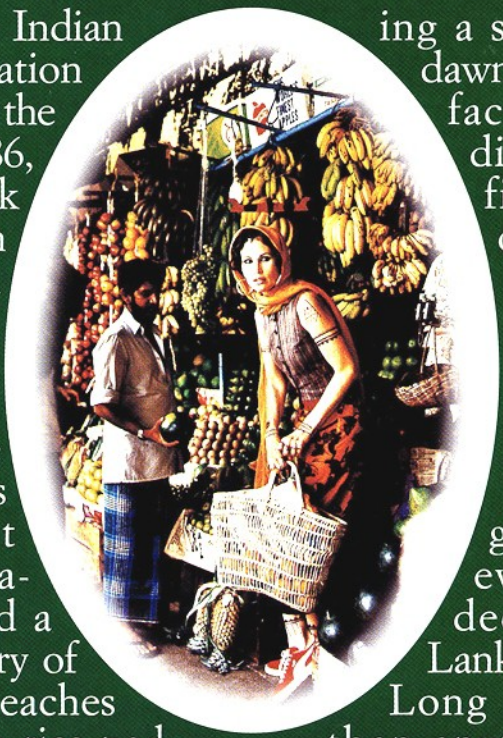
Resplendent isle

Ancient traders called Sri Lanka Serendib. William McGowan chances upon the island's hidden heart, Mark Connolly captures its unchanged beauty

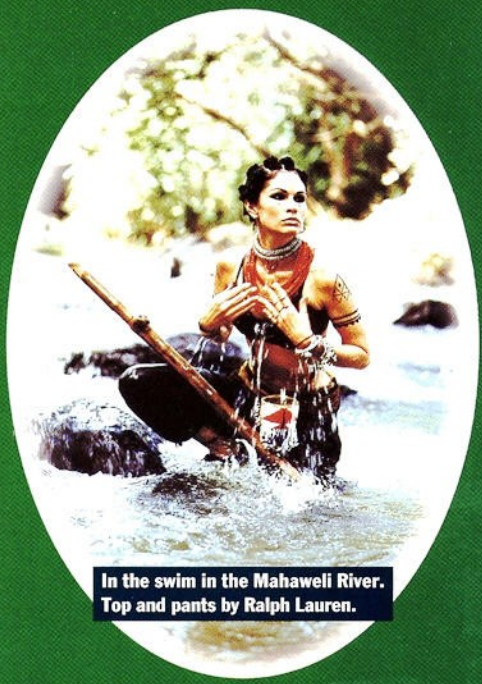


As I neared the Indian Ocean island nation of Sri Lanka for the first time in 1986, all the storybook imagery of an exotic tropical paradise seemed to be in place. From the air, Sri Lanka—the name means "resplendent land" in Sinhalese—appeared a stunning tapestry of palm-fringed beaches and shiny green rice paddies, with mysterious blue mountains silhouetted in the distance. Making the picture even more captivating were the veils of early morning mist that clung to the landscape, suggesting a scene from the dawn of creation. In fact, so beautiful did the ancients find the place called Lanka that Muslim scholars declared it the site of the original Garden of Eden.

Once on the ground, however, I quickly decided that Sri Lanka was more the Long Island of Asia than anything resplendent. English-language signs advertised any number of Western products—color film? air-conditioning? life insurance?—and a billboard from the Colombo Lion's Club

Kandy, in the central highlands, is Sri Lanka's cultural stronghold. She shops at the Kandy Municipal Market in vest and dress by Dries Van Noten, scarf by Go Silk. *Opposite:* At a Kandy lottery-ticket stand. Sari by Suneet Varma, T-shirt by CK Calvin Klein.

PHOTOGRAPHS by JOSEPH HUNWICK



In the swim in the Mahaweli River. Top and pants by Ralph Lauren.

