sacred fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) in the Mahamewna Gardens

was next on the menu. It is said to be the right-wing branch (southern branch) from the historical Sri Maha Bodhi at Buddha Gaya in India under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. It was planted in 288 BCE, and is the oldest living human-planted tree in the world with a known planting date. Today it is one of the most sacred relics for Buddhists in Sri Lanka and respected by Buddhists all over the world.



Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi is a Sacred Fig tree in the Mahamewna Gardens, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. It is said to be the southern branch from the historical Sri Maha Bodhi at Buddha Gaya in India under which Lord Buddha attained Enlightenment. It was planted in 288 BC, and is the oldest living human-planted tree in the world with a known planting date.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaya\\_Sri\\_Maha\\_Bodhi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaya_Sri_Maha_Bodhi)

There was more. Lovamahapaya was a nine storey building and remained the tallest building of the island for over a millennium between 155BCE and 993CE.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lovamahapaya>

And finally, Ruwanwelisaya, a stupa considered a marvel for its architectural qualities and sacred to many Buddhists all over the world. It was built by King Dutugemunu c. 140 BCE, who became lord of all Sri Lanka after a war in which the Chola King Elara, was defeated. The stupa is one of the world's tallest monuments, standing at 103 m (338 ft) and with a circumference of 290m.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruwanwelisaya>



Tharanga had detected in us some early signs of temple-fort malady and fearing that we may fall seriously ill suggested we forgo the other 74 temple visits he had earlier planned for the day.

So local bread and bananas for lunch and a well-deserved mid-afternoon beer. Some excellent birds were seen in the beer garden with white-browed bulbul, both hornbills, Loten's sunbird and Asian paradise-flycatcher to name a few.

A cursory cultural meander across the road revealed blue-faced malkoha and dark-fronted babbler. Barking dogs and arrack-sozzled locals added to the mix. Many hundreds of rose-ringed and the occasional



Alexandrine parrot flew across the beer garden on dusk. Holidays can't get much better than this.....

## Day 4 – 10<sup>th</sup> July 2017

A swim, breakfast, and then off to the largest ironwood forest in Sri Lanka and the associated rose quartz mountain, apparently the largest of its type anywhere. The forest was superb, the mountain less so, and the wildlife non-existent.

We stopped to buy bread and bananas for lunch, and later, at a beer shop where we bought a dozen 500ml Tigers for \$A3.40 each.

After arriving at Nice Place Bungalows we soon connected a bar fridge and had a particularly nice time, with lots of nice birds right in front of the room. The afternoon's program included time for a swim in the sizable pool. This contained not only lots of water but a fair scrum of splendid European teenage girls.

The day could have ended here quite nicely (to overuse a local term). It didn't. We were off to Sigiriya, arguably Sri Lanka's biggest tourist drawcard. This World Heritage site is a very large rock with lots of bricks on it. There is much other stuff scattered about. You would get a much better understanding by reading this:



“Sigiriya is an ancient rock fortress located in the northern Matale District near the town of Dambulla in Sri Lanka. The name refers to a site of historical and archaeological significance that is dominated by a massive column of rock nearly 200 metres high.

According to the ancient Sri Lankan chronicle, the Culavamsa, this site was selected by King Kasyapa (477 – 495 CE) for his new capital. He built his palace on the top of this rock and decorated its sides with colourful frescoes. On a small plateau about halfway up the side of this rock he built a gateway in the form of an enormous lion. The name of this place is derived from this structure — Sīhāgiri, the Lion Rock. The capital and the royal palace was abandoned after the king's death. It was used as a Buddhist monastery until the 14th century.

Sigiriya today is a UNESCO listed World Heritage Site. It is one of the best preserved examples of ancient urban planning.”



Busloads of Chinese, European and local tourists traipsed through the royal gardens and up stone steps, a spiral staircase and more stone and steel steps until they reached the top of the impressively large rock. Of much interest to me were the 1600 year old cave paintings of bare-breasted women located halfway up the cliff in a seemingly inaccessible cleft. Unfortunately these cannot be photographed for reasons that are not apparent. There are, however, plenty of photos on the internet....



history, nature, landscapes and...





We stopped to have a stickybeak in a lake before returning to Nice Place where Manju joined us for a beer, whisky and arrack.

A cursory post-dinner spotlight revealed a common palm civet in front of our room. A Sri Lanka painted frog was also seen.



## Day 5 – 11<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Up before 0500 for a jeep safari in Minneriya NP. We were a tad late in getting away for a 0600 start. Our driver, Vijay, was in a roaring hurry to get to a big lake before the elephants abandoned it for the forest. He needn't have worried.



As it was the dry season in this part of the country the shorelines of the lakes were receding. Big feeding flocks of spot-billed pelicans, hundreds of painted storks, 250 Asian openbills and a handful of lesser adjutants joined ibis, spoonbills, herons, cormorants and various others. Four golden jackals took their chances. Sufficient crappy views of Jerdon's bushchat meant that all similar looking birds could safely be ignored for the rest of the holiday.



Not long after we failed to squash an Indian cobra crossing the road we spied a large female elephant on the narrow tree-lined path ahead of us. It turned on us, trumpeted and charged head on. We had nowhere to move as the trees were too close on each side, so reversing was out of the question. So Vijay charged at the grey beast with much use of horn and headlights and much complaining from the gearbox. We both stopped just short.

