

# SOUTHEASTERN BACKPACKER EXPEDITIONS

Expedition by  
"The Southeastern Voyagers"

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Expedition members: Expedition  
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From the eastern seaboard to the south of Sri Lanka the atmosphere is unique and distinctive offering charm that no other landscape of the island achieves. After months of halting life in self-isolation, we were adamant to get on board an expedition or maybe a journey that we would end up cherishing for a lifetime. There were five of us.

The road from Passikudhah to the southern coastal regions was paved for us. Navigating the unknown, at times hitchhiking when no public transportation was available, eating at run-down roadside cafes, and sleeping in drab lodges may appear bit overwhelming, but what made it an incredible experience for us was the company and the fact that we had never done it before!

From the beginning to the end of the journey, we were always greeted with warmth and hospitality. The humble faces we met along the way made us feel safe and at home, and as a result, we developed a newfound beloved island. We are incredibly blessed to share this peaceful island with its greatest wealth, its people. From discovering new landscapes to learning about new experiences to meeting wonderful people, our journey was all about connecting stories with sentimentality.

We had the chance to live someone's life through his words every day. Regardless of whether it was about a war hero, a hardworking fisherman, a humble businessman, or a scientist seeking alternatives to tackle Human-Elephant conflict, the people we met along the way and the places we discovered made our experience complete.

Here you will find a series of daily blogs that will provide more details about what we saw and experienced during this adventure.

#### Day 1

It all started when we were given a challenge, or rather a task, to go on a backpacking trip from the eastern coast to the southern coast with the goal of exploring lesser-known territories and broadening our emotions and experiences for Tropiculture. Since our first meeting, all five of us have been eager and focused on this with a "challenge accepted" attitude. After several brainstorming sessions, we were finally counting down the days until the big day. This was more than just a vacation; it was a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. We didn't have a clue about any plot twists that might come our way, and we didn't stress ourselves out over what-if scenarios. We were prepared!

We boarded the night-mail train from Colombo Fort, and after eight and a half hours of sleepless travel, we arrived at the sleepy train station at three-thirty in the morning. For obvious reasons, we were quite tired... However, seeing Pradeep and Rathish, eagerly awaiting us at the train station's entrance with a bright smile on their faces, made us feel very welcome and happy.

After a quick refresh, it was time to go exploring... Then there's OUR HOST, Evera, who invites us for tea and snacks in the morning. Despite not knowing us well, his invitation made us realize what kind of person he is... a person who would go out of his way to make us feel "HOME" in a world where social distancing has become the new normal. Evera (a well-known personality in Passikuddah) and a hardworking citizen who usually spends the day attending to his businesses decided to stay with us throughout the day to ensure that our mission was completed.

Evera is a humble Tamil personality who speaks fluent Sinhalese and knows his way around the kitchen. Evera had been living in Colombo until 2005, when, admittedly, due to the ongoing civil war, he decided to return to his hometown and resume his life where he was born and raised.

Onwards to the unknown parts of the East, where, despite being alien territory to all five of us, we were eager to meet a native coastal tribe whose sole source of income was fishing and fire-fallow agriculture. The common forest dwellers in Sri Lanka are known as "Veddas or the Vannilaththos." However, these coastal dwellers were not like the other indigenous tribes we encountered while traveling across the country. These tribes, descended from a social group within the minority Sri Lankan Tamil, primarily live in small fishing villages stretching from Trincomalee to Batticaloa.



We were prepared with a slew of questions for the tribe's chieftain. When we arrived in the village, he was dressed in a sarong, with a red cloth on his right shoulder and an axe on his left. It took us to a whole new level of comfort when he greeted us with "Ayubowan," his two palms pressed together under his chin and in front of his chest. From there, it was a very interesting conversation with him, learning about their culture, traditions, rituals, and so on...

With the challenges of today, we understood from his own words that being a chieftain was a huge responsibility. His eagerness to show off his fellow clan members who lived in neighbouring villages compelled us to visit them, despite the time constraints we faced and piqued our interest in learning more.



