



SRI LANKA RECCE REPORT



Sri Lanka is one of those countries which we all want to visit, but somehow bypass it – usually en-route to the far east or Australia. Being south of the Indian sub-continent it is often regarded as a footnote to a trip to India but as we discovered it is a country that deserves special attention and a dedicated visit.

The idea of our Sri Lankan Rally is that you should see all the important sites and monuments in the one visit – as well as drive some of the amazing roads.

In order to experience similar conditions to the rally we headed out on the recce exactly one year before the event. We went by Qatar Airways as it is a comfortable and reliable airline with good reviews. An alternative would be to go on Sri Lankan Airlines which gets a mixed reception – it seems the quality of the flight rather depends on which plane you are on.

Qatar Airlines is fabulous but you do have to change at their hub in Doha. On the return journey this meant changing to a BA flight which was a noticeable drop in quality and standards generally. It really showed up how BA has declined in recent times.



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DAY 1 - ARRIVAL IN COLOMBO

Although it's possible to get your visa on arrival in Colombo it is far preferable to get it online before you depart at <http://www.eta.gov.lk/slvisa/> Its quick and simple and should be with you on-line within 24 hours. On presenting my passport at Colombo immigration they already had a record on the computer – all very efficient.

After collecting our luggage we headed for the exit where there is a chance to change money. We changed \$800 USD at a very acceptable exchange rate.

We were met by our driver who took us to the Mount Lavinia Hotel which at one time had been the top hotel around Colombo. Sadly now it is a shadow of its former self. After a one hour forty minutes drive through dense traffic it was a less than attentive check in which was not helped by the arrival of a touring cricket team and entourage. Sad to say rooms were basic, plain and ageing. Although the food was excellent and the location fabulous this is not a hotel we will be using. We went to see other hotels the next day...



DAY 2 - COLOMBO

The local agent had had trouble understanding what we intended to do – ie drive the route ourselves – so the first thing we had to do was exchange our driver for a guide who would sit with us throughout the event. His name was Roy (to us) and proved to be exceptional.

But, before I could get behind the wheel, I had to obtain my local driving licence from the Automobile Association. The cost is R5000 which is around £21. It was an easy operation which involved filling out a small form, presenting my



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International Driving Permit (IDP), handing over R5000 and waiting 10 minutes. For the rally we will fill all the forms ahead of time which will make it even faster.

The AA is close to the Galle Face Hotel which is a traditional colonial style hotel on the sea front. It was truly beautiful and just what we need for the rally. Initially we were going to look at it at the end of the rally but being close by gave us an ideal opportunity to check it out and confirm that this will be the rally hotel at the start and the finish. Steeped in history, it even has Prince Philip's old Morris 8 from the days he was posted in Ceylon. There are also photos of many of the famous people who have stayed at the hotel. A truly satisfying place to stay.

As an aside, having mentioned the word Ceylon it is interesting to see that the word Sri Lanka is almost entirely absent in the street and on government departments and buildings. In fact everywhere you see the word Ceylon! After inspecting the Galle Face hotels and taking a lime soda there we met Mark Forbes in the old Dutch Hospital for a walking tour of old Colombo. Mark is a historian and with his iPad showed how this old part had changed from colonial times to the civil war times to how it is today. We ended the tour in the dilapidated Grand Hotel which once would demand to see your bank balance before allowing you to stay – my how things have changed!



DAY 3 - COLOMBO TO SINHARAJA

In some ways we had a false start but also a great day with much that we will use on the rally.

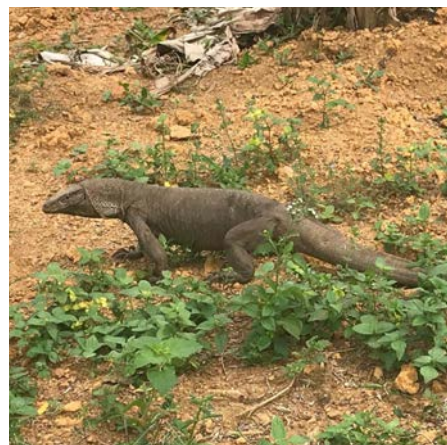
We tracked the route from the Galle Face hotel which required driving back into Colombo before heading out on our rally route – traffic was heavy in both directions! But at least there is nowhere like Colombo traffic anywhere else on the island.