The jeep allowed us to stand through the open roof with a lot of steel pipe to hold onto. This provided the perfect facility to have our ribs stoved in when drivers suddenly

accelerated and then stopped, for instance, in the event of charging elephants. We swapped places with the pachyderm as it followed us a metre or so away. Impressive beast.



We were out of the park at around 0900 as we had seen what it had to offer, apparently.

After a coffee or two at Nice Place (can't get over that name!) I plodded the road toward Amaya Lake. After 3.5km of an alleged 2km walk I gave up and returned. A site on a river had some nice gallery forest and a good set of birds with Tickell's blue-flycatcher, common, white-throated and stork-billed kingfishers, small minivets, black-naped monarchs, Asian paradise-flycatcher and black-capped babblers.

The hotel pool beckoned. Fixing my Walkman was next and a great success. I threw it in the rubbish bin. So no bird calls.

A beer in the restaurant produced a brown-capped babbler. The afternoon degenerated, with Manju joining us with beer, whisky and arrack on offer. A had a wobbly boot on for a spotlight walk along the road and nearby irrigation canal. Saw nothing save for an Indian flying fox.

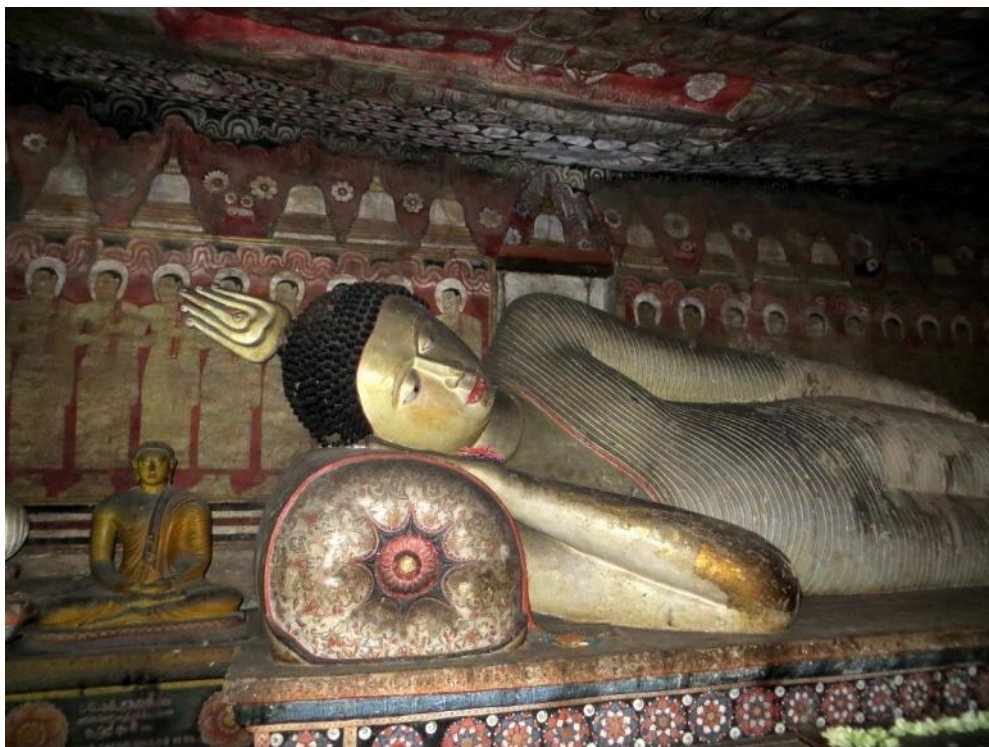
### **Day 6 – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

Today's menu included an early morning guided bird walk courtesy of the hotel. It was said to start at 0600. The advertised time came and went and I soon gave up waiting, favouring a walk by myself. Happily I picked up the allegedly rare black-throated munia. Baya weavers along with grey-breasted and plain prinias were feeding with them on some seeding grasses. Also flushed an Indian hare.

The focus for the day was a visit to the World Heritage listed Dambulla Rock Temple. Five adjacent caves dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE are filled with art and statues. These include a 15m long Buddha carved from the native rock, the 1000 sq m, seven metre high Temple of the Great King and much else besides. More can be gleaned here:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/561/gallery/>

The first two caves were really old and the last three much more recently adorned. Curiously the newer caves and their art looked tattier than the older ones. Apparently the ancient methods for producing natural colour dyes have been lost.





We walked back to the car by a different route, passing the recently-built Golden Temple along the way.

Manju drove us past Amaya Lake and then to a new lodge that he thought would be really good for us should we ever return. We begged to differ. Back to Nice Place and a swim before catching up with my diary and notes over a midday beer. The afternoon saw us



meander about on foot within the confusing local road network, failing to get lost in the process.

Manju joined us for drinks and dinner before an early night.

### **Day 7 - 13<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

We left Nice Place for a much anticipated visit to The Knuckles Range, some semi-forested mountains just north from Kandy. At

least that was the plan. Our car was parked in and we had trouble locating the other driver.

