

# ***SRI LANKA JOURNAL 2003***

*By Phil Chapman*

### Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> April - "Expectations"

We had both been waiting for this for a long time. Work pressures, the cold British winter (despite a warm and sunny March), the so called "War on Terror", our fond memories of past visits to this part of the world; these were all pointing towards a kind of moment of release, a long smooth out breath, that we knew would come as soon as we hit our beds to sleep off the long journey here. Sweet.

When we had got up at 3.30am on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> April it felt like we were playing practical jokes on ourselves. By the time we arrived at our accommodation we had been travelling solidly for 28 hours. We both felt more tired than we had ever felt before, and it was hard to see the funny side of things. The flight had been better than expected though, especially from a culinary point of view, as for the first time ever on a long-haul flight we had vegan food on every leg of the journey. The sandwiches and snacks that we had bought, expecting them to be needed, could now be given to the beach dogs once we had arrived.

We stopped off in Prague, and briefly in Dubai, where the people were friendlier than expected towards us English. The initially serious looking security guard jokingly "beeped" at Scooby as we once again got searched before re-boarding our freshly re-fuelled plane. The rest of the flight went smoothly.

### Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> April - "Arrival"

We had planned to get a taxi from Colombo airport to the railway station, and then travel down to Hikkaduwa from there, which would save us some money. At our taxi driver's suggestion, we quickly reconsidered this plan in light of what an effort it would be to negotiate two large rucksacks and a 7ft surf board bag onto a packed train. By packed we mean packed really tight. Like sardines, or chick-peas in a tin (vegan metaphor version). If we had been more awake, then maybe we could have done it. As it was we just wanted to arrive.

During our taxi journey we only had a couple of near misses, as the driver dodged our taxis, dogs, people, cyclists, cows, huge diesel spewing buses, tuk-tuks, more people, more dogs, more buses..... ad infinitum. I have never smoked forty cigarettes a day (I have never smoked cigarettes), but I got the idea of what it must feel like from all the accumulated diesel fumes and pollution from driving through Colombo. This gradually eased off when we hit the coast road, and by the time we stopped off for coconut water, the roads were much quieter.

We headed straight for Eldora do, skipped the formalities (they could be done later) and went straight to bed, for eight hours. Bliss. We woke up at 4.30pm, and after a quick shower we headed off to check the surf, and general ambience on the beach. The waves were 2-3ft and reasonably clean, despite the on-shore winds. We had drinks at Bandulas Beach Hut and watched the surfers. I felt too tired to go in but there is always that nagging feeling of missing something if you are a surfer, watching others surf. Even if you are tired, even if you have been in earlier, and sometimes even if you have just got out of the sea. I think it is some form of mental illness. Obsessive-compulsive surfing disorder.

As the sun dropped low on the horizon we walked down the beach, sandwiches were given to (at first) reluctant beach dogs, and we headed towards perhaps our most favourite restaurant in the world; Sukhawathi. We were greeted by Kasanjith, and also met his wife and son. We enjoyed once again his gorgeous vegan food, his Yogi tea, and talking to someone on the same wavelength as us. We talked about many things; the war (inevitably), food, the environment, yoga, tourism, and generally caught up with each others lives after two years. He graciously waived the fee for the food (he knew we would be back!) and offered us a lift back to Eldorado. We said we would prefer to walk back along the beach, and we said our goodbyes until breakfast tomorrow.

As we walked back there was lightning in the distance, the cool breeze was blowing off the sea, and it finally sank in that we were back in Sri Lanka.

### Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> April - "Thunder and Lightning"

1am. We can't sleep. Scooby reads while I unpack my surfboard and inspect the damage. Surprise - there is none. The two yoga mats and copious amounts of bubble wrap have done their job. After a couple of minutes the power goes out (no surprise!), and I was left feeling my way around the room in the pitch blackness, and desperately trying to remember where I had left the torch. Bits of surf kit were strewn all over the floor, which made the job even more confusing. Scooby resigned herself to trying to sleep. A few minutes later and another surprise; on came the lights, and most importantly the fan. Relief. Soon after, as the power went out again, we both immediately started to sweat. Two more minutes and it was back on again. This continued for what seemed like an eternity, until we heard the roar of distant thunder. Perhaps that had something to do with it.

It grew louder and nearer. Scooby expressed her thoughts that although she really liked the sound of thunder and the flashes of lightning, she could imagine that the people of Baghdad would not interpret these sights and sounds in a positive way at the moment; there seems to be no escaping this war. Usually Sri Lankans ask a few questions when they meet you. Number one is "Where are you from?". Number two is "What is your profession?". Number three is usually "How do you like Sri Lanka?", or "How long do you stay in Sri Lanka?". On this visit we have noticed that talk turns to questions about the war soon after numbers one or two.

I decide to have a quick shower to cool off. It doesn't work. I am as wet from sweat as I was from water in the shower. Sleep came, eventually. A 6.15am alarm call was ignored. We were both too tired. I will have to wait a little longer before I can surf. We got up at 10.30, had a quick shower, and headed off to Sukhawathi for breakfast. Mmm.....herbal porridge and tropical fruits for me and French onion soup, guacamole and toast for Scooby (preceded by papaya, pineapple and lime juice).

There was more talk of the war, and Kasanjith showed us a paper showing photos of dead civilian casualties, on the Iraqi side. There are many knock on effects of this war, and Iraq is the fourth largest purchaser of Sri Lankan tea under the 'Food for Oil' scheme. Since the war there have been no tea sales to Iraq and no oil to Sri Lanka. As usual the poor suffer most.

Another thing that caught our eyes was a large photo of a Sri Lanka man that Scooby recognised, taking up most of the front page. Kasanjith told us that this man was a very famous singer, and had died from a fall while exiting an airplane. He had been to Dubai for a concert. This man had been on the same flight as us! He had caught our attention on the flight because when the steward was showing him to his seat, the singer had handed him his baggage expecting the steward to put it in the overhead lockers for him. We laughed when the steward handed it him back and gestured for him to do it himself! This wasn't first-class! Kasanjith told us that this singer had a bit of a drink problem, so maybe he had made too much of the complimentary drinks on the flight, when he fell to his untimely death. We were grateful that we had got off first and didn't witness this tragedy. Everywhere we went over the next few days we saw posters of this man, as a kind of an obituary, and tribute to his life and work. There were also many letters in the national papers from readers expressing their grief and sadness at this much loved singer's demise.

After breakfast we strolled up the beach, and had some tea at Bandulas whilst watching the surf. After giving my food some time to go down, I went back and got my board and joined the other surfers in the line-up. Again it was 2-3ft and on-shore, but enjoyable enough, and got plenty of waves on my hybrid Fluid Juice "flying saucer" board. Now that I'm getting on a bit I'm prepared to sacrifice a bit of manoeuvrability for faster paddling. This board is wider and thicker than I am used to and paddles really well. Scooby amused herself with both dogs and Sri Lankans, passing the time just hanging out on the beach. Scooby described my style of surfing as being like an ocean going sea bird; smooth long lines and carves, whilst she observed most of the other surfers as being like small garden birds, with quick, sharp, pecking movements. I think it was a compliment!

We returned "home" to Eldorado for showers and a freshen up before heading off again to Sukhawathi. Dinner was excellent as always. Scooby joked with Kasanjith about whether it was at all possible for him to cook something that was not delicious. We had pizza, chick pea salad, deep-fried tofu in soy/ginger sauce, followed by sticky rice and papaya. Yogi tea made its usual appearance. Kasanjith showed us a couple of mats that he had in case we wanted to use them for yoga. We told him that it was very kind, but that we had brought our own; however when we returned to Hikkaduwa we may try and put on a yoga class there and his mats would be very useful for that.

