

Postcard #2 Feb 18, 2005 Sri Lankan Cultural Triangle

Great Tours, Evil Bicycles

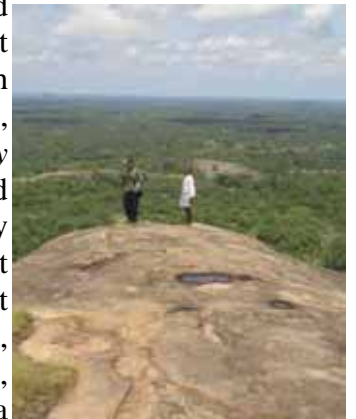


Sri Lanka has a long, rich history, much of it well preserved. The first ancient city was built in the 4th century BC. The big event in Sinhalese history was the introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd century BC; they believe themselves to be the center of Buddhism in its most pure form. We talk about 300 years' history in the US. They talk about the 4th century. Puts a different perspective on things.

These sites are located within quite a compact area, dubbed the "cultural triangle", which we spent a week exploring. Our first site was a big rock outcropping called



Yapahuwa, also known as "Fire Rock". This was built in the 13th century as a fortress against invading South Indian armies. The site wasn't that interesting, actually, except for a fabulous, 360 degree view from the *very* top, which we climbed to in 90 degree heat and humidity. The first part of the climb was relatively straightforward - a huge run of very tall stairs. But that just gets to the initial temple level. To get to the ruins at the top, you have to climb up a steep, narrow, unimproved jungle path. We scrambled and slipped, exhausted by the time we reached the top, guided by a



sure-footed, un-winded sixty year old man in flip flops. The view from the top was worth it.

Then, it was a long drive onwards to **Anuradhapura** - the ruling city of Sri Lanka from 400 BC to about 1000 AD - claimed to be the longest lasting ruling city in history, easily besting Rome. It's spread over a wide area, so we rented bikes to take us around. Biking was a perfect way to see the area -- except the bikes were in terrible shape - little/no brakes, leaking tires, slipping seats, etc. They were so bad that we had a bicycle repairman, complete with pump, accompany us for the day, fixing things as they broke & refilling the tires! And it was still 90 degrees.



The most revered part of the park was the the sacred bhodi tree, grown from a cutting of the tree under which the Buddha received Enlightenment. The original tree (in India) is gone, so this is the only (living) relic of the Bhodhi. It is also the oldest documented tree in the world, having had continual guardians for the last 2000 years.

The ruins were mostly overgrown and forgotten; the British rediscovered them and reserved the land from development and exploitation. The temples and other buildings have been restored bit by

bit over the last 100+ years, with most of the work being done in the last twenty years or so by UNESCO, the Chinese and various others. The biggest temples, or *dagobas*, are huge and made of solid brick. It is said that the bricks in just one of them could build a



3 metre high wall from London to Edinburgh. Here are a before and after picture of a couple dagobas.



Next, it was on to **Polonnaruwa**, an ancient city founded because Anuradhapura was continually being overrun by invaders from South India. Another long drive, but the main roads in Sri Lanka are in relatively good shape for a developing country. Only occasionally do you have to contend with a herd of water buffalo or other ruminants.



Polonnaruwa is the site is the first and second "Temple of the Tooth". Yes, I know it sounds like something from

Monty Python, but its serious business here. The tooth is a relic of the Buddha, snatched from his funeral pyre and smuggled to Sri Lanka hidden in the hair of an Indian Princess. With an 85% Buddhist majority (with minorities of Hindus, Moslems, and Christians), a real artifact from Buddha: a tooth, is a *big deal*. It is thought that whoever controls the tooth has authority over the country. It now rests in Kandy temple "Sri Dalada Maligawa" (No, we are not making up these names. No, we can't pronounce most of them, either.)



Polonnaruwa was another death ride on bikes - 90 degree heat, flaky equipment, but with hills this time. Nonetheless, we had a great time, even Kathy who trailed behind even the pump-carrying repairman; the thought of a cold lager at the end kept us going,



We'll share more of our experiences of our trip, over the next few postcards. **To get them, send a blank email to WT-subscribe@blesslev.net. (We had some teething pains on the first attempt at this. If your message to this addressed bounced, and you didn't send us email telling us about it, please re-send – it should work this time. If you succeeded before, it'll tell you that, too.)**

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