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As per the agent's itinerary we went to a man-made lake, saw a woman folding coconut leaves and visited a temple with a reclining Buddha. The temple was excellent and a good introduction to Buddhism. It won't be the best we see, but nevertheless was good. We saw a lady making Bindis - the local cheroot - but this was all a lead up to a local small holding where Arun and his family give demonstrations of cinnamon, coconut toddy, rubber collection and processing into flat sheets, pineapple growing, extracting coconut oil, 70 varieties of banana, star fruit, giant passion fruit and much more. After that they gave us an excellent meal made from the local produce. Finally we planted a pineapple which we hope will be fruiting by the time we get there next year!

From there we made our way to the Boulder Garden Resort which was cut out of rocks in the face of a hill. Lovely but not suitable for our rally as it has only eight rooms of variable standard.



DAY 4 - SINHARAJA TO GALLE

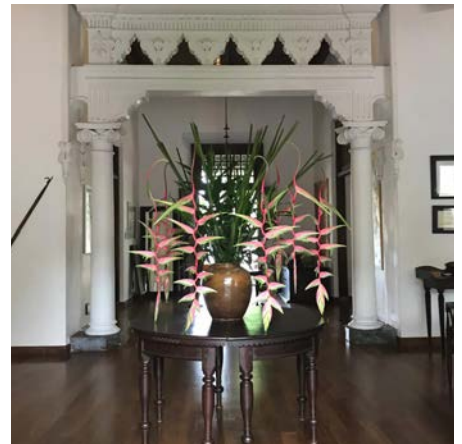
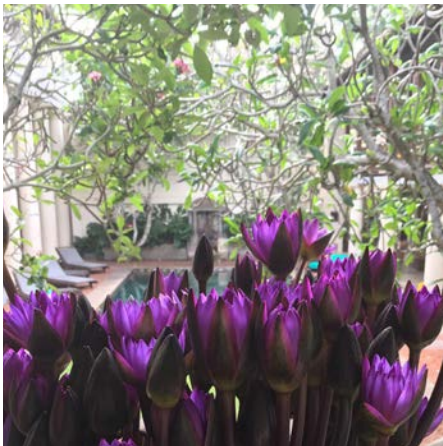
Having studied the roads and various options we decided that we had to go back to the farm and then head down to Galle. We re-joined our route from the previous day, and headed south, touching the coast for a while before driving inland onto quieter roads. We visited and marched a moonstone gem mine, passed a turtle conservation centre and Ambalangoda, a town renowned for making balsa wood 'medicine' masks. We started to see tea plantations now although not particularly manicured.

We arrived in Galle and once again had been put up in an unsuitable hotel, The Closenburgh. I am sure it was delightful once but not for the rally. So, straight into Galle to check out the various hotel options. We liked the Galle Fort Hotel and hope to take over the entire hotel for the event. Failing that we will go to Le Grand which is just outside the Fort but modern and beautifully positioned.



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The Galle Fort area is fantastic, being full of little bars, gem shops, restaurants, local produce and souvenirs. We stopped for a Roti and a pineapple & ginger fresh fruit juice. A delightful meal of chicken and rice Sri Lankan style rounded off the day beautifully. Then back to the Clovenburg for a mercifully short night as tomorrow we were going whale watching.



DAY 5 - GALLE TO YALLA

It was an early start to drive the 34kms to the whale watching port. It is a bit of a tourist trap, its true, but who can pass up the chance of seeing a whale or two. We joined the hoi polloi but we will hire a private boat on the rally. You will need sun glasses, sun tan lotion, a hat and motion sickness tablets if you are prone. Most of the Japanese on board our boat were not good sailors!