When we paid for dinner and said "keep the change" Kasanjith attempted to give us our change anyway, and mentioned that he should be giving us a discount for publicising Sukhawathi. We won the "battle of goodwill" on this occasion, and left for a slow walk up the beach in starlight, back to Eldorado, and hopefully sleep.

#### Friday 4<sup>th</sup> April - "Too Tall"

Sleep came eventually (well after 1am), and we were woken by the alarm at 6.30am. Just before I was woken I was dreaming about just going off to sleep. I was just about to drop off.....and then "beep, beep, beep". Reluctantly at first, we made the effort to get up and out. We did a few quick stretches on the beach, and then I paddled out to the surf and Scooby went for a run, going south along the beach. I saw her later from the line-up watching the surf. It was good, 2-4ft and clean off-shore conditions. The swell was a little confused as it lined up on the reef, coming in from many directions. I had my share of waves, but got pitched with the lip on a late take-off and felt the gentle "kiss" of the reef below.

For a reef break the water is quite deep, and thankfully the reef is reasonably flat and not too sharp, so I escaped any injury on this occasion. Later on though, coming up from a duck-dive, I stupidly swung my left foot back and cut my heel on a fin. This is the third time I have cut myself in the same spot, so I really should have learnt my lesson by now. Thankfully it is not as bad as the last time I did it, and I carried on surfing until I got tired. I wanted to try and come in on a good wave, but instead caught a smaller one, just before a large set broke further out. I couldn't be bothered to paddle out again, so caught the white water in, and met up with Scooby. She told me that one guy had come in with only half a board. It had snapped in the middle, and the other half could not be found. The waves certainly packed a punch.

We went back to our room and after a short while did some yoga. I started explaining the sequence of postures at the beginning of the Primary Series (of Ashtanga Vinyasa) to Scooby. She is familiar with them all anyway, just not in the prescribed sequence. It will be useful for us both to practice this ahead of our workshop with John Scott in July, as we are attending a week long "Practice Intensive" with him in Cornwall, and the more we are familiar with the postures the better. Then he will hopefully help us with refining technique rather than having to teach us the correct sequence of Asanas. Now I normally sweat a lot during the sun salutations, but with the heat here I was absolutely drenched after the third sun salute. Scooby however merely "glowed". I don't know how she does it. The sweat was nearly running off me.

Scooby's wrists were a little sore, as she has not done much yoga lately, and I was being very careful with my left big toe as I have an old injury which I habitually keep reawakening. While I am on the subject, I am puzzled and annoyed with how often I have been banging my elbows on every available surface; doors, doorways, tables, armrests, walls, my surf board, etc, etc. I have done this repeatedly over the last two weeks, and now if I knock my elbows even lightly in the right (or wrong) place, I wince with pain. What is that all about? What is the psycho-physical meaning of the elbow? What are my elbows trying to tell me? I wish they would use a less painful method of communication! Perhaps it just comes down to my size. I am a tall, gangly person in a medium sized world. Everything is either too low or too narrow; sinks, door handles, mirrors in bathrooms (for shaving), doorways, roofs and ceilings, work surfaces, etc, are always too low. If there isn't room to "swing a cat" (that enjoys being swung of course!), then there isn't room for me. Scooby on the other hand, being considerably shorter, has the opposite problem.

We got changed and headed off to Sukhawathi for brunch, which was again delicious. Scooby stopped off at the post office and posted a few cards. I should start writing mine soon. We looked at a map and got excited about going over to the east coast. Hopefully we will have a really interested drive over there, and it won't be too hot! Tomorrow though we are planning to travel to Midigama and meet up with Mandy and Alan in Unawatuna in the evening. Mandy may come with us to the east coast. We had an afternoon nap for a couple of hours in an attempt to avoid the midday heat. When we woke up we went out to do a little shopping; Scooby for some sandals and me for some postcards. We both found what we were looking for, with Scooby's sandals costing less than my 17 postcards, after a little haggling of course.

Jupiters was our next stop, for a couple of really good mango juices and some cold water, while we watched life on the beach go by. One surfer was trying to make sense of the messy on-shore surf, and the customary game of cricket was in progress. There was also a westerner teaching a young Sri Lankan boy how to fly a kite. He nearly got the hang of it, but there were some very close calls with passers-by, beach dogs, roofs, and in the end a coconut palm. I had stayed at Jupiters before and we got chatting to the owner and her daughter, who also know a lot of the surfers from Newquay. Simon from Ocean Magic always recommends them to anyone he knows who comes here. They are nice people. We found out some more information about Arugam Bay as well. Apparently there are sand dunes, the sand is very fine, and they told us about a restaurant "Star" and some beach cabanas "Tsunali/Sunali", or something like that. We couldn't quite tell because of their accent. It sounds really nice. Very quiet compared to Hikkaduwa.

On the way back home we stopped off for tea and a chat with a Sri Lankan family. When we here last Scooby took some photos of an old man who always came out to meet us when we passed. He usually had a bright red Hibiscus flower for Scooby and always asked us for cigarettes, no matter how many times we told him that we did not smoke. We sent the photos to him and his family, and they remember us too when we passed. Sadly the old man was in hospital in Unawatuna, as a result of refusing his family's many attempts to get him to stop smoking. When we asked what was wrong with him, his daughter said "head problems", pointed to her head and made a kind of "doo-lally" gesture, so it sounds a little like dementia/Alzheimer's. We said we would take more photos of her family to send back to them when we returned to Hikkaduwa later in the month. Her husband was glued to the cricket; Sri Lanka versus Pakistan. She made us some really good tea, and then we headed off to get changed and ready for Sukhawathi.

I had Rice and Four Curries, and Scooby had Sombrero salad, Potato salad, and Soya Sausages. As usual it was very very good. There was another storm just before we left for home, with more thunder and lightning. Kasanjith offered us a lift home which we gladly accepted. Just a few hundred metres up the road, the ground was dry. No rain had reached there yet, although the few remaining shopkeepers and stallholders were hurriedly packing away for the night. Hopefully the rain will make for a cool night. I've just got some postcards to write before sleep.

#### Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April - "So Enthusiastic"

Another poor night's sleep for me. Scooby slept fine. I was awake until gone 2am, and then the alarm went off at 6.30am. I was too tired to surf, and Scooby didn't want to get up either, so we went back to sleep. Well, Scooby did. I just tossed and turned in the heat until we noticed the time was 10.50am. We had planned to have a relatively early breakfast (oh well!), and then catch a train from Hikkaduwa to Ahangama, and from there get a tuk-tuk to Midigama. However, on the way to Sukhawathi for breakfast our tuk-tuk driver said he would take us to Midigama for Rs700, which is a good price, so instead of fighting the crowds on the train, we took him up on his offer and arranged to meet him after breakfast. On the way there, in the heat of the day, we knew we had made the right decision.

We arrived at the Hilten, and "our old room" was free, so we negotiated a price and settled in. We had stayed here two years ago, and had a really nice time, so we were glad we had the same room. Another bonus was the fact that it was very close to the sea, and at night we would have the cooler sea breeze blowing in through our

window. The room overlooks the main surfing point, a left-hand reef break that peels into a horseshoe shaped bay that is also good for swimming. As I write this, Scooby has already got changed into a bikini to go swimming, and is patiently waiting for me to finish this part of the journal before I join her.

