



SRI LANKA: June 6 - 22, 2003: 4,000 Bedkits

BY LAURA HARPER
OAKVILLE, ONTARIO

It's June 22nd as I write this report while enroute from Sri Lanka to Toronto. Just back on June 10th, following our flight from Toronto via London and Doha, Qatar, to Colombo, Sri Lanka, and after a full day to recover, our SCAW team met with our Oversea's hosts—the Rotary Club of Kelaniya. We discussed procedures, itinerary and pertinent details for this, SCAW's 2003 bedkit distributions throughout Sri Lanka. Our itinerary was as follows:

June 10 - travel 2 hours to Kurunegala, distribute 250 bedkits, have lunch and continue on for 3 hours to Anuradhapura for overnight. (This was Sri Lanka's first capital)

June 11 - following a distribution of 250 bedkits we proceeded to Kandy for overnight stay.

June 12 - travel to Matale, a 45-minute drive, to distribute 250 bedkits, have lunch and return to Kandy for an afternoon distribution of 250 bedkits.

June 13 - an a.m. distribution of 250 bedkits, then lunch and afterwards a short tour of beautiful Kandy, then a 4-hour drive back to Colombo.

June 14 - 17 - a distribution of 500 bedkits each day in the surrounding suburbs of Colombo - in Kelaniya, Kolonnawa, Pamunagana and Mt. Lavinia.

June 18 - travel 4½ hours to Embilipitiya to distribute 250 bedkits and stay overnight.

June 19 - after 3½ hours of travel,

distribute 250 bedkits in Galle and stay overnight.

June 20 - a.m. distribution of 250 bedkits in Galle, and travel 3 hours back to Colombo.



Our travels afforded us many unexpected pleasures, from the hospitality of the various Rotary Clubs to the strikingly beautiful landscapes; from the golden beaches of the Indian Ocean to the historic temples and gigantic monuments...and always the beautiful children. Through the ages, a string of identities has referred to the island's great beauty: an ancient Indian word meaning "land of delights; *Celoa*, derived from the Chinese *Si-lan*, altered to *Seylan* by the Europeans, adjusted by the Dutch to *Zeilan*, and finally to *Ceylon* by the British. After gaining independence its name was changed back to Sri Lanka - "beautiful island".

Having arrived in Sri Lanka with such anticipation (my first visit), I find myself experiencing much sadness upon leaving. What sights and sounds and smells I carry away with me, which I will recall in the quiet times at home—the roar of the surf, unusual bird songs, magnificent inland and coastal scenery, the perfumed blossoms, the excited child as he changed into the bedkit clothes for his photo, and the little boy who stole a piece of my heart as he darted about eating

from his little bowl of rice—the images go on and on.

In a book I bought entitled Sri Lanka, Rohan Gunaratna writes about this country:

History and legend, monuments and memorial temples and processions, myth and folklore, fable, philosophy and religion, statecraft and the art of war, morals and the romance of modern Sri Lanka reveal the story of a new nation at crossroads—the death of an old civilization and a new culture struggling to be born.

As I journey homewards, I wonder—is there a word for Food for the Soul? If there is, I would add it to the list of identities that have been given to this beautiful tropical island.

BY CARM MAINIERO
TORONTO, ONTARIO

Sri Lanka - "A Land Like No Other"

Varuni is vivacious, elegant and warm. She is active, gregarious and hospitable. The mischievous glint in her eyes gives away her fun-loving manner of teasing others. She is the only woman with the Rotarians who met us at the airport, and she was with us all the time we were in Sri Lanka. Also, she was completely responsible for the production of the bedkits.

Kingsley is slight and fine boned, with soft brown almond shaped eyes. An overly large thick black mustache tops off his warm smile. He displays a patient, peaceful manner, and is normally quiet, unless addressed. He was our bus driver for the first five days of distributions. For your information, Kingsley's salary is 5,000 Rupees per month (approximately U.S. \$50).

(continued on page 2)

These two individuals, one from a high socio-economic background, and the other from the working class, are both extremely proud of their homeland. They never missed an opportunity to excitedly communicate information about, and/or to express their love of Sri Lanka. I'll share with you below some of the information Varuni and Kingsley shared with us to satisfy our endless curiosity.

