



The View from Serendip, 1977, by Arthur C. Clarke

The island of Ceylon is a small universe; it contains as many variations of culture, scenery, and climate as some countries a dozen times its size. What you get from it depends on what you bring; if you never stray from your hotel bar or the dusty streets of westernised Colombo, you could perish of fulminating boredom in a week, and it would serve you right. But if you are interested in people, history, nature, and art —all the things that really matter —you may find, as I have, that a lifetime is not enough.

Of course, not everybody feels that way; the writer Eric Linklater once left in disgust, rashly announcing to the world that "Ceylon stinks." The Ceylonese have carefully mispronounced his name ever since. Other distinguished visitors have been more flattering; Marco Polo declared that Ceylon is "undoubtedly the finest island of its size in all the world," and one could dig up similar quotations throughout the ages. The most beautiful tribute ever paid, however, must be that by a papal legate six centuries ago: "From Ceylon to Paradise, according to native tradition, is forty miles; there may be heard the sound of the fountains of Paradise."

You certainly-won't hear the fountains if you arrive when the monsoon breaks, and the rain comes down in the best Somerset Maugham tradition. The finest time of the year for the western (Colombo) side of -the island is December through March; there may be occasional showers, but most days are sunny and temperate, with the thermometer around 80° F. (27° C). Between April and July it becomes humid and generally unpleasant in the west, but on the other side of Ceylon, behind a barrier of mountains up to two thousand metres high, the weather will be fine. Thanks to these mountains, there are two-climates in a country less than three hundred kilometres across. By careful choice of time and place (and travel agent!) it is possible to enjoy Ceylon in any month of the year.

One of the factors that adds immeasurably to the convenience of visiting Westerners is that —in contrast to many exotic countries —English is spoken everywhere, and practically all street signs are in Roman characters (as well as in Sinhalese and Tamil). All educated Ceylonese are bilingual, since the country was a British colony until 1948. It must be admitted that, as a result of a drive to make Sinhalese the national language, the standard of English among the younger generation has plummeted during the last few years. However, attempts are now being made to correct this, and it would take a fairly determined traveller to find a place where not a single person understood that famous Victorian phrase-book appeal: "Help! My postillion has been struck by lightning."

The British influence, though waning, remains powerful; one of its most obvious signs is the large number of double decker London Transport buses, still painted red, which come to Ceylon to die. Their corpses may frequently be seen by the wayside, mourned by passengers patiently waiting for a replacement.

Slightly older, and rather more interesting ruins will be found in the sacred cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, which were the capitals of the Sinhalese kingdoms for fifteen centuries, until about A.D. 1250. Dominating Anuradhapura are three great shrines, or dagobas, bell-shaped piles of solid masonry almost rivalling the pyramids in size. And here may also be found the famous 2,600-year-old Bo Tree, reputed to be a sapling from the original tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

The finest statues of the Buddha himself will be found at Polonnaruwa, which became the island's capital when Anuradhapura was abandoned (after repeated invasions from India) around A.D. 1100. A huge reclining figure, fifteen metres long, represents the Buddha at the moment of death; standing at its head is a smaller — but still impressive — statue with arms crossed and a look of downcast meditation or sadness. This is usually taken to be the Buddha's chief disciple Ananda, grieving over the departure of his master; but most modern scholars believe it to be another manifestation of the Enlightened One himself.

When Polonnaruwa was abandoned in turn, the Sinhalese kings retreated to the hill capital of Kandy, which still flourishes; during the Second World War it was Lord Mountbatten's headquarters. Today its chief claim to fame is the Temple of the Tooth, from which every year caparisoned elephants accompanied by dancers, bands, and torchbearers march in a spectacular procession honouring the sacred relic of the Buddha which, however, never leaves the temple precincts.