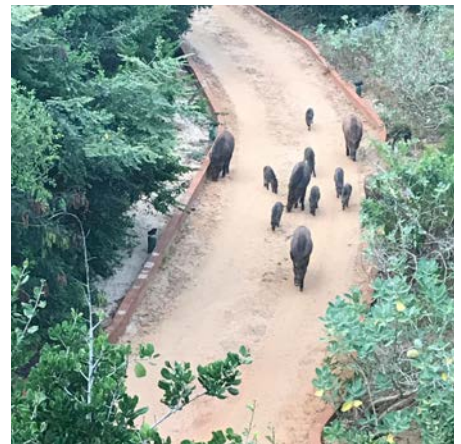
The trip is at least three hours and we were offered water/tea/coffee /fruit and a sandwich. Once back on dry land we re-joined the main road where, soon after, there is a supermarket and coffee shop. Good place to stop for a break and the toilet – it will be marked on the roadbook.

We have organised a lunch stop at Sanu Lagoon which apart from being a restaurant and small hotel has an ayurveda medicine spice garden attached. Back on the road we pass paddy fields and salt panning before turning off into the Bundala National Park. Clearly seldom visited, it was a real gem. In no time we saw crocodiles, water buffalo, mongoose plus an amazing variety of birds from the painted stork and ibis to plover, purple coot, wild peacocks and hens, herons and pelicans...Just amazing. Despite there being crocs in the water the locals still fished with water up to their waists. Rather than me.



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That night we stayed at the Yala Jetwing which we had booked on the hoof. We did check others in the area but the Jetwing was magnificent. The local elephants think so too as they wander harmlessly around the hotel! Good food, great atmosphere and well equipped rooms. Lovely.



DAY 6 YALLA SAFARI THEN DRIVE TO UDAWALAWE

Our first safari of the journey was in Yalla National Park in search of the elusive Leopard. Leaving our hotel at 5am it was not to be our day and after four hours of driving around bumpy tracks we headed back to the hotel for breakfast. At 12.30 we left the hotel for Udawalawe. We spotted monkeys and land monitors plus a number of elephants by the road as we approached Udawalawe, passing a stunning reservoir and dam on the way.

There were no noteworthy lunch stops and would suggest we have lunch before leaving Jetwing Yala and to take advantage of the beautiful setting.

In Udawalawe we visited the Udawalawe National park. We went in a really good safari jeep around the park and saw much wildlife. In particular the elephants were spectacular and came very close to the jeeps (which they just ignored). It was quite incredible seeing so much wildlife so close up.

Hotel for the night was the Grand Udawalawe Safari Resort. Good rooms but average food. It's the best in the area for a group our size requiring parking.



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DAY 6 IMAGES



DAY 7 UDAWALAWA TO HAPUTALE

After a very average breakfast at the Grand Udawalawa Safari resort we visited the Elephant Transit Home which was very close to our hotel. It is a sanctuary for orphaned elephants where you can watch them being fed. They are given milk through a large hose on the end of a funnel and some juicy leaves from branches that have been laid out for them. There were approximately 60 young elephants and one older disabled elephant who had lost one of his rear legs possible when he was caught in a trap. He had been operated on and a prosthetic leg had been made for him. We then returned to the hotel to check out. Our car had been cleaned (R550). Whilst the food had been poor, the staff at the hotel had been very kind and helpful.

We headed off towards the north into the lush green hillsides with stunning views, passing tea plantations, tall pine trees, Kapok trees, monkeys, shops at the side of the road and a school. The roads were very narrow and windy and you had to watch out for the buses, tuk tuks and the odd cow on the road.

We stopped at a bat cave but the route into the cave was quite hazardous requiring crossing a river on wet and slippery rocks covered in bat excrement. We had to practically wade into the cave which was impassable. We will give that one a miss.

We continued on stopping briefly for lunch in a road side café. Then our guide took us to a friends house in Rakwana. He is going to organise lunch there for us on the rally.



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Our final stop for the day is Hotel Akway, just beyond Belihuloya. The hotel brand new and built into the hillside. The views from the rooms are quite dramatic. The staff couldn't be more accommodating, and the food was excellent.



DAY 8 HAPUTALE DAY OFF

Today started with a drive through the tea plantations to Lipton's seat. We passed Pitarathmale Tea Plantation and stopped briefly at Dambettana Tea Plantation for a factory tour. This was originally owned by Thomas Lipton. We had a brief tour and they explained the process of making the tea starting with the weighing of the bags of leaves picked by the tea pickers, drying the leaves over large vents with warm air being blown underneath the leaves, rolling, chopping and sieving the leaves, leaving them on the floor to ferment, removing the fibrous pieces using electrostatic rollers, to finally collecting the tea.

