

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

Today began early with an amazing sunrise! My hotel faces east over the Indian Ocean, an unusual sensation for a boy from the Pacific Northwest where the beach was a place to view sunsets. But this morning, the skies were afire at about 5:30 am.



“Red sky at morning” didn’t seem to apply today - the whole day was fair and my bottle of sun tan lotion is getting of attention.

It was going to be a hot day and our plan was to start early, grab a quick bite to eat and get out walking by 7:30 am. Trincomallee was known throughout its exceedingly long history for its amazing natural deep-water harbor. All the colonial powers were here to exploit the shipping benefits of such a natural phenomenon.



These guys are preparing bucketloads of food for the free lunch (yes that apparently does occasionally happen) due to full moon day

It was a holiday today — full moon day — and our walk headed up into the Fort Fredrick area, built by the Portuguese in 1623, captured by the Dutch in 1639, controlled by the French in 1672, then finally in the hands of the British during the Raj era. It still has a military function under the authority of the Sri Lankan military, but the public is allowed to walk through the fort to the temple at the top of the promontory.



Lord Shiva - one of the primary Hindu deities

There has been a temple here for about 2500 years. Koneswaram temple was apparently one of the reasons for the settlement of the area, along with its huge harbor. Full moon day is a Buddhist holiday but Koneswaram temple is Hindu in origin. This part of Sri Lanka is heavily Hindu, and heavily Tamil, so today was a busy day at Koneswaram temple. The interesting thing is that Buddhists also revere the gods represented at this temple. One of the gods is prayed to for couples who want to start a family. Another Hindu custom is the purchase and smashing of a coconut upon a special pointed rock — the coconut symbolizes a particularly thorny problem you are dealing with, so smashing it can only be a good thing.



The coconut smashing cage - just after a guy made use of it. He smashed it with great force, so I hope his problem met the same fate as the coconut!

The route to the temple was busy with pilgrims, even a group from India was in attendance. Vendors along the way were selling all manor of trinkets, but the sellers of fruit plate offerings to the gods were doing a brisk business. At one point, we stopped to talk to a group of men who were cutting up vegetables for today's lunch. Lunch today, because of the holiday, would be provided free of charge to all comers.



Thanksgiving cradle offerings to Shiva from couples who had a baby

Leaving the temple, we worked our way back down through the fort, along Dutch Bay beach, and through the Christian Tamil neighborhoods to the back part of the bay.

Prasantha tried to explain the complicated issues of the civil war that raged in Sri Lanka for 30 years (ending 2009). Much fighting took place in this area. The belligerents were the Tamil Tigers fighting for a new state in the north of Sri Lanka independent of the Sinhalese majority based in the central and southern parts of Sri Lanka. It's a complicated puzzle that I'm still working to understand.



This Hindu lady is preparing fruit offering plates for the god Sheva, but purifying each piece of fruit in saffron water before it goes onto the platter.

After a coffee break at the end of the walk, we headed north for an afternoon at Pigeon Island, one of Sri Lanka's Marine National Parks known for its snorkeling. Because of its close proximity to our hotel, I decided to give it a try. Along the way we passed a funeral procession. At the front, people were tossing fire crackers into the air. At the back, others were tossing handfuls of sand into the street. Prasantha told me these two customs go way back to a time when the majority of people lived in the jungle. The firecrackers were to scare away wild animals, and the handfuls of sand served as markers, like the proverbial bread crumbs of Hansel and Gretel fame, to find your way back home.



The funeral procession - firecrackers and handfuls of sand

Pigeon Island turned out to be a disappointment. Since it was a holiday, it was crowded with locals, and Sri Lanka is still a bit behind the times when it comes to preserving the coral at a site like this. Swimmers stand on the coral and there has been quite a bit of bleaching. The fish were colorful and relatively numerous, however, and I even swam above a black tipped shark for a minute or two. But the most memorable encounter took place on land when I spotted a chameleon that was surprisingly red.



My chameleon pal is a very unhappy red

I couldn't understand why he was red when his background was anything but red. Then a second chameleon dropped from a branch and skittered away. The resident chameleon had sensed an intruder and turned red — a warning color. Once the intruder gave up and exited the area, the local lizard returned to a less conspicuous brown.



Now much happier after the intruder left his territory

Lots more I could share, but those are some of the highlights. Remember as you read these accounts that I am in country for 22 days, and the tour will be only 10-12 days. So much of what I am experiencing will not make the final cut...only the BEST experiences will be in the final itinerary for January

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