Fifty kilometres south of Kandy is an equally holy spot, the 2,200-metre-high mountain, Adam's Peak — an equatorial Matterhorn, completely clothed with trees. Perched on its summit is a tiny temple, and every year thousands of pilgrims make the ascent up what must be the longest stairway in the world. The climb is not difficult, but can you imagine a stairway several kilometres long? I managed it once, and my legs were paralysed for the next three days. But it was worth it, for at dawn I saw the spectacle for which the peak is famous. As the sun rose, the perfectly triangular shadow of the mountain was cast on the clouds below, stretching for perhaps fifty kilometres into the west. It lasted for a magical ten or fifteen minutes, then faded out to cries of "Sadu, Sadu" ("Holy, Holy") from the pilgrims.

Of all Ceylon's archaeological wonders, however, the most remarkable — and certainly the most useful — is the enormous irrigation system that, for over two thousand years, has brought prosperity to the rice farmers in regions where it may not rain for six months at a time. Frequently ruined, abandoned, and rebuilt, this legacy of the ancient engineers is one of the island's most precious possessions. Some of its artificial lakes are ten or twenty kilometres in circumference, and abound with birds and wildlife.

Ceylon was once a hunter's paradise; Victorian "sportsmen" boasted of killing hundreds of elephants, bears, leopards, and birds beyond computation. There are now less than two thousand wild elephants in the island, most of them rigidly protected in great game sanctuaries. Wilpattu, the largest of these, is only a few hours' drive from Colombo, yet it seems so remote from man and all his ways that the visitor can easily imagine he is back in the primeval forest. No wonder Ceylon

has become popular with makers of jungle-type movies; though Tarzan has not yet arrived. Elephant Bill and Mowgli are on the way, and who can forget Elizabeth Taylor facing the stampede of tuskers in the blazing finale of *Elephant Walk*? But the best film made in the country is still *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. If you want a vicarious trip to Ceylon, revisit David Lean's masterpiece next time it comes around.'

The mountains, the jungles, the ruined cities, the lakes, the game reservations, the misty upland tea estates, will all have their advocates; but to me there is nothing that can compare with the beaches and the reefs. To see these at their best, you have to get well away from the towns. Drive south of Colombo for fifty kilometres, or fly across the island to the sun-drenched loneliness of the east coast, and you may find yourself the only human being on a crescent of soft white sand, enclosing a bay of the purest blue water, fringed by palm trees of astonishing height and slenderness.

The Indian Ocean is one of the last great unexplored regions of this planet. It is a curious experience to stand at the southernmost tip of Ceylon, Dondra Head, and to know that there is nothing but empty sea all the way south to the icy ramparts of Antarctica. After the swift sunset (for here you are only six hundred kilometres from the equator) the last lighthouse of the northern hemisphere will start to flash its warning above you, and far to the east you may see the flicker of its companion on the deadly Great Basses Reef. A long chain of barely submerged rocks, ten kilometres out at sea, this has been trapping ships ever since men started to sail the Indian Ocean. A few years ago my colleagues discovered the wreck of a large armed merchant-ship carrying at least a ton of beautiful silver rupees. We nearly went bankrupt salvaging it, and I wouldn't wish sunken treasure on my worst enemy.

A better investment in time and effort would be hunting for emeralds and sapphires in the island's gem pits, famous since the days of Sinbad. His "Valley of Gems" was located in Ceylon, but the elephant-catching crocs which nested in the mountains above it are fortunately extinct.

Today's jumbos fly under their own power, and land at the very handsome Bandaranaike airport thirty kilometres north of Colombo. When you disembark here, you may encounter for the first time the phrase "Ayu Bowan"—which means both "Greetings" and "Goodbye."

With the adoption of a new constitution in 1972, Ceylon officially changed its name back to the ancient Sinhalese form. So — "Ayu Bowan, Ceylon; Sri Lanka, Ayu Bowan." Either way, the country will still be just as beautiful.

In 1966, the island of Ceylon cut itself adrift from the rest of the world. It abandoned the seven-day week and reverted to the traditional Buddhist calendar, based on the phases of the moon. Thus each lunar quarter became a holiday (Poya Day), and the day before it a half-holiday.

The result was instant chaos. Only astronomers could make long-range appointments; it was useless planning to meet anyone on, for example, Monday week, since Monday (or any other day) might be Poya, and all offices and shops

would be closed-. This was merely an inconvenience as far as the country's internal affairs were concerned, but it caused utter confusion in all dealings with the outside world. Once every six weeks or so, as the moon drifted across the constellations, Poya Day fell on a Sunday and the Ceylonese were briefly in step with the rest of humanity. But most of the time, the tea-brokers of Mincing Lane could telephone their Colombo offices only three or four days out of every week, and they were never quite sure which days those would be.....