The road up to Lipton's seat was extremely narrow and windy, so we have decided that for the rally we will park at the Hindu temple opposite the Dambettana tea factory and take tuk tuks up the hill. Our guide Roy will negotiate this for us. Up at Lipton's seat there are good photo opportunities and a small café which served us a nice snack lunch of Roti, vegetable curry, vegetable samosas and tea.

On leaving Lipton's seat we wanted to take a short route to the Diyaluma waterfall at Koslanda. Unfortunately we were told all the short cuts were impassable so we retraced our steps and went the long way round.

First, we visited the lowest part of the waterfall and took some drone footage. Then we parked up a short distance away and were guided along a steep narrow gravel path to the top of the waterfall. The climb took approximately 30 minutes at quite a fast pace. The first point we stopped at was where the waterfall dropped over the edge to a 720 foot drop (the second highest waterfall in Sri Lanka). We then continued up the track to a number of smaller falls and several pools where the water collects. You can swim in these pools and the water is very refreshing. Our enterprising waterfall guide is looking forward to seeing us again next year and we promised to return with some pens for the children.

We returned to our hotel, Akway, to a warm greeting from the staff and another delicious meal. Good place to get the laundry done.

PHOTOS OVERLEAF...



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DAY 8 IMAGES



DAY 9 HAPUTALE TO NUWARA ELIYA

We left the Akway hotel and headed for the Devil's Staircase and Horton Plains. We passed the highest waterfall in Sri Lanka, the Bambarakanda. There is a ticket booth at the start of a path leading to the base of the falls. Worth a visit. Shortly after the falls we passed a monkey park (on the right hand side of the road). Then onto the Devil's Staircase proper. It's a narrow rough windy road with dozens of hairpin bends. Parts of the climb have a broken surface and it can be quite rocky. There are a few passing places but its unlikely you will encounter another vehicle. It's a decent challenge and you will need 4x4 at some points.

Once the Devil's Staircase has been conquered, we enter Horton Plains at the Ohiya entrance. A permit needs to be obtained at the entrance, then it is a 3Km drive to the car park. There are toilets at the Ohiya entrance as well as by the car park. There is also a café selling cold snacks only. Probably better to take a packed lunch. On Horton Plains you can take a guided walk to the points of interest which will last approximately 2 ½ hours. This includes Bakers Falls and Wold's End view point. We arrived as the fog came down, accompanied by a thunder storm!

We left Horton Plains towards Nuwara Eliya through a green and wet forest on a good tarmac road. We crossed the railway line at Pattipola, the highest railway station in Sri Lanka. Our drive takes us past a milk factory, a wind farm (installed by the Dutch), a reservoir and tea plantations.

Arriving in Newara Eliya, the Grand hotel is a very impressive colonial building, with a spa and tea rooms and an extensive tea menu. It is a lot cooler in Nuwara Eliya so warmer clothes will be required. You can see why it's called Little England. Money can be changed in the town at very reasonable rates.



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DAY 10 NUWARA ELIYA REST DAY

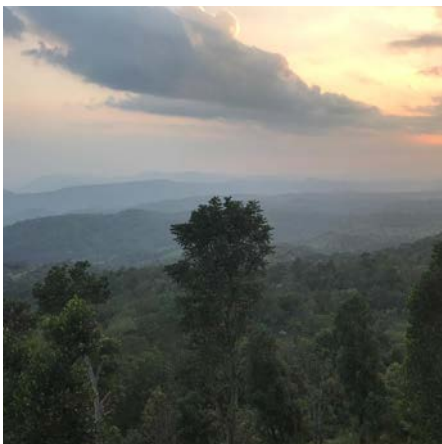
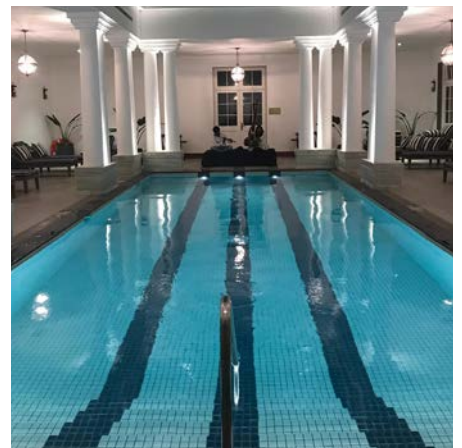
The Grand Hotel has an indoor pool and treatment rooms. Treatments can be booked in advance.

