

The Ceylon Shuffle

My time in Sri Lanka seemed brief when I landed, but now as I face the commute to the airport, I think I got the timing right. Come for the tea, stay for some adventure.

After the fortnight in and around Istanbul I hopped a midnight flight to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; twas an odd place for a layover. The plane landed so far away from the terminal, the shuttle bus ride was over thirty minutes...I thought we had landed in Yemen by mistake.

Instead of having a long building with various gates spaced along the way, Jeddah's plan is to get everyone, and I mean EVERYONE in the same building, pump in some air-conditioning and call it a night. So the first few hundred thru the door got the luxury of a seat, the rest of the two thousand or so, grabbed some nicely tiled floor. Since all the "gates" were in the same building, there was no immediate need to post departure gates before-hand; five minutes would be enough...you couldn't miss your gate...you could see them all. Oddly they had a Tim Horton's Donuts there, which struck me as funny at 3am.

TimHorton

Then there was the 7am flight to Sri Lanka; 5hrs in the air and the odd 90 minutes of time change and you're there. Both legs on Saudi Air, and I gotta say, what an experience. An old fashion "wide body" with 10 seats across..plenty of leg room and movies...like flying used to be before we all went "cheap" in the air. Even a space in the back muslim prayer, complete with compass to point east when the plane didn't.

But enough about the "getting here":

Sri Lanka is a place I had thought little of, until I flew from India to the Maldiv Islands back in 2016. I flew Sri Lankan Air and along the way they ran a promotional video on Sri Lankan tourist sites and showed the beautiful countryside...made me want to deplane right there, but I just added it to my "to do" list.

Arriving in Colombo after a 90 minute bus ride from the airport, I was greeted by the hustle and bustle that was topped by my arrival in Delhi, India...well Colombo is like little Delhi. Thankfully I had read about this and only had to find the train station to escape to the serene seaside town of Mount Lavinia.

There is no "perfect route" around Sri Lanka. I researched as many blogs as I could handle, most written by young intrepids who exchange words of praise for comfy beds every night. So you find a map, close your eyes and choose a city. None are technically 'wrong' but rather various shades of 'right'. I chose Kandy, as my first stop, and hoped for the best.

With your world strapped to your back, where you stay every night is really up to chance and choice. Kandy is a major hub within Sri Lanka, and I had chosen my hostel in proximity to the train/bus depot. I wanted an early start in the morning, so I was willing to sacrifice a bit of 'social atmosphere' to get a shorter walk. This turned out to be a mighty sacrifice.

I have rarely been this wrong, but in my defense, the pictures on line didn't match up to the reality as I walked thru the door. A row of seven bunk beds awaited me in the basement of a building under construction. Sure, it was cheap, (\$4) but I could have slept on a park bench for free, and I seriously pondered this option. The sweltering heat in candy Kandy, with near 100% humidity left me a flop-sweaty mess as I cracked thru that door, so I dumped my gear next to the bed and collapsed. The lone fan spun weakly overhead, making this "ka-clunk" sound with every rotation. Again, a total disaster. I had this beautiful air-conditioned train ride for four hours to get here...it was heaven, and to lay here in a bed with "ka-chunking" fan... a total shock to my aging system.

After a few moments, I went out exploring, looking for that first cold drink. I found it, along with the "tooth temple" a major spot in Kandy. Purported to be the actual tooth of Buddah, there is a temple here to honor this relic. They openly admit you won't be allowed to see it, or take pictures inside, so I openly admitted that I would pass on the opportunity and opted for an early dinner instead. Ah street food can be such a blessing sometimes; or a curse. To top off my night, I got a bit of food poisoning off a rather tasty bit of chicken curry... It was a long night, and sleep proved elusive, as the fan kept clunking along, seemingly unwilling to lift the hot air off me, as if staging a protest.

The stay in Kandy was an epic fail, but you have to keep moving. I did the zombie stroll to the bus station and my trip north to Polonnuruwa; one point of the "culture triangle" here. I had visions of catching sleep along the three-hour route, but those visions quickly faded as I had to force my way onto the packed bus. I got a seat in the front, probably a testament to my advanced age than anything else, but the ride was anything but smooth. Sri Lankan drivers are as a class, not good drivers. Yes, they generally don't crash, but it seems they really want to. The flow of traffic is dictated mostly by size of vehicle and the timber of the horn; and the horn shall be used as often as the brake...actually the two might be linked together. And thus, the Ceylon Shuffle.

All forms of transport in Sri Lanka come with brakes installed, but are to be used, apparently, as a last means of stopping; like a backup parachute for sky divers. I could be convinced that the brake pedal was installed to keep the accelerator company...both mean "go". And Sri Lankans "go" everywhere, simultaneously. There are no stop signs here, just the occasional signal system to add color to the haphazard skyline. I have been told one beep of the horn means "I'm here" and two short beeps means "I'm passing you" but if everyone uses two short "beeps"? chaos...but I digress.