Arriving at the base of The Knuckles at 0930, we picked up a local guide, Prasanna, who proceeded to guide us around a forest of gum trees and silky oaks. Needless to say we didn't see too many Sri Lankan birds – or Australian ones either. We relocated to some native forest and did rather better with Sri Lanka scimitar-babbler, Malabar trogon, yellow-fronted and Sri Lanka small barbets, Indian swiftlet, black eagle, black-throated munia and several

others that were new for the trip. A troupe of montane purple-faced langurs slipped out of sight. Nearby we had the montane subspecies of toque macaque. We covered quite a lot of ground on both sides of the range and would have enjoyed the chance for an early morning visit. Given that our exploration was through the middle of a very windy day we were well pleased with our sightings.

The onward journey to our hotel in Kandy was notable in that we survived it. Many near misses and constant traffic meant that a return visit to The Knuckles was out of the question. At times I felt as though I was trapped in a weird computer game where the winner was the one who could sit for two hours without screaming.

Our new digs, The Change Hotel, cannot easily be described. I wasn't sure whether it was "smart" or a shit-dump. It turned out to be the latter. We perused the reading material on offer with "Childhood Ear Infections – a Parent's Guide" looking like a great holiday read. Maybe we could swap it for "A Connoisseur's Guide for Throwing Rocks at Pigeons", if only I could lay my hands on a copy. Or there was John F. Taylor's book "The Hyperactive Child and the Family". Maybe the hyperactive child had an undiagnosed ear infection?



### **Day 8 – 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

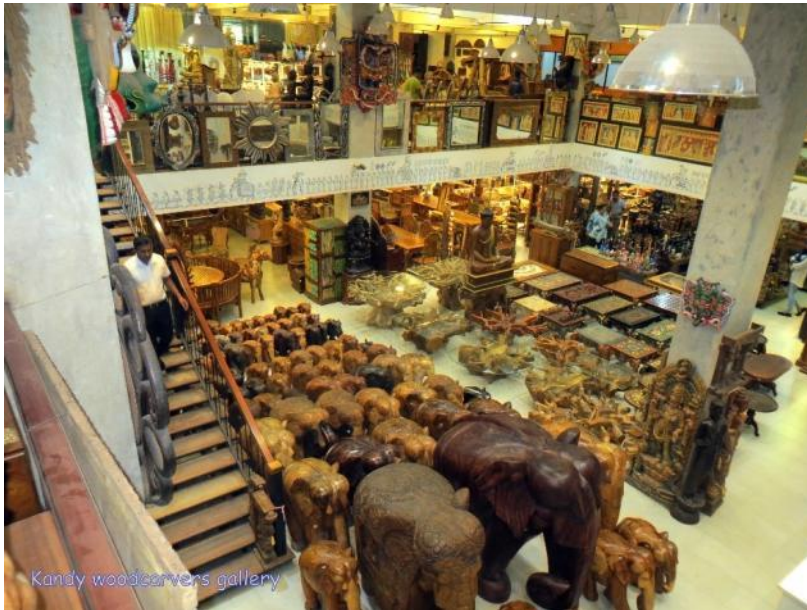
I started the day by asking the owner of The Change if we could leave a day earlier than scheduled. He said this would be no problem and that he was quite flexible. What he didn't say was that we would still have to pay for the cancelled night. I paid the \$A80 rather than spend another night in a place I didn't like.

Kandy Botanic Gardens was our first stop. It is really quite beautiful. Many of the trees have been planted by world dignitaries going back into the mid-1800s. A huge camp of Indian flying foxes can be seen here along with a troupe of friendly toque macaques. Few birds



were seen, the best being Asian dwarf kingfisher. An orchid house had many plants from all over the world in bloom.

Although we weren't buying we toured a woodworking workshop and gallery. Some truly impressive pieces caught our eyes but none were inexpensive.



Next was the Temple of the Golden Tooth. The tooth, which cannot be seen, was said to come from some important person's head.

Lunch was amusing. We sat in a fast food restaurant and ordered some sandwiches. After 30 minutes we were told they had run out of our choice. We then ordered three different sandwiches. After another 20 minutes I staged

a walkout. So we ate samosas and other pastries in the car on the way to a small forest reserve in Kandy. The forest is quite lovely although we only managed to see about two birds in two hours. We saw more barking deer than we did birds.



A visit to Kandy Railway Station to buy some train tickets for a few days hence failed in its primary purpose. It seems that railway staff buy them up so they can sell them at a profit to tourists "on the day".

Next was a performance of Kandy traditional dance and firewalking. All good if you don't have a lingering childhood ear infection – it was quite loud. The dancers were far prettier than me and they could dance a bit – just not too well with each other.

Back up the mountain we went to Basil Fawly's The Change. Two beers please. They're not cold; why? The grilled chicken dinner was still alive but I managed to gnaw at the edges of it and left a spectacular display of chicken parts that just screamed "unhappy with this food". I was praying the flexible hotel owner would ask me how my meal was but when he looked at my plate I figured he already knew.



### Day 9 – 15<sup>th</sup> July 2017

A walk in the local tea plantation produced a Sri Lanka hanging-parrot and a pair of lesser hill mynas.

We couldn't depart The Change fast enough. Manju suggested we spend a night at Adam's Peak to soak up the day we saved by not staying in Kandy. Good plan Manju. He further offered that our hotel was situated in a very big forest. The plan gets even better!

An hour or so out of Kandy and Manju found a road with enough remnant native vegetation to encourage us to walk along it. We soon had yellow-browed bulbul; then nothing....

