

[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]By Dan Friesen

Two activities today introduced me to two very different faces of Sri Lanka. Medieval Polonnaruwa was one of Sri Lanka's two great cities of the distant past. Our walk through the nearby countryside was another introduction to rural life, coconut culture, and more of the wonders of Sri Lanka's wildlife.



Stylized, distorted images of lions were a fixture in ancient civilizations which knew about them only through legend - had never seen one!

As Dileep and I trekked through the ruins of Polonnaruwa this morning, I struggled to wrap my mind around this piece of Sri Lanka's 3000 years of recorded history. The modern history of the country has been marred by nearly 30 years of warfare, ending only in 2009, pitting two different ethnic groups against each other - Sinhalese and Tamil. The Sinhalese originally emigrated from northeastern India and are generally Buddhist; the Tamils emigrated from south India and are generally Hindu; there are now Christian minorities in both groups. It's a confusing and controversial story, the facts of which are often disputed.



Sometimes I'll have a senior moment and forget which country I'm in...signs like this are helpful at times like that!

Medieval Polonnaruwa dates from the 10th to 12th centuries and is apparently part of that story. The majority people group in Sri Lanka has always been the Sinhalese, at least for all of recorded history. Polonnaruwa is the second major civilization; the first was Anuradhapura, which I visited earlier in the trip, and which predates Polonnaruwa by over 1000 years. Both civilizations prospered because of the mastery of hydraulic engineering (Everywhere I've been in Sri Lanka, the land is dotted with lakes -manmade reservoirs!). But Polonnaruwa was founded after an invasion by the Chollas from south India - the Tamil people. The Chollas then moved the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa, but could only hold the territory for about 100 years, when the Sinhalese took control again and expelled the Chollas.



The largest inscribed single slab of stone in Sri Lanka. The inscription tells how the stone was moved - with elephants and logs underneath it as rollers.

The human fabric of Sri Lanka has therefore been woven out of strands from several people groups, including European colonizers (Portuguese, Dutch, French, English), during a 400 year period that ended with Sri Lankan independence in 1948. The primary strands in that fabric have been Sinhalese and Tamil.



We left the busier sites to strike out beneath the tree canopy to “lesser” ruins. This one was completely deserted except for the guard, who looked surprised to see us.

As Dileep and I walked and talked, I mused about the jagged, messy, flow of history: people get together and create a community based upon shared values; community perpetuates those shared values and individual personalities are formed; emerging from those cultures, individual people make decisions that alter the regular, ongoing events of mankind; the more “significant” events attract the attention of future generations and are recorded as “history”.



We are now in the monastery, and this step well was meant for the monks to bath. The tiers allow access to water regardless of the level. In the rainy season, they didn't have far to go; during drier times they had to descend toward the bottom. Wonder how clean the water felt by then?

As I travel through Sri Lanka, I'm privileged to enjoy firsthand interaction with Sri Lankans who are opening my eyes to this colorful and complicated mosaic of humanity in Sri Lanka: Sinhalese, Tamil, European, Arab...Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian.



A reclining Buddha - one of 4 representations of Buddha carved out of one face of granite. Considered the highlight of Polonnaruwa

Admittedly, this is pretty heady stuff for a travel blog. This little island nation is a brainteaser and these are the riddles that bounced around my brain as we walked through the ruins of this once-mighty civilization beneath the forest canopy, and watched the people who had come to see this place, some as sightseers, some to worship.



He's higher than he looks - probably 50 feet up!

The second part of the day was less complicated, and more fun. Dileep knew a route along the back roads that he's used for bicycle trips. The first part of the trail followed a dike along the edge of one of Sri Lanka's innumerable tanks (reservoirs), then turned back into the jungle to a humble little abode nestled amongst the trees.



Prepping the coconuts to drink the “milk”

There, as we watched, the son of the family scaled a coconut tree and pulled down several of this versatile fruit. Mother and son then demonstrated how to 1) chop a hole in the coconut to drink the clear fluid inside – the milk, which we did, 2) use the stringy husk of the coconut to weave any number of practical and commercially profitable products, 3) expertly split the nut in the middle of the husk, 4) use a specially designed bench to scrap the white flesh from the shell of the nut, and 5) pour hot water into the container of shaved coconut, then strain the coconut to leave coconut milk, used for cooking.



Scrapping the flesh out of the nut - her hands were lightning fast!

Leaving the coconut grove, which also contained a host of other fruit bearing trees and spices, we road by tuk tuk (3-wheeled motorcycles) through the countryside for another 10 minutes to a stream where our walk resumed. For the next 4 kilometers, the trail paralleled the stream, farmland to the right - mostly rice paddies - homes on the left, accessed by wooden footbridges. It was feeding time for local critters and a veritable aviary of birds hunted along the stream from the trees and waded through the water. Even a water monitor lizard made a conspicuous appearance!



Water monitor lizard - probably 4 feet long

As the dirt lane met a busier paved road, the tuk tuk was there to meet us and drive us to our hotel, which sat just around the corner perched on a rise overlooking another of Sri Lanka's plethora of lakes.

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