We received an unexpected, rather disappointing message from a pottery artisan with whom we were supposed to meet two days before we left Colombo. She stated that she is unable to meet with us due to illness, but shortly after meeting with the chieftain, we received another call from her stating that she would like to meet with us. We had low expectations for this experience because our meeting with her had not been confirmed, but after seeing her pottery craftsmanship, we were like "WOW" and our perception changed in a matter of seconds. We were truly astounded by the way she breathed new life into a lump of clay by turning it into a fine commodity.



Just when we thought we'd had a good day, we went on to the next stop on our itinerary: a visit to an estate that produces coconut tree-based products. Coconut tree... "The tree of life" (as our host Harrison refers to it), also known as the wonder tree... has so much to offer that nothing goes to waste. Among the many things we learned on the tour were traditional methods of extracting oil, choir products, and the use of coconut shells for charcoal and various crafts. The most touching moment, however, was learning that Mr. Harrison himself had empowered a rehabilitant with a difficult past. The passion, the set of skills he possessed, and the effort he put forth in beginning a new chapter in his life left us baffled...



## Day 2

We awoke energized after a well-rested night, looking forward to our second day, which turned out to be quite adventurous. As expected, our chauffeur for the day, Karthi, arrived on time, and we bid our hosts at "Ashram" farewell (the guest house we stayed over). Then we embarked on a bumpy ride to Thoppigala Reserve (hiring a Jeep to commute on this road was a wise decision, as the road conditions were poor; kudos to us). We drove through a variety of landscapes, including bare lands, lakes, paddy fields, and woods, as well as some water buffaloes, peacocks, cows, and goats, which was a welcome sight.

The Battle of Thoppigala was fought between the Sri Lanka Army and the LTTE in the first half of 2007, over control of the LTTE-dominated peak of Thoppigala (also known as Baron's Cap), located 40 kilometers northwest of Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka. On April 14, 2007, the Sri Lanka Army announced the start of a military operation to capture Thoppigala. This operation made extensive use of sixteen long-range reconnaissance patrol units from the Army Commando Regiment, making it the first time such deep penetration units were used on a large scale during the civil war. On the morning of July 11, 2007, the Sri Lankan military captured Thoppigala (Baron's Cap), the LTTE's final stronghold in the east, after 13 years of warfare.

According to archaeological evidence, the rocky mountain and surrounding jungle were the sites of a large monastery built during the Anuradhapura era. Stone inscriptions discovered atop the mountain detail various donations made to the monastery complex by King Kanishta Tissa.

We arrived at Thoppigala Heritage Center after a nearly one-hour and fifteen-minute journey, and were greeted warmly by Dahanayaka, who was supposed to take us on a guided tour of the Heritage Center. After a very informative description on Thoppigala and its history, we were even more eager to climb the rock, even though it wasn't on our agenda. The climb to the top was most rewarding indeed. The only few words we could ensemble were "what a view!".

A few words about our host Dhahanayaka: as our conversations became amicable during the hike, and by the time we reached the summit, he felt more and more comfortable opening up to us. His story as a soldier begins with emasculating experiences as a child as a result of the civil war. After finishing high school, he immediately joined the Sri Lankan Forces and served as an LMG operator (which made sense given his physique; he was clearly built for arduous tasks) with one goal in mind: to defend his land and people from any evil force that may befall its way. Then he went on to talk about the Thoppigala Mission, and it was a very proud moment for all of us as we listened to the stories of our wartime heroes while looking at the exact location where all of those events occurred, and it painted quite a vision in our minds.

The next stop on our itinerary was Batticaloa Fort. Much to our dismay, what we had hoped would be an exciting walk turned out to be a harrowing experience due to the fort and its ramparts being so inadequately maintained. We had to cut our visit short due to this disheartening outcome. We kept brainstorming ideas for things to do and where to go next without wasting much time.

We found our next host by a stroke of luck. A member of the Sri Lankan Portuguese Burgher community who was eager to share his knowledge of Portuguese cultural activities such as singing, dancing, playing instruments, Portuguese cuisine, and his proud heritage. "Age is nothing but a state of mind," as they say, and Uncle Newton – our wonderful host – exemplifies this. He played a short piece on his violin, extending his enthusiasm and passion. A simple "Portuguese song" that put us in a good mood right away. Uncles Newton's was a cherished moment!!