The whole region is dominated by tea plantations and forests of swamp mahogany. The township of Dalhousie – and our hotel, the Punsisi Rest House – is smack bang in the middle of such a forest. The trail to Adam's Peak starts near the hotel but my cursory afternoon stroll revealed that the first native forest is 2.5km away. My ten minute "reccy" turned into three hours. Yellow-eared bulbul, quite pretty as far as bulbuls go, was my only reward.



My plod back to town was enhanced by the knowledge that they sold cold lager. I enjoyed a few of these whilst watching the local youth show their considerable cricket skills in the "town square". Of interest was a guy across the road welding – no mask, gloves or anything, hanging like a spider off the roof of a half-built building.

It may have been the beer, I will never know, but a decision was made to get up at 0330 and climb Adam's Peak, spotlighting along the way. Even though I figured the mountain would likely be fogged in, I just had to give it a go.....

### Day 10 – 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017

The Adam's Peak experience started when I woke at 0245. I spotted as I plodded. I managed two common palm civets feeding on eucalyptus blossoms. Then a small herd of sambar. No nocturnal birds. Plenty of nocturnal people though, as several tourist couples passed me by. Some passed me more than once.

A howling gale and fog made the ascent feel a little stupid. I stopped in a dry shelter shed 30 minutes shy of the peak and considered my options. That the summit would be fogged in at sunrise was a no-brainer. I wasn't going to see any wildlife either. That only left the prospect that others might cast doubts on my character if I didn't try to go to the top. Oh stuff it.

I joined the other 40 or so nutters at the fog-bound gale-affected summit at 0600. Said hello to all of those I recognised from the ascent or from elsewhere in the country. The temple was closed for the "off" season, so no joy there. I was easily the oldest person on the peak – which can be read at least two ways. Of all of us, I should have known better.....



view or lack thereof at Adam's Peak

or



More on Adam's Peak here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam%27s\\_Peak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam%27s_Peak)

I started back down without really stopping on the top. The birds, once I managed to get below the fog-line, were clearly elsewhere.

Back at the hotel at 0830, having watched many fit-looking young folk behave like cripples as I passed them on the descent. Coffee, shower and depart Dalhousie.

Luck was with us as we filled the car's empty fuel tank just as the village's power failed. The drive to Nuwara Eliya was along winding roads without too much to see – endless tea plantations and the odd waterfall that looked distinctly out of place. Pretty much no native forest to be found anywhere.

Our new home, Gregory's Bungalows, sits across the road from a lake. Not a tree in sight. Wouldn't have mattered anyway. Anything not made from concrete would have long since blown away. The wind was relentless day and night. The windows rattled and the doors slammed.

Hakgala Botanic Gardens was visited in the mid-afternoon. What a joyful and beautiful gardens these are. There are magnificent 19<sup>th</sup> century plantings of Australian, American and Asian trees and shrubs. These complemented formal gardens brilliantly. The whole gig reminded me of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney in size and design.



As far as the birds were concerned, we walked for half an hour before we found a single one. Then as so often happens we intersected with a small mixed flock in the native forest that fringes one of the garden's borders. Gray-headed canary-flycatchers, Sri Lanka white-eyes, yellow-browed bulbuls and the endemic dull-blue flycatcher changed things a little. A curious whistling call had me running down into the gardens – an awesome Sri Lanka blue-magpie! If there was one bird I wanted to see in the country it was this one! It was quite tame, even allowing some crappy photos. I retrieved Barry-Sean; fortunately the bird was happily where I left it.

A troupe of semi-habituated montane purple-faced langurs was icing on the cake! They were in the process of destroying some rare vine or other and allowed a very close approach. Our afternoon couldn't get any better than this!

We were advised to buy our beer outside the hotel and put it in their fridge to save money – can't argue with that logic! We quite liked Gregory's Bungalows. Although it sits in a howling

gale and offers no reason at all to go outside, it has many comfortable seating areas, Al Jazeera on the television and an old world charm – difficult to achieve in a newish building...

On a strictly personal note – I couldn't believe how good I felt after getting up at 0230, climbing a mountain in the dark, surviving Manju's best Formula 1 driving efforts and a couple of 500ml Anchor Strong's @ 8.8%.

Dinner, mixed fried rice, was the best meal of the trip and the very best fried rice I have ever eaten!



### **Day 11 – 17<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

A much anticipated visit to Horton's Plains National Park saw an early start. The wind was only howling outside, so we looked forward to a relatively calm morning.... The scene at the park entry point was surreal. Jeeps are not needed at Horton's Plains. Visitors walk. However you need to buy a permit for each person and vehicle. Locals pay 60 rupees, foreigners 500 times that amount. There is a single ticket window and a single staff member. Tourists are queued for some distance in the freezing gale and thick fog. I was wondering why?

Forty minutes later we found ourselves in the Seething Horde Car Park. Here our tickets were triple checked and all plastic and cigarette lighters removed from our packs and

person. Even the plastic sleeves around water bottles. Our lunch box was discarded and our food put into paper bags.

The fog lifted and the walk to Land's End and other points of interest was pleasant enough. Two factors diminished the experience – the mighty numbers of noisy walkers and the howling wind. We saw few birds with glimpses of Sri Lanka wood-pigeon and a few more common types. A Sri Lanka blue-magpie was heard calling.

