

Sri Lanka

Making sense of



Tim and his wife, Heidi

In a blur of colour and movement, Sri Lanka leaves a vivid impression that is impossible to forget.

Words and picture by Tim Lyddiatt

“At Yalla National park, we would see elephants, crocodile, deer and, from a distance, a young leopard shading herself from the sun.”

This is a story told in extremes of motion and colour; the days and nights blurring into one long hallucinatory dream of deep, intense colour and the memory of revelation. I will not, in detail, try and convey the intensity of the country's rhythms - its sights, sounds and flavours, preferring instead to meander through memory in order to convey a sense of the place and the wonder we experienced there.

The first morning, groggy headed but excited, we started our tour of the country. Over the next seven days we witnessed a world unlike any I have ever visited before. From up high it looks like Jurassic Park, its dark jungle brooding, and feeling safe only from atop the mountain. The mountains themselves rise to more than 8,000 feet and are densely covered with monkey and fruit laden trees. It is a country teeming with life. At Yalla National park, we would see elephants, crocodile, deer and, from a distance, a young leopard shading herself from the sun. On the southern coast, four types of turtle nest, and lay their eggs. We attended festivals where decorated elephants marched with fire breathers and jugglers in deference to the day that Buddha's tooth was safely returned to the kingdom.

We trawled the old capital of Kandy, Sri Lanka's second city, heading straight to the market to buy rambutan, papaya and sweet orange coconuts, as well as beautiful

batik sarongs and kilos of Ceylon tea. We would pass through lush jungle and high up tea plantations that spread for as far as the eye could see, their impossible slopes marking the hardness of the women that work them, and their English names a reminder of Sri Lanka's colonial past.

Officially a Buddhist country, more than 30 per cent of the population is Muslim, Hindu or Christian. We saw shrines to all their gods, and mosques on the coast that have stood for more than a century, having survived nature's rigours with the brute force of will. We saw ancient temples carved into mountains and statues of Buddha wrought from high granite and limestone cliffs; we saw giant cruciform at the sides of roads, and intricately carved



Elephants playing in the river



Adam's Peak



Sri Lanka's green and pleasant land

shrines to Ganesh and Vishnu. It is a holy place, calm and serene.

We sat on her beaches and under her undulating skies that were never the same from one second to the next. We swam in her rivers and lakes and watched from the shore as men fished, children bathed and women washed clothes against their pinkish rocks. The earth is red and orange and fertile. And it rains in Sri Lanka, the water, the source of all that life; up high in the mountains, it gets cold: having come from the Gulf, in Sri Lanka we lived for a week in another world.

Time constraints meant that the only way to see as much of the country as possible was by hiring a guide. Nimal, tall and softly spoken with broad shoulders filling his brightly embroidered shirt, greeted us at the airport with a firm handshake and wide smile. He took our bags, and marched us swiftly to his waiting vehicle. He drove us to the beach hotel, the first of seven we would sleep in, each with a different virtue: the beach, the

jungle, the city, the view. After dumping our bags, we went downstairs and swiftly fell in love.

I will always remember the food in Sri Lanka, its memory is inseparable from my memories of the place. Because things grow there, Sri Lankan food is filled with vegetables and fruit and because it is a relatively poor country, meat plays only a small part in the show. The sharp, chilli-fuelled curries are softened and thickened

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with lime juice and freshly-creamed coconut; the rich green mess on my plate was bitter gourd, and other vegetables too competed for attention. The beetroot was warm and infused with sweet aromatic spices and the banana flower was soft and delicate, as any flower should be. Finally,

there was the creamy, flaky wonderfulness of 'sombol', grated coconut enriched with chillies and lime, all served with mountains of rice and washed down with 'Lion', a Sri Lankan beer. It was love at first bite.

