

Poya Days
A Sri Lankan Travelogue
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It's Sunday afternoon when we make the journey from the airport to the City of Colombo. The warm moist air, the scent of flowers in decay and gasoline fumes engulf us. The 4-lane road passes through one village after another. The driver weaves with terrifying speed through the left hand traffic – three wheelers, bikes, motor bikes, wooden lorries, small and big buses of all ages, cows and dogs and crows - and people. Everyone seems to be out on an afternoon stroll along the roadside looking at the goods displayed by the green grocers and bakers, the butchers and the fruit vendors. I am holding on to my seat hoping that we won't hit anyone. I wish the driver would slow down, that I could catch my breath and take everything in more leisurely.

One of the first things I become aware of is the mass of long black hair flowing down women's backs, abundance of hair. They move by in groups, laughing, holding hands. Their long tailored dresses or saris come in all colors and shades and reveal the shape of their bodies in a natural way – there is an unexpected freedom.

The sky is overcast with storm clouds building up. Dense green foliage everywhere, coconut palms, jak and mango trees. Here and there a cloud of bright red, soft yellow, purple and white. The jungle plants invade the old, small wooden houses and the fruit stalls, even the newer two or three story high concrete buildings are hidden behind green matter. Here and there along the road sits a smiling plaster Buddha in a huge box made of glass and metal, casts a wooden, dressed-up saint his eyes up to the sky, watch the multi-armed, dancing Hindu gods over their people who try to cross the road in the heavy traffic. There are no traffic lights, no cross walks. It seems impossible, but they

try anyway and start a dance - put themselves out there in the middle of the road - skin and blood towards grinding metal.

We pass a military checkpoint, cross a bridge over a wide river, and then we can see the few high risers, which signal, from the Fort area, the center of the city. In one of those high risers we'll stay for the first six days.

The air-conditioned world of the Hilton has nothing in common with the life on the streets. It is looked upon as haven for the tourist and businessman passing through the city and as a location to entertain the old and nouveau riche of Sri Lanka. The views from the 11th floor encompass Colombo's history in architectural form. Rundown colonial arcades, minarets of a mosque, the Grand Oriental Hotel facing the harbor with its modern cargo base. As soon as one opens the window gasoline fumes and the roar of the traffic invade the room. It was always a surprise to leave the cooled hotel and to step right into a wall of moist warmth.

One day we walked towards the old center of Colombo, Peetah, which the Moslem traders settled many centuries ago. It is still here where a lot of small traders offer their goods – electrical equipment, jewelry and hardware, fabric and dried fish, fruits, vegetables and ajurvedic herbs. The streets are narrow, jammed with trucks and motorized tricycles called tuck-tucks, men carrying sacks of potatoes and onions on their shoulders, balancing their heavy loads barefoot through puddles of water and garbage. We zigzagged through the market, found by accident the Dutch Period Museum with it under florescent light displayed ebony and wicker furniture, household goods and maps. We passed a couple of mosques to find ourselves coming out at the other side of the Peetah right in front of the former town hall with street vendors selling plastic utensils in bright colors.

To take one of the three wheelers and to tuck-tuck around is a more or less comfortable way to get to know the city. The early morning hours are preferable for such outings, less congested and less diesel smoke. Some of the drivers are

free style road racers – they made me wonder if I would survive the journey. I preferred the older drivers who were taking their time.

During the days when Gero helped prepare the conference I visited the National Museum with its collection of masks, woven mats, tools and weapons. There was a section dedicated to the old cities with painted copies of some of the frescoes and stone carved lions, elephants and snakes. There were Buddhas and Hindu gods, and the throne of the last king of Kandy. Next door the Natural History Museum hadn't changed the displays in half a century, but nevertheless was quite informative about Sri Lanka's fauna and flora. At the National Art Gallery the small collection of Sri Lankan paintings spanning the last century of western art history was warping and cracking in the humidity. Across the road lays the Victoria or Viharamahadevi Park, one of the few green refuges in the city with gigantic trees giving shade and water basins cooling the air. I passed through the park to reach one of the few contemporary temples of commerce: a small, fully air-conditioned shopping mall, which transported me back to Santa Monica. There is espresso available, but also Ginger Beer. I have to confess, after walking around for hours in the tropical heat it felt good to cool down – at least for a while.