Late in the morning we relocated to a trail leading to Sri Lanka's third highest peak. Nobody walks this trail and it was quite birdy. One large mixed flock include Sri Lanka bush-warbler, Sri Lanka white-eyes, Sri Lanka scimitar-babblers, dull-blue flycatcher and a dusky palm squirrel.



My legs were contemplating a divorce as we staged a strategic retreat to Gregory's Bungalows. Here we enjoyed a coffee in the forward lounge. An agreement was reached to do a tour of Nuwara Eliya at 1500.



The town tour was underwhelming. A visit to the fish, and fruit and vegetable markets was balanced with a chat to a local guy on the virtues of Australian cricket players – past and present. Sri Lankans love Australian cricketers for some unknown reason.

Beer'o'clock was marvellous. The half way

point of the holiday had been reached and the second half couldn't possibly be as good as the first. And it wasn't.

### Day 12 – 18<sup>th</sup> July 2017

The gale outside showed no signs of abating and encouraged me to take the morning off. Most of the wildlife targets now sat at lower altitudes in any event. So it was a languid morning waiting to board a lunch-time train to Ella. Manju would drive and meet us there.

We left for the Nanu Oya Railway Station at midday. The first item on our list was to buy tickets. These we obtained from a railway worker at a premium. He had bought up first class tickets days earlier knowing he could sell them and make some money.

The train was an hour and 40 minutes late. This gave us plenty of opportunity to chat with tourists – there were literally hundreds of them squeezed onto the platform. Two young



Chinese girls from Kunming and Chengdu spoke excellent English and quickly attracted Manju's interest. In what, I do not know. Maybe a business opportunity?

The train arrived from Colombo almost empty and quickly filled. The second and cattle class carriages had unallocated seating and were packed. We sat in relative luxury. The route of the track is a testimony to British

railway engineers who must have spent most of their waking hours scratching their heads about the route of the track, except for the time they were busy shooting elephants.

The journey is stupendously scenic and passengers get much opportunity to view it as the train never really gets going on the tortuously twisting and occasionally steep track. Sadly much of the scenery is unbroken eucalyptus forest, although most of the passengers wouldn't have realised this. What we were seeing was Australia on steroids.

We walked from Ella Railway Station through the town, which is reminiscent of Thamel in Kathmandu in a positive way – lots of small open-air bars and hotels catering exclusively for



young Westerners. We procured a few beers and checked in to the new and very swish Sky Green Resort. Here we had a long and confusing discussion regarding our ongoing itinerary....

An amazing dinner, chicken curry, which arrived in eight separate bowls, was delicious and inexpensive.

### **Day 13 – 19<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

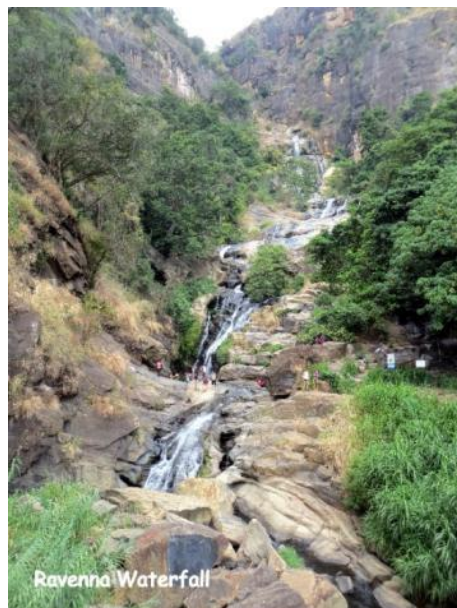
Walking along the road that winds up the hill outside the “resort” was quite productive for birds, squirrels and monkeys – all in the eucalypt dominated gardens of local people.

Walking up Little Adam’s Peak allowed me to tick off the Adam’s Peaks double. At least this time we could actually see something thanks to the lack of fog. The scene defines Sri Lanka in my view. There were dozens of European tourists to say hi to on our return to the car. We did a quick and dirty poll and offer the following findings:

- Gold Medal – Portugal, gorgeous happy faces and extra-friendly
- The Silver goes to the French West Indies, with
- The Netherlands taking Bronze.

A country quite near to Spain came last.

Anything with the word “Ravanna” in it became a target for us, with Ravanna Cave, Ravanna Temple and Ravanna Waterfall all falling in our path. The cave is a pre-historic occupation site dating back 7,000 years. The temple was small, cute and deserted – just how I prefer my temples. Like any temple in Sri Lanka it hosted the requisite two species of monkey. The waterfall was some distance down the long and winding road that leads, not to your door, but to the lowlands that can be seen in the far distance. The stop was worthwhile. The waterfall is impressive enough although the bikini-clad tourists in a waterhole were of more interest to some.





We stopped to buy some local roast peanuts and a thing called a wood-apple, which had a peculiar taste made more palatable by being drowned in sugar. The low point of the day was reached when I impaled my head on a protruding piece of gum tree at a watermelon vendor's stall. Our last food stop was for fresh boiled and buttered corn. Yum.

Udawalawe NP hosted an afternoon jeep safari. The park is a little boring to look at with just two habitats – elephant-filled and lake. We figured there wasn't much going on here as our guide was very skilled at identifying birds – a sure sign that he needs to point at *something* to entertain tourists. When he stopped for a red-vented bulbul I knew we were in trouble. Lots of elephants, some dodgy-looking water buffaloes, a brown mongoose, Indian star tortoise, a crocodile, no deer at all, both the local monkeys and many birds. Our trip list saw



Marshall's iora, Jacobin cuckoo, barred buttonquail, orange-breasted green pigeon and pied kingfisher added to it.

