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words and photos  
by Joseph Pisani

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# OH SWEET SERENDIPITY

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## AN IMPROVISED JOURNEY ACROSS SRI LANKA

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Our plan was simple enough. Armed with only a guidebook and our backpacks, we would keep everything spontaneous and let serendipity\* take care of us along the way. We had no set itinerary and no reservations, and that's just the way we liked it. Now we were passengers inside a dilapidated Toyota, heading east into the morning sun.

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Priska and I were jolted awake on our morning arrival at Colombo Bandaranaike Airport by the relative chaos outside the terminal. Dozens of makeshift offices with hordes of taxi touts begged for business from every direction. We haggled by calculator, punching a price and sending it back and forth, managing to cut the fare by 300% before settling on what seemed like a reasonable deal. Food stands lined the streets, entire families commuted on small motorbikes, burning leaves and trash filled the morning air with an acrid, plastic smell, while an elephant worked on the side of the road... It was great to finally be back in Asia.

Beach Yala

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\*Serendipity - the phenomenon of making fortunate discoveries by accident was first coined by English author, Horace Walpole. The word Serendib, an Arabic name for Sri Lanka, refers to a Persian tale, The Three Princes of Serendip, whose heroes "discovered, quite unexpectedly, great and wonderful good in the most unlikely of situations, places and people".



Colombo

Despite being a tourist trap, Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, a few hours east of Colombo, provided us with an early highlight. Barely tucked into a corner of the road, with my camera ready, we watched a procession of more than 60 elephants stroll by. Our basic room overlooked the Maha Oya River, where the elephants bathed, and although the fan didn't work and the night was hot and humid, we were still quite content – we had three weeks of exploring ahead of us.

We travelled to Kandy the next morning, checking in to a pleasant guesthouse overlooking the lake, "Be sure to close and lock all windows before going out," the owner said sternly, "or the monkeys will steal everything."

While searching for a temple in town, we took a wrong turn and found the British Garrison cemetery, a sanctuary from the hustle of Kandy town. The proud caretaker was happy to show us around as he rattled off the epitaphs word for word from memory. "Here lies John Spottiswood Robertson, the seventh and last recorded death of a European killed by wild elephants..."



Tea weighing station

From here, we hired a taxi to Sigiriya. Our driver seemed to verge on the insane, speeding blindly around turns along the route. Inevitably, we were pulled over, and while one officer questioned our chauffeur, another tried to shake us down for money. I employed a tactic that has served me well in the past – my English suddenly became very poor and I replied "No understand" a few times in broken tones, while smiling. He finally gave up. Much to our dismay, our driver hadn't learnt his lesson.

Thanks to Speed Racer we arrived in Sigiriya sooner than expected and spent the afternoon hiking the steep stairway of the giant ochre-coloured Sigiriya rock, while trying not to think too much about the height or condition of the rusted structure. Meeting curious students along the way, we didn't mind answering the same questions over and over again: "We live in Switzerland," and "Sri Lanka is very beautiful!"



Sri Lankan tuk tuks

When we reached the summit, the 'magic light' – the soft, photogenic light that comes only at sunrise and sunset – arrived. The other visitors who'd been frantically snapping photos had curiously disappeared. A Sri Lankan family, visiting from north of Colombo, drove us back to our guesthouse, while we traded questions and laughter – fourteen people from three generations tightly crammed into one passenger van.

The next morning, we headed to the ancient city of Polonnaruwa by taxi. It's easy to forget that Sri Lanka has been involved in a bloody civil war for nearly a quarter of a century, but here, close to the war zone, there are obvious reminders – heavily fortified roadblocks and a high concentration of troops along the route. The explosions we heard during the night were downright scary, but were dismissed by the hotel clerk as "fireworks to scare away wild elephants". The buzz of low-flying helicopters wasn't as

easy to explain. Yet, despite our fears, the beautifully preserved area made it well worth the effort.

Onwards to Ella, where, after searching fruitlessly for a room with a view of Ella Rock, a friendly local gave us a tip and directed us to walk along the railroad tracks for 700 metres. "But what if a train comes?" I asked. "Oh, no problem. Train slow. Plenty of time to get out of the way," he replied. Much to our surprise, we weren't the only ones walking on the railway.

On the way to Haputale, we hiked through a tea plantation up to Lipton's seat, from where Sir Lipton (of tea fame) would sit and ponder. Along the steep path, we met children who jumped for joy when I photographed them, crowding around to get a glimpse of the display and yelling in chorus: "One more photo! One more photo!" Like the Pied Piper they followed us with a glee which seemed to match our delight that such little gestures could bring great joy. We

inadvertently timed our route back perfectly, and watched as the women tea pickers returned from the fields, lining up at one of the tea weighing stations with their morning harvest. Haputale itself was dusty and wind blown, but not without charm. We were fascinated by the most unexpected things. The decaying, one-room library was a veritable museum. Deciphering a lunch menu was like breaking an ancient code. Even changing money was an experience – and took us 45 minutes. While the teller filled out giant ledgers and multiple forms, we waited patiently, keeping a wary eye on the two shotgun-wielding guards pacing back and forth in the lobby.

Dalhousie was the next stop and the base camp for our 9,600 step pilgrimage: Adam's Peak a.k.a. the little Matterhorn. This trek was one of Sri Lanka's most celebrated pilgrimages by Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus alike. Each religion however, had conflicting ideas as to who had actually cast their footprint on the summit floor. Regardless of whether or not the print belonged to Buddha, or Mohammed, or Shiva, this was inarguably one of the island's most stunning natural features. I was nervous, unsure whether I would be able to complete the mountainous fourteen-kilometre trek. Yet, at 2.13 am, we set out with two bottles of water and ten kilos of camera equipment strapped to my back. We rang the first ceremonial bell and were blessed by a monk, marking the start of our ascent. Small stands with ambitious merchants selling snacks, tea and trinkets lined the route. By the halfway point, the steep path started to take its toll, and my legs were already twitching under the extra weight of my equipment. We pushed on and the gradient grew ever steeper, until the track looked more like a ladder with cold rusty handrails on both sides. At times, I became dizzy; holding the rails tight until the spell had passed, fearing that I might fall backwards.

Finally, at a 5.15 am, we were greeted with a sign that read: "Remove Shoes and Hats". Masses of pilgrims were covered with towels and sprawled out everywhere. The cold, dirty floor of the outdoor temple stung my bare feet. We rang the second ceremonial

bell, announcing our first successful ascent, then sat in the cold darkness, waiting for the sun. It was hard to complain, since many locals had made the entire journey barefoot. The return trip after the sunrise ceremony was easier, even with jelly-filled legs. During our descent, we basked in the magnificent view, high above the clouds, thrilled with our accomplishment and grateful that we had decided to make the journey.

We made the last leg of our trip to Colombo by train, after taking our time travelling up the west coast. Colombo had an eerie feel, mainly due to the large military presence – road blocks, checkpoints and fortified bunkers with machine gun positions were almost as common as traffic lights. Despite this added tension, we stuck to our original plan of improvising, certain that serendipity would take care of any problems we encountered along the way.



Colombo

Joseph Pisani is an artist from New York who now lives in Zurich. In 1995, after visiting more than forty of the fifty US states, he set off to see the rest of the world. Twelve years and almost fifty countries later, he's just warming up. Known for never booking more than a plane ticket in advance, and purposely avoiding the easy route, Joseph puts it this way: "Spontaneity keeps things fresh, while serendipity guides me through it all. There have been a lot of rough moments along the way, but they often bear the best memories."



Tea children

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