At night, Sri Lanka is alive. The warm sky swam with a thousand kinds of winged and flapping creatures: as if the night believed it had the right - and was right - to threaten and cause us fear. The noise was incredible, as if on our porch we were sat on a precipice overlooking another domain. A thousand types of tree and plant greenly and darkly swooshed and swayed in the breeze that rolled down off the mountain and up from the ocean - the former cold, the latter warm; where they met, a short-lived storm clattered the land like a broken wheel. The moon was pregnant, slowly convulsing against clouds like wisps of smoke; its birth - a new month - slowly forming inside.

On the beaches, the ocean rolled in forever like an unwelcome guest, gate-crashing the land, threatening and slightly terrifying it. The earth - stable but forlorn at its edges: the opposite of its dark and churning heart - looked on, unable to summon the courage to repel its writhing tormentor, or talk it down and out of its way. The Sri Lankan night augments the day, framing and corralling it, shaping and affecting both the hours of daylight and your reaction to them. If the night is full of

mystery and fear, then the days are filled with wonder.

I thought Sri Lanka beautiful, and terrifyingly primal in a way rarely found in these primped and manicured parts. Perhaps out in the deserts you can feel this close to nature, and so scared by it, ▶

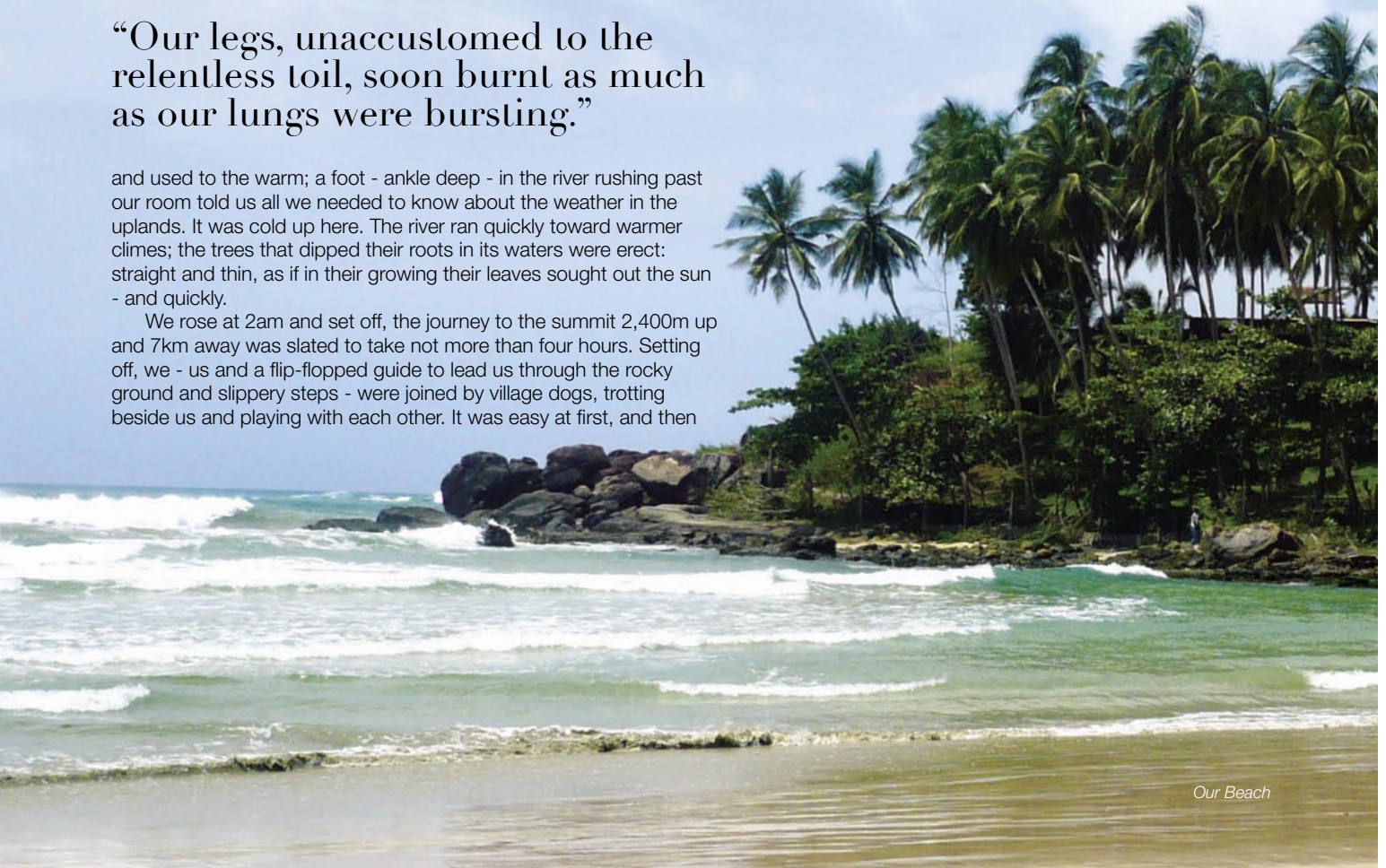
but not in the cities, not where the land has been so finessed and finished; the sea tamed so as to barely move.