Upon exiting the security area of the Colombo airport, my eyes were attracted to beautiful, tissue paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling. We would see quite a selection of artistically well-designed lanterns during our Sri Lanka stay. Apparently, lanterns are the most common decoration for the *Poya*, a Buddhist celebration held every month on the day of the full moon. We had just missed the most important *Poya* (in May) when the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha are recognized. In June, the *Poson Poya* commemorated the entry of Buddhism into Sri Lanka from India. The lighting of the lanterns is the highlight of these festivities, and creates a fairyland atmosphere throughout the entire country. During the *Poya*, all businesses shut down to allow Buddhists to visit temples and spend time with their families.

Buddhism is the dominant religion, practiced by the Sinhalese, who comprise 74% of the population. It is both spiritually and culturally important to them. Sri Lankan literature, art and architecture, for the most part, are a product of Buddhism. A further 17% of the population are Tamils, who practice Hinduism. The rest (9%) are Muslim or Christian, and may be either Sinhalese or Tamil.

It was very interesting to learn that people of such different socio-economic backgrounds live together side-by-side in the same areas. People are probably more tolerant of each other, but that is not to say that shanty towns do not exist. Apparently the unemployment rate is 40% and, as a result, land is not easily purchased. Because of this high unemployment, retirement occurs at age 55 to give the younger generation a greater chance for employment.

Kingsley was very knowledgeable about archaeological ruins, as well as floras.

Because we couldn't visit the ruins, but were constantly engulfed in lush, rich, green foliage that was soothing and cooling, I encouraged talk about plant growth. He told us there are 920 different species of plants in the world, and Sri Lanka has 725 of them, primarily because of its seven types of soil. Their numbers of tropical fruits are incredible: the *belli* fruit, a remedy for upset stomach (Sri Lankans say, "A *belli* a day keeps the doctor away"), jack fruit, bread fruit (a person could survive on it alone), and the wood apple were all unheard of previously by me. The Mangansteen is considered the 'queen' of fruits because it is so tasty. The fruits, of course, make juices very popular in Sri Lanka. Because my preference for dessert is fruit, and because papaya was in season, I actually had enough to last me until my next trip to the tropics.

2003 BEDKIT ITEMS

- 1 mat
- 1 mosquito net
- 1 blanket
- 1 sheet
- 1 pillow
- 2 pillowcases
- 1 thermos
- 1 skirt/sarong
- 2 T-shirts
- 3 pair shorts

Rice is grown in abundance, and although not as beautiful as the fields I'd seen in Indonesia, I must say the patchwork of the different shades of green attract the eye. Sri Lanka is also the number one tea producer in the world, and it's grown in terraces in the highlands around Kandy. Spices are another major product, and I also learned about Saffron from Kingsley. As well as being a spice for food, it is used to purify and kill germs. Sri Lankans are fond of hot spices, which meant we Westerners cleared our sinuses and breathed fire.

Sri Lanka has two varieties of intoxicating drinks. One that fascinated me was the Toddy, when I saw the Toddy-tappers while coming back from Galle. Toddy is a natural drink tapped from the tops of Palm trees. Men who do this work remind me of tight rope walkers for they move from tree top to tree top by walking on two ropes tied to two or more trees. Talk about high-risk work! When the Toddy is fermented, it becomes Arreck, and is produced in a variety of grades and

qualities—some which can be real fire-water. Consume with caution!

There are many ceremonial rituals in this country. One we experienced the first day of distributions is the lighting of candles at a rooster-topped, tall, brass structure (did the Portuguese bring this, I wonder?). All auspicious occasions begin with this oil lamp ceremony. It is lit in the hope that light and prosperity will be with the people for this occasion. Our team was so impressed, that we each bought miniature lamps to bring back home with us as souvenirs. I intend to use mine as a centrepiece for my dinner table, and will begin auspicious dinners with the lighting of this lamp.

On one distribution, as I was handing out the bedkits, I was deeply moved when children knelt down spontaneously. The Rotarian next to me said, "They are showing appreciation and respect". As more children performed the same action, he added, "They worship you". My lips started to tremble, and my eyes began to tear. I could not look at anyone for fear of making a fool of myself. How could such a gift elicit such gratitude? I reminded myself to show appreciation to all the people who surround me at home, and for all the material things I take for granted. Unknowingly, Sri Lanka has taught me something, and I say "*Istuti!*" (Thank you!), to all the Sri Lankans I was privileged to meet.

As Marco Polo wrote, 'Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) is undoubtedly the finest island of its size in the world'.

BY KAY EASUN TORONTO, ONTARIO

To have a child drop to his knees, touch his forehead to the ground and then touch your feet is a startling experience! This is a gesture of eternal gratitude, not of subservience as one is apt to feel. Even as we completed our mission and left the area, sometimes both parent and child would drop to their knees spontaneously.