Our next stop was at the home of Sandrine, a French lady who has been living in Sri Lanka for over a decade. She was delighted to welcome us into her home. During her well-spent time, she has managed to forge an incredible bond with the Batticaloa community... With that relationship, she has curated a variety of authentic excursions in the region while remaining responsible and giving back to the local community.

We had our final rendezvous with Felician Fernando, one of Sri Lanka's most experienced professional deep-sea divers, before wrapping up our adventures for the day. We were astounded by his love and addiction to diving; his stories about the sea and diving made us wonder if he spent more time in the sea than on land! His passion was so inspiring that it inspired us to become divers as well!

Felician considers the discovery of the world's first purpose-built aircraft carrier (which was lost for more than three decades due to fishing restrictions and unrest and was sunk by the Japanese during WWII off the east coast of Sri Lanka) to be the pinnacle of his career.

PS: We were amazed by the hospitality shown to us in all of the regions we've visited so far; for example, our bus conductor gave us advice on how much we should spend on a TUK TUK to get to our accommodation, and the TUK TUK guys (Hilmy and Shafeel) recommended a place to eat and wanted us to taste the food before acquiring it to make sure we liked it! Although gestures like these would seem small yet personal, Sri Lankans are known for their hospitality in the small details. For that, we are extremely grateful!

Day 3

When you hear the name "Arugam bay," the first thing that comes to mind is that it is one of the most popular surfing destinations in the world. But we soon realized that it has a lot more to offer.

Do you want to know why? Continue reading...!!!

To start off, we'll introduce Priyantha, a well-known personality who was born and raised in Arugam Bay (Panama village). A patriot, a researcher, a wildlife enthusiast, and, most importantly, a humble, funny guy who enjoys cracking jokes now and then. When we approached him with our ideas and places we wanted to visit, he added his thoughts, made it more organized, and decided to accompany us throughout. His ideology in tourism is not merely commercial but aims to highlight the heart and soul of this city. As we began our day's visits, he took us on a virtual tour of the rich history and cultural heritage of Arugam Bay and its surrounding villages.

A little bit about Priyantha's hometown, Panama, which is close to the Kumana National Park and is considered the farthest village in this area. Panama, which is divided into five divisions, is thought to be populated by descendants of those who sought refuge here after the Uva – Wellassa uprising during the British era (1815).

Our first stop of the day was at the Kudumbigala monastery complex, which was built in 246 BC during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa as a refugee camp for Buddhist monks at the time. Walking through the jungle to the top of the rock brings you closer to nature, which is such a unique feature of this monastery that all five of us felt the same way. As we entered the monastery complex, we realized that the villagers are very conservative of the place and that they had thousands of questions about our visit because their culture and values had been dishonored by recent visitors who had merely visited the site to admire the view rather than to appreciate and acknowledge the historic or cultural values. As the visit progressed, we had the opportunity to meet the temple's chief incumbent, who took us through the temple's origins.



An entertaining folk story about Lord Ganesh told by Priyantha at the Okkanda Kovil, (Elaborated in modern terms) "Lord Murugan and Lord Ganesha were siblings, and Lord Murugan had a crush on Valli amma (A princess of sorts – A stone age jungle princess). Lord Murugan requested his brother's assistance in making Valli amma fall in love with him. They devised a strategy to frighten Valli amma and Lord Murugan into becoming her saviour (Typical Bollywood love story). Lord Ganesh prepared as an elephant for the act, which was to scare Valli amma, and in order for him to return to being human, Lord Murugan had to throw magical water at him. Though everything went as planned once Valli amma was scared and hugged Lord Murugan as her saviour... Lord Murugan was engrossed in love, and as a result, he forgot to throw the magical water at Lord Ganesh for a while, which he later did... However, due to the delay, only his body changed to human form, while his face remained an elephant. That's how Lord Ganesh got his half-human, half-elephant hybrid."

We stopped for a quick photo stop en route to our next destination to capture some images of lazy Sri Lankan crocs. When we spotted a few of them on the river bank, a crocodile jumped into the water to the sound of our footsteps, and Pramodhya from our team, who is literally terrified of any animal, ran off for about 15 meters, pushing all of us toward the crocs in a matter of milliseconds (Anuruddha said she ran like "Flash," the DC super hero). Nonetheless, it was a memorable moment.