The Coir Conference, which Gero helped organize, was very well attended and informative. Three days of presentations about the processing of coconut fibers, the various applications and the market situation, including a couple of very specific papers on fiber composites and erosion control mats in front of 150 participants – coir processors and vendors from Sri Lanka, India and China who were willing to compare experiences and discuss problems.

A visit to one of the fiber mills and a processing plant for erosion control mats and rubberized coir mattresses was very insightful about the labor intensity of the whole process. The coconuts first have to be dehusked. The husk is about 3 inches thick and has to be soaked in water for a couple of weeks, before it can be cracked and the 7-inch long fibers can be separated from the pith. That is done by mechanized pounding, grinding or squeezing. Then the long fibers have to be

washed and dried. Subsequently they are spun, twisted and woven, and can be used for mattresses, upholstery, carpets and doormats, as filling for car seats and as composites for car paneling. The short fibers are used for filling woven erosion control mats and logs. The pith or dust finally is increasingly used as a substitute for peat moss for gardening or landscaping projects and can be found in nursery stores in the U.S. Because most of the small mills have only antiquated equipment the laborers, women and men have to work hard physically: the water ponds are smelly, the grinding machines with their belts full of nails are dangerous, the hand sorting and turning and carrying of the fibers in a very dusty environment is back breaking. The spinning, weaving and knotting is still done by family owned small operations, but there are also large processing plants which have assembly lines to stitch the erosion control mats, press rubberized coir into flower pots or to make mattresses. In the last couple of years the working conditions have changed in these factories, air filters and vents got installed, more safety measures are taken. These visits to the mills were very informative and made me aware again of the hardship of any manual food and fiber growing and processing work.

We left Colombo on a Tuesday morning taking the train into the tea country. We wanted to spend some time at Ella, a small village at the rim of a mountain range in the southeast. There was the promise of fresh mountain air at least at night and a view through the Ella Gap towards the Eastern Coast. In the last minute we learned that we had to make seat reservations for the first class observation car. There is only one train daily making the trip of 200 km in 8 hours to Badulla for the price of \$4 per person, incl. the reservation.

The train system built by the British a century ago is now quite antiquated, and so was our observation car which is the last car hanging on to a 10 wagon train. Dust of decades had settled in the upholstery and curtains, the windows were cracked, and air conditioning was provided by three electrical fans mounted to the ceiling and moving back and forth in full speed. All windows were open and a comfortable breeze went through the car as soon as we were in motion. By pure

luck we had gotten the backmost seats right in front of a huge window looking out onto the tracks receding into the distance. We settled down for what turned into a 10-hour train ride – and the most beautiful journey through the heart of Sri Lanka – in slow motion.

It felt strange to look into a receding world. Made me dizzy to see first the houses and tracks recede and pile up at the horizon line. We passed swamps covered with lotus flowers, water buffaloes, rice paddies and coconut groves. Then the landscape turned hilly with mountains building up at the horizon. Approaching Kandy we came into mountain area, passing jungle green and cutting through tunnels. Whenever the train stopped in one of the many stations we thought it was still moving, very slowly, until we realized that our eyes couldn't adjust so quickly – they were still reading motion.

There was always a lot of activity at the stations. Vendors came by selling king coconuts and mangos, nuts and corn. The 2nd and 3rd classes were overcrowded and people were hanging out of the train doors during much of the trip. There was laughing and shouting. And off we went again passing through the backyards of the villages. On our way out of Colombo we passed through the slums – roughly built wooden shacks roofed with corrugated metal or blue plastic tarp. There was laundry drying on the unused track, on top of the bushes. Women were sitting and talking, men walked up and down, some were weeding grass, here and there was a cow grazing. The children played and waved and cheered. Coming into the rural areas it was curious to see how the track turned into a thoroughfare for pedestrians. It was surprising to see the school kids; women with umbrellas and men carrying groceries jump out of the bushes back onto the track as soon as our car passed, resuming their walks.