Behind me drums beat, and monks chanted

bid us a hearty welcome. Next to it was an even bigger billboard, this one for *Rambo*. Although Mark Twain, who had visited Sri Lanka almost a hundred years earlier, when it was still the British colony of Ceylon (independence came in 1948), had been able to declare it "Oriental in the last measure of completeness," I saw little that seemed authentic or primary. What, I wondered, had Twain—not to mention Leonard Woolf, Herman Hesse, Paul Bowles, Thomas Merton, and countless other writers—come here to find?

Serendib, Arab traders had called Sri Lanka, happy to have come upon this land of cinnamon and spices. But in the land where serendipity is all, accidental good fortune seemed at first to elude me. As the academic director for an American College Semester Abroad program—a sabbatical of sorts from journalism—I had arrived with a group of students under my wing. We had arranged for a series of home- *(Continued on page 207)*

Lanka's lure

Sri Lanka's decade-old civil war, waged against the Sinhalese-dominated government by Tamil independence groups, is restricted almost exclusively to the island's north and east. For how best to experience the country's trouble-free—and stunningly beautiful—southern and central areas, see page 210.

Travel by car—old Peugeots like this abound—is a sometimes rough but rewarding way to experience Sri Lanka's allure. Dress the part in Anne Klein by Richard Tyler.

MAP BY JOHN TOMANIO

(Continued from page 170) stays to deepen our appreciation of local customs, practices, and beliefs. But the choice of families had been an unfortunate one. While my students and I were intent on gaining insight into a foreign culture, the families we were staying with—members of the Westernized elite—were intent on showing off how much like us they were. "I have come from halfway around the world to meet monks who can teach me how to meditate," groused one of the more disappointed students, "not to attend High Anglican service and eat ice cream at the mall."

But that, I soon discovered, was just Sri Lanka playing tricks on us. Like the jungle that may temporarily conceal an elephant, the island's centuries of colonialization and its Western-style economic development are but the thinnest, most deceptive of screens. With time, the "elephant" inevitably emerges.

SRI LANKA IS AN INTENSELY Buddhist country (the nearly three-quarters majority Sinhalese, mostly Buddhists, dominate national life and politics, with the primarily Hindu Tamils a minority of eighteen percent and the Muslims of eight percent). The Buddhist aura is most concentrated in Kandy, a cultural stronghold nestled upcountry in the foothills of the central highlands, where the famous Ceylonese tea is grown. While Sri Lanka's coastal areas fell to a succession of Western colonial powers—first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British—the kingdom of Kandy retained its independence, providing a sanctuary for Buddhist tradition until the British finally conquered it in the second decade of the nineteenth century. "The island hid its knowledge," writes Sri Lankan–born author Michael Ondaatje in his family memoir, *Running in the Family*. "Intricate arts and customs and religious ceremonies moved inland, away from the new cities."

The trip to Kandy northeast from the capital, Colombo, starts out easy. The road passes through a tableau of every shade of green imaginable, a lowland quilt of rice paddies and shaggy coconut palms. Girls bathe along the riverbank in wet, soapy saris, which they leave on in the name of modesty. Small boys in loincloths sit imperiously atop hulking water buffaloes. From time to time a procession of monks comes into view, their wide bare feet visible beneath saffron robes, their shaved heads the color of teak and mahogany. As the road begins to climb, the paddies are arranged in tiers, like terraces. When it rains, the water sluices happily from one level to the next, making the ancient system for growing rice seem as much a marvel of hydraulic engineering as a work of art. Soon, one is crawling along through jungle and alongside deep ravines (no wonder Kandy was able to resist Western intruders for so long).

Sinhalese Buddhists consider themselves the chosen people of the Buddha, charged with the mandate of protecting and preserving the Buddha's teachings in their most pristine form. This myth seems most real inside the massive, cream-colored walls surrounding Kandy's renowned Temple of the Tooth. The shrine was built by the Kandyan kings to protect what pious Sinhalese believe to be a relic of the Buddha's tooth itself, which had been spirited out of India in the fourth century as Buddhism collapsed there under the strain from revivalist Hinduism.