Magul Maha Viharaya, located on the northern edge of the Lahugala National Park, is an ancient Buddhist temple that was part of the Kingdom of Ruhuna in ancient Sri Lanka and is one of the major tourist attractions of the Eastern province. It is an archaeologically protected monument in the Ampara District, about 22 kilometers from Siyambalanduwa and 11 kilometers from Pottuvil. The Magul maha Viharaya's history is thought to date back to the 2nd century B.C., and legend has it that the temple was built by King Kavantissa (205–161 BC) on the site where he married princess Vihara maha devi (the word 'magul' means "wedding" in Sinhalese).



It was an emotional moment for all of us as we entered the premises... This sweet family approached us with the intention of selling flowers as offerings. It was a touching moment when they discussed not having their usual customers during these unprecedented times, and how they struggle to make ends meet. Sunil escorted us from the entrance, a smart gentleman with a classy moustache who is very passionate about his job, which he has been doing for over four decades. His knowledge astounded us all... There was a sense of belonging there... His explanations made us wonder if he was a time traveller or a reincarnated person who had truly lived among the ancient civilization during King Kavantissa's reign.

The Tharulengala forest monastery, located several kilometres away from Lahugala, houses Sri Lanka's longest cave. This monastery complex, built by King Kawanthissa on a 633-foot-tall hillock, is home to Asia's longest drip ledge cave. This 512-foot-long drip-ledged cave is 30 feet wide and 82 feet tall at its highest point, with eight levels inside. We were unable to complete the entire trek because we were not permitted to stay on the premises after 1800hrs... We are determined to return as soon as possible!!!

Muhudu Maha Viharaya was our final stop for the day. Magul Maha Viharaya's story was pre-connected to Muhudu Maha Viharaya, where princess Vihara Maha Devi landed after being cast into the sea to save the island from the gods' wrath. This site was barely salvaged, and the project was halted due to the war that occurred at the time. (I wish we could have seen more of it, but it was hidden behind sand dunes.)



## Day 4

We arrived in Tissamaharama after a long journey, seated overlooking the beautiful Debara lake, ready to document our day's events with "Mad World" by the Riverdale Cast playing in the background.

The alarms went off as usual in the morning, but we were surprised by the sounds of pouring rain outside our rooms, as this is not the rainy season in Arugam Bay. Despite the fact that it delayed our schedule by a couple of hours, we felt revitalized and more energized to begin our day because we were embarking on a new chapter of our journey, changing our course from the east to the southern part of the island. So it was time for breakfast!! That's when we realized it was the first time we'd all sat down for a proper breakfast together, and it was at a nice roadside café near the busy streets of Arugam Bay (The previous days it was all light snacks and fruits on the way for obvious reasons).

Hilmy and Shafeel, who had met us at the airport two days before, were waiting to drop us off at the Pottuvil Bus Stand. That's when we decided to leave because there were so many foreigners roaming the busy streets of Arugam Bay, and their happy faces made us all wonder if we were in the presence of a pandemic...

Our bus arrived on time and left the Pottuvil bus station by noon. Kapila was the driver of bus number "NB-7470," and we had to find out his name because we were pretty sure he had the quickest drive time from Pottuvil to Monaragala... For us, it was a roller coaster ride! It took us three hours to get from Monaragala to Tissamaharama. Tissamaharama has been the capital of the Sinhalese kingdom of Ruhuna since the third century BC. Only a few structures from that era are still standing, and it is home to some of the most important historic monuments/places such as Tissamaharama Stupa, Sandagiri Stupa, Yatala Vehera, and Manik Vehera.

We were on our way to Tissa when we received an unexpected notification from an online booking engine offering us a last-minute deal. When we arrived, the place looked incredible, with treehouse-style wooden cabanas overlooking Debarawewa. Vimukthi and Dhanushka, along with their family, own and operate "Lakeside Cabanas." Needless to say, the current situation appears to have had a significant impact on them. We sympathized with them because they are attempting to sustain their family income by providing special offers to Sri Lankans. They even attempted to make our stay more meaningful by providing us with bikes and a barbeque set up in exchange for nothing.



We decided to use the in-house facilities before it got too dark... We rented three bicycles and a scooter and set out on our own to explore the village and its surroundings. The ride was nearly 12 kilometres long, on an easy difficulty level, through a village area, passing golden paddy fields, a tar road, and finishing with a lakeside trail that was busy with lake fishermen anticipating their catch for the day. A wonderful way to end the day.

