

Postcard #1 Feb 15, 2005 Colombo, Sri Lanka

Quick, come up with three things you know about Sri Lanka besides the *tsunami*.

If you're like we were, your list is pretty short, and looks something like:

1. There was a long insurgency, with the Tamil Tigers blowing various things up (extra points if you know they were the assassins of Rajiv Gandhi)
2. Its home of the famous author Arthur C. Clarke (2001: A Space Odyssey)
3. It was formerly known as Ceylon, and famous for tea.

That's about all we knew, until the kids of a friend we met in India extolled the virtues of Sri Lanka, their home country.



The kids were right - it is a fabulous country, and very different from neighboring India. Its original name, Serendib, suits it well. Think of a cross between the garden of Eden, Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" a quintessential British colonial outpost of the 1930s, then add some Buddhist monks. The Sri Lankan tourism tag line is "Like no other place in the world", and I think they're right. There are

terraced hills of tea plantations, ancient cities pre-dating Angkor Wat by a thousand years, wild elephants, monkeys in the trees, exotic birds, spice and fruit trees of every description, garden flowers growing wild by the roadside, beautiful beaches locked in a permanent summer, highlands in perpetual late spring, and an exotic alphabet with letter shapes that look like they belong in



a fairy tale. The people are friendly and in general not out to scam you, the prices are very inexpensive, it's easy to get around, and it's surprisingly organized for a developing country.



Of course, there are downsides, but they aren't very evident when one is touring. The government, like most developing countries, is relatively corrupt. The twenty year battle with the Tamil Tigers ended with a cease fire four years ago, but tensions still run high, as evidenced by frequent checkpoints on the road and abundant military presence. During our tour, a Tamil member of the Sri Lankan parliament was assassinated (by a ultra-right wing Tamil); this was the first significant incident since the cease-fire. The Tigers have *de facto* control over the north and east of the country, but it's relatively straightforward and safe to travel there. It is quite a poor country, with certain

segments of the population, like the tea pluckers, living in absolute poverty (less than \$1/day). The tsunami devastated the eastern and southern shorelines, but the rest of the country remains a great place to visit.

As we did last year in India, we decided to book a tour with [Intrepid Travel](#) - two weeks that covered most of the country except the rebel-held areas and the tsunami-damaged beaches. Normally, the tour consists of about 12 travellers plus a group leader. Despite the fact the tour was almost entirely inland, away from tsunami-damaged areas, most of the people on the tour cancelled out. There were only two other people on the tour, both of whom were experienced, adventurous travelers and both of whom were excellent companions on the trip.



[Erik](#), a Norwegian who has been living in Australia for the last 10 years. He's 39, a university lecturer in Electrical Engineering in Melbourne. He's the fittest of the lot of us.

[James](#), a mostly-retired Primary School teacher in the UK, 62, he's had the travel bug for 40-some years and it seems like he's been just about everywhere including a stint in San Francisco during the "Era of love". His wife wasn't particularly interested in

coming to Sri Lanka -- so he's rooming with Erik.

Our tour leader [Bruno](#), *Intrepid's Man in Sri Lanka* is a handsome, ebullient 29-year-old, who spent two years in Seminary, then expanded into marriage counseling and psychology; ended up with NGO called "Woodlands Network " then ultimately hooked with Intrepid.

We'll share some of our experiences in Sri Lanka over the next few postcards. **To get them, remember to REPLY to the email message this was sent with.**

You can get *removed* from the list at any time by sending a message to WT-unsubscribe@blessley.net. The list won't be used for ANY other purpose, sold, bartered, lent, written on the back of an envelope and left in a busy 3rd-world train station... it's just between us and you. And only we'll be able to send ("post") to it -- so it won't become a SPAM target.