

Sri Lanka trip report – March 2014

Last year our friend Gerald Broddelez – tour arranger and guide – told us that he was putting together a trip to Sri Lanka entitled “Blue Whales and Leopards”. Sri Lanka is well-known as a country where both creatures are relatively easy to see (although not at the same time). Out of the blue, Penny’s mother Susan announced that she was interested in a trip to Sri Lanka, so the decision to join Gerald was an easy one for us to make. The three of us signed up, together with our friend Liz (who has accompanied us on many trips, and looked after the cats when we have been on trips without her).

Also accompanying Gerald were friends met on various previous holidays – Margaret and Nigel, Christine, Phil and Julie, Phil and Dinah, and Gerard from NZ. Twelve of us in all, together with Gerald and excellent local guide Koush. Koush is extremely knowledgeable about everything to do with Sri Lanka including its wildlife and its history, and speaks excellent English.

The tour took us to two different parts of southern Sri Lanka. There was then an extension to an area in the north which we did not join.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka used to be called Ceylon before it was renamed in 1972. It had become independent from the UK in 1948. The island lies off the south-east tip of India (to which it was once linked by land bridge before sea levels rose, possibly as recently as the fifteenth century). The population is approximately 20 million, about a third of that of the UK. The area of the island is some 25,000 sq miles, about three times the size of Wales. The island was originally settled by the Portuguese and the Dutch at the time of the spice trade in the sixteenth century. The Dutch later handed the island over to the British and it became part of the Commonwealth.

Interestingly, the term “Ceylon” is still met in the names of banks, hotels and the like. It does not seem to have any adverse connotations even after independence.

The island lies a little to the north of the equator and so its climate is governed by wet and dry seasons, which differ depending upon which part of the island you are in. In the south of the island, we were visiting during the end of the dry season. The temperature was probably near to 40 degrees C during the day for most of our stay and the sun shone for virtually all of the time. In this part of the world, the sun rises and sets at about 6.00 all year and there is virtually no twilight. The transition from night to day takes only 20 minutes or so.

The recent history of the island was dominated by a fierce civil war between the two main ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamil. The war was fought in the north of the island but there were some nasty terrorist attacks in Colombo and in cities in the south. The war ended in 2009 (with some frightful atrocities on both sides) and its end, according to the Lonely Planet guide, has been greeted with enormous relief. It has sparked a boom in building and construction. Every village and town is dotted with building sites and a network of motorways is being constructed (currently they are almost empty, looking much as the UK motorways must have looked in the 1960s). A second international airport has recently been opened in the south of the island. It seems to be an exciting time for Sri Lanka.

There appears to be little private car ownership yet in Sri Lanka. The majority of journeys seem to be made by public transport – very sturdy locally built buses, trains or the ubiquitous tuk-tuks, dangerously light three-wheeler taxis built around a motorcycle frame. There are some modern buses and cars but they seem to be used for ferrying around us tourists. Driving behaviour is some of the worst we have encountered anywhere in the world (second only to India). Drivers have no patience, pulling out into the traffic without waiting for gaps, and showing none of the good manners that makes driving in the UK relatively civilised. And

the overtaking defies belief. Roads are narrow and winding, so people take the chance to overtake when they can. And if there is oncoming traffic – well, that has to swerve out of the way. About a quarter of the traffic (ignoring tuk-tuks) is buses, which stop and pull away without warning. And no-one worries about double or even triple overtaking – lorries overtake bicycles and are themselves then overtaken by tuk-tuks or even buses. We expected to see much evidence of accidents but actually all we saw was the aftermath of one minor shunt, which was very surprising. All this meant that the drives between hotels and from and back to the airport were lengthy but full of excitement.

There was plenty to look at during the drives. Most of the roads have ribbon development along them, and much of this is shops or other commercial buildings. There are plenty of small towns and quite a few large ones, with a mixture of traditional small buildings and then huge glass monstrosities with showrooms on the ground floor and offices or flats above. There is nowhere in Britain that looks like Sri Lanka.

Part 1: Blue whales

At the start of the holiday we flew non-stop overnight with Sri Lankan Airlines from Heathrow to Colombo, and then drove in our coach to the south coast village of Weligama, which took about four hours. On the journey we were taken through the centre of Colombo and shown some of the main sites. We then joined the new motorway to the south (funded by the Chinese, as in so much of the third world). By that stage we were quite peckish and were pleased to find a modern service station on the motorway. We arrived in late afternoon at the Heritage Hotel in the small town of Weligama on the south coast. It is a modern hotel, with very large rooms and slightly inexperienced (to put it mildly) staff. The hotel was less than 40 yards from the sea. This was an area of Sri Lanka that was hit very badly by the 2004 tsunami. In all some 30,000 people died on Sri Lanka.