Vimukthi and Dhanushka are getting ready to entertain us with a barbeque... I'm looking forward to a productive night!

## Day 5

We decided to treat ourselves to a well-deserved treat last night, and it was a lovely BBQ night by the lake accompanied by some local cocktails and music.

It's the start of day 5, and we began the day by going to Kirinda fish market to catch some live action as it comes alive, bright and loud in the morning. The fish market was bustling with fishermen and their daily catch, giving us the opportunity to meet the local fishing community and get a glimpse of the fish auction. Thousands of fish – seer (Thora), paraw, Kelawalla (Tuna), Thalapath, Modha, Salaya, Hadella, Kumbala, Linna, Salaya, Sea Prawns, Sea Crabs, Mullet Varieties (Garupa, Lomessa, Sole, Red Snapper) and much more – were laid out on either side of the street... As we walked through the market, we noticed that some of the boats were still bringing back their morning catch... While some waited for the newly arrived to unload their catch, others were busy in their respective stalls doing the usual. Aside from being skilled at haggling, scaling, and gutting fish, it was also a sight to see the brave fishermen auction off their day's catch.



For many, the life of a fisherman is all they know. Fishermen are sea-nomads who are rarely stationed in one place for an extended period of time, and their livelihood is often passed down from generation to generation. A fisherman's life is inextricably linked to the tide. They make a living by fishing from one coast to the next as the seasons change.

We decided to have breakfast around nine o'clock in the morning and were looking for a simple roadside café. We entered a small restaurant a few minutes later... brighter and more alive than usual, and only then did we realize it was their Grand Opening!! We sensed their eagerness to serve us because we were their first customers, and we were delighted to have shared this special moment with them. After a traditional Sri Lankan breakfast, we were all energized!!

Tissawewa is approximately one kilometer from Tissamaharama city. It was built in the third century BC by King Dewanampiyatissa and restored in 1871. Many aquatic birds live in Tissa Lake, including Pelicans, Terns, Purple Swamp Hen, Purple Heron, Little Grebe, Lesser Whistling Duck, Spotted Dove, Baya Weaver, Scaly Breasted Munia, and others... While fishermen were laying their nets and kingfishers were attempting to catch their prey, we were fortunate enough to see most of these bird species while enjoying the scenery on the boat ride.

Later, we stopped at the home of a couple in their mid-70s who made a living by making pottery products. Their children are married and live outside of Tissamaharama. Their income has been halted due to recent tragic events, but their passion for the art of making pottery does not appear to have faded. We saw the couple engaged in doing what they love together when they did a demo for us. We were heartened to see their abilities while listening to their stories and techniques.

“Around 150 elephants and 50 people die every year as a result of the human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. So, what do you do? Put all the elephants in protected areas and fence them in? Unfortunately, the thousands of elephants living outside cannot be stuffed into a few protected areas. Therefore, we need to look for alternative strategies for elephant conservation.”

Our next guest, a well-known researcher and internationally recognized scientist, was very concerned about the human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka. Dr Prithiviraj, who has lived in Tissamaharama for the last five years with his wife, Dr. Jennifer Pastorini (also a renowned scientist), has led the "Center for conservation and research, Sri Lanka" on a mission to find new solutions to the human-elephant conflict.

Some of the strategies in place were developed and implemented decades ago, based on information that was available at the time. However, because there was little information available at the time on elephant ranging, resource use, ecological requirements, and interactions with the environment, the previous management strategy had many flaws and was not long-term viable.

Under his new leadership, Dr. Fernando has proposed a new conservation strategy that includes both protected areas and areas outside of protected areas, benefiting both elephants and humans, and ensuring the sustainability of a healthy elephant population in Sri Lanka. We were ecstatic when our meeting ended because it was so different from what we had discovered and experienced thus far on our journey. We also felt fortunate to have collaborated with him to create a one-of-a-kind experience for our prospective guests, as well as to have his support in giving back to the local community, which is one of our core values.