On our day off we visited Pidurutthalagala, the highest point in Sri Lanka. Entry is R345 per vehicle. It is a military establishment and the area is controlled by the army with strict security. To gain entrance passports are required. It is not very picturesque and views are restricted by satellite equipment, but it is the highest point.

We also visited two tea plantations Glenloch Tea which was approx 26Km away and Damro Tea Factory approximately 12Km from Nuwara Eliya. Both highly commercialised and at Glenloch there was a hard sell that was quite awkward. On the journey to both tea factories we passed miles and miles of tea plantations, roadside plant and vegetable stalls and road side cafes suspended over the cliff edges with incredible views.

Finally we visited Aadishakti Seeta Amman Temple. (Sita Mata Temple) on the other side of Nuwara Eliya, driving along the lakeside of Gregory's lake. It is a place of great significance specially for hindus as it is built around Ashok Van where King Ravana had kept Sita as captive as stated in the Ramayana. The temple is very small but is very vibrant and energetic place. It also has foot marks of the monkey god Hanuman.

In the evening you are spoiled for choice as The Grand has a number of restaurant options - buffet, a la carte, Thai and Indian. There is also a golf course and Victoria Park next to the hotel. To visit the park expect to be charged an entry fee (Rs300 each)





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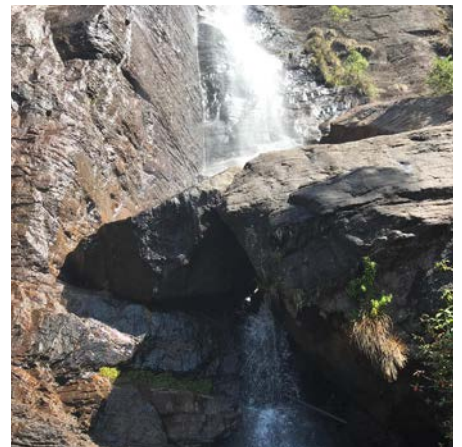
DAY 11 NUWARA ELIYA TO KANDY

Leaving Nuwara Eliya we visited Pedro Tea factory 4 Km outside of town. Really nice tea factory that produced light tea only. Its unusual in having no fermentation process. There was no hard sell here.

On the opposite side of the road from the tea factory there is a track that leads to the Lover's Leap waterfall. We parked a 10 minute walk from the waterfall. It was a gentle walk with lovely views across the town and tea plantations. We suggested that these two places are visited on the day off, rather than the long trek to the Glenloch Tea Factory. Heading to Kandy, the road is gently winding tarmac through the beautifully laid out tea plantations and past many tea factories and reservoirs.

We stopped at a roadside food court which sells local produce and is a government funded project. It is worth a stop to try the local food which is cooked fresh in front of you.

On reaching Kandy we took to the hills to the Amaya Hills Hotel which is nestled in the hillside in a beautiful setting with amazing views above the clouds.



DAY 12 KANDY DAY OFF

The best thing to do on your day off in Kandy is visit the Botanical Gardens. They are so beautifully set out with all the plants labelled. There's an orchid house with one of the best collections in the world. There is a plantation of amazing Canon Ball trees. It's worth looking round the memorial garden where dignitaries from around the world have planted trees. Walk on a bit down the pine tree avenue to the delicate suspension bridge at the end of the park. Then turn back and run the gauntlet of thousands of fruit bats hanging along another border walk. Lunch was had at the cafe by the great lawn.

In the evening we visited the Temple of the Tooth where one of Buddhas molars is locked away in a casket. The doors to the room where the casket is held in the centre of the temple are opened periodically for a short time. People queue and wait to get a glimpse of the casket! The temple was worth the visit even though we didn't wait for the tooth unveiling ceremony! It was believed that whoever owned the tooth had a divine right to rule.