Wow, that's the first time I have felt cool in a few days. We have just been in the sea and there was quite a wind blowing. We both felt a little cold (well, cool) going into the sea, but soon got used to it. Very nice. We've just got time to get showered and changed, and then we are off to Unawatuna to meet up with Mandy and Alan. We caught a bus there, after being spotted at the bus stop by a tuk-tuk driver, and having the usual ritual of him trying to talk us into using his services instead of the bus. We declined his offers of "cheap price".

Unawatuna did not seem to have changed much since our last visit two years ago. There were the usual unsmiling German package tourists, and by the look of them, a few more seasoned travellers. The only thing that we noticed that was different was there was nowhere to change any money. The only place that we found seemed to cater exclusively for German tourists, and the rate they offered us for our pound sterling was laughable.

We bumped into Mandy and Alan by accident. Scooby spotted Mandy in a tuk-tuk, and shouted to her. She did not hear, but luckily the driver did and pulled over. It took a few minutes for them to walk the 10 feet over to where we were, as they had to say hello, get the latest news, and trade a few friendly insults with every passing Sri Lankan. When they made it to us we said our hellos and Mandy proceeded to hug Scooby repeatedly. There must have been a strong bond formed when they met on the previous occasion, doing some modelling for Dominic Burd, photographer, in Plymouth (then again, it was nude). Mandy and Alan were just off to get some money changed in Galle, and a mosquito net, so we arranged to meet them at 7.30pm at Samson's Chai Shop and Restaurant on the beach.

For our evening meal we went to South Ceylon Vegetarian Restaurant. This is the place that Kasanjith from Sukhawathi used to run, and it is now run by his uncle. The menu is mostly the same, except there are fewer dishes, but when it came to ordering, most things were "sorry.....not available". We did find out that Veggie Burger and Chips were, so we settled for those, and very nice they were too. This place has a reputation for slow service, with meals taking anywhere from one to two hours to prepare on a busy night. We were the only customers on this occasion, and the meal was on the table within 20 minutes. This must have been some kind of a record!

The food was good, but the building was getting quite run down. Kasanjith had said that his uncle wanted to sell the place, so he probably didn't want to put any money into it for repairs before he passed it on. It's a shame, as it is a lovely old building with wooden balconies, a well established garden. On previous occasions the toilet was accessed by using the balconies to get to the back of the building heading and heading down the stairs. On this occasion the balconies were probably not safe as I was directed to use the stairs at the front of the building when I needed to relieve myself.

After our meal we walked to the Buddhist stupa on the point, overlooking the ocean and the sunset on one side, and the reef and sweeping sandy bay on the other. As the sun drops and the lights of the restaurants come on, the bay is lit up with green, red, orange and yellow lights, and looks very colourful and inviting. We went to meet Mandy and Alan at Samson's at 7.30pm, but did not take into account the fact that they operate on "Sri Lankan time", and turned up just as we were about to leave at 8.20pm. There were handshakes all round, and there was more hugging of Scooby by Mandy. Mandy and Alan seemed to know everyone around, and they have a permanent entourage of Sri Lankans who are always at their side to provide various services.

At first we were a little sceptical of this situation, thinking that the Sri Lankans were only there for the money, but Alan has been coming to Unawatuna for ten years, and Mandy for five, so they do have many friends, and both parties seem to profit from the situation. One thing that was very noticeable was the amount that Mandy and Alan dominated the conversation. They only seemed to have a passing interest in what others were saying

and that was if it related to them and what they were doing. Perhaps I am being overly harsh, but first impressions count, and perhaps we thought we were boring and quiet.

We discussed plans to go to Arugam Bay, and they were very vague about whether they would actually go or not (vague, but enthusiastic). In the end, they said they would go, but only for the drive there and back, to help out with the driving for another friend with whom they had struck up a special deal for us for the taxi fare. As it turned out the "special deal" was the same as we had been previously quoted elsewhere, Rs6000. Also, we had to wait for the van to be fixed, the seats to be reinstalled, and the air-conditioning to be fixed. Mandy and Alan were still enthusiastic about going though. They seemed to be enthusiastic about everything. If we had said that we were going to the moon on Wednesday, I'm sure they would have been enthusiastic about coming along, and would surely be able to arrange a special rate for us for the fare.

We had to leave, as time was getting on, and we didn't want to be stuck in Unawatuna for the night, so we said our goodbyes, shook lots of hands, and there were more hugs for Scooby. Even I got one just as we were leaving. We caught a bus really quickly, and struck up a few conversations with the passengers sat next to us. Most were on route from Colombo to Matara. The journey must be so much better at night with fewer vehicles on the road and less diesel fumes.

On arriving back at our room, we found that there was no power. Every other room had power but not us. There had been power earlier in the day. When faced with the prospect of another hot night without a fan to cool us, we decided to swap rooms for the one next door. After moving all of our kit over to our new room, we both used the toilet, and discovered that the handle for the flush was broken off. I, with my limited plumbing knowledge, stuck my hand in the cistern and flushed it using the mechanism inside. As soon as I did, water poured out across the floor, which thankfully was from the feed into the toilet bowl rather than the flow out. Then the lights went out. A power cut. Great. It seemed like we were in for a hot night anyway. Then, after only about 15 minutes the power was returned, and we could settle down to sleep. For some reason though, neither of us could settle. It was close to 2am when we dropped off, so it would be another poor night's sleep.

#### Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April - "Local Knowledge"

We were woken by the alarm at 6.30am, and after a short while we got up. I checked the surf and there were already about six surfers out. I returned to the room and got ready to go. I couldn't find my wax comb, which is used to roughen the surface on the top of the board for more grip. It must have gone missing during our removals in the darkness last night. When I paddled out everyone was happy and smiling, a real contrast to Hikkaduwa, where the vibe is very competitive. I got lots of waves, probably as many or more than the other surfers out there put together. I put this down to the fact that they were all sitting too wide of the take-off point, so each time I paddled back out, I paddled to the same vacant spot where the wave first shows itself to the reef. A few of the others paddled over, as they could see I was catching quite a few waves, but the others were happy to wait for the waves that came in wide. I stayed out for a long time, risking sunburn, and receiving another little 'kiss' from the reef when I wiped out on take-off. When my shoulders and neck started to really ache from all the paddling, I caught a wave in.

Scooby had been amusing herself in the small lagoon that the low tide had revealed on the reef. She saw lots of fish, and a sea-slug/cucumber type creature. There were a group of Sri Lankan youths who started to invade her space a bit, but with a polite but firm tone, she stated that she wanted to be left in peace. Miraculously this worked. We had breakfast at the Hiltens, which despite the owner's description was quite good. We had mango, pineapple and bananas, followed by lots of toast, with some pate that I had brought with us. The remainder of the toast was eaten with jam and bananas in a sandwich 'stylee'. We also had a pot of tea. Everything that we could not manage was polished off by the ants, which move in quickly in these parts. As I write this we are trying desperately not to fall asleep, so that we are good and tired this evening. We manage it and head off to William, to look for photo opportunities, money-changers, and also a possible taxi to Arugam Bay.