Our final stop before calling it a day was at the Sandagiriya monastery complex. This complex was completed in the third century BC by King Mahanaga and later renovated by King Vijaya Bahu the first. We were surprised to learn that, despite being the oldest stupa in the southern region, most of its history has yet to be discovered!! The chief monk, Samitha Thero, expressed similar sentiments... Nonetheless, he greeted us with a warm smile and led us on a pleasant tour of the complex, highlighting its beauty.

## Day 6

After a six-day journey, we are celebrating the final night at Unawatuna Beach, one of Sri Lanka's most vibrant beaches. We feel quite triumphant with what we have archived, but also dreadful because it is the last night of this journey. Our regional expert Kavindu was eager to join us on the final day of our tour; we were glad to have him on board because we rarely see his face despite the fact that he is one of our colleagues. He decided to join us as we began writing our daily blog and sharing our previous days' experiences and stories.

This morning began with confusing roads and obstacles because the person who promised to show us around couldn't make it due to personal obligations, but we were determined to find our own way, and as a result, we found this lovely family who makes curd for a living. We didn't have any plans or contacts, so we just drove to a very remote village on the outskirts of Tissamaharama. Although Tissa was once well known for its curd production, it is now a very rare occupation among genuine villagers. As a result, we had a difficult time finding this amazing location. We were warmly welcomed by Dhammika's wife, despite the fact that they were not expecting us to be there. Despite the fact that we didn't know each other, she was gracious enough to welcome us (strangers) into her cozy home.



Her husband, Dhammika, had gone to get the daily milk containers, and we were being watched by Dhammika's two sons, 14 and 4 years old. While we waited for Dhammika, his wife briefly explained the process of making curd.

Dhammika is a person with a clear desire to provide for his family by working multiple jobs; during the school day, he drives a school bus, and the rest of the day, he works in their family business, curd manufacturing and delivering fresh milk to "MILCO"... We were relieved to learn that Dhammika is also friendly and helpful shortly after she arrived at our house. While Dhammika began to demonstrate the curd-making process, his wife was frantically moving around the house, attempting to juggle ends in order to serve her unexpected guests. We were all taken aback by her warmth; she never lost her friendly smile. We learned not only about the curd process, but also about the strong bonds shared by family members, which is uncommon in city life. They were all involved in one way or another in order to tie up loose ends in their little family. They were proud of what they did and gladly shared their stories.



On our way back to catch a bus to Dikwella, we did a quick reconnaissance of Dhammika's village (Badagiriya), an underdeveloped area where people must walk for miles to reach the nearest town. On our reconnaissance, we passed by beautiful lakes (Badagiriya maha wewa and Keliyawalana wewa), agricultural farms, herds of buffalo, villages going about their daily business, and, most importantly, the picturesque Badagiriya raja maha Viharaya, built by King Kavantissa in the 2nd century BC and considered the highest peak in the Hambantota district.

Then we said our goodbyes to our wonderful host Vimukthi, who had become a member of our team during our brief stay in Tissamaharama. He helped us in a variety of ways to ensure that our travel goal was met.

After a quick brunch, it was time to move along the southern coast, stopping along the way at a small-scale beeralu lace making center. Weaving beeralu is on the verge of becoming extinct. It is a centuries-old Sri Lankan tradition passed down from coastal generations after being influenced by Portuguese and Dutch colonization. Although it is now an important part of our culture, its history dates back much further than 600 years. The Portuguese women were experts at the craft, and it eventually became a pastime for Sri Lankan noblewomen. According to some folklore, the origins of this industry can be traced back to Kuveni, the mythical queen of the indigenous tribes back in the day. We learned from Mrs. Susila Rajapaksha, who runs the Dikwella Lace Center, that their main goal is to keep this traditional craft alive and pass it on to future generations. And it is quite difficult because it is approaching a decline due to a lack of interest among younger generations and the involvement of modern machinery.

As much as we refuse to believe it, this is the last night we'll be sharing each other's company during this heartfelt adventure that began six days ago... We, on the other hand, prefer to get lost beneath the starry skies, reminiscing about the memorable moments we've shared as the night passes...