The bus system here is obviously built for Sri Lankans, who, it must be said, have femurs about 3-inches shorter than mine. How do I know? I had three hours of pain to discover this. The seats are set just about three inches shorter than in the states. Thankfully the seats were wide enough for this American's dupa, but it felt like I was sitting on one of those grade-school wooden chairs the whole way. My legs were going numb; the congested bus didn't allow for you to move your feet.

Pouring myself out of the bus at Polonnuruwa, I was a jostled, numb, sleepy mess. I had done some reading about the sites to see here, but there was no easy, direct path between my camera and its objective. Like with my time in India, there is a tuk-tuk driver for about every five feet of pavement here, and I usually fend them off with a stern look or sarcasm, but with the day I was having, being

driven around didn't seem like such a bad idea. For \$12 he would drive me around for 2hrs and stop at all the sites I was supposed to see. That sounded like the way to go since the alternative was to rent a bike and pedal those miles myself. Sometimes you just get in the tuk-tuk.

The sun was relentless that day and my enthusiasm for photographing the weathered religious icons set before me was minimal and rapidly diminishing, but together we got thru them all. As a bonus, the tuk-tuk guy drove me to the bus stop where a waiting bus took me to the final destination of the day; Sigiriya.

The last hour passed as had the previous three, painfully as I tried to regroup and stop sweating so much. I had nothing more to do today but find my room and take a nap. I had booked a room and dinner at this farm homestay, that was close to the rock I intended to climb in the morning. Imagine my surprise to find my newly built accommodation was fitted with a room air-conditioner. The owner knew the art of the deal and offered to turn it on for a small up-charge in the room price, which I gladly paid. I cranked it down to 60 and went and finally got my nap in....

Sigiriya is the locale for the "Lion Rock" and "Little Lion Rock" formations. Both "rocks" are about the same height and hold religious significance here. On Lion Rock there are temple stops along the climb up and a guided tour is what most people opt for. This makes it a crowded and expensive affair, as a conga line of tourists traipse up the only path to the top. After my nap, I pondered my options, there was a few reasons NOT to do the big hike; there is but one staircase and perhaps Blanche and Joe from Tuscola can't climb as fast as they used to...so the entire conga line stops for Blanche and Joe. Then there was the time thing...it didn't open until 9am to ensure you're hiking during the heat of the day.

Instead I opted for the "Little Lion Rock". It was about a kilometer away, but it opened at 5am, so the lesser climb was done under shadow of night. Twas no less of a struggle, but it was dark, so only the critters see you sweat. The sunrise over the valley, with Lion Rock in the distance was well worth the loss of sleep to get there.

Taking the early climb also allowed me a few more hours of sleep once I got back...Sri Lanka makes you cherish the air-conditioning when you find it.

From Sigiriya it was back to Kandy. More leg cramps but a shorter trip and a new hostel was chosen, a bit farther from the bus station, but I was taking a train...this place had efficient fans, and a proximity to a Burger King which makes the most delicious ice cream sundae when you need one..

One of the "must do's" in Sri Lanka is the Kandy to Ella train. Seven hours of diesel -driven delight as we roll along the tea plantations of central Sri. The "preferred way" to go is 2nd class where you're supposed to sit in the doorways, with your feet dangling off the side as you marvel at the green lush surroundings passing before you. That's what was supposed to happen. Again, I had such high hopes.

The "secret" plan was to take a tuk-tuk to the station before Kandy, get your ticket and board there. That way you're on the train before the maddening crowds of tourists get on in Kandy...you were

supposed to have a legitimate shot at a seat...but I'm sure it would be a few inches short of comfort...but a seat none-the-less. This plan was so "secret" I read about it on the internet.

So I get a 5am tuk-tuk to the previous station for the 8am train...plenty of time to stake out my place...only to find that the 8am train is first-class only, reserved by all 6 months ago...next train is 9am...so it's now 5:30am and I can take a nap or two; I like my odds. By 8am there are about twenty of us with the same "secret" way of securing seats...Suddenly I don't like my odds anymore.

The train arrives on time, but it is packed beyond capacity...we tourists all jog down the line but can't find any space to board, as there are 10 people hanging out of every opening....the train stops for ten minutes, no one got off..or on, and then departs ...so now there are about forty folks in various stages of disbelief... We all dutifully bought our \$1.60 tickets, but weren't going anywhere.

Apparently this happens often, so the train staff direct us to the other side of the station, telling us the train will go to Kandy and then come back thru to this station. But logic dictated that if the train was too full at this point, it will only be *more* of an issue after everyone gets on in Kandy...but we sat and waited it out.

