



## Travels in Sri Lanka —The Resplendent Island (Part 5A)

### Description

By Alan Ho Chok Chan

### Kandy

The second largest city in Sri Lanka, on a plateau with a lake at its centre, it is surrounded by hills with alpine forests and tea farms. Cooler and less humid than Colombo, though the traffic snarl is as bad or even worse downtown. It is also the place where Sinhalese kings signed away their country, their birthrights to the British in 1815 and ended their 2500 year-rule. As a British protectorate, the people were exploited, impoverished, their lands were taken, and they were reduced to labouring as sharecroppers. A revolt among farmhands forced the British to import hundreds of thousands of Tamil coolies from South India to work the tea farms. Two rebellions followed, the Matale rebellion by the farm workers, followed by the Uva rebellion . Although both failed, it paved the way for a new, semi-independent society to evolve from an older order, the feudal society under British rule.

Kandy is also the cultural capital of Sri Lanka, housing the Tooth relic temple and many other famous monasteries.

It is also famous for its many treks, and the Udawattakele Royal forest reserve with many tracks deep into the forest.

So, today we are done with the plains and are heading into the hills. A climb of some 1500 feet.

The Colombo to Kandy road, and the Kandy to Nuwara Eliya road are the two most scenic roads in Sri Lanka. Due to floods and landslides, we had to forego the first, loop around to Habarana, then southwards to Kandy.

Oops!

Almost missed out the stopover at the Golden temple of Dambulla, whose gold Sitting Buddha dazzled and dwarfs everything in sight.

In your awe did you notice the Mudra or hand gesture of the Buddha ? Remember the 7 Mudras the guide in Dambulla cave taught us? It is the Dharmachakra Mudra, the teaching of Dharma or wisdom, with the thumb and forefinger of both hands forming a circle. The release of a chattering group of schoolchildren who surrounded us clamouring for their photographs to be taken further reinforced the educational role of the temple. I hope they all grow up to embrace the Five Precepts: Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not lie, Do not commit sexual impropriety, and \*Do not consume intoxicating substances. ( \* Yours Truly failed miserably! )

## Herbal Garden



Our next stop : Herbal Garden along the road to Kandy. A well-organised tour led by an eloquent young man who knew a smattering of Mandarin to impress. There were some 15-16 stations ranging from the common pepper, to extracts from barks, herbs, fruits and roots. The medicinal uses ranged from curing skin rashes, to turning white hair black ( mine ), to wrinkle removal ( Father Jim's ), to restoring sexual potency ( all the aunties' ), to maintaining youthfulness and beauty ( all the uncles' )

Sorry ! Wrong medicines on the right person, or the right medicines on the wrong person! ( we will end up with female Amazons and Gehlek uncles ! )

The last station was an interesting demo of stripping the bark of a branch of the cinnamon tree to form a cinnamon roll.

After that, it was pep talk and then we were herded into the souvenir shop where we were efficiently stripped of our currency rolls like they process cinnamon!

A lunch mostly of curried dishes completed our Spice Garden tour.

I asked my wife as we left : “ Is my hair darker now ?”

“ All I can smell is the coconut oil,” said she.

We finally reached a small road at the periphery of Kandy town to pay a visit to a Gem factory cum showroom prior to attending the Kandy Cultural Show in the hotel across the road.

The Gem showroom is brightly lit and clinically sterile, while the Kandy cultural show was all percussionists' din and physically rigorous dancing and cartwheels. I would have traded both for 2 hours' on the city's streets : to discover the bona fide culture of Kandyan society.

It was another hour of rocking and rolling along narrow country roads, with a lot of switchbacks, and often at crucial junctions, one vehicle had to reverse course to let the other oncoming bus through. After a particularly harrowing execution of driving skill, the passengers often applauded Mr Newman the driver as a gesture of gratitude and encouragement.

Finally we reached Amaya Hills Hotel near sunset.

Perched on a fairly steep hill, the rooms cascaded down over 3-4 levels, with the reception, bar and restaurant at the ground level.

Our rooms were on the basement 2 level, with windows open, the mountain air was cool, clean, invigorating.( sounds like the old Matterhorn cigarette advertisement jingle , Father Jim ? ) Bird songs abound. There were no traffic noises, no neon lights. The mind becomes a still, forest pool , just like what my spiritual master Thich Nhat Hanh taught.

I could achieve a state of Emptiness here, perhaps even Enlightenment...

( End of Part 5A) To be continued

Dr Alan Ho is a Paediatrician in private Family Practice. He also spends time golfing, swimming, playing tennis, wine tasting, playing guitar and singing. He is also a bibliophile and a voracious reader.