

# There are still two Sri Lankas

Shane Joseph, revisits his country of birth after a 8-year-gap and finds though much has changed, Sri Lanka is still two countries - one for the tourists and one for the locals



Sri Lanka for the tourists and the Locals

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**One always** runs into the danger of upsetting someone when recounting a visit to the old country, especially when viewing it through the eyes of a westerner. My visit back to Sri Lanka (December 27, 2016 to January 11, 2017) this Christmas, after 8 years, was a pleasant surprise, especially since my last one after a longer 21-year-gap had been during the height of the civil war when movement had been somewhat restricted. This time the country was finally in motion, going in the right direction for a change. And everyone was engaged, even if it was in criticizing the government (which is a national pastime, no matter which government is in power).

There are still two Sri Lankas, I realized: one for the tourist and one for the local; and for people like me, I get a pass to both, for I speak the vernacular; I am a product of the 'Sinhala only' days of the Bandaranaike dynasty.

In the tourist world, the experience is top notch: great hotels, vast arrays of food served by world renowned Sri Lankan cooks with signature Sri Lankan cuisine now totally outshining standard western fare, ancient cities, fantastic beaches, wild life, night life and a gentle climate.

The tourist wishing to experience this Sri Lanka has to commute in air conditioned cars along new highways or in private airplanes between city centres, and on prescribed routes and itineraries. Step off this path and you wind up in the other Sri Lanka where the now well-paved roads, especially in the southern half of the country, are clogged with traffic and the air is stifling in leaded exhaust fumes, where the teeming hordes spill over sidewalks, where the tuk-tuks appear to be on hara-kiri missions, where every town is a garish parade of shop signs lining narrow main streets, making them all look the same, except for the size and age of the Botree that sits in the middle of the main intersection.

The contrast between these two extremes is evident in the Colombo Fort, where York Street acts as the physical and metaphorical divide between West and East: the West heads towards developed, touristy city blocks with shopping centres like the Dutch Hospital complex, hotels and restaurants like the Kingsbury, the Stuart and the Ministry of Crab, and office towers like the Trade Centre and the Bank of Ceylon; the East draws in the sprawl of the local bazaar crawling in from the nearby Pettah replete with the detritus and smells of night dwellers who squat in prohibited places, hollowed out structures like the Ghaffoor Building, and motorcycle parking lots on Lotus Road where once I used to catch the bus home from work.

The country will have "arrived" when these two worlds coalesce. And help is around the corner, for a huge land reclamation project, almost the size of the present Fort, is underway on the western end of the city to ease congestion. Hopefully, it will also bring prosperity in the way of jobs to the man on the street, so that he too can enjoy the pleasures currently affordable only by the tourist and the local 1%.

The hills of Nuwara Eliya were a welcome respite from the heat and the pollution but the switch-back roads through beautiful vistas looked perilous to the older me.

The tea estates were in good repair - a national treasure not to be squandered in wartime or peace, and the estate workers'

dwellings had improved, some were even two-storey concrete structures now.

The Kandyan lass who sang out her commentary on the workings of the tea estate reminded me how much English had deteriorated in the country over the intervening years. There is an attempt to introduce English in the schools at present, but an entire generation has lost its opportunity for global advancement due to political expediency. This gave me the added impetus to practice my Sinhala on the locals, an effort that paid off handsomely - I didn't get charged tourist prices when I frequented local dives and chimed "Keeyada?"

Descending to Kandy threw us into an unbroken circle of traffic whizzing around the lake. The water level was low in the Kandy lake- drought, said my driver - and I couldn't see the fish or the myriad of coins that used to lurk below in the old days as the remaining water was murky. But a drive along Upper Lake Drive at night for dinner in one of the many cosy restaurants overlooking the lake gave us a break from the pollution and offered a bird's eye view of this picturesque city.

The stop at a famous jewellery store was a no-pressure visit, unlike the one in Colombo where the salesman had pressed me to buy a precious stone lest his family starve for the lack of him earning a commission. The sales lady was gracious, giving us a history of the gem industry in the country and letting us loose in the showroom where we were free to browse and/or buy, or not; the sheer variety of stones only made me gasp. The same no-pressure approach held true at the Batik factory where we got the run down on that garment's 8-stage creation process, and at the Ayurveda farm where we got to sample various native treatments and received a massage to boot. The no-pressure tactics worked, for we bought from these places.