For the next two mornings we joined a boat trip out of the local port of Mirissa to search for dolphins and whales – specifically blue whales. A population has been discovered living, year round, in this part of the Indian Ocean. They do not grow quite as big as the blue whales of the Pacific, which migrate between the equatorial regions (to give birth) and the Arctic or Antarctic regions (to feed up in the winter), and they are therefore known as Pygmy Blue Whales. However they are still enormous.

Blue whales are the largest animals that have ever lived, but they look pretty small from a boat a couple of miles off the Sri Lankan coast. We did see a couple of whales on each trip. Unfortunately they did not stay at the surface for very long, but we were still able to appreciate just how large they are. For some reason the whales were not staying on the surface for the usual ten minutes to take in oxygen. Instead they came up and dived again after taking only a few breaths. People have suggested that they were disturbed by the whale-watching boats as they rushed at high speed towards the place where the whale was last seen, but this seems unlikely given that we were on the main shipping route around the tip of the Indian sub-continent. So even when there were no whales, there were ships of various kinds to watch, and later to identify on the Internet. Hooray for wi-fi at hotels. As you will see from the photos, Peter particularly enjoyed this part of the trip.

We were well fed on the boat trips as the hotel provided us with a packed breakfast – and so did the boat. It did mean a lot of cheese sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs but fresh pineapple was a definite bonus as were the very sweet small bananas. In fact throughout the trip the fresh fruit provided as the meals was fantastic.

On one of the afternoons, there was a visit to a wetland area to see wetland birds. It was in a lovely area and, despite the high temperature, the birds were singing and we saw lots of different species. Phil just avoided treading on a rat snake. We found the target bitterns together with stocks, peacocks, bee eaters, kingfishers and orioles. The area was humming with life. On the other afternoon, there was a snorkelling trip to a local reef for those who were interested. Liz thought she had seen a sea snake (she had not realised that sea snakes

are extremely poisonous and so took some photos) – but in the end we discovered it was an eel masquerading as a sea snake instead – still very exciting. The sea was quite stirred up and the underwater visibility was not that good, but we finished off the afternoon with a trip to a local turtle rescue centre where we had close-up encounters with some of the residents.

In the hotel grounds there were Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys feeding together with a number of different species of birds. Hundreds of Indian Flying Foxes (large fruit-eating bats) flew over at dusk and there was a good selection of trees. From our hotel bedroom we could hear the waves breaking on the beach just across the main road from the hotel, and we had a lovely visit to the beach on the night of the full moon.

On the third day of this first part of the holiday we were treated to a visit to the nearby town of Galle (pronounced "Gaul"). It was first settled by the Portuguese, then taken over by the Dutch and finally run by the British. It was originally developed as a fort and has huge ramparts around both the seaward and landward sides, all still in a very good state of repair. In the morning we ambled around the town and then ate lunch in a colonial-style hotel. It began to pour with rain during lunch, which was deafening on the tin roof, and reminded us that the wet season was about to start in the southern part of the island. Later in the afternoon we visited a nearby folk museum and then a tea factory, which used machinery almost 150 years old from the UK to dry and then packet the tea. We enjoyed a mandatory tea-tasting and retail opportunity as well.

Meanwhile Penny had, at the last minute and with a lot of help from Koush, arranged a day's birding in the higher areas of the island, north of where we were staying. She had to leave the hotel at 5 am for a 3½ hour drive to a national park. This was followed by a full day's birding, with her returning to the hotel at 9.30 pm. She was, elated, not exhausted, in view of all the species she had seen, including the rare and endemic Serendip Scops Owl ("Serendip" is the old name for the island) plus a Spotted Eagle Owl. She had also visited a tea plantation (but had not been offered a cup of tea as she was climbing through the bushes to get to see the Eagle Owl). Her lunch was somewhat solitary with the mandatory cheese sandwich but it was accompanied by French fries and fantastic views of a Serpent Eagle perched in a nearby tree. Lovely fresh fruit finished the meal and some great cups of coffee provided the energy needed for the afternoon's birding session. Penny's guide and drivers were excellent and she clearly did not miss the day of culture at all!