For the second time in my Sleeping Children journeys, I caught a glimpse of two little girls simultaneously covering their mouths, looking into each other's

eyes and shrugging their shoulders in anticipation and excitement—a fleeting moment, unfortunately not to be caught on camera.

I purposely sat while presenting the children with their bedkits to be at their eyelevel, so that I could look directly into their beautiful brown eyes, say “*sua ninde*” and see by their smile the happiness and gratitude they felt. Thank you was unnecessary.

As they arrived, the children were given a small package (part of their bedkit). To their delight it contained two shirts (medium or large) and a sarong for boys, or skirt for girls, to change into now for the picture taking. In their eagerness, they would often put one or both on over their school uniform shirt, which must have made for a little discomfort in the 40°C+ and 98% humidity weather. (Usually we made the boys remove the bulkiness, but if some of the bulkiness shows in your picture, you’ll understand why.) Imagine their delight when they also found three pair of shorts in their bedkit package!

Every distribution took on its own characteristic depending on the venue and organization of the hosting club. In a few, anxious parents crowded the kids area and pushed their child forward for fear they would miss out. However, once Laura Harper, our leader, explained about your gift to them and our need to take their picture as their gift to you, the donor, everyone calmed down and listened to procedures. The children waited patiently for our “*You-enda*” and the parents retreated to the area where they could assist the children with the many pieces of their bedkits. Of course, without the assistance of the Rotarians from the Project Organizing Club in Colombo who travelled with us, none of this calmness would have happened

To put into perspective (for us) the importance of these gifts to the child and his family, we visited three recipients’ homes. In Embilipitiya, an area where extreme poverty exists because inconsistent weather makes farming meagre and employment scarce, we visited a family with five children living in a donated two room, windowless, cement home with two doors for ventilation, and with a cement

floor (better than earthen). An adobe brick lean-to from their old place gave them a separate kitchen area for their little two-burner cooker. The other small room was presumably for the parents. About 10 yards away was a large dug pit surrounded by materials hung from bamboo to create an outhouse. There was a small amount of land surrounding them and it was well swept and neat.

The mosquito net was already hung from the rafters, and the bed mat located under it would probably be shared by several of the children. Perhaps the two blankets would go under them for more comfort because the heat (at this time of year) didn’t warrant being covered. Even the two towels were precious items to be put to good use. A few old stacking chairs were the only other furniture. My overall impression was of thankfulness and pride in their newly found riches



In Galle, the families in the next two homes we visited were neighbours, living in a cluster of wooden shacks with metal roofs, sitting on the edge of the Indian Ocean – the place from which the fathers earned their meagre subsistence. Hemming them in on the other side was the back of a ‘strip mall’. It seemed as if the sparse land outside the homes was their common living room, and the two small rooms of the shacks their sleeping quarters. One place had raised planks for the bed mat to sit on, with the mosquito netting to hang from the rafters. The other home would put the mat directly on the cement floor. Poverty was most apparent, but the children seemed happy enough playing in the ocean and looking out for each other.

Unfortunately, we later learned that these homes were to be demolished to allow for the creation of a scenic drive—of course, the people in the homes have no place now to go.

The last item in the bedkit was a bonus, thanks to Varuni Cabraal. Varuni’s Mother (Pali Gunatilake) organized Sleeping Children distributions in Sri Lanka for the Inner Wheel until her death two years ago. Varuni learned a great deal from her mother, so when the Rotary took on the project this time, she carried on and organized the manufacturing of the bedkit items wherever possible using local cottage industries, thus keeping the monies in the

hands of poor women.

In the end, she had sufficient funds to include a thermos bottle. It is very important to the children that they have safe boiled water with them. We thank Varuni for ensuring the production of such an outstanding bedkit, and all the Rotarians who contributed so much to make this another successful SCAW distribution.

Thanks also, to you, the donors, for your continuing support!

BY HARRY GAUTHIER BARRIE, ONTARIO

This was my first SCAW distribution and my first time to visit this part of the world. I knew very little about Sri Lanka and searched the internet before leaving Canada for any and all information I could get. I left armed with what little information I had, and very few expectations as to what I would encounter when I arrived there.