Whether this is the actual Buddha's tooth is dubious, but at least once a year—and normally during the full moon in July and August—the tooth is taken out of its protective inner sanctum and paraded around the sacred Kandy Lake, escorted by scores of grandly festooned elephants and thousands of marchers in the ceremony known as the Perahera. The rite attracts villagers from all over the island, eager to get a glimpse of the relic for the good karma it supposedly brings, as well as countless politicians, determined to demonstrate their devotion to what is, more or less, the state religion.

On at least one trek to Kandy, the forces of serendipity were clearly with me. I stumbled upon a normally unscheduled New Year's Eve Perahera. Kandy that night, its narrow streets jammed with people, was bedecked with garlands of electric lights and Buddha statues of every gaudy hue. A powerful spotlight illuminated the Temple of the Tooth, making the lake beside it appear all the more still and dark. Out of the equally dark hills behind it swooped giant fruit bats and angry crows.

Suddenly, a contingent of masked men advanced from the direction of the temple, whips snapping, followed by others slashing the air with swords to slay the evil spirits that might be lurking. After the swordsmen came the fire jugglers, some with batons lit at both ends. Soon the entire street was molten. A line of men materialized on each side of the procession, holding long staves with buckets of burning pitch at the end. They strained to avoid being burned by the flames that leapt back at them as the wind shifted. Then came dancers, jugglers, acrobats, magicians, their contingents punctuated by grandly decorated elephants in capes of crimson, maroon, orange, and black, studded with blinking electric lights and ridden by men in the traditional garb of the Kandyan chiefs. *"Sadhu! Sadhu!* (Holy! Holy!)," chanted the crowd as the elephant carrying the gold casket of the Buddha's tooth lumbered by. I was ready to believe.

THE FORCE OF GRAVITY IN UNawatuna," science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke has said, "is one of the strongest on earth." This, too, I am ready to believe, having been drawn back to this tiny fishing village (one of a string of such settlements that stretch south along the coast below Colombo) again and again during the years I lived in Sri Lanka. It was not difficult to see how the "crude exoticism" of life in these villages had inspired Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia and a young civil servant in colonial Ceylon, to write his famous novel, *The Village in the Jungle*.

I always loved the trip down from Colombo, luxuriating in the cameos of life glimpsed from a slow-moving train or the rickety backseat of a rented Peugeot that had somehow made its way to Ceylon long ago from French Indochina. Between densely packed rows of coconut palms, women spun coir—a form of rope—out of the fiber obtained from coconut husks, and men standing in the surf strained at seining nets run out as much as half a mile into the sea. Markets emitted the sharp smells of dung and beasts and sweat and spices, and resounded with the unsettling glottal cries of fishmongers advertising their product as they hacked creatures the size of men into curry-size chunks for dinner. In every swatch of shade sat people delicately pouring tea into saucers to cool before drinking it. Dreamily, towns floated by one after another—towns with names difficult for Western tongues to pronounce but which the train and bus conductors would call out with gusto: Kalutara, Bentota, Ambalangoda, Hikkaduwa.

It was Unawatuna itself, however, that became most indelibly etched in my memory. The village sits on the shore of a stunningly beautiful horseshoe-shaped bay, whose turquoise waters smash up against a natural seawall of boulders before gently rolling to the white sand beach. Behind it is the jungle, an impenetrable green wall of banana and breadfruit trees, coconut palms and frangipani.

In the morning, I would wake in a guest

house to the sounds of village girls splashing themselves with water at the well and lovemaking monkeys screaming ecstatically in the jungle. At night, I would sit on the beach watching fishermen's spindly wooden outriggers bob against the horizon, their lights twinkling like stars, while behind me drums beat and monks chanted. Sometimes I'd be startled by bare-chested villagers emerging out of the darkness with blazing torches, or by lobster divers coming in off the reefs, glowing, Neptune-like, with phosphorous from head to toe.