PHOTOS OVERLEAF...



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DAY 12 IMAGES



DAY 13 KANDY TO SIGIRIYA

Leaving Kandy our route follows a river and passes over a dam. We head uphill through a number of villages, saw mills and tea plantations. We pass the Hatale Tea factory where there is a tea shop, a potential early stop. We head up and follow the Knuckles mountain range which can be clearly seen from the route. On the recce we attempted to get to the top but the old road which is used by the tea plantations disappeared after a while. After we passed the Pitakanda Estate the views were spectacular.

We stopped at the Euphoria Spice garden which was quite basic. They were doing a cookery demonstration, the lunch was delicious.

We also visited Ranveli Spice Garden, which had a much better set up. We were shown around by Ashok and made purchases in the shop. It had a large buffet restaurant across the main road from the garden.

We visited a 3rd spice garden, Isiwaya Ayurvedic Village. This was superb. They showed us how the curry powder was made, how the cinnamon bark was used, gave a complimentary foot massage, we were also given a cocoa drink and they demonstrated the climbing of the coconut tree and rope walking between the trees. The restaurant was across a suspension bridge. The manager of the village said they could provide us with a cookery demonstration and lunch. We were very impressed, so have marked this one on the roadbook.

We didn't have time to visit the Dambulla Rock temple before turning off the main road, although we will add this to the itinerary for the rally.

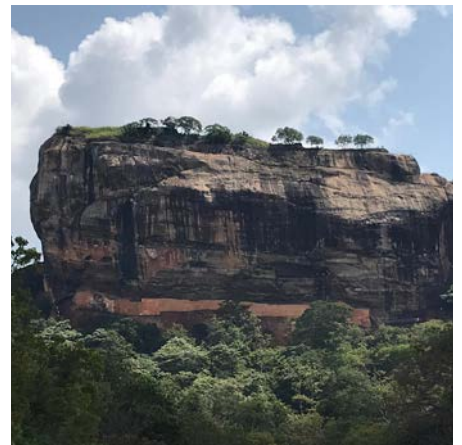
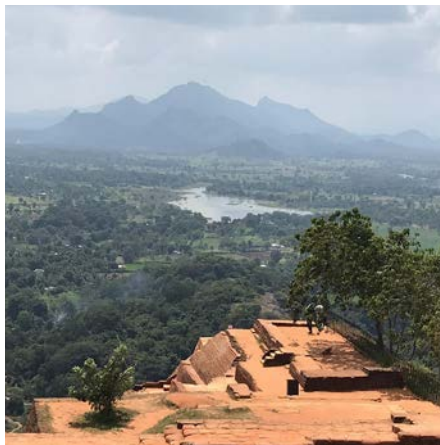
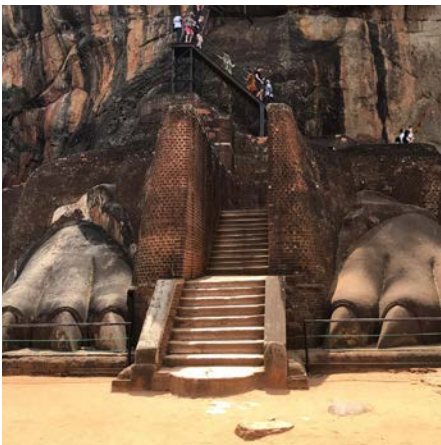
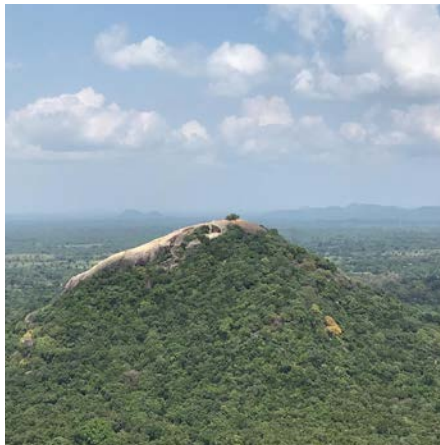


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At the end of the day we arrived at the Heritance Hotel in Kandalama. One kilometre long and built into the rocks, with lake and jungle views. There are two restaurants, a la carte and buffet. The buffet is excellent and they have an evening BBQ. There is a lavish breakfast with a great juice bar where you can choose from a range of fresh fruits to make your own cocktail.