Within about a half hour the train came back, and perhaps we all were a little more "steemed" to the realities of boarding a Sri Lankan train, but we all launched ourselves into the bar car and somehow we all made it...but

There's a phrase "packed in there like sardines" but it doesn't fully describe the feeling. I think I saw a capacity of 60 on our car, there had to be 300. All backpacks got stacked into a bulkhead and all hands reached up to the hooks and bars coming from the ceiling for stability. 300 people in a train car. Forget looking out the windows at the scenery...we couldn't see beyond the body in front of you. Forget hanging your feet out the car door. You couldn't see the door, and barely the floor.

And then after about a half-hour the drumming started. The Sri Lankans love music, and bring it with them when they travel. Some kids who were lucky enough to get seats started drumming a bongo and chanting local tunes...like "Sing Along with Mitch Miller" for Sri Lankans.....for 6.5 of the 7 hours. In all that time I think they got thru about four songs. The droning of the drumming was like a Hindu version of Gregorian Chant...endless... I thought I was just being a curmudgeon in my dislike, until another tourist suggested taking up a collection to get them to stop. About six hours too long.

Now at about the six hour mark, people finally started to de-train and there was enough room to take some pictures out the window and a few got to dangle their feet, but on the whole, this is an adventure best left for those who did it before it became so popular. Even though we bought second-class tickets, we all ended up in third, the only ambiance missing was a few crates of chickens and goats, and frankly I'm surprised we didn't get those too.

Getting dumped off the train at 5pm at a place called Kethal Ella. I was expecting a small hamlet, or at least a place to get a Coke and a smile...Nope. There were a handful of tuk-tuk guys sipping on coconuts,

and when I mentioned the hostel I reserved, they just pointed back at the railroad tracks and said. "Walk this way". So this way I walked. It was only a few hundred meters before I saw my hostel, Ella Escapade

Ella Escapade photos

I had three nights booked and extended to five. The jungle setting, the daily hikes and relaxed atmosphere is something I hadn't had to date in Sri Lanka and I didn't want to give it up so easily.

There is nine-arch bridge

There is the 5am hike up to Ella Rock

From Ella it was a bus to Udawalawe, for a game drive. The seats on the bus were still short, but so was my bus ride.

Safaripic

After Udawalawe, it was on to Mirissa for some beach time where I got sunburnt instantly

Mirissarock

From Mirissa it was onto Galle for a day before coming back to Colombo.

Initially I had budgeted a month here, but ended up with seventeen days. Looking back I honestly don't know what I would have done with another thirteen days. I saw some culture, I climbed some mountains, and I saw the elephants and surf...More doesn't necessarily mean better.

I had thought that Sri Lanka was a "lite" version of India upon landing, and I'll stick with that. But like a lite version of everything, sometimes you need the full version to really experience something fully. There are temples here, but nothing matching the grandeur of any in India. There is Dutch influence here in Galle, but it pales in comparison to Kochi. The food is great here, but as long as you prefer roti, and curry...India has so much more...but there is a Sri Lankan Kotthu that's amazing.

The only area where the two countries match up closer is in the congestion of Colombo and Delhi, and in the overcrowded trains and busses. The "Ceylon Shuffle" closely approximates the "Delhi Dash" in intensity.

In looking over my images here, I was struck by how few there really are. I'm so used to shooting well over 1,000 and here the shots are in the hundreds. I'm glad I made it here, and it has answered a lot of unknown questions I had, but it also makes me excited for my next stop, 3 weeks in the UK.

Random Bits:

There are no pretzels in Sri Lanka, but there are Pringles

The hotdogs are more like brats and the chili garlic one is a thing of beauty

There is a dish called 'Khotu' which is cabbage, carrot and a protein chopped up with roti minced into it. If you don't know roti, I can't help you...go to India

There is a national board game in Sri Lanka called "carom". Essentially "finger billiards" where you use your index finger like a cue and flick an object "disk" towards the black and white chips...sort of like a hybrid between checkers and billiards..

Carom Photos

Tuk-Tuk honking protocols:

1 short honk = "I'm here"

2 short honks = "I'm gonna pass you"

1 long honk by the nearest tuk-tuk AFTER the two short ones = "oh no you're not!"

3 long ones = "my truck is bigger than your tuk-tuks and I don't move over for anyone!"

So I'm on a bicycle thru the town of Galle. I see this huge crowd watching the fishermen bringing in their catch. I get out amongst the folk and was expecting to see a massive haul..but not exactly. There are definitely fish in there, but for the number of people involved in bringing in this net, it didn't seem worth the effort

Fishing photos.

Last Pictures

9-Arch Bridge, Ella

Sunrise in Mirissa

Lighthouse in Galle