

The Most Rewarding Part of Traveling



While the ancient ruins, exotic wildlife, and spectacular geography might seem to be the purpose of our travel, in fact by far the most interesting is the day-to-day life of the people in the countries that we visit. It is fascinating how much cultures differ and at the same time, how much they are the same. Here are a few vignettes from our travels.

Local Markets

The best way to get an instant feel for a place is to visit the local market. In developing countries, this means an outdoor market, with lots of independent stall keepers. We stopped at a fish and vegetables market at the start of our journey; here are some of the sights. It had been a tough couple of months for the fisherman. After the tsunami, there were no fish to be caught for a while.



Once the fish came back, no one wanted to buy them, figuring that the fish had been eating human bodies floating in the water.

Schools

Between 1 and 2pm each afternoon, the streets would swarm with school kids in crisp clean uniforms - from the streets of Colombo all the way up to the poverty-stricken tea plantations. Simple cement schoolhouses with half-open walls dotted the landscape. Education makes a big difference in alleviating poverty, so this was heartening to see. We saw more boys than girls in school uniforms, disappointing if this accurately reflects classroom ratios. And the kids at the tea plantations typically quit after 6th grade - higher education was available only in town -- too far for a daily trip, and too expensive for boarding. The (English-language) newspapers were full of advertisements for various universities, including many overseas ones, especially in Australia.



Winning Friends

A lot of the places we go to, they don't see a lot of foreigners. Even in tourist towns, it's only a few streets - by the shops or temples - where tourists congregate. How do you interact & communicate when there is no common language, and people are wary of strangers? It turns out that the digital camera is the world's best icebreaker. The chance to see oneself on the small screen is a huge draw. Old ladies who turned away, men that glowered a bit, all are transformed the magic of the digital camera, and are genuinely appreciative, crowding together to try to appear in each shot. Fortunately, the "film" in digital camera is cheap, so it's easy to let everyone participate. The real treat is when photos can be sent back - sometime the tour leader is able to do so, sometimes it's possible to get an address. Throughout our trek, Bruno the trip leader was passing out photos that earlier travelers had taken. What a treat for people who had virtually no possessions to be given a picture of themselves or their children.