By one o'clock in the afternoon we had reached the Kandy junction (500m above sea level). Here the train climbs – in even slower motion - 1400 m towards Nuwara Eliya, the city above the clouds. The mountains get steeper, creeks running over huge boulders; water falls here and there. It gets dryer, the vegetation changes – and suddenly there were eucalyptus trees and firs. It looked like California for a while - we even saw a group of lumber men sawing

eucalyptus trees by hand into lumber, which reminded me off photographs showing how redwood was cut in the early 1900. Later we learned that the new forests had to be planted on abandoned tea land to keep the mountainsides from eroding. Then we sighted a tea factory among rows and rows of tea bushes. The afternoon sun reflecting golden on tea leaves and rice paddies. A cool breeze moved through the train – and still 3 more hours to go. We passed through a huge valley with vegetable gardens, a sign announcing a pass and it's elevation – and slowly down we rolled into the hill country. Night fell quickly. We saw fires burning in the forest, passed another village illuminated by a couple of light bulbs – and then we arrived in Ella. A handful of people waited for the train. We stepped out in front of the small station – into velvet, somewhat cooler flower scented darkness surrounded by all kinds of insect sounds.

After we recovered from our confusion – there were no taxis, no tuck-tucks, no telephone, we didn't make a reservation at the hotel and it was quite late– someone showed us the way down to the main road, hailed a passing van, which turned out to be a taxi and took us to the Hilltop Guesthouse in no time. There were rooms available, basic, but comfortable, mosquito nets floating above the beds. And we could, if we liked Sri Lankan food, have some of the rice and vegetable curries leftovers the owner's family just had for dinner. The table was quickly set, two bottle of lion lager showed up and we were content. Our host promised that in the morning we would see the low lands and perhaps the ocean through the Ella Gap.

We stayed four days and explored the area. Hiked up through rice paddies and tea plantations to Little Adam's Peak with great views of the mountains and way down in the coastal plain. We took a walk on the train tracks; a short cut to reach the trail to Ella Rock, through rice fields and tea gardens.

We visited the Uva tea factory and saw how the surface of the tea leaves get leathery dry, then rolled and rolled to release the fermented juice, then roasted and sorted into broken and unbroken Pekoes. The women and men work all day

in this hot, tea scented environment, lifting, carrying, sorting and packing the tea leaves.

We spent a morning at an Ayurvedic Treatment Center where they offered a coconut oil full body massage and a camphor scented, old fashioned steam baths (wooden sarcophag where one's head sticks out, and the rest of the body is heated up on low flame). The third element is a session in a sauna – a small, cone shaped red clay covered structure where one sits on a small bench feet resting on a wooden grid filled with all kinds of seeds and spices.

One afternoon we took the tuck-tuck to the next bigger town, Bandarawela, to visit the Woodlands Network, a non-profit organization, which offers alternative tours and travels to foreigners. By chance we met the co founder, a catholic priest from Holland who had introduced meditation to church communities in the late 60ties/70 in Germany, and then had moved to Sri Lanka with the idea to create networks which bring people from different cultures/religions/traditions together and support small local enterprises involved in “alternative tourism”, sustainable living, revitalizing of abandoned tea plantations, growing herbs for the Italian cuisines of Colombo.

The first morning in Ella (and the following mornings, too) we were woken up at 5am by the creaking sound of a loud speaker sending chants up and down the hills. First, we thought a muezzin would be chanting, which would have been strange since particularly in rural areas Buddhists are by far the majority. Overall, the Sri Lankan population is 69% Buddhist, 15% Hindu–i.e. Tamils living both in the North and East of the Island and in the tea country, and Moslems and Christian both account for 7%, largely living in the cities. Later we heard that Poya, the monthly celebration of the full moon, was coming up. The Buddhist monks in the nearby temple were getting ready for the celebrations with chanting and praying in the morning and evening. The Sri Lankans take Poya days very seriously. They are holidays, and if they fall onto a Friday or Monday people like to travel to specific sacred sites for worship, festivals and parades.

From Ella to Kandy we took, on the weekend before Poya, the same old van-taxi, which had picked us up the night we arrived. The eastern part of the central mountain is in the rain shade, much drier, more Mediterranean than the western portions. Kandy is the old Sinhalese capital. The kandyan kingdom withstood the three invading groups of Europeans—Portuguese, Dutch and British—for over two centuries. But in the last 150 years the western world has invaded the old town with its temples and mosques, and brought in British hotel architecture and storefronts. It is still a place for pedestrians and we enjoyed the weekend atmosphere a lot. The municipal market is housed now in a concrete structure where the fruit and vegetable, fish and meat vendors have their stalls. Nevertheless, the market is a feast for the eye: all kind's of vibrant colored tropical fruit and strange looking vegetables, 15 different varieties of rice and lentils and beans packed in plastic sacks – and the air is spiced by cinnamon and pepper.