When we arrived, we asked around a few of the phone and internet places to see if they would change money, but without any joy. As it is a Sunday, none of the banks are open, but the rest of the town is a hive of activity. There are market stalls lining the streets, and rows of various plastic utensils, ceramic pot and kitchen utensil stalls. Scooby spotted a particularly photogenic one but when she asked if she could take a photo the answer was a firm "no". As we walked on we were approached by a tuk-tuk driver asking if we wanted to go anywhere. When we said "yes, Arugam Bay in a taxi", he was initially surprised, but then walked off to speak to an acquaintance. He came back, and we negotiated a price of Rs4500, which was really cheap. As it turned out though, the taxi driver turned out to be a friend with a van. When this friend went off to speak to another taxi driver, he must have been told the going rate, because when he returned the price had miraculously jumped Rs7000. We said we would think about it and walked away surprisingly easily with no further haggling.

As we walked further on, we were again approached by a tuk-tuk driver, but his whole approach was much more low-key. His name was Indee, "like India", and his one-month old tuk-tuk had some carefully placed surfing stickers positioned at strategic points, for maximum visibility. One of these was a 'MMY', or 'Marsh Mellow Yellow' surfboards sticker, from my home town of Newquay. It turns out that Indee surfs, and lots of travelling surfers leave their boards with him to avoid the hassle of travelling with a board when they next come here. He assured me that he looks after them very well, and I believed him.

Indee was the man with true local knowledge. His English was good, and he had all the connections. In five minutes we were sat in the private home of a gem and jewellery factory owner who also does a little unofficial money changing business. We negotiated a good rate, and were then led into a back room through a hidden doorway. The room was lined with display cabinets, full of all kinds of gems and jewellery. There were more display cases in the centre of the room and a European woman, perhaps Danish, was looking at some silver and seemed to be negotiating a price. Everything in Sri Lanka has three prices; the real price, the price they are asking, and the price you are willing to pay. Hopefully, you have your wits about you, and negotiate to somewhere near the real price. One example of this is fares. Alan had told us a story that on a previous visit he had just got off the plane, and caught a bus down the coast. He knew the real price, so handed his money to the bus conductor before anyone had said anything. A Japanese tourist was also on the bus, and when he asked how much the fare was, the conductor said Rs500. The real price was closer to Rs10 but the Japanese guy was reaching for his wallet and just about to pull out a crisp RS500 note, when the conductor's cover was blown by Alan and some fishermen's wives. The women were in control of the situation and were saying that they didn't want tourists to think that all Sri Lankans were crooks. In the face of such ferocious opposition, the conductor had no choice but to concede.

As we were changing our travellers' cheques, Scooby thought to ask the gem people if they knew of any taxi drivers that could take us to Arugam Bay. Ten more minutes later, and after a few calls on the mobile phone, we were all set. We would be picked up at 6am on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup>. The fee would be Rs6500. This was the most concrete offer we have received so we went for it. Unknown to us at the time, but not to the jewellers, Indee had been doing some asking around, and had found us someone who would do it for Rs7000. The jewellers told us that they would prefer it if we did not tell Indee about our taxi deal, as he may be offended, and he brings them trade. They did not want to lose his goodwill. Who knows, perhaps it was the same taxi driver that they had both approached! After all this taxi business, the jewellers said, "and now to our business". Here we go! Out came the trays of earrings, necklaces, etc., and then came the 'not too hard sell'. We explained that money was tight, and that we would call in before we left Sri Lanka if we had any money left for presents. We did genuinely enquire about a few pieces, but the price seemed to go up the more interest we showed so we thought it best to leave.

Afterwards, Scooby and I both confessed that we had been wary of being ripped off by these people in some way, either by giving us forged notes (more on that later) or somehow ruining our travellers cheques, and giving us no money. As it was, we had to sign a receipt for sale of goods before we could get our money. This was their way of hiding the transaction from the authorities. When we left, Indee was waiting for us outside, and

informed us of his deal with the taxi. We had to make our excuses, as we had given our word to the jewellers that we would not tell Indee about the taxi they had arranged. However we did employ his services for a tuk-tuk ride back to Midigama, stopping en-route for some photos of the beautiful little island in Weligama Bay called Taprobaine. Arthur C Clarke used to rent this island (he of '2001 - A Space Odyssey' fame), and now it is up for rent for \$500 per night. Bankers and 'high-flyers' from Singapore and Hong Kong who have plenty of money, rent it out on a regularly basis for holidays and also for weddings and other events. Our next stop on from here was 'Coconut Plantation', a surf spot that Indee said he would show us. It turns out that we had been here before as it was just up the road from Midigama. Indee gave us plenty of tips on where to paddle in and out, wind conditions, etc. Good man. When he dropped us back at the Hilten, we gladly took his card as he was a good person to know, with an abundance of local knowledge.

We changed and went for a swim to cool off. Well we were going to, but the tide was high, the wind was making the sea very choppy, and so we decided to just 'play' on the beach instead. We came up with a game where we would find two similar bits of driftwood (well 'drift spiky seed pod' in this case), and then we threw them out to sea, and waited to see whose would wash into the beach first. It made sound a little tame, but we enjoyed it, and it was made more difficult by racing to pluck our items out of the powerful shore break without getting swept off our feet. Then there were the dogs. We got play fighting with two pups and another older dog, all identical apart from a darker muzzle on the older one. This was actually initiated by one of the pups, who came racing up behind us while we were sat looking out to sea, and then dug its paws into the sand to come to an abrupt halt just inches from my back. This sent sand flying all over us, and so the games began. After a while the dogs got bored of us and went their own way. Earlier in the day we had seen the mother of some pups at the Hilten pulling a big hunk of fish (at least 3lbs of rotting fish) out of the sea, and tucking into it on the sand. It looked disgusting to us but she seemed to be enjoying it. Later on we saw another skinnier mother also tucking in. She needed it more, as she really did look like a 'bag of bones'.

We headed back to our room. On the way we were accosted by the proprietor, who attempted to talk us into eating there this evening. He was a little too forceful, so we said we were meeting friends elsewhere. When will Sri Lankans learn that we westerners do not like to be hassled or cajoled into anything? We headed out to a place called 'Lace Rock', one km up the road. We had visited this restaurant twice two years ago, and although the food was good (vegetable biriani) it was a little too peppery for our tastes. The owner had also constantly 'buzzed' around our table, interrupted our conversation (or quiet), and here's that word again, 'hassled' us to stay in one of his rooms. We had forgotten all this when we headed there for our meal this evening but it all came flooding back as the events repeated themselves. The food was good though. Scooby had vegetable noodles, and I had rice and curries. Everything was tasty, but the curries had psychedelic amounts of chilli in them, and when Scooby asked me whether I was getting bitten by mossies I had to confess that I couldn't feel anything from my forehead down! Apart from a salad of tomatoes and onions, everything was hot. Scooby asked to try some of the dhal and asked if it was hot. I said no. It was the dish that I ran to, to cool my mouth down after the others. The food must have been hot, as Scooby could not even bear one mouthful of dhal. I managed (relished even) it all apart from the coconut sambol. This seemed to consist of 50% grated coconut and 50% red chilli, and had a lovely aromatic smoky flavour. Until the heat kicked in that is. Then it was all I could do to regain my composure and banish the stars from before my eyes. I had eaten a grand total of  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon of this dish. I really don't know how the Sri Lankans can eat this and not cry.