## Day 7

The teardrop-shaped southernmost point of mainland Asia became an essential port of call for the first travellers looking for favourable trade winds for onward journeys. This Great Emporium became a major centre of exchange and commerce between the Roman empire's Mediterranean trade and imperial China's wealth. The Portuguese arrived bearing a sword and a cross, the Dutch a ledger and a law book, and the British roads and railways. One well-known example is the ancient Silk Route. Sri Lanka was fortunate to be one of the countries along the ancient Silk Road, where goods were transported by ship to various parts of the world. We had the opportunity to learn and see the entire silk manufacturing process from start to finish at this silk factory in Gintota, which is the only natural silk factory in Sri Lanka that provides this experience. The small-scale factory is run by a family, was damaged by the tsunami, and has since re-entered the industry.

We were astounded to see how silk was extracted from a silk worm cocoon and astounded to learn that 700 meters of silk can be extracted from a single cocoon. Shian, our host, took us on an informative tour of the factory, which educated us greatly.

Shian and his family take pride in their work and have participated in numerous community projects with schools. Before we said our goodbyes, he took us to the back of the factory, where there was a beach, and we had a fruitful conversation, followed by a round of Thambili.

Sri Lanka is a small tropical island off India's southern coast. As you travel from one region to another, you will undoubtedly notice many differences... in topography, cuisine, climate, and even culture, as it is home to a multicultural society that lives in harmony, embracing and respecting each other's differences and beliefs. We've had firsthand experience with these changes as we've traveled along the coast from Passikuddah to Galle over the last week. Most importantly, it was our turn to be drenched!! Actually, we got drenched in it because we had some outdoor activities planned to start the day, but we must admit, we all had a great time!!

It was our second time on this adventure that we decided to go for a cycle ride, and this time we chose an off-the-beaten-path route about 07 kilometers inwards from the historic town of Galle. The ride was nearly 14 kilometers long, mostly on dirt and gravel tracks, passing beautiful landscapes, villages, green paddy fields, tea – rubber plantations, and meeting locals... mostly children, yelling "Yo, what's up??" Clearly, they had been missing the sight of foreigners or local visitors for quite some time. Throughout the ride, rain kept us refreshed and drenched... It was the ideal way to experience a village's awakening, local lifestyle, and a peaceful get-away that we would recommend to anyone.

Wood carving is a method of working with wood using a cutting tool to create a wooden figure or figurine, or the sculptural ornamentation of a wooden object. The ancient art of woodcarving handicrafts has been passed down from generation to generation in Sri Lanka; it requires a unique combination of skill, patience, and creativity. The carvings visible at Kandy's Lankathilaka and Embekke temples are a true testament to this expert craftsmanship.

Following our bicycle ride, we met a family who has been carrying on the wood carving trade for generations, relying on their hands and skill to this day rather than machines, as is widely popular now. Kumara's unique talent and tenacity captivated us. He specializes in carving wooden elephants and stilt fishermen, which are popular with tourists in Sri Lanka's southern region. We were able to witness various stages of a wood carving, which was a memorable experience.

“For uncounted centuries, they came from the four corners of the globe...braving treacherous oceans and cruel currents... howling hurricanes and turbulent tempests... They arrived on the golden beaches of our magical, lush Island of Ceylon in graceful Galleons, Majestic Chinese Junks and sleek Arabian Dhows. They came in search of the most enchanted, fabulous spices in the world. The emissaries of Roman Caesars, Egyptian Pharaohs, and Chinese Emperors arrived. Who valued and treasured True Ceylon Cinnamon and other spices from our Island for their distinct aroma, delectable flavour, and numerous medicinal properties. True Cinnamon- *Cinamomum Zylanicum*' and other spices native to the bewitchingly beautiful Island Nation of Sri Lanka, which has been legendary for its Cinnamon for well over 2000 years. Wars have been waged... The Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupied (but never conquered) the country primarily because of our spices, particularly cinnamon.

Cinnamon was one of the first spices to be traded in the ancient world. Cinnamon was a popular spice in the ancient Arab world, and Arab traders paved the way for Cinnamon to travel a long distance to the European market via the spice route. '*Cinamomum Zylanicum*,' a plant native to Sri Lanka, is a bushy evergreen tree of medium size. Cinnamon grown and produced in Sri Lanka has a long history in the international market due to its distinctive quality, color, flavor, and aroma.

Despite the rain, we've started our journey to Ahungalla to meet Anil, who has pledged his strength to their family's cinnamon plantation. This facility, which dates back to 1958, was founded by his father. Anil's plantation is 35 acres in size and includes a cinnamon processing facility.