DAY 14 SIGIRIYA DAY OFF

This is a great day off. We visited the Lions Rock at Sigiriya. There is a \$30 entrance fee but it does include a visit to the museum which we visited first in order to understand the significance of the rock. It has a great model of the area and both a computer generated visual and an artist's impression of how the rock would have looked. Then we walked through the ruins of the water garden and past a number of caves before climbing the rock. It looks daunting but proved to be quite manageable. At the base of the final climb are the lions paws which the rock is named after. At the top is a maze of terraced gardens and pools with stunning views over the jungle. Tip: wear sensible footwear and take water.



DAY 15 SIGIRIYA TO TRINCOMALEE

The day started with a flat battery which ultimately proved to be a lack of water in the battery. It seems to have evaporated in the heat.

The plan for today was to explore the archaeological site at Polonnaruwa but our time was curtailed due to the battery but we did manage an abbreviated look round. The museum next to the ticket office is a great place to start and has



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models of how the site would have originally looked. It has plenty of stone carvings and artefacts and was a great introduction to this large site. We were beginning to realise the extent of the ancient civilisations of Sri Lanka and how far advanced they were which we in Europe were in the dark ages.

The site itself covered a large expanse and we drove to all the different sites. The unknown statue, the citadel, the carving of the four Buddhas and more.

Afterwards we stopped at a wood carving factory and shop. They demonstrated how colour was made from the rainbow wood by adding lime and chalk.

We then took a very rough track towards Trincomalee and decided it was too long and rough for the rally. We are rerouting onto the main road and will go via the Thidas Arana Restaurant by the side of the road as we will all need a break by the time we leave.

The road to the Trinco Blu by Cinnamon was a little difficult to find initially, but we now have a track to the front door. It's a seaside hotel for a change and we will have a day off here. There are two restaurants, seafood and buffet. We found the buffet to be excellent.





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DAY 16 TRINCOMALEE TO JAFFNA

This is the drive to the north of the island and until recently out of bounds to tourists. It all looked very peaceful to us although there are a lot of military barracks dotted along the route. Make sure you have plenty of fuel before leaving Trincomalee as right now there is no super diesel until you get closer to Jaffna. There was a petrol station under construction just outside Trincomalee on our route and that should be finished by the time we get there. On leaving Trincomalee we visited the hot springs. There was a local market there and lots of school children. However, it wasn't very impressive. The War Memorial closer to the hotel is a better one to visit.

We took the coastal road towards Jaffna, over many bridges and a few short gravel sections. We saw cattle and monkeys on the road, although this has now become the norm. We also saw rice being dried on the roads, taking care not to drive over it.

We got a glimpse of an army cricket match and stopped briefly at a café next to 622 Brigade. Service was not high up on his list of priorities but hope he will take more notice when there are more cars.

The journey from Trincomalee and Jaffna is approx. 4 to 4.5 hours, there are not any lunch stops so either have a late breakfast and take some items from breakfast with you or stop at one of the roadside shelters as we did.

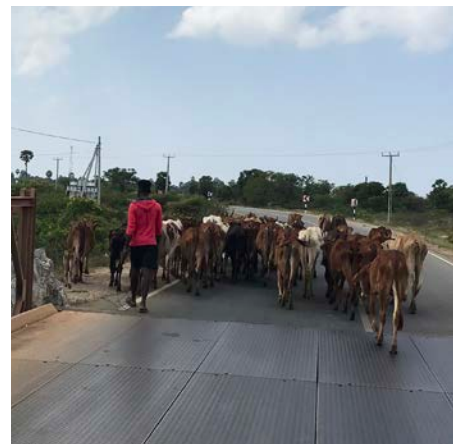
As we approached Jaffna we drove alongside the railway track. Watch your speed as there seems to be an increased number of police as you approach Jaffna on the main road.