When we finished our meal we had to endure more hassling about having a room there and whether we would be back for breakfast or an evening meal tomorrow. We were suitably non-committal. One of the waiters also brought out a £10 and asked what it was worth. He seemed surprised when we told him Rs1500. He then asked us to change it for him, as he did not have a passport and the banks would not let him do this without one. I was a little reluctant but Scooby said that she would do it. It was quite dark in the place and so I held the note up to what remained of the sunset out to sea, and it became obvious that the note was not real. It looked like it had just been photocopied onto normal A4 paper and cut down to size. The silver band was just printed onto one side in a series of dots instead of threading in and out of both sides of the note, and the images of the queen

were far from flattering. The waiter seemed surprised when we pointed these things out to him but we both wondered whether he had known it was not real all along and was just trying to pull a fast one on us. We paid for our food and got a tuk-tuk back to our room. Scooby read and fell asleep (until I accidentally woke her) and I got busy writing. We were both confident of a good nights sleep and just hoped that our earlier session of mending holes in the mossy net would prevent a repeat of last nights feeding frenzy for the 'little buggers'.

### Monday 7<sup>th</sup> April - "Monsoon Surf"

Well, for the first time since we arrived here we both had a pretty good nights sleep. We were still a bit reluctant to get out of bed at 6.30am when the alarm went off, but did it anyway. The surf was bigger than yesterday, about 3-5ft and a little wild. It was messed up by a cross/off-shore wind as well, and there was a group of surfers on the beach debating whether to go in or not. Some of the bigger set waves closed out across the whole bay, and repeatedly cleaned-up their mates who were sat a little too far inside. We all watched for a minute or two and then made our way out-back. When we were out there it didn't seem quite as bad as it had from the beach, but then a large set came through and washed us all further inside. Some surfers gave up on it and paddled back to the beach, or caught the white water in. A group of five of us started to catch a few waves, but it was difficult to know where to sit. If we waited for waves to peel left around the point, then we would get trashed by the bigger close out sets. If we paddled out further then it was hard to catch anything, and we were on the edge of a strong rip pulling us out to sea which we had to be constantly aware of. Soon there were only 3 of us, and for 45 minutes we praised the fact that we had the place to ourselves. When a big set came through and they both caught waves in, I was left out there on my own. I caught a couple more waves and then a Sri Lankan surfer came out on a board borrowed from one of the hotels. He was followed by a French guy, but they both got washed in by the bigger waves and soon returned to the beach. I had a few more waves to myself, and then caught one in to the beach to meet Scooby on the reef and go for breakfast.

We had the same as yesterday; fruit followed by toast and pate, then toast and jam and sliced bananas, all washed down with more tea. It's not a bad breakfast for a travelling vegan. After breakfast we paid for our room and food, and then went out onto the reef to look for fish and anything else we could see. We really enjoy wading around on the reef. There were many parts that are too sharp or rocky for our delicate feet, but other parts are carpeted with a blanket of sand and plants, that is soft enough to walk on. At first we were greeted by a mass of crabs fleeing our presence. This is followed by fish and other creatures. There are fish that jump from rock to rock and have legs (perhaps not fish at all!). We have seen sea cucumbers, clams, starfish, sea urchins and many different types of fish and crustaceans. The crabs move incredibly fast over the rocks. We spend an hour or so there looking at everything and being washed around by the currents as the waves wash over the reef on one side and the water gets channelled through a rock gorge as it drains off the other side. Sometimes waves wash over both the left and right and the water level raises considerably. The sun got the better of us, and we went back to our room to get ready to go out. We ended up cuddling and falling asleep on the bed. We woke up at 2pm and headed out. We posted some postcards in Weligama and got snacks for the journey to Arugam Bay tomorrow. At one shop we bought some crisps that had a small bouncy ball free with each packet. The two girls behind the counter found it hilarious, that we adults were buying a snack for babies (meaning children). When I put my thumb in my mouth to suck and said that I was a baby, they collapsed in hysterics.

Scooby also bought 3 tins of finest mackerel to feed to the 3 dogs that belong to our hotel. Two of the mothers are nursing, and one in particular looks very undernourished. Scooby also, after a little searching around, bought a tin opener to open the cans.

After this we got a tuk-tuk to Marissa, a quiet sweep of a sandy bay, a little like Unawatuna. There is good surf here when the wind is right, but this afternoon the wind was on-shore and no-one was out. We had some drinks and walked to the other end of the beach. Here there is a small 'island', little more than an outcrop of rocks with some grass type greenery covering one side. This side was also sloping at a 45 degrees angle, and parts of

it were quite smooth. Two Sri Lankan boys were pulling out handfuls of grass, bunching them up, and using them to sit on when they slid down the side of this rocky outcrop. It looked like fun.

Just on the other side of the island from the main tourist beach, long peeling waves were breaking over a reef, some for as much as 250 metres. I have never heard of people surfing these waves. Perhaps there are hidden rocks or the reef is too shallow. It really looked like it had a lot of potential. It was a good size too, probably 5' on the set waves. We both took a few photos; me of the waves and the 'sliding' and Scooby of a boat that was bobbing around in the shore break. We both quite like it here and discussed the possibility of coming back here to stay a while if we didn't like it over at Arugam Bay. Then we went to get some food. We had the vegan staple diet in these parts (well, pretty much the only thing available apart from curry), vegetable fried rice and vegetable noodles. We splashed out on a plate of boiled vegetables too, but these were just a few carrots, potatoes and green beans. We drank what is becoming a favourite cool drink, ginger beer.

After our meal we headed back to Midigama in a tuk-tuk and Scooby fed the dogs. A few small disagreements broke out with the dogs over this gourmet meal, but overall they seemed to be really appreciative of it. We were trying to do this out of sight of the hotel owner, in case he took offence. He did not mind at all, as he came walking around the corner just as Scooby was dishing out the second tin, and was friendly and chatty.

We went to pack our bags and 30 minutes later the owner came knocking on our door saying that two men were here about the taxi we had coming in the morning. This seemed a little strange, so I went to investigate. The driver, whose English was very poor, and someone who worked for the jewellery people in Weligama were waiting by the gate. They said they had been asked to get an Rs3000 advance from us to 'prepare the van, fill up with fuel, etc'. I told them that this was not what had been owner if I could use his phone. Every time we phoned the line was busy, so they suggested that they would phone the hotel later to speak arranged and that they could have some money in the morning, when we were on our journey. They asked me to phone the jewellers in Weligama to tell them that I would not be paying in advance, and I began to go along with this, asking the hotel to us once they had cleared it with their bosses. At this point Scooby came over to us and when I told her what was going on, she just stated in a very assertive way that either they stick to the original plan and come and pick us up in the morning or we would go elsewhere, no phone calls, no messing around. That did the trick and suddenly they did not need any advance, and told us they would be here in the morning at 6am. Sometimes you really have to have your wits about you and stand your ground, and Scooby did a fine job. I just hope the taxi is here in the morning. We spent the rest of the evening packing, and getting everything sorted for the morning.

### Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> April - "To Arugam"

The alarm went off at 5.30am, but we had both been awake since 5am. We quickly got to work sorting out the few last things to do before we left, like packing toiletries and putting my surf shorts and rash vest, which had been drying overnight, into my board bag. While I was doing this, the Beach Boys lyrics "something tells me I'm into something good" were running around my head. Weird.