The luminous, idyllic surface of village life, I discovered, also had an underside, a harsh edge. So poisonous were some of the kraits, cobras, and other snakes in the area that a single bite could kill within minutes. Huge rogue sea waves had occasionally swept in from nowhere, I was told, smashing some of the beachside structures into splinters. There were rogue elephants, too, who'd break free from their chains from time to time and rampage through a settlement, flattening anything in their path until their keepers, called mahouts, managed to calm them. Sometimes at 3 A.M., when I'd get the cold sweats from the cheap arrack the villagers shared, I'd watch the jungle stir in the moonlight, rising and sinking as if it were a living, breathing beast.

As an honorary member of the village, I was often invited to private "devil dances," a form of exorcism in which a troupe of dancers, led by a shaman, try to drive evil demons from a person thought to be possessed. Locals perform a bastardized form of devil dancing for tourists, but the real thing is often concealed from outsiders. Still smarting from British disparagement of what they called "Oriental barbarism," the Sinhalese are careful about letting their guard down.

An exorcism was performed in Unawatuna one night in the backyard of a private home. I had gone out for a late-evening walk and was steered there serendipitously by a fisherman I knew. Coming into the courtyard from the dark, I was blinded by a blaze of torches, disoriented by the way the space had been filled with voodoo dolls pinned onto an elaborate grid of trellises. As my eyes adjusted, I was able to see that almost the entire village was there, familiar faces transformed by the spectacle, peering from behind palm fronds and shiny vegetation as in a Rousseau painting.

At the center stood a girl, seemingly in a trance or drugged. Sixteen years old, I was told. Possessed. A shaman held her from behind, and around them dancers swirled in spooky masks and shaggy, palm-frond costumes—half men, half plant spirits. In between rounds of dancing, the shaman would drag the girl out to the beach, the crowd following, and there she would be sprayed with blood from a freshly killed chicken. Everyone then returned by torchlight to the courtyard for more dervish dancing, the cycle repeating itself until dawn.

THE CUBAN POET PABLO NERUDA, who lived in colonial Ceylon in the late 1920s on a diplomatic mission while writing his most sensually powerful collection of poems, *Residence on Earth,* initially felt only frustration with this beautiful land. Caught between the stiffness of the English in their dinner jackets and the natives in their "fabulous immensity," Neruda gnashed his teeth in painful melancholy. "You could smash your head against the wall and nobody came. No matter how you screamed or wept," he wrote in his memoirs. "Across the blue air, across the yellow sand, past the primordial forest, past the vipers and elephants, I realized, there were hundreds, thousands of human beings who worked and sang by the waterside, who lit fires and molded pitchers, and passionate women also, sleeping naked on thin mats, under the light of immense stars. But how was I to get close to that throbbing world, without being looked upon as the enemy?"

Memo to Neruda: A road trip to Kandy and one to Unawatuna would have been a good way to start. □

LANKA'S LURE

Tropic treasures

HEADLINES OF THE last few years have told sad tales of an island afflicted by civil war. With the exception of three years in the late 1980s, however, the war has been restricted almost exclusively to Tamil areas of the north and east. In the south and central regions, life goes on today without a hint of trouble as the tourist industry rebounds with vigor.

Driving in Sri Lanka, though, is chal-

lenging at best, especially if you try to visit the Hill Country. Traffic moves British-style (on the left), and potholes abound on the winding, narrow roads. Allow plenty of time to reach your destination. Better yet, consider having your rental agency supply a driver along with your car. Our driver from **Jet Travels** (31-3097) set us back a modest $4.50 per day. A driver can also spare you from having to ask directions in a culture that can be maddeningly inexact.

The best beaches rim the southern half of the island, and most of the temples can be found in the triangle of ancient cities to the north of Kandy. One of Sri Lanka's most astonishing sites, however, is Sigiriya, a penthouse fortress finished in 484 by Kasyapa, ancient Lanka's own Caligula, on a 600-foot rock in the central dry zone. Filled with water gardens and frescoes of maidens, Sigiriya has a Babylonian air, and travelers daunted by the climb up the rock are missing a rare treat indeed.

