

Sri Lanka - 'India without the chaos'

2 Feb 2011 by Jancis Robinson

There are times when a long flight is useful rather than a pain and our 14-hour Sri Lankan flight back from Colombo on Tuesday (via the Maldives) fell into the former category. It provided the ideal opportunity for me to write up my scribbled tasting notes from my trip to Portugal at the end of last year.

But it was also a journey punctuated by unusually strong memories of our trip to Sri Lanka, the first time we had been to this beautiful island once known as Ceylon. No, there is no wine there - although I suspect there could be as tea is the island's most valuable crop. We visited a tea plantation, as shown here, which has had huge commercial success with its white tea. It now has a tea museum and the plaque below shows the co-operation of smart Parisian tea merchants Mariage Frères. I wrote on Wednesday that Nick and I had been generally disappointed by the narrow range and lack of refinement of most tea available in the hotels and restaurants we visited on the island. US wine writer David Schildknecht came back as quick as a flash to report that two of his favourite teas come from Ceylon: Kenilworth Estate BOP1 and OP and Shawlands Estate OP1, supplied to them in Ohio by Upton Tea Imports. I hope to extend my acquaintance with fine Ceylon teas, and I think there are real opportunities in Sri Lanka itself for including fine teas more in what is offered to the tourist. You can see below right what my favoured drink was.

Our excuse for escaping the freeze in London for a tropical isle was the fifth <u>Galle Literary Festival</u>, held in the old Dutch stronghold of Galle on the south-west tip of Sri Lanka. This was the sixth literary festival I had attended and was definitely the most fun - perhaps because for the first time Nick was with me.

The terrible war between the Singhalese government and the Tamil Tigers ended, in appalling bloodshed, two years ago, so tourism is firmly on the increase, and mothers can sleep soundly at night at last. (The conflict was concentrated in the far north but the capital Colombo became a target for what are now somewhat grimly regarded as the world's pioneer suicide bombers.)

The president Mahinda Rajapaksa has distinctly despotic tendencies and there are still several tens of thousand people in the north who have yet to find a permanent home and also have to cope with landmines, many of them dislodged in the recent floods. I was grateful for a thorough briefing from the London branch of PEN, the international writers' organisation, before I set off, but PEN was adamant that it was better to go the Festival and engage with the Singhalese than to boycott it as one writer, Damon Galgut of South Africa, decided to at the last minute on the grounds that there were curbs on free speech in Sri Lanka. It is true that some particularly critical reporters have, shockingly, simply disappeared. But I suspect Galgut would have been impressed by the uninhibited fire and vitriol expressed by the audience at the opening session of the Festival on the topic of post-war trauma, chaired by Bridget Kendall for the BBC World Service.

I am ashamed to report that I felt no trauma at all the whole time I was there. Apart from the sadness associated with the memorials to the terrible tsunami in December 2004, it was blissful. The island is particularly green and beautiful, sandy beaches fringed with tall coconut palms and with bright green paddy fields in the interior. Temperatures vary delightfully between low and high twenties Celsius year-round. Perhaps because this is the year of La Niña, rainfall has been particularly high this year and we saw heavy rain most days during the last half of our stay, even though such downpours are meant to be concentrated in the monsoon season of May to July. June is the quietest month for the island's increasing number of stunning places to stay.

Many of the most vivid impressions that kept revisiting me during the long flight home were associated with the most atmospheric of them. On our last morning in Galle we had an egg hopper, string hopper and curry breakfast with Darina Allen of Ballymaloe in Ireland (left) and Louis de Bernières of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* on the verandah of The Dutch House, which is exactly that, set in almost ridiculously perfect gardens. Another night we dined on the Somerset Maugham-like terrace on Taprobane Island (right), to which you have to wade through the Indian Ocean, with fellow wine writer and novelist Jay McInerney and Candace Bushnell of *Sex in the City*. On our penultimate night, with Renaissance writer and broadcaster Sarah Dunant and award-winning novelist William Fiennes, we gorged on the most refined Sri Lankan buffet at Kahanda Kanda, another boutique hotel sculpted almost literally in the jungle by British interior designer George Cooper. And we stayed for most of our Galle stint in the stunning Amangalla right in the middle of the old Dutch fort, a spit over an ancient rampart from the Festival HQ. It is housed in an old stone army garrison complete with high, high ceilings, dark shiny floorboards, and the most understated luxury imaginable.

It was at the Amangalla (pictured below) that my Saturday night wine dinner took place - quite an achievement in a



country with such a limited wine selection. It tells you something that for the first 72 hours on the island, I drank no wine at all. And even more perhaps that I didn't even notice. But when I started studying wine lists in the smarter restaurants and hotels, the only ones with a wine list anyway, I realised that there seem to be only two or three wine importers and that the national wine diet is basically Bichot, Borsao, Sandalford and Valdivieso. Why them, I have no idea, but as you can tell, the range is distinctly limited. That said, our first bottle of wine, a Pasquier Desvignes Beaujolais 2009 sipped under the stars in the garden of Club Villa in Bentota, through the middle of which the main Colombo-Galle railway line runs, tasted like nectar.

To the huge relief of the Festival organisers, loth to cope with the punitive import duties on wine themselves, Sandalford of Margaret River sponsored my wine dinner, as well as part of the wine tasting I conducted in a rainstorm at the Jetwing Lighthouse hotel to the north of Galle. Thank the Lord their wines are as well made as they are. I particularly liked the Sandalford Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 Margaret River, which reminded me just what a sweet spot Margaret River is for Cabernet.

Oh, did I mention the whales? Another high point was a journey 20 miles out into the Indian Ocean, feeling distinctly queasy (note if you can in the picture on the left the Chinese woman in the foreground lying on the deck with her lunchbox on her face), but being rewarded not just by striped dolphins larking about but no fewer than six blue whales up to 23 m long - incredible creatures. Our guide, whale-o-mane Philip Hoare, author of *Leviathan*, reported that in his 10 years of whale watching around the world, this was the first time he had ever caught sight of a blue whale. Lucky, lucky us. I write this suspecting that some terrible disaster surely awaits us back in Blighty. We certainly deserve it. (It turned out to be getting a bad cold - worth it.)

We were also extremely touched by our first visit ever to a Room to Read project, a colourful pre-school near Galle where the four-year-olds put on the most inspiring performances even though they had only a few days' notice in which to prepare. And all in matching costumes sewed by the mothers too. Singer sewing machines must love Sri Lanka. All the schoolchildren are immaculately dressed in the most brilliant of whites. No British parent of my acquaintance would dare send their child to school in bright white. Sri Lankans are extremely friendly, and there seems to be much less heart-breaking poverty than in India.

Sri Lanka was a wonderful discovery. Not unlike Kerala in southern India but, as the Festival organiser Geoffrey Dobbs put it, 'India without the chaos'.

Nick will be writing about some of the great meals we had a week on Saturday. Meanwhile, here are some highly recommended places to stay on the south-west coast, from north to south.

And the picture at the very top is of the oldest member of staff at the Galle Face hotel, the traditional British stop-off in the capital Colombo.

Club Villa, Bentota
The River House, Balapitiya
Amangalla, Galle
The Dutch House, Galle
Kahanda Kanda, Koggala
Taprobane Island, Weligama (private residence on an island that is occasionally rented out)