I went to see if the taxi had arrived at 6am. It wasn't there, and the gate to the hotel was still chained shut as well. I headed back to the room and checked 10 minutes later. Still no taxi. 6.15am and still no taxi. The commotion from the dogs was enough to wake the hotel owner though, and he came and unlocked the gate. When the taxi was still not here at 6.20am, I became suspicious, and told Scooby that I had been wondering if the hotel owner had taken note of the taxi peoples phone number, and had phoned them to tell them we had cancelled, thereby giving him a cut of any deal he arranges or more rent for us if we had to stay longer. I have a suspicious mind. Right on cue, the hotel owner came over to us and said, "If taxi not come, I have some friend who can arrange". Scooby and I both looked at each other and agreed that we just wanted to get there. At this point we didn't care who drove us and we were just about to get into the details of this with Saman, the owner, when the taxi pulled into the gates. Phew! Our worries were not over just yet though, as two different men from the night before got out, and came towards us. It turns out that we were just being a little paranoid, because these men explained that the first taxi driver had another job, and as they spoke English it would be

better for them to drive us. We again checked the deal; Rs6500 to Arugam Bay, and this was again agreed. So off we went.

We waved goodbye to Saman and set off on our journey. It was good to be up and driving into the sunrise. We drove south along the coast road to Matara. We had been here before, and not really enjoyed the experience. It was too hot and dusty and didn't hold our interest for long. Everything east of Matara was new to us. We headed south east past Dondra Head, Sri Lanka's most southerly tip. All along this coast there must be many surf spots, and I was on the look out for any I could see. I had heard about a break at Dikwella and saw a few possibilities as we passed through, heading north easterly now, with the road hugging the coastline. We passed through Tangalle, a place that we had read about in the Lonely Planet guide and had thought about visiting before. However, we were on a mission to get to Arugam Bay, so we didn't hang around. We passed through Ambalantota, but at Hambantota, the next town, we pulled over for the driver to have a break, and some breakfast. I used the café toilet, and it was on a par with the dirtiest ones I had ever seen. Just outside the rough wooden door, a bowl of soaked red lentils was sat on an equally scummy ledge, waiting to be cooked up for lunch. I was glad we had brought our own food for the journey.

On the edge of Hambantota lies one of Sri Lanka's two salt factories (the other is further north near Negombo). The factory employs 1500 workers. Twice a year huge holding fields are irrigated with sea water, and then left to dry out for the next six months. After the salt is gathered using machines and is left in huge long lines, perhaps 5' high and 100' long. They look like hug lines of cocaine, ready and waiting to be snorted by an evil deity (well they would do if they weren't covered over with thatch). One surprising feature of this landscape is the huge wind generators that line the back edge of the salt lagoons. Just for a moment I was reminded of Cornwall.

From Hambantota we skirted the top of Bundala Sanctuary, a relatively small area of nature reserve. Here the scenery begins to change more dramatically, and we could have been driving across the plains of Africa. There were fewer people around, and the building went from concrete to crude bricks, and finally to mud huts. There were many paddy fields though, before we entered drier areas and our taxi driver told us that sometimes the people have trouble finding enough water. The roads were totally straight at times, and could have been 'built by the Romans'. We passed through another sanctuary, and headed towards Wellawaya. Mountains rose up in the distance and we were reminded of our climb up Adams Peak on our last visit. Other smaller hills looked reminiscent of the landscape in Snowdonia, only a lot hotter!

We passed through more plains, more paddy fields, and also passed lots and lots of cows. When we reached Wellawaya we turned right on to the A4. This was a good road, and we thought we were making good time, but as we drive on there were more and more police checkpoints, more potholes, more bends, and this took its toll on our driver (and us) and we pulled over for another break at a small shack in the middle of nowhere. The driver and his friend had tea, and cigarettes, and I had a ginger beer, 'made using real ginger'! One of the guys who was hanging around this shack was obviously the local 'Village Idiot'. He was annoying, but amusing, and made a game out of seeing who he could pinch on the chest. He was singing to himself and, although he was incredibly thin, he gave half of his cake to a much healthier looking dog nearby. When we pulled away in the van, we left him singing his head off, and the taxi driver just remarked, "Mental problems".

From the small town of Monaragala the road deteriorated further. It was narrow single-track carriageway, with a few passing places, and sand and dust was blown across the road in places. On one stretch, we had to crawl along at 1 mph over a surface that resembled the moguls of a ski run more than a road. Earlier we had passed through paddy fields, plantain, banana and rubber plantations. Now it was back to the open plains, and we both had our eyes glued to the horizon for wild elephants. As we got nearer the coast the police "Special Task Force" checkpoints got more and more frequent. Scooby wondered what their 'special task' was, and I suggested it was dealing with the Tamil Tigers, who until recently had been engaged in terrorist swoops and civil war throughout this part of the country, and along the coast right up to the north.

We came to yet another National Park (Latugala Kitulana) and everywhere there were signs stating 'no entry without permits'. Eventually we reached the heavily guarded entrance to Pottuvil, and its ramshackle, almost 'Wild Western' main street. From here we took a right turn, and saw dunes before us, then a brief glimpse of Arugam Bay itself. Straight after the Pontoon Bridge, and the first building on the left, is the Stardust Hotel. This is the premier place to stay in Arugam Bay, and would normally be out of our budget, but we knew we would be tired when we got here after our six hour journey, and wanted to treat ourselves a little. They have their own website as well, and like many others, we got most of our knowledge about the place from their website. The website has some good surfing information and even some photos of the main surf point as well. I think a lot of travellers arrive here, find their feet and then find cheaper accommodation further along the road. This was our plan also.

We settled in a little to our 'thatched bungalow' (read: detached room with en-suite), and then went to check out the beach and walk up to the surf point. This should be a 20 minute walk, but it ended up taking us 1 ½ hours with all the diversions. As we walked out of the Stardust and onto the beach, we were immediately taken with the huge expanse of beach, and were quickly chaperoned by the hotel dogs. Just as quickly we were descended upon by a group of children of all ages, from about 7 to 13 and possibly their mum. They immediately asked us to take their photos. Scooby's eyes lit up! She whipped out her camera and before we knew it these kids were strutting around like supermodels, and posing in our sunglasses. They kept us there for a while asking all the usual questions, "Where are you from?", "What is your name?", "Your job?", etc, and amusing themselves by interrogating Scooby about what she had in her bum-bag. After we moved on we were soon accosted by a couple of people who had rooms, but when we looked they all seemed dirty and grubby. I think we have been spoiled by the Stardust.

We moved further on, and Scooby saw some photo opportunities among the rows of fishing boats, and then we came to the surf point. It was a reef/point break that breaks very close to the shore on a shallow reef, and I must admit looked a little scary to me. It was on-shore and 2' to 3', with one guy out. He wasn't catching many waves, but he caught enough to show me how the place works. You walk up to where the wave starts, time the sets and wait for a lull, then wade out carefully over the reef and paddle like hell for the outside. He made it out with only one duck dive. After each wave he rode, he would paddle a little further around the point, pick up his board and carefully wade back to the beach. This was obviously much quicker and easier than paddling all the way back around the point to the take off zone. We watched him go through this routine a few times, and then walked further on, past the surf break and on to a totally deserted expanse of beach that stretched out for miles and miles in front of us. There was a tangible sense of how remote this area is, that we both picked up on.

As we climbed up one of the dunes Scooby pointed to a series of tracks in the sand and attempted to convince me that they were the tracks of a cobra. Just for a second the thought did cross my mind, and there may well have been snakes about, but from that moment on everything was snake-related - "watch out for that snake hole!", "look out for that snake over there" (a dried up piece of wood - rigour mortis must have set in!), etc.

Back on the beach, we came across a large dead white bulbous fish, covered in 2" long sharp spikes, each one like a heavy duty needle. I am glad that I did not meet it in the water as it looked like it could prove painful.