If you have sports in mind after you've had your fill of sightseeing and shopping, there is the **Colombo Golf Club** (1-695-431; daily greens fee, $20). And thanks to the British, who favored the hill town of Nuwara Eliya during colonial days, you can also hit the links at the **Nuwara Eliya Golf Club** (52-2835; daily greens fee, $15).

LODGING

IN COLOMBO THE BETTER HOTELS are all located downtown, about an hour's drive from the airport. The **Hotel Lanka Oberoi** is comfortable, with an airy central atrium and a great breakfast buffet (1-437-437; doubles from $84). The **Hilton International Colombo** is good, too, offering the same five-star amenities (1-544-644; doubles from $155). For faded elegance, there's the 158-year-old **Galle Face Hotel,** with its mighty entrance halls and vats of water perfumed by hundreds of swirling rose petals (1-541-010; doubles from $40). If you must stay near the airport, the **Airport Garden** is clean and has a pool and a good Chinese restaurant (1-453-771; doubles from $86).

Kandy, Sri Lanka's second-largest city, is a good home base for exploring the central Hill Country. There are several decent hotels in and around town: We liked **The Citadel,** a hotel of recent vintage located about ten miles from the center of town (8-22020; doubles from $80). There's a nice pool and attractive rooms with balconies overlooking the Mahaweli River. Skip the buffet lunch and dinner, though: Ordering à la carte is a better bet. For those less comfort-concerned, there's the **Hotel Suisse** on Kandy Lake (8-22637; doubles from $42) and the **Queens Hotel,** a relic of the Raj, right in the middle of town (8-22121; doubles from $42). If you want to be in Kandy for the annual Perahera, though, reserve early and reconfirm as the date draws near.

DINING

BETTER RESTAURANTS ARE ALmost always found in hotels. In Colombo there's the **Golden Dragon,** at the Airport Garden hotel, for Chinese food (1-30-3771; entrées from $8). The **Hilton International Colombo** has the best coffee shop for light, Western-style meals and has a fine Japanese restaurant as well (1-544-644; entrées from $12). The **Colombo House** in Colombo is the best for a traditional Ceylonese breakfast of string hoppers (rice noodle pancakes with spiced coconut), and you can get to know the proprietor, Desmond Fernando, a prominent attorney and *mahattya*—that's Sinhalese for "gentleman par excellence" (1-574-900; entrées from $5). The **Hatton Guest House** in Hatton is a great place to stop on the way from Nuwara Eliya to Colombo (512-444; entrées from $4). The traditional—and ubiquitous—rice and curry is excellent there, too, if quite spicy. The **Cafe Saffron,** in the Sindbad Hotel in Kalutara, also has excellent curry, plus tasty Chinese noodles (34-22537; entrées from $4).

SHOPPING

SRI LANKA IS TOUTED AS ONE OF the gem capitals of the world, especially for sapphires and rubies, but it's wise to shop for jewels very carefully. Some stores have been closed down repeatedly by the Sri Lanka Tourist Board for selling fake gems. Stick to shops that display the State Gem Corporation's seal of approval, or, safest of all, buy from the government itself: The State Gem Corporation has a showroom in Colombo, next door to its gem testing lab (310 Galle Rd.). You'll spend a little more, but the odds of taking home the real McCoy are significantly higher. We particularly liked **Zam Gems** in Kandy (548 Peradeniya Rd.; Zam also has boutiques in some hotels).

A word on cultural sensitivity: Sri Lankans are supremely tolerant, but they have a culture that lays a great deal of stress on modesty. Although many Westerners prefer to bathe topless, locals consider this highly offensive, and the practice can bring trouble. Modesty should also be observed in temples, on pain of stern lectures from formidable monks. No tank tops or short skirts.

–William McGowan and Hyla Ames

The country code for calling Sri Lanka is 94.