Walking around the lake one evening I saw a middle-aged gentleman with brief case in hand standing for his bus. As the crowded vehicle roared by with no intention of stopping, he deftly ran into the middle of traffic and jumped onto the footboard and pushed his way inside. I used to do that in my youth, and it came to me as a shock that I could have been that man, one who had decided to stay and not roam the world like me.

The deeper I went, the safer I felt. Yes there were warts and everything was not perfect but this was an imperfection I had been raised with and come to expect as normal. Maybe it was the imperfection that made the journey comfortable and familiar.

An ultra-modern 'village in the jungle' (with apologies to Leonard Woolf) is how I would describe the Cinnamon properties (the Lodge and the older Village) situated in the middle of the Habarana wilds. While monkeys roamed the vast grounds, guests enjoyed peace and quiet in semi-detached chalet-style apartments, replete with every type of modern convenience.

Habarana is a great jumping off point to the attractions in what is now known as the Cultural Triangle that includes Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Dambulla, each situated within short drives from the hotel complex. In this part of the country, the well-paved roads are less crowded and the traffic is more likely to be stopped by a straying wild elephant (and we saw plenty of them by the side of the road

as we toured). The historic sites have been restored and cleaned up since my last visit 8 years ago. There was also a conscious effort being made to portray the religious side of these sites, in particular, their Buddhist aspects. Where once upon a time all visitors had to remove footwear prior to entering hallowed premises, now women, especially tourists, had to additionally cover necks, shoulders, arms and other revealing skin.

The water tanks, built by far-sighted Sinhala kings, that had been allowed to languish in colonial and post-colonial times had been restored, for there was actually water in them now; the Sea of Parakrama was actually a giant body of water helping to irrigate farmers' fields in the vicinity. Gone, I hoped, were the droughts of my childhood, or the excuses of droughts, when whatever rain that came was supposed to have fallen outside the catchments of the tanks, leading to the lack of food, to power cuts, and to other shortages.

Onto Trincomalee, a place I had visited in my childhood and youth. I remember taking a never-ending boat ride around the giant natural harbour, walking through the streets of the old town, and vacationing at my great-uncle's sprawling estate home where everyone was welcome, where the food was plentiful, where there was no electricity, where we sat outside at night under the stars and swapped stories while listening to a battery-powered radio.

My great uncle and his family emigrated to Australia a long time ago, and the great man himself had since passed away, and so I decided to experience another side of Trincomalee - the beach. We spent two days on the beach outside town and it was a restful break from the constant travelling of the last few days. The seas were rough but the water was warm and the beach was strewn with dive shops, guesthouses and sea food restaurants. The local fishermen conducted a daily ritual of running a giant net out into the water, without a boat, and then hauling it back very slowly, the lead fisherman bobbing out far in the rough seas as he towed the net out and in. The sorting ceremony that was performed on the beach opposite our hotel after the laden net came in resulted in a battle between the gulls and the crows for the spoils left behind by the fishermen - a raucous event, and you had to watch out for falling offal from the sky. The unevenness of the beach became clear after while: this entire strip had been washed away in the giant tsunami that ripped the island in 2004.

I observed another phenomenon in Trincomalee, a town that has always been predominantly Tamil and Muslim: the burqa had replaced the salwarkhameez. I wondered whether moves by the previous government to firmly entrench the nation as a Sinhala Buddhist one had resulted in religious minorities retaliating and staking out their own turf, and whether a subtle polarization was taking place - again. Or were returning housemaids from the Middle East wearing their work clothes to avoid buying a second wardrobe to wear at home?

When the driver advised me that in the recent census, Muslims instead of Tamils were now the dominant minority in the country, I raised my eyebrows even more. And talking about politics, I realized why the common man was still enamoured with the last regime, corrupt or not; he

had witnessed visible signs of progress with the last gang: roads, infrastructure, and price controls on essential goods, on a scale never seen before. The common man did not care that the new guys were saddled with the former guys' bills, or that the new guys were still trying to figure out how Green and Blue (traditional rivals since Independence) could work together, or that they were trying to reduce - yes reduce, not increase - Presidential powers that lead to dictatorship.

Last stop: Jaffna. I have been trying to get to Jaffna since 1978. On that last occasion, I had turned back on my bike due to the 'troubles' that were brewing, especially as my pillion rider was an American friend with a powerful camera who could have been mistaken for a CIA spy. But this time the rebuilt highway (and railway track) ran uninterrupted into the northern city with scarce traffic accompanying us. I saw the signs of the recent war immediately: military camps in every major town en-route, police check-points spot-checking motorists (we were stopped twice and my driver said that the cop was disappointed when he saw two tourists in the car, preventing him from collecting a customary bribe), the bombed out water tank in Killinochchi lying on its side as a stark reminder despite reconstruction going on around it.