Part 2: Leopards

The second part of the holiday was devoted to leopards and other land-based mammals. We travelled about 50 miles along the south coast and then slightly inland to Tissaharama. On the way we stopped at a lagoon close to the coast where there were hundreds of migrating birds and we also saw our first close-up view of a monitor lizard – about four feet long. This one was a water monitor. Most of the birds were wading birds such as thick-knees and sandpipers but we also had stints, warblers, snipe, peacocks and peacocks.

In Tissamaharama we stayed in the Priyankara Hotel for three nights (do look at its website: the language is exquisite. For example: "The hotel is enriched with a perfect surrounding of valued spots to provide you with everything possible for an enjoyable holiday"). On the first afternoon of our stay there was a trip to one of the nearby wetlands where we saw hundreds of Indian Flying Foxes and a huge variety of birds. This wetland supplies the water to the local area. The lakes (called "tanks") were full of water lilies and water hyacinths and were very beautiful. There were some large hills in the distance and, we discovered, crocodiles in the water rather nearer than that.

However the highlights for this part of the stay were the two full-visits to nearby Yala National Park. This is a good place to see leopards, elephants and sloth bears and we saw all three, as well as many birds, monkeys and other creatures. The leopard sightings were not brilliant but one was close-up (but fleeting). Another was a good distance off lying in a tree.

We then saw it get down and so waited nearby in an open area hoping it would appear, but it did not. However we did see a cobra sliding across the sand while waiting.

The sloth bear was a good spot as they are not easy to see. Most of the vehicles watching the bear in the distance drove off when it disappeared into the bushes. However we stayed on and were rewarded when the bear came out to give us some really good views. We were also to watch its behaviour as it was searching for termites.

Breakfast on both days was a picnic by the sea by the memorial to the 52 people who died in the park when the tsunami hit. Lunch was by a river with lots of shade so that we could take a rest from the midday sun. Our jeeps were covered, which kept the worst of the sun off, but it was still very hot. The outside temperature was about 40 degrees C. The only downside to this spot was the presence of Toque Macaques (monkeys) who think we are there to provide them with food. We had to be very careful not to let them steal our flimsy cardboard lunch boxes and Peter had a spat with one of them when it came too close. Both were baring their teeth at one other. Peter retreated gracefully when he remembered how nasty a bite from a monkey can be. Unfortunately no-one got a photo of this (also to Peter's relief). Bee eaters and kingfishers were around and a wild boar wandered through the area.

Yala National Park has narrow rutted roads and, as mentioned above, the Sri Lankans are not patient drivers, overtaking in unwise places and situations (eg in the face of oncoming traffic). This is how they drive both on the roads and in the national park. There were dozens of jeeps vying to get the best views of anything that moved, so the animals must have found life in Yala a bit disconcerting. The vehicles were in various states of disrepair. We used three jeeps on each occasion. On the first occasion all had three tiers of raised viewing benches behind the driver. Our jeep had a crack from side to side across the upper front window, apparently caused by an elephant tusk when one of the elephants took a fancy to a visitor's orange one day. On the second visit, one jeep had no glass in the front window at all, which made for a great deal of dust and didn't do a lot for the expensive optics.

After those two days we made our way back to Colombo airport through the verdant hill country in the centre of the island. The roads are slow and very busy, with few opportunities to overtake safely, so the trip took virtually all day even though it was no more than 100 miles. We stopped to look at a historic stupa (a Buddhist monument in the shape of a hemisphere) near Tissaharama and for lunch at a very pleasant hotel at Ratnapura. There, to our astonishment, a drilling rig was being used to drill a well to extract the groundwater (presumably for drinking, but not by tourists). The noise was immense and very unpleasant. Our final night was spent at a pleasant hotel near the airport. The grounds were full of birds but the most astonishing sight was the following morning when we found a mare and foal grazing outside the chalet, to keep the grass mown. There was a big swimming-pool where Penny had a swim at dawn to the sounds of the Sri Lankan birds. Half of the group flew home, and the others enjoyed a two-day trip to the northern part of the island.

Thoughts of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is becoming increasingly popular as a holiday destination. The people are very friendly and smiley, and the infrastructure is improving all the time. The flight time from London is approximately 11 hours and there are daily flights from Heathrow. The food in the hotels was good, if a bit spicy on some occasions, and there was always fresh fruit in abundance – pineapple, bananas and papaya.

Koush, our guide, was excellent and very knowledgeable not only about the wildlife but also about the history and culture of the country. We learned a lot from him.