Our onward drive to Tissamaharama was not a long one, arriving at the Peacock Reach Hotel on dusk. The evening's tiny highlight was the joy on the face of a very young adopted Kenyan girl when she was awarded a stuffed toy kangaroo.

## Day 14 – 20<sup>th</sup> July 2017

A jeep safari to Yala National Park saw us leave the hotel at 0450. The park is about 20km from the hotel and along the way dozens of other jeeps passed ours. Once at the park, it took 45 minutes for the driver to get our entry tickets as there were ~100 jeeps waiting and more were to come – and this was the low season!

The park is quite beautiful with lakes, lagoons, a seashore and thick savanna style forest. We soon saw sambar, chital, Indian gray mongoose, so-called water buffalo, Sri Lanka sloth bear, and wild boar. There were many birds although only great thick-knee, small pratincole and yellow-wattled lapwing were new for the trip.

A sudden and dramatic change in the behaviour of our driver preceded an episode of the little known local sport of leopard blockading. It works like this – find a leopard or two that wish to cross the road; then call all your jeep-driving mates and form a long nose-to-tail queue, making any attempt at crossing on the part of the leopards futile. It is understood that extra kudos goes to those that can persist in the blockade for at least an hour. In reality once the scrum starts there is no opportunity to leave it as more and more jeeps crowd in ever closer from either end of the road. Precision



reversing and jumping forwards in first gear also see bonus points awarded.

After a time the platoons of green vehicles became more interesting than the leopards. Old friendships were renewed – “remember us, we met you on Adam’s Peak!” “Oh hi, and how was the train trip?” and “Weren’t you the girl from the back of The Easybeats’ concert in 1962?” Two leopards, one a male and the other I don’t know, were seen.



Departing the blockade wasn’t easy as a whole army of jeeps stretched to the horizon. Soon afterwards we discovered another male leopard lounging near the road. It was at this point that the driver discovered a sudden and urgent need to leave the park. We were back at the hotel at 1030.



We decamped to the aptly named Lake Wind Resort, located on the edge of “Tissa’s” largest tank. A visit to town allowed for a quick lunch and a new pair of thongs, with much of the rest of the afternoon spent at the hotel and surrounding streets. A rubbish-filled drain from the rapidly drying tank was quite birdy – this was where many of them came to wash and drink. Dozens of them provided constant entertainment. A black-crowned night-heron shat on me.

CNN, beer and dinner – all with a view of thousands of twenty-odd species of waterbird.

### Day 15 – 21<sup>st</sup> March 2017

It had rained during the night – the first rain we had discovered, if not experienced. Some wet season. We walked along the road outside the hotel, probably the birdiest semi-urban place we found on the holiday. A lost common hawk-cuckoo was joined by kingfishers, barbets, bee-eaters, coucals, koels, parakeets, night-herons, other waterbirds, orioles, munias, babblers, bulbuls and many others.

We checked out and headed in the direction of the Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve. Soon afterwards we found ourselves alone on a six-lane motorway; some sort of political promise apparently. Then it was a four-lane road to nowhere with dozens (hundreds?) of sleeping dogs decorating it. Every one of them was exactly in the middle of each lane. Was this some sort of attempt at mass suicide? Sadly nobody ran over them, nor did they move when we swerved around each one.

It is often a mistake to expect too much at the end of a road you know nothing about. And so it proved with Sinharaja. First we had to abandon the Honda in favour of a tuk-tuk for the last couple of kilometres to the Sinharaja View Villa and Restaurant. There wasn't much of a view but there was constant noise and passing trucks due to a concrete pour happening a few metres away. This lasted well into the night.

Our arrival at Sinharaja signalled Manju's departure for his home at Galle, a couple of hours drive away. Here he would spend time with his family for the three nights we had booked at the Sinharaja View.



I sat about for three hours waiting for a guide to take me to the forest. Guides are compulsory apparently. At 1500 Vine (pronounced "Winnie") took me to the reserve, about 300m away. Although I thought the afternoon's birding to be a bit on the lame side, I now realised that I was very lucky indeed. We managed two Sri Lanka blue magpies in a flock with Sri Lanka drongos, Sri Lanka scimitar-babblers, Sri Lanka mynas, Malabar trogons and several other babblers and flycatchers. Also seen were Sri Lanka kangaroo lizard, Sri Lanka green pit viper and hump-nosed lizard.



Half stung by one GB Strong 8.8% and almost blithering after two. Gave away a couple of toys to a young lass who worked in the kitchen and to Vine's daughter. A Monkey Shoulder made

sure I couldn't go spotlighting. The churning of the concrete mixer and various other pristine-wilderness-corrupting rackets failed to stop me from sleeping.

### Day 16 – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2017

A mad panic as I couldn't find my torch. It was exactly where I left it, outside, the night before....

A "Sri Lanka breakfast" saw us eat curried chicken for breakfast for the first time. Vine was nowhere to be seen for our 0630 departure into the forest so we walked to the reserve entry and met him there. A few dozen leeches took their chances with us as we poked about the



forest for the next six hours. Very few birds were seen with only green-billed coucal added to my life list. Easily the quietest rainforest I've ever visited.