Dusk would not be long, and it was strange to think that we were by the sea, and yet the sun would be setting over the land. We are so used to it being the other way around, and setting over the sea. We started walking back and were called over by a group of Sri Lankans who were sat watching the waves and the lone surfer. They immediately began thrusting roasted peanuts at us, more than we could possibly eat. That didn't stop me trying, as we talked and again answered the usual questions. They were soon joined by three more Sri Lankans, who were all deaf and using sign language. It turns out that all 11 of these people were sisters, brothers and uncles and we actually communicated better with the deaf guys, as they had a wicked sense of humour, and also a pen and paper and excellent written English. We laughed and joked with them, while in the background two Sri

Lankan soldiers walked past in full camo gear and semi automatic rifles at the ready. A pleasant evening stroll after a hard day's soldering or patrolling the eastern borders of a disputed territory? We may never know.

One thing that has struck us about this place is the good will and friendliness of the people. Sure, there are a few who come over to speak just to get you to their rooms, restaurant, or safari nature tour. The majority however, are just intensely interested in who we are, and the type of lives we lead. This is all a little strange to us considering that here on this part of the coast the people are 88% Muslim, and at this very moment "our boys" are bombing the hell out of their brothers in Iraq. In the last few days we have come into contact with more and more Muslims (our taxi drivers were also), and not one of them has mentioned the war. We debated whether this is because they know that it is not the doing of the majority of people in the UK, that we are opposed to war. It could also be that we are too polite to mention it, and for fear that they will that they will pull out huge knives and "slit the throats of the infidels"!

Back to the Stardust and to food. There were many signs up around the restaurant stating, "No food orders after 6pm", but when I went to get some more free drinking water for our room (the water here is double filtered and UV treated, and really good to drink), the waiter asked if we wanted to eat. He said it is OK to order food still (maybe because they are quiet?) and so that is what we did. We had looked at the menu earlier, and it was expensive for Sri Lanka but we had heard the food here was good so again we treated ourselves. You've got to have a little luxury in life every now and then.

I ordered bread and humus, and vegetable stir fried noodles with soy sauce and ginger. Scooby had salad and chips. Now apart from the bread and humus, this could sound to you like lots of the other meals we have had in the past few days, but let me assure you this was in a whole different class. The humus was fresh and made with real olive oil, tahini, chick peas, lime and garlic. It was topped with sliced olives and sprinkled with fresh herbs. The bread was home baked that morning. The noodles were delicious, with real, brewed soy sauce and a strong taste of ginger. Scooby's salad was really good too; more humus, green leaves, grated beetroot, carrot, asparagus, sauerkraut, olives, and another vegetable that we couldn't quite work out, all in their own individual dressings. The chips weren't bad either. This was followed by home made sorbet; a scoop each of papaya, pineapple and coconut and vanilla (my personal favourite). They were all good, but the coconut and vanilla was one of the most delicious things I have ever tasted.

Our glasses of water were kept constantly full by the waiter, and I personally felt a little out of place. I'm not used to the silver service approach, but I was willing to try and 'fake it' in this new found world of luxury. The food was added to our room bill, and we retired to sleep. Before sleep we discussed how long we could afford to stay here. We were getting spoiled!

#### Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> April - "Elephants don't have headlights"

We had not set any alarms this morning as we wanted to sleep well and recover from yesterdays drive here. I still woke up before dawn and thought about going surfing. I was still tired though, and decided to sleep for longer instead. That way I would be feeling fresher tomorrow morning, and I could have my first Arugam surf experience then. We both slept until around 10 o'clock, and Scooby made the first moves to get up. I could have slept for even longer, but she was right when she said we should get up or we might not be able to sleep tonight. We had showers and shaves (my face and Scooby's legs), and went and sat in the shade in the gardens overlooking the beach. We ate dried fruits and nuts that I have brought with us from England; almonds, figs, sultanas, etc as I wanted to use them up so we did not attract any "wildlife" to our room. I still have more food to use up, but that could be saved for tomorrow.

We had decided to stay here at the Stardust for four nights in total. Luxury. We may even have stayed longer if they had not been totally booked up for the Sri Lankan New Year, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> April. With this festival in mind, we thought we had better arrange our next accommodation ahead of time, in case the whole place filled up over the next few days, and we were left without a room. We went down the road to hotel Tsunami. We'd had a

quick look at the place yesterday, and chatted with some of the guests who were more than happy with the place. We saw a couple of the rooms, and they were quite nice, but we had a few security issues with the rooms and wanted to check elsewhere, to get the idea of the standard of rooms and prices generally in the area. A little further down the road is the Aloha hotel. We went through the gate, but could see no-one around. On closer inspection we found a sleeping Sri Lankan in what looked like the workers rooms, but our shouts of "hello" failed to wake him, so we moved on (the place was still in the process of being built anyway). We checked another place a little further on, and this was of a similar standard to the Tsunami, only a bit more expensive. Strangely when we mentioned where we were staying (The Stardust), the price went up further, but we held the owner to his original price. We didn't make any definite commitment to move in, and carried on our search. On the opposite side of the road, a little further down, is the 'Hideaway'. This place was a cut above everything else we had seen, but the amount of people around let us know that it may be full. A quick chat to the owner, a lovely smiley Sri Lankan lady, confirmed this. Damn. Maybe we should have come here first. Oh well, we would continue our search. Just across the road is the Hilton Hotel, one of the cheaper places that The Stardust recommends on their website. We disturbed the owner from a siesta and he got tangled up in his hammock as he got up to meet us, which had us all in a jolly mood. He was incredibly laid back, and had a permanent smile glued to his face. He showed us two standards of rooms, and to be honest both would have been OK for us. They were cheap too; Rs 500 and Rs 400, and we went for the more expensive option, which had a fresh coat of paint, new mosquito nets, and surprise surprise, spring mattresses. All the other beds we had slept on had quite thin but adequate foam rubber mattresses; even The Stardust. The only problem with the Hilton was that the rooms we wanted had been provisionally booked for one night on the 16<sup>th</sup>, but we came to a deal with the owner and we could stay in one of the cheaper rooms for this night then move back into the first one. The cheaper rooms had been wallpapered with photos from surfing magazines by a group of Israeli surfers who had stayed for a long time last year. The owner apologised but it was OK with us.

Like all the hotels, this place had its own restaurant. When we asked what the food was like and told him we were vegetarians, he gave us a quick smile and his reply. Obviously he wasn't going to say, "Oh its crap" but we liked his answer. He said, "Once you try this, you no need to ask again and when everyone try this food once, they like, they come back". This remained to be seen (and tasted) but we were hopeful. We booked in for the 12<sup>th</sup> and were relieved that we had found somewhere that we could feel confident about, and for a good price too. The only niggles were that we'd have to move rooms for one night, and the possible disturbances at night around the Sri Lankan New Year (the owner had warned us about the possible noise).

We returned to the Stardust and put our food order in for later on. We had the same as yesterday, only I had vegetable fried rice rather than noodles. After this we headed out to walk along the beach, in the opposite direction this time. As yesterday, it was quite hard going underfoot, with the sand being firm in places, but mostly soft and yielding, making our progress slow. Another factor halted our progress were the kids that came rushing out of the fishing huts as we passed, waving frantically and shouting "hello, hello, hello", at the top of their voices. When Scooby got our some 'school pens' they grabbed the lot and then had the cheek to ask for some money too. When this wasn't forthcoming, they pushed us away, saying "you go now". Cheeky. We were held up by more kids, and chatted briefly to a few people that we met, but for the most part this section of beach was deserted. Powerful swells rushed up the steep beach, and back out to sea to meet the incoming waves head on. This caused huge explosions of water and foam, and also carved a vertical drop into the sand at the waters edge, which gave way like a crumbling cliff when the bigger waves came in. There were fishing boats just back from this section, and we wondered how on earth they got them down this vertical drop. We found out that fishing from there was only seasonal, and the boats had not been used since the previous season when the differing wind and swell direction changed the shape of the beach, and made it relatively easy to launch the boats.