The roadway to the plantation starts by passing the Ahungalla railway station and this road laid between thousands of cinnamon trees. The processing facility is entirely filled with a cinnamon aroma which soothed our mind and soul. At the facility, cinnamon trees were being peeled and brought to another set of skilful workers who manoeuvre their knives to remove the bark into two halves from the peeled tree. The Center of the plantation has been occupied by a facility where cinnamon oil is produced, which uses excess cinnamon leaves from the processed cinnamon trees. By doing so, we felt that Anil's cinnamon manufacturing process is being be more sustainable.

Since its first appearance in November, the Pandemic has completely changed our lives. The deadly problem has snaked its way around the world, destroying millions of lives as it grew into a global health crisis. The pandemic has left a deep wound in the travel industry, and it is still bleeding. Staying positive and optimistic is one way to get through it. To keep our interests alive and motivated, we must be resilient and look beyond the daily news.

Since the lockdown, my desire to travel has never been the same. We were all desperate for an opportunity to travel. This adventure not only allowed us to regain our travel momentum, but it also allowed us to discover hidden and lesser-known things and activities that we could recommend to our future travellers, who are out there waiting for the opportunity to pack for a vacation.

Over the course of seven days, we shared a lot of laughter, joy, and good company with each other, as well as with the people we met who were down to earth, emotional, and eager to show us around. Such humility and willingness to share their local knowledge. Despite our hectic schedule, we never missed an opportunity to crack a joke or two while travelling and interacting with people we met in kiosks, villages, trains, and buses. That allowed us to stay awake and alive despite our exhaustion.

It was finally time to say farewell... We ate our final meal together at a nearby café. We've learned a lot... Our seven-day journey was an amazing adventure!! We went through some of our photos, notes in our notebooks, and memories in our minds... Some of what our hosts said to us was still ringing in our ears... We began reliving the events right away.

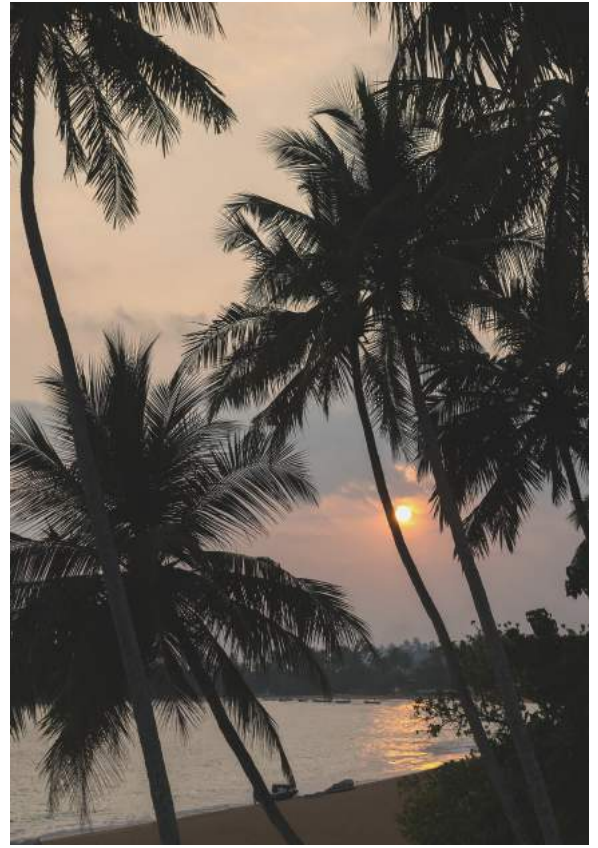
Such gems of ideas and knowledge we gathered by the end of day seven could be quite useful for us when designing products, products with unique touch... including unseen and unheard parts of this exotic destination... knowing the roads and accessing some sites was far different than what we had known and heard of. We were convinced that seeing what you would offer your guests in advance would be more effective than reading about it...





What an adventure! We will treasure every moment and are truly grateful for being given this opportunity, particularly to discover undiscovered experiences in two different parts of the country.

Until we meet again!



# **SOUTHEASTERN BACKPACKING EXPEDITIONS**

**WRITTEN BY  
THE SOUTHEASTERN VOYAGERS**