My old school teachers used to tell me that Jaffna was a hot place where they only grew chillies and garlic. Well, if those pundits are still alive I'd like to inform them that they are wrong. Many tanks and ponds accompanied us as we entered the peninsula, and paddy fields, coconut estates, palm and corn fields ran right up to the outskirts of the city. Jaffna itself is a smaller version of Colombo with its teeming Pettah-like centre, the fishing harbour, the stately colonial buildings, the Fort (a military one unlike the commercial one in Colombo), and the temples and churches (make that Hindu temples and Catholic Churches). There were no Buddhist shrines to be seen, unless I missed them. But the signs of "We beat you, now buckle up and behave" were everywhere: the army's foot patrols that walked the town, bullet-scarred houses of those who fled or died crumbling into decay beside modern structures of those who survived rising beside them, and hotels with management staff who spoke only Sinhala and English, sent from head-offices down south to manage lower level local Tamil staff. Temple Road leading to the famed Nallur Temple, once dubbed NGO Row had lost all its NGOs as those benevolent organizations had packed up and returned home when the war ended. Our Tamil tour guide lamented that now they had no help in the reconstruction as the foreigners had left and the government in Colombo was wrapped up in its internal conflicts. Testament to his lament is the state of the Jaffna Fort, slated for reconstruction but only with its outer walls restored, the inside is still a mass of bombed out structures with cattle grazing in the tall grass growing amidst the rubble. The only sign of hope was the fully restored Public Library, burned down twice in recent history by those who have no appreciation of history; I now only hope that its sparse collection of donated books and periodicals would increase and multiply over the years. Un-

like in the Buddhist temples where we had to cover up, I was asked to remove my shirt at the Nallur temple, and I wished I had been permitted to take a selfie - darn!

We took the train back to Colombo. And we travelled 'local' this time: second class. The CGR (Ceylon Government Railway) is still the same as it was 40 years ago; its rolling stock, its railway lines, its stations; the toilets still stink and there are no garbage pails so you are encouraged to throw your refuse on the track outside. Vendors ply their trade on board between stations, and railway guards turn a blind eye because there is no restaurant car. But we left and arrived on schedule, 7 hours later, something unheard of in the old days.

Before I left the island, I had to revisit my old home in Nawalwaha I had lived for 18 years. I had learnt by now that old landmarks are useless after 40 years, only the narrow, un-expandable road remains constant. The turns, inclines and declines in the road were my markers, except that over-construction in the once open land on either side had shrunken distances. I followed this road to my old address, but it had vanished behind a giant wall, even the number on the gate read differently. After much jumping up, ferreting, and snooping like a thief, I discovered that our former garage had now morphed into the main building and the old house was just an annex. Over the top of the wall I caught a glimpse of the American-style bungalow roof that my mother had picked out of a magazine and my father had charged the contractor to build for us. I could not proceed further; I did not know the new residents, and to all intents and purposes, I was an intruder.

However, I was lucky to find my former neighbour, a retired octogenarian doctor and an eminent writer, at home, as well as a former teenage buddy (now retired, sobering thought!) who came rushing home from wherever he was as soon as his wife phoned him to announce that I had arrived unannounced. And their instant showers of Sri Lankan hospitality, replete with fish cutlets, patties, cake, tea and Lion Lager beer, all magically produced from the recesses of their kitchens and the kindness of their hearts, were... well, heart-warming.

And then it was time to leave Sri Lanka. However, I left with optimism. This country may not be my home anymore but it is a place where I feel extremely comfortable, in its hustle and bustle, its polluted traffic, its mouth-watering food, its side-splitting humour, its social contradictions, its irreconcilable political differences and its incomparable beauty. It is a place to return to, again and again, because HOME, after all, is only a state of mind.

**About the Author**  
Shane Joseph is the author of several novels and collections of short stories. His latest novel, *In the Shadow of the Conquistador*, was released in November 2015. He is also a travel agent whose travels inform his writing and welcomes a chat on off-beat destinations. For details visit [www.shanejoseph.com](http://www.shanejoseph.com) - This article was sourced through The Sri Lankan ANCHORMAN, Toronto, Canada

