

SRI LANKA

*It's a long way to go for a game of golf but our intrepid travel correspondent, **David J Whyte**, crosses the South Indian Ocean to evaluate golf in Sri Lanka*

PHOTOS David J Whyte, Supplied

"YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY!" my driver told me. "Golfers like to be different," I replied. We were heading south towards the country's newest golf resort, Shangri-La's Hambantota Resort & Spa. The 'right' way according to perceived wisdom and my driver, Lionel, was to do the country's 'Cultural Triangle' clockwise. But I'd come to Sri Lanka, primarily to play its handful of golf courses.

The Krishna Bus

There is a route, Highway E01, that can whisk you straight south from Colombo to Galle in a couple of hours but, according to Lionel, it wasn't very interesting. We were following the coast road which is heavily populated so progress is slow but it's a great way to get a glimpse of Sri Lankan life!

And that life seemed to spill out onto the roads mostly in the form of three-wheelers or tuk-tuks, tooting and racing round corners sometimes three abreast going all of 20mph. Lionel had the uncanny knack of knowing when to overtake. There is one phenomena that stands out amidst the motor m  le, the 'Krishna Bus'! Horns blaring like the terrible host of Lord Shiva, the destroyer of worlds, they appear from nowhere without regard for anyone in their path. And they travel in packs, racing to get to the next stop ahead of the competition.

Sanctuary

I was relieved when we pulled into the tranquillity of a turtle sanctuary. Along Sri Lanka's west coast, female turtles heave themselves onto the beaches to deposit eggs before flopping back to the deep, leaving their offspring to fend for themselves. Few survive to live the 150 years their mothers often do. All of Sri Lanka's seven species of sea turtles are endangered and only 1 in 5,000 babies survive.

I'm usually quite cynical about this sort of 'charitable' operation, seeing them as an easy way to sap sappy tourists of their hard-earned holiday cash. But the 'Sea Turtle Hatchery and Rescue Center' in Hikkaduwa was an exception, perhaps due to the

tragic tale that is attached to it.

The founder of the centre was BK Ariyapala, whose untimely demise coincided with the year the centre opened. His daughter took the helm but she also perished in the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 along with six immediate family members. The hatchery was simultaneously decimated. With admirable fortitude, the remaining family members, (a sister and brother who were in Colombo at the time of the tsunami) along with a few international volunteers, rebuilt the facility. Following a guided tour, donations were encouraged and after learning their story, even I - the tight-sporraned Scotsman - was happy to deposit an extra 1000 rupees (£5) in the collection box.

Toddy tapping

A few miles on, we pulled over again, this time to sample Sri Lanka's indigenous alcoholic drink, 'toddy'. This acrid concoction is obtained by fermenting the sap of flowers found at the top of coconut trees. In Sri Lanka, that's at least 100-feet up and toddy tappers gambol, monkey-like from tree to tree, tending their pots. They do all this without a net. I sampled the toddy which has a fermented coconut flavour and let's just say it might not be to everyone's taste! I drank on, however, in the hope that it might dull my senses for the rigours of the road ahead.

Galle stones

Our final 'pit-stop' was a moonstone mine that did ignite my sense of cynicism. The manager gave us the 'grand tour', which included some old fellah raking through a pile of gravel, supposedly freshly-hoisted from the mine. With a signal, another scantily-clad miner appeared below to give us a friendly wave. And low and behold in the gravel a few glistening moonstones-in-the-rough were discovered much to the delight of the entire team.

This 'Disney-type' production was clearly staged to get us excited and coax us into the shop where the 'jewels' lay waiting to be purchased. Lionel, who was a prince among drivers I'm sure, was undoubtedly ►►

▶ a cog in a system where drivers are commissioned to bring their charges to certain facilities in the hope of achieving sales.

Shangri-La's Hambantota Resort & Spa

At last, we had reached Shangri-La! This version of earthly paradise is Sri Lanka's first, purpose-built, luxury golf resort. And from the moment you enter, Shangri-La is indeed a divine experience! The resort spans 58 hectares, making it the largest in Sri Lanka with 300 spacious rooms including 21 suites and all surrounded by lush tropical gardens. There's plenty going on with an outdoor water park, three swimming pools and a health club. The Chi Ayurveda Spa offers traditional therapies along with personalised Ayurveda consultations with a qualified doctor.

In the morning I was on the golf course with Mahesh, my caddy. A buggy and caddy are compulsory, though the only thing against walking might be the heat. The course is not long, a par-70 at around 6,000 yards playing over three different terrains. The first is called the 'Coconut Plantation', as you might imagine, tree-lined and lush. I kicked off with a birdie much to the amusement of the gardeners lopping coconuts from adjacent trees. My approach shot rattled off the pin and dropped straight into the hole. One of the gardeners came over and handed me a coconut!

The Sapphire Mine section was once a working mine; in fact I believe the whole site was. There's a noticeable change here, generous greens and an abundance of water. This section was a bit rough when I visited but the course was yet new and I'm sure it will have settled well. The final Dune section sees more elevation changes and teasing glimpses of the Indian Ocean. Wind affects the closing holes close to the Ocean, particularly the 17th.