The car park to North Gate Jaffna hotel is behind the hotel. It is a city boutique style hotel, close to the railway station. Having checked in we drove to the islands as far as the ferry to Nainativu. The route took us over a long causeway past all the fishermen. To reach the island of Nainativu you need to park before the turning to the jetty and walk a short distance to the ferry.

The ferry plies the route to the island all day. The last ferry is at 16:30 and the last ferry back at 17:30. The ferry takes you directly to the temples on the island of Nainativu.

There was some development going by the car park to the ferry and there may be a restaurant at the ferry stop by this time next year. Otherwise it would be good to take beers/gin and tonics to watch the sun go down.

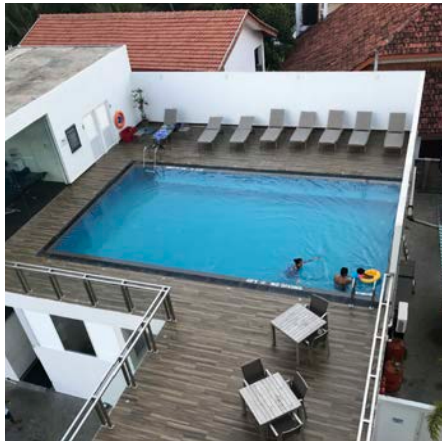
We returned to North Gate hotel for supper. Currently they don't have an alcohol licence but they are looking to obtain one. The food (when heated up) was very good.





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DAY 16 IMAGES



DAY 17 JAFFNA TO ANURADHAPURA

As we headed out of Jaffna, there was still a heavy police and army presence on our route. This is a hangover from the war as this area was occupied by the terrorists. Again there were many cows on the road.

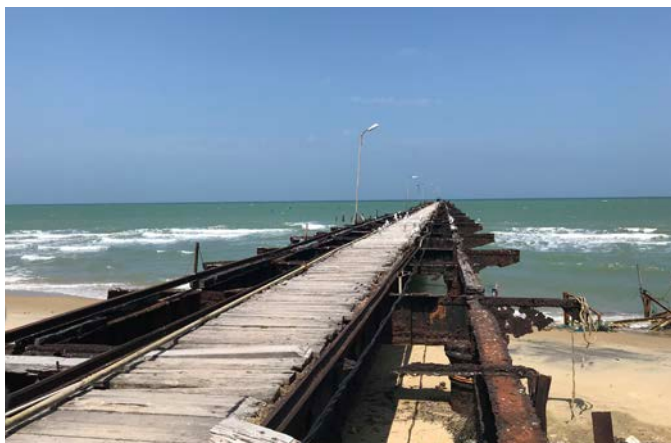
We headed towards Mannar, this island is joined to the mainland by a long causeway. As you cross into Mannar there is still evidence of the war where buildings have been damaged by bombs.

The Western most point of Mannar is the closest point to India and is the location of Adam's Bridge. Currently Vayu resort occupies this point with views over Adam's Bridge. Hopefully we can arrange lunch here for the rally although they had a group on a yoga retreat when we arrived.

Further along the coast is a lighthouse and a pier where ferries used to cross to India.

As we left Mannar we stopped for a snack at Thalladi Gimanhala. A clean new café. Just before the café there was a property overlooking the river that may be a restaurant by next year.

We continued on the Anuradhapura to our hotel, Lakeside at Nuwarawewa. We were not happy with the hotel so had a good look round the area. The best to suit the rally is the Palm Garden Village, an extraordinary hotel set in what looks like ancient ruins but has been recently created. We spend two nights here giving the opportunity to check out the ruins of the ancient civilisation of Anuradhapura or another park day in a little visited but fascination Wilpattu National Park. For both it's a visit of several hours.





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DAY 18 ANURADHAPURA TO COLOMBO

Homeward bound now and we cross to the coast and run down the west to Colombo. Its quite busy at times but we do try to weave in and out to provide for a more interesting run. The final approach to the Galle Face hotel is via the trunk road, one of the only time we use it on the whole journey. Finally we reached Colombo and could heave a sigh of satisfaction and look back on an amazing journey. Even our guide Roy had to admit we had taken him to places he had never seen in his 30 years showing visitors around the island.



ENDS