This attempt to put the calendar back a couple of thousand years was a move by Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's mildly left-of-centre government to gain the approval of the priests, who have considerable influence in a country which is predominately Buddhist. But the opposition — led by Mrs. Bandaranaike, the world's first woman prime minister — was just as keen on the idea. Four years later, when her United Front party was back in power, it issued special stamps celebrating the anniversary of the Poya calendar and its hoped-for return to traditional virtues.

Despite its cost to the country, and the grumblings of the businessmen, no politician dared to attack this exercise in nostalgia; yet before it had completed its fifth year, it was quietly abolished and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...re-entered the Ceylonese vocabulary. The sudden ending of the Poya calendar was a small but significant byproduct of a national tragedy which proved that there is no way back into the past, and that the real or imagined qualities of one's ancestors have little relevance to unemployment, adverse trade balances, and the other problems of modern life.

On the night of 4 April 1971, when the little island of thirteen million people appeared reasonably contented under a government, which had been elected by a large majority, a force of several thousand well-trained insurgents attempted to take over the country. Attacks were launched upon many provincial police stations, which were quickly overwhelmed; the rebels were thus able to seize arms and ammunition and obtain temporary control in some rural areas.

Although there had been some earlier signs of trouble, the government was taken almost completely by surprise. It appealed for help — which promptly started to arrive from a remarkable variety of sources. The countries that rushed to the aid of Ceylon included (not necessarily in this order) the United Kingdom, the United States, the U.S.S.R., India, Pakistan, the United Arab Republic, Yugoslavia, and China. Ceylon is a land without enemies; however, she frequently exasperates her friends.

In a few weeks of often bitter fighting, the insurrection was put down and some fifteen thousand rebels and suspects were rounded up in prison camps. To this day, the organisers have seen in an afternoon's Land-Rover ride.

The wildlife of the land has been famous for centuries, but only in this generation have we grown to know the wildlife of the sea — which is even more prolific, and far more colorful. Much of the island is surrounded by coral reefs, the new playgrounds of our age. It was these that first drew me to Ceylon and gave me the keenest

moments of delight (and fear) I have ever known; only much later did I discover the lovely land that they guard against waves thundering across thousands of kilometres of open sea.

Ceylon is the last outpost of the Northern Hemisphere, jutting into the still largely unexplored emptiness of the Indian Ocean; it may be the base for the great undersea expeditions of the century to come. And the southern- coast of the island, I realise now is the source of the magic that holds me here.

I was born by the sea, and spent much of my childhood on the beach of a great curving bay in the west of England; no wonder that I have always been haunted by Housman's lines:

Smooth between sea and land is laid the level sand. And here through summer days the seed of Adam plays.

But I lost the sea when I was about ten years old, and thereafter saw it only on holidays and brief visits. School, the civil service, the war, college, and a new career separated me further and further from the games of childhood.

Even a year on the Great Barrier Reef did not unlock the doors of memory. Not until I came to Ceylon did I fall in love with an exquisite arc of beach on the island's south coast and decide to establish a home there.

It takes a long time to see the obvious, and in this case perhaps, there was some excuse. After all, there was little apparent similarity between dull gray English sea and turquoise Indian Ocean; between boarding houses, Butlins camp/railway station — and an unbroken wall of closely packed coconut palms.

One day, after a lecture somewhere in the American Midwest, a young lady asked me just why I liked Ceylon. I was about to switch on the sound track I had played a hundred times before, when suddenly I saw those two beaches, both so far away. Do not ask me why it happened then; but in that moment of double vision, I knew the truth.

The drab, chill northern beach on which I had so often shivered through an English summer was merely the pale reflection of an ultimate and long unsuspected beauty. Like the three princes of Serendip, I had found far more than I was seeking — in Serendip itself. . ?

Ten thousand kilometres from the place where I was born, I had come home.