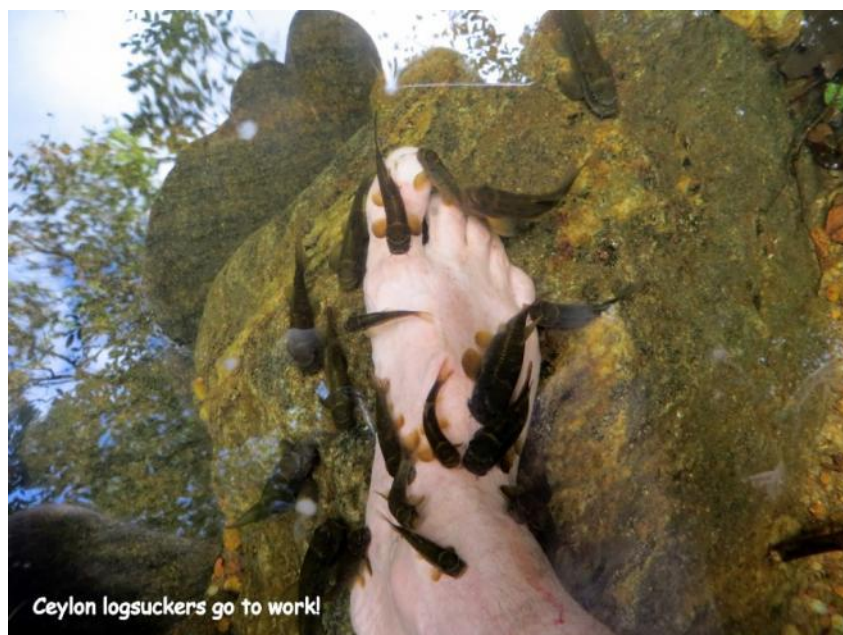
Three snakes were seen / tormented: Sri Lanka green pit viper, what was probably a buff-striped keelback and a green vine snake.

A highlight was getting a foot

massage from a school of Ceylon logsuckers. They clearly don't much care about insect repellent. A swim at the local waterfall was also a delight.

A lazy afternoon. Saw a few birds in Sri Lanka hanging-parrots (perched for once!), Layard's parakeets and Sri Lanka green pigeons.

Spotlighting failed to reveal anything – exactly in line with expectations.



## Day 17 – 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2017

Spent most of the night regretting not removing the prawns from yesterday's lunch of mixed fried rice. I'd arranged with Vine for a 0630 start but in truth I wanted to stay exactly where I was – near the dunny. As luck would have it, and not before time, it rained. Vine called to say the walk was off / postponed. Good. Then he turned up anyway. Ahhh. Just as we kitted up it rained again. Beautiful.

The day passed slowly. Tourists came and went – as did the rain. I passed on the idea of eating lunch and dinner. Managed to get Vine to call Manju and arrange for him to pick us up before the time we had agreed earlier, 1300, in favour of something like 1030. Manju said before 0900. That'd work.



## Day 18 – 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Another night on the bog. Manju failed to arrive at 0900, nor the revised time of 1030, nor the further revised time of 1100. We eventually took the initiative and bailed from the rather awful Sinharaja View so-called Villa (in reality it was someone's home and the owners were sleeping on the floor on account of us...) in a tuk-tuk only to meet Manju coming the other way.

While we chatted in the car about politics on the relatively uninteresting drive to Galle, Manju asked me if I'd heard of the Big Girls' Party. Wow – what a strange area of politics – large women. He asked if I knew what he was talking about. For the

seventy-third time in eighteen days I admitted that I had no idea. He then brought up the subject of little girls. Hmm, could be dangerous. Little girls then turn into big girls. A small light bulb popped on. In Sri Lanka when a girl has her first period they hold a party – a Big Girl's Party. If you tried this in Australia you'd end up in court, or worse. Anyway, all the newly accredited big girl's friends, relatives, friends of relatives, neighbours (you get the idea) come round for food, drinks, dancing, music and merriment. We'd been invited to just such an event on the way to Galle.

We soon found ourselves in a very leafy rural setting at a typical working-class home. Various folk stared at us. I targetted the Girl of the Moment and her retinue of minders – all girls. They spoke no English so my audience was brief in the extreme. One old largely toothless gentleman, who'd consumed rather a lot of arrack, tried to introduce me to several big girls plus a few for which such a celebration was a distant memory. He desperately wanted to dance with me. I declined on the basis that he may have used his one tooth as a weapon if my dancing skills were shown not to be up to his usual standard. And they wouldn't be.

The lady of the moment was dressed up and suitably coy, although what she thought of the occasion is anyone's guess.



Manju took us to our last home in Sri Lanka, the Damith Guest House, Unawatuna Beach. The description of the lodge is perfect except for one minor point – the beach is some kilometres away, accessible by a narrow well-trafficked road network along with the odd railway line.

Barry-Sean and I went for a walk. Not too much to see aside from a mixed gasoline and passenger train and some guys wrestling with a large concrete power pole, which explained why the guest house had no power. Back to the swimming pool for us....

Dinner, well Barry-Sean's dinner anyway, was at the Lucky Tuna Resort on Unawatuna Beach. Lucky tuna? I think not. He was happy with it. As for me, well, I might never eat prawns again.