My first impression was that the majority of the people may be poor, but they are very hospitable. An arrival party greeted us at the airport, just north of the capital city of Colombo. Then, after a half hour drive to Colombo through crazy traffic on the wrong side (for us) of the road, the Kelanya Rotarians welcomed us in the Taj Sumadra Hotel lobby. After exchanging names and arranging a meeting, we went for a well-deserved shower and a bit of a rest after our exhausting 24-hour travelling period. Later, we were able to venture away from the hotel for a look at the surroundings, and a walk along the Galle Face Green. It was soon apparent that we had many, many ‘friends’ amongst the three wheel vehicle drivers, offering to take us anywhere aboard their “*tuk-tuks*”. There were also a lot of other people that would walk along side us and ask us many questions, and eventually ask us to sign our names in their books, in hopes that we would fund them in their causes for teaching the deaf and the blind. We had been warned about this so it was not a big problem, and we simply told them that we were not interested.

The Rotarians went out of their way to make us feel welcome. Both the Rotarians and the local people treated us like royalty. During

(continued on page 4)

(Sri Lanka by Harry Gauthier, Barrie, Ontario, continued from page 3)

our stay, it became customary to be taken out to lunch after the morning distributions. (We counted 20 different dishes at one lunch after our distribution in Kandy). We were also treated to dinner on several occasions, and enjoyed a vast assortment of Sri Lankan food (somewhat spicy and hot but definitely great food).

Our hostess and friend, Varuni, was very gracious and took us out for a shopping venture on our arrival in Colombo, and then once again before our departure. She wanted us to check with her before we bought anything so she could tell us if it was a good deal or not. If she thought she could get us a better deal, she would do so for us. Varuni also accompanied us on the majority of our distributions. Without her assistance in translating, helping to dress the children and setting them up for their pictures, we would have had a much more difficult time.

Our reception at the distribution sites was in many cases overwhelming. We were led in by a fanfare at a few sites and greeted with a welcoming Betel leaf ceremony. The children were so excited and happy to receive their gifts of a bedkit that their faces shone. "Istuthie" and "Ayubowen" ("thank you" and "welcome") were common words that were heard after the "Anda" and "Yanda" ("come and go"). The smiles on their faces were priceless.

A special event took place during our drive on the bus from Colombo to Embelepitaya. We were accompanied by the Rotarians and some of their children. To pass the time, someone started playing "I Spy With My Little Eye". Soon everyone on the bus was playing, and we had a great time, and it made the drive more enjoyable. What

started out with a few ended up involving everyone on the bus.

I would like to give special thanks to Chandra, Rajan, Varuni, Sydhney, Sarath, Ravi, Maha, Gupta, Harichandra, Bews, Ekknown, Gunther and Sunimal. (I am sorry if I have forgotten some of the names.)

I would be remiss if I did not give a special thank you to Kingsley who drove our van the first five days. He was an excellent driver and provided a wealth of knowledge, as well as being a super tour guide.

PART OF SCAW'S WISH LIST

Every so often we advise you of a need that SCAW has outside of our bedkit distributions. Be assured that no bedkit donations ever have, nor ever will be used to augment the running of SCAW's program, i.e. all bedkit donations go 100% to the purchase of bedkits in developing countries.

However, as you know, to run any organization, there are things that must be done. Upkeep of property is one very strong element.

At this time, the upkeep at 28 Pinehurst Crescent (our SCAW head office), is in need of some specific repairs and window dressing in keeping with the neighbourhood. Specifically, we need to replace a backyard retaining wall (that collapsed a few years ago), and we'd like to plant some shrubs/flowers (an annual dilemma). Other items that would be very helpful for inside the office include: shelving to fit a closet 6' wide x 12" to 18" deep; an office chair; a word processor; and a small or bar sized refrigerator.

If you would be interested in making a contribution to help with these projects, or to any other part of the running of SCAW's organization, we would be most pleased. Unfortunately, no tax receipts can be issued for these purposes. If you wish to help, please contact Linda Webb at the office. Thanks!

RECIPE FOR CASHEW CURRY

8 oz. raw Cashews
3 cups thin Coconut Milk
1 medium Onion, finely sliced
½ teaspoon Turmeric
½ teaspoon Curry Powder
sprig of Bay Leaf
2 cloves Garlic, finely chopped
5 cm Cinnamon stick
1 cup thick Coconut Milk
Salt to taste

Put all ingredients, except thick coconut milk and salt, in saucepan and simmer gently, uncovered, until cashews are tender (approximately 30 minutes). Add thick coconut milk and salt and simmer for 5 minutes longer. Serve with boiled rice and peas.

A curry made of fresh cashews is a delicacy in Sri Lanka, and is one of the delights in Sinhalese cooking. Raw cashews should be soaked overnight in cold water before using.

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