Across the market we found a Hindu temple, a large concrete structure which houses a main shrine surrounded by 10 small chapel like buildings, each devoted to a specific god. People brought flower offerings and prayed, lit small clay bowls with coconut oil. The gods are made off plaster and painted in pink and turquoise, bright yellow and red and green. Nearby the main shrine were brass bowls on a table containing ashes, ocher and red pigment and some oil. In another Hindu temple Gero once had witnessed wild dancing and rolling on the floor accompanied by drums and flutes— that Sunday morning it was very quiet.

We walked through the small downtown area, passed a lot of bakeries, tea houses and an internet cafe to reach the mayor attraction of Kandy: the Temple of the Tooth where one of Buddha's teeth is stored in a reliquary which is housed in a huge shrine behind many gold covered doors. It was very crowded there: first the bags and backpacks were checked, then we passed the resident elephant, waited in line for storing our shoes, had to pass another security check – understandable, since in 1997 the temple was devastated by Tamil Tiger bombs, since then restored to it's old glory. Finally we were in front of groups of golden plaster Buddhas, all sitting and meditating. Above the statues were paintings depicting how Buddhism found it's way to Sri Lanka. The shrine room

was overcrowded, people sitting on the floor praying and meditating. Everyone brought white and violet lotus flowers as offering to the Buddha which were presented on a long table and then quickly scooped up by a man behind the table who piled the flowers into large, red plastic garbage cans. Outside was an area where hundreds of coconut oil lights were burning, behind that was a Bo tree with colorful prayer flags dancing in the breeze – and more oil lights. Next to the bodie tree a group of women were having lunch in the shade of a column-supported roof. Here everything seemed more relaxed.

On Poya day we went back to Colombo by train. Oncoming trains leaving the city were completely overcrowded with even more people hanging in the doors, on their way to some of the sacred sites. In the evening we visited the Buddhist temple nearby which was illuminated by colored light bulbs and oil lamps. There are many buildings on the temple grounds: a lecture hall, a small dagobe, a shrine with two huge and brightly yellow painted, seated Buddhas surrounded by disciples, including some bare breasted women. In the back of the compound on a 7 row high bleacher are sitting at least one hundred cast metal Buddhas smiling down on to the visitors and worshippers. People were milling around, praying, talking, laughing, bringing offerings for the temple to the priest. The building where the monks live also has a huge room on the first floor, which houses the temple's collection of offerings and donations. One finds everything in there from artifacts to watches to MontBlanc pens to cars and printing presses from the 1920.

Since we came back to the West friends have asked us about the political situation in Sri Lanka - how does it feel to be in a country, which has, at least until the recent cease-fire between government and Tamil Tigers, ravaged by civil war? Except for Colombo it isn't really visible. There we saw a lot of military posts in the government district and business center in Fort, occupying watchtowers and gates. Out in the tea country the world seemed to be in order. We had read novels and essays about the waves of civil unrest since the independence in 1948 (Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and *Anil's Ghost*; short

stories by Jean Arasanayagam and Romesh Gunesequera) and also about the centuries old conflicts between Tamils, Sinhalese and Moors = Hindus, Buddhists, and Moslems (*An Historical Relation of Ceylon* by Robert Knox and L. Woolfs' *The Village in the Jungle*). There is a sense of hidden atrocities committed after the crackdown on the Tamils and riots in the early 1980. Over the years 60.000 people got killed, 1 million people displaced by the conflict between ever-changing governments and the Tamil Tigers but also by ethnic violence between the three major groups.

Colombo is far away from the northern part of the island where the Tamils fight for their independence. Most of the people we encountered on our travels were open and friendly, smiling. We discussed the political and social situation with many people from various backgrounds. They all had there own reading of the past – and two weeks are not enough to understand and to find out about the underlying frustration and pain. But everyone is hopeful that the new round of peace talks, which the newly elected government started with the Tamils in December 2001, will continue and bring peace to the country.