As for the hotel, it is surely one of the very finest in Sri Lanka. We liked the place so much we decided to stay an extra night, throwing Lionel, our driver, into a tizz about our schedule but 'Shangri-La' is a difficult place to leave.

Tea Time

The next day we drove north into the relative cool of the mountains towards Nuwara Eliya, the 'City of Light', better known as 'Little England'. This place is remarkable, a slice of Surbiton with a much more pleasant climate. It's also in the heart of 'tea country', an area established by British planters and civil servants 150 years ago. In its heyday and hot summertime, British colonials flocked to the cool of the 'Hill Country' and immersed themselves in sports such as fox hunting, polo, cricket and golf.

Nuwara Eliya Golf Club

We were a day late for our tee time at Nuwara Eliya Golf Club but no one seemed to mind. Established in 1886, the club is a time capsule with Ginger Beer and a lunch of 'tatties and mince' served on the veranda. The course follows a gentle valley through the middle of town, fairways narrowed by tall, mature trees. It's a bit of a challenge off the tees but otherwise a short, enjoyable track. Overlooking the course is the Grand Hotel, another colonial edifice built in 1891 and, nearby the Hill Club Hotel.

Kandy Man

Driving down the mountain towards the city of Kandy is a two-hour roller-coaster ride through terraces of tea plantations and avocado trees. Apparently, there's a 'Hill Country' train which might be less tortuous as this style of driving can be tiresome.

At Victoria Golf & Country Resort, a few miles east of Kandy, I stayed in a lodge overlooking the golf course with birds tapping at my window to get me up for a 7am tee time. A fair few players were already teeing off to take advantage of cooler temperatures. You are paired with a caddy and fore-caddy here. Walking isn't easy as it's fairly hilly on the front nine but there are wonderful views over the

Victoria River Dam with white-throated kingfishers and blue-tailed bee-eaters flirting with monkeys in the branches. The back nine is a little more flat and forgiving. If you keep the ball on the fairway, this section is quite easy but if you go into the rough, it's very thick and would make for 'warm' work trying to keep a score.

Cultural Triangle

The City of Kandy commenced the cultural section of our trip. Beyond the golf courses, there's much to do in Sri Lanka. Ancient temples and palaces are high on the list but more young people are discovering the island for surfing, snorkeling, swimming with turtles, elephant safaris or bird watching. The place is so very friendly and you always feel safe.

Kandy is a must-see for the Temple of the Tooth. Every year they parade one of Buddha's teeth, the 2.5 thousand year old relic that's lasting well. I guess Kandy isn't so bad for your teeth after all!

In Minneriya National Park, I took a Wild Elephant Safari and once again my sense of the 'incredulous' leapt into action as jeeps lined up like taxis to transport tourists to the waiting Wild Elephants. Cynicism engulfed me but it was actually a rewarding experience.

That night we pulled into Heritance Kandalama. It was dark when we arrived so I couldn't appreciate just how utterly amazing this place was. When I awoke in the morning and stepped onto the balcony, all I can say is the view was incredible. The hotel is built in the middle of the jungle. There are hot air balloons and elephant rides around the edge of the lake, hiking, biking and trekking to an ancient village, Puranagama. Again, we could only stay for one night but this is one place I'd definitely come back to.

Royal Colombo Golf Club

My final round was at the Royal Colombo, an exclusive members' club in the island's capital and they go out of their way to remind you of that. My friend, a member, sent his car to collect me but on arriving at the club, a simple spot of lunch whilst waiting was out of the question. Eventually the word got through I was bonafide and in the system but service was radically

slow; a drink took 15 minutes to arrive and lunch another half hour. It seemed a truculent sort of place - at least for a visitor. I think this might be a hangover from the British colonial times so I can't blame the Sri Lankans entirely for this one. Though Britain might have moved on, these poor people remain stuck with our colonial past.

It's not a great course, either: a bit rough and patchy in places. We set off walking in the heat with an entourage of well-covered female caddies. With a sharp whistle, a goods train trundled straight across the middle of the golf course. My most memorable moment, however, was when I came across a 'Pond Boy', a skinny, solitary figure sitting 'Gollum-like' at the edge of each lake, ready to dive into the thick, stagnant pool to retrieve a golf ball should it end up there. And all for a few measly rupees!

Royal Colombo is one of the oldest golf clubs outside Britain and it's worth a round for that reason although green fees are relatively expensive for the flat, parkland course that it is. The hire clubs are not the best either and everyone expects a tip. I got the feeling visitors are seen as a soft touch compared to the well-heeled Sri Lankans who join the club as a step-up on their social status.

Sri Lanka is a wonderful country with a host of cultural offerings and magnificent natural encounters. It is apparently doing very well with booming tourism and industry contributing towards a modern, thriving society. But the British colonial period is still very much alive and well in certain, well-lined pockets! ●

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Clockwise from top: the brilliant and absolutely gorgeous Shangri-La Hambantota Resort & Spa; a traditional VIP welcome: our man David J Whyte playing Victoria Golf Club; some interesting instruction during a Wild Elephant Safari



WHEN TO COME: The months of January and February are best although March and April are also quite popular. September and October constitute the Monsoon season.