### **Day 19 – 25<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

After experimenting with some dry toast and coffee for breakfast, I waited to see the effect on the Guts From Hell – Day 4.

The World Heritage listed Galle Fort was a minor disappointment. This 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch fortress has been butchered over the centuries and lacks interpretation. The fort's internal streets are narrow and packed with hundreds of little cafes and trinket shops along with boutique hotels and anything else that caters for cashed-up tourists. A couple of hours was spent here, much of it marvelling at the size of the thighs of European visitors.



Before we reached our lodge we stopped at a Japanese-funded and almost new “Peace Pagoda”. Underwhelming.

Ate almost half of my evening meal at The Lucky Tuna.

### Day 20 – 26<sup>th</sup> July 2017

We visited Kottawa Forest, a ten hectare arboretum about 15km out of town. After a

slow start we managed to see a reasonable number of birds. We had agreed that the number and variety of birds in Sri Lanka seems to be in inverse proportion to the quality of the forest. Best sightings were Sri Lanka frogmouth, brown-capped babbler, yellow-browed bulbul and nuthatch. The site is well worth visiting.

Back to the guest house for lunch, a swim and a short rest before catching a tuk-tuk to the beach. Here I added an ocean to my swimming list – Indian. It seems I was the only one on the whole beach to actually swim along it. Had a beer while holding at bay the itinerant masseurs, coconut salesmen, wooden artefact vendors and bedsheet salesladies.



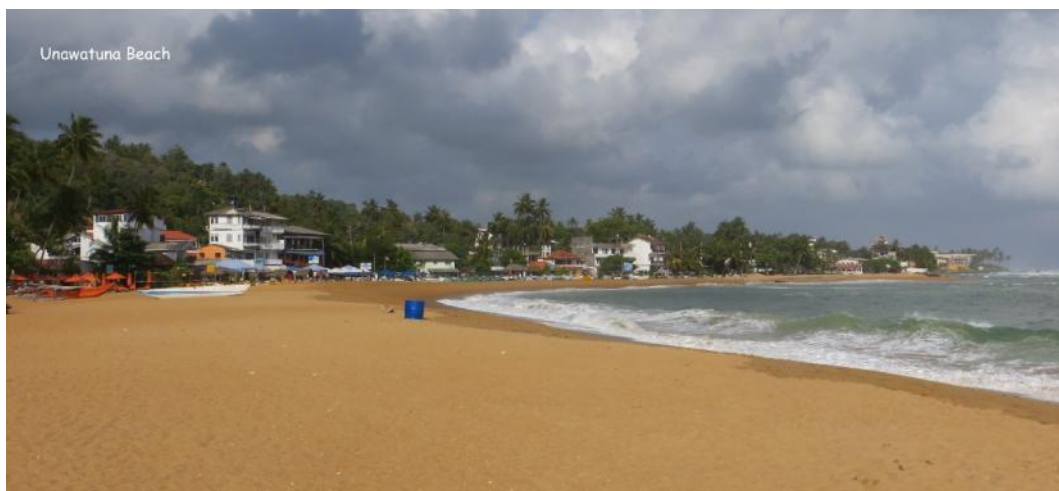
Manju picked us up and took us to his home for dinner. Here we met his delightful family. The dinner was wonderful. My digestive system was less impressed, now into Day 5.

### Day 21 – 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017

It's as well that the customs and quarantine folk at Sydney Airport don't ask the question “Are you bringing into Australia any invasive wildlife in your guts?” I wonder the process for rectification?

Barry-Sean had some computer stuff to do so I thought I'd give the Kottawa Forest one last shot. Manju was a bit late arriving (no real shock here) but we went anyway. On arrival I found that the office couldn't change a 1000 rupee note (about \$A9) for the \$6 entry fee. In fact the office had no money at all. The only staffer said I could pay on the way out but an unemployed guide started some mantra about it being a sacred protected forest and wobbling his head a lot. I muttered something to him that rhymed with "You're a f\*cking idiot." Rhymed probably isn't the right word. I walked away.

We were soon back on Unawatuna Beach where I found myself immersed in the ultra-salty, milky and bumpy Indian Ocean for a splendid swim. We passed the next few hours sipping lime juice, trying to avoid looking at bikini-clad tourists, eating (!) lunch and thanking my good fortune that I didn't go to the first test against India currently underway in Galle. India made 600 in the first innings.



We had the benefit of a late checkout from the Damith Guest House. We left Galle at 1500, arriving at Colombo Airport a couple of hours later. Luckily the airport's labyrinthine processing system gave us something to chew on for a few hours.

The flight to Kuala Lumpur was mercifully short and on time.



## Day 22 – 28<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Managed to sleep for an hour or two on the floor at the terminal at Kuala Lumpur before our 1000 flight to Sydney. The plane was quite full but the time passed quickly enough.

I knew we were back in Australia when a large Aussie lady at quarantine yelled to a group of Chinese visitors trying to go through the green escape channel “Okay you lot, I want none of you here – you listening – go up there, RED, understand, arrgghh”. We turned up in front of her, having been given the all-clear by some friendlier quarantine folk while we were waiting for our baggage. She was about to let fly at us, quickly checked herself, grunted audibly in our faces and pointed to the exit. Welcome to Australia.



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2 August 2017



That's how it should be spelt too!