One day we set off to climb Adam's Peak, one of the highest in the country and a Buddhist Pilgrimage site. It started slow and sluggish; the rain fell as we changed from beach clothes to mountain clothes and realised the task that lay ahead. We were tired already,

“Our legs, unaccustomed to the relentless toil, soon burnt as much as our lungs were bursting.”

and used to the warm; a foot - ankle deep - in the river rushing past our room told us all we needed to know about the weather in the uplands. It was cold up here. The river ran quickly toward warmer climes; the trees that dipped their roots in its waters were erect: straight and thin, as if in their growing their leaves sought out the sun - and quickly.

We rose at 2am and set off, the journey to the summit 2,400m up and 7km away was slated to take not more than four hours. Setting off, we - us and a flip-flopped guide to lead us through the rocky ground and slippery steps - were joined by village dogs, trotting beside us and playing with each other. It was easy at first, and then



Our Beach

became much harder.

The peak is supposed to be the place where Adam first trod the earth; the Buddhists believe the footprint was borne by Buddha. It is holy to Muslims and Hindus, Christians and Buddhists alike and as such, the path up has been trod for centuries. We were walking to see the dawn, but really, to prove that we could do it. Early on, the going gently sloped on its way past waterfalls and crashing rivers rendered invisible by the deep thick night. Then the steps begin.

There are more than five thousand in total, in places steep and deep and hard to climb. Our legs, unaccustomed to the relentless toil, soon burnt as much as our lungs were bursting. In the dark, our path lit only with pallid, thin torchlight, it was impossible to know how far we'd come or how far we had left. It was one step at a time forever ad infinitum.

We made it, in less than three hours and at the top had time to drink hot sweet tea in

the temple keeper's shack, served by a man who lives up here for months at a time, only venturing down for food and tobacco. When we got to the top it was cold and grey, the sky that had surrounded us throughout the night wrapped its arms around us as we approached the bell. It was damp, but becoming less dark: we'd made it. More than five thousand steps but, more than anything else, we'd conquered the peak.

Ambling down, tired and increasingly warmed by the sun, took as long as the journey upwards. In daylight the scale of the peak was visible for the first time. Looking back, the summit remained shrouded in clouds, but the sun revealed our tortuous climb through a vivid mass of green crisscrossed with whitely falling water. Arriving back, we were greeted smilingly as friends by people we had met only the day before. They gave us breakfast and somewhere to sit, their faces lit up by our sense of achievement. They were pleased that we were pleased that we'd made it.

A week in Sri Lanka is not enough time to spend in a country that is so many things: a nature reserve and Garden of Eden; a Holy place and place for exploration; a beach resort and a bustling city break - there is luxury there and hardship too and often, where they meet, Sri Lanka revels in the sparks that fly. It is a country of opposites and of harmonious existence: it is, in short, my new favourite place and a place to which I vow to return ■



Nimal

I would not have experienced any of this were it not for Nimal guiding us around his country. Throughout, he was helpful, knowledgeable and courteous, and the tour was tremendous value for money. You can contact him via email: ndsilva67@yahoo.com