We continued on, hoping to walk as far as Pottuvil Point, another surf spot that only starts working when Arugam Bay is a decent size. I think we nearly got there, but it was getting darker and we had ordered our food for 7.30pm, so we headed back. We met many of the same characters on the beach as on the outward leg of our

journey, and a few others. We were again greeted by the 'schoolpen wielding' group of kids we met earlier demanding more pens and money. We also met an extremely friendly owner of a small restaurant among the fishing huts, who implored us to visit him and have some food. He was a Muslim, and asked where we were from. We said England, and he asked us what we thought of Muslims. Scooby said, "All religions are the same", and I added that we liked all the Muslims we had met saying that everyone was very friendly. This pleased him and he said, "English and Sri Lankans the same", and added, "All people the same". He asked our religion and we said, "Pagan". This isn't really true and he had not heard of this, but it is about as close to our belief system as we could think of at the time. We felt a little bit like western ambassadors, setting out to prove that not all of us wanted to bomb everything in sight. I think we did a reasonable job as we swapped addresses and made vague comments about visiting his restaurant tomorrow.

We had heard from a Swedish man staying at the Stardust that a few of the shops in Pottuvil were sporting pro Bin Laden stickers, and that he had heard of two Australians who had stumbled upon an anti-American, pro-Bin Laden march about 1 ½ hours down the coast. They were in a taxi, and he didn't say whether they had to keep their heads down but they made it out alive. By the time we were approaching the Stardust it was dark and there were small groups of fishermen with lights dotted around the lagoon by the pontoon bridge. In the vein of yesterday's snake comments, I spotted two long low dark shapes in the water and said, "Look, crocodiles". Scooby replied, "No, they are water buffalo". We weren't sure what they were, but Scooby, pointing to the outline of a group of fishermen with two lights, said "that's an elephant over there" (the shape did look quite similar). I replied, "nah, elephants don't have headlights".

We got back in just about enough time to have a shower before dinner. It was as good as yesterday but the portions were smaller for some reason. The bonus for me though was that they had run out of pineapple and papaya sorbet, and all that was left was coconut and vanilla. Oh no, how terrible! How will I cope with three scoops of the nicest desert I've ever eaten? Easily! By the time we had finished eating it was getting late, and I had decided to give surfing Arugam Bay a go tomorrow morning, so we set an alarm and settled down to sleep with the sound of the surf outside.

#### Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> April - "No, honestly, it really is an elephant"

The alarm went off at 6.10am, but neither of us was in a hurry to get up. We gradually came round and got ready for a trek to the surfing point. I was a bit tired as I had been disturbed in the night by something biting, but each time I checked with the torch, I couldn't see a thing. I have quite a few new bites on my bum this morning. We headed out onto the road, figuring that it would be easier to walk on rather than the soft sand, and we were willing to take a tuk-tuk if one passed as well. None did, until we were about half way there, so we negotiated a price and off we went, with me holding my board outside the open doorway. It was a bit of a bumpy ride, and difficult to hold my board still to stop it from banging on the metal door frame of our vehicle. As the road turned inland we veered off onto a dirt track, and the tuk-tuk driver was pulled over by a colleague. They spoke in Sinhalese and then the other driver suggested to us that there was no surf at the point today, but he had been at Pottuvil Point earlier and there had been good waves there. We were a bit surprised by this statement, as we had read that Pottuvil is usually half the size of Arugam. Then we spotted his plan. By taking us to Pottuvil, and the waves suddenly being no good, we would have to come all the way back to Arugam if I still wanted to surf, thereby earning him extra rupees for both journeys. Crafty! We carried on as far as the driver could go, and then he also started with this ruse. "Look, no good, no waves today", he said, but we were still a short walk around the corner from the main break, and so paid the man and made our way around the point on foot. As we rounded the point we could see that there were waves! It was 2-3ft, off-shore, clean as a whistle, and the bigger set waves peeled for 200 metres around the point. No waves indeed! Despite our early start it was already crowded, so I watched for a while and then I did the 'reef shuffle' until I was deep enough to start paddling. I made it out with dry hair, and soon caught a wave. I am a 'goofy footer' (right leg forward), so it is a little more difficult to work the wave down the line but I did okay on my first couple of tries. Lots of people paddled back around the point rather than getting out onto the beach and paddling out again, and this was my preferred method of reaching the line up too.

On my next wave I was going along quite well, and then the wave closed out in front of me. I got tumbled around in the foam a bit, and when I came up I tried to stand, and find my footing on the reef. My right leg went straight down a hole in the reef and I got a couple of small cuts on my shin. I won't be doing that again. My small cuts were nothing compared to some of the gnarly scars on one of the Japanese surfers backs. They were mostly healed up, but looked like they could have been very painful. I hoped he hadn't sustained them here, but it is very shallow in places so he could well have done. It started to get a bit more crowded, and there was a group of Japanese surfers who seemed to be catching most of the waves. A couple of Sri Lankans also had the place totally wired, and got all of the longest waves. They got out at the end of each wave, jogged up the beach, paddled back out, and caught another wave straight away. I got chatting to an Aussie guy, and he asked where I was from. When I said, "Cornwall, UK", he replied "you're kidding! Whereabouts?". I told him Newquay, and again he replied, "You're kidding!". It turns out that he and his mate are beach life guards every summer at Fistral beach, Newquay. I didn't recognise him from there, but then again, a lot of people surf in Newquay and he didn't recognise me either. It was weird though to meet someone from where I live, half way around the world. I will look out for him this summer for sure. I caught a few more waves, but found the wave hogging of the Japanese and Sri Lankans a little frustrating. Still, I had been pleased with my first surf at Arugam. A couple of the Sri Lankans were getting good barrels, and an Australian surfer turned up and started to dominate the peak, catching long fast waves all the way through. The sun had started to get the better of me, so I headed in. Even with booties on it was a little sketchy. I don't know how all the surfers in bare feet do it. I'll go surfing at Hikkaduwa, Midigama, etc without booties, but here it's just a bit more unforgiving.

As I made my way in I noticed that there was a couple, male and female, and the guy seemed to be teaching the girl how to surf. She is very brave. She had the basics, but even so it is not a very easy place to learn how to surf. There was another girl out there on a long board and she was getting long rides, drawing 'hoots' of appreciation from everyone watching on the beach. Scooby had been taking some photos of both the surfing, and life on the beach. There is a café right on the point and we had some drinks there while watching the world, and the surfers go by. I must have been dehydrated, as I drank almost a litre of water, and a large glass of tea, and still felt thirsty. There were plenty of surf mags laying around at the café, and we were shown a Japanese edition of 'Surfing Life', featuring the wave I had just been surfing. There was a photo of the café too, and of the huge grins on the faces of the people that work there. No wonder some of the Sri Lankans were good surfers with this wave on their doorstep.

We walked back along the beach, showered, and ate more dried fruit and nuts for breakfast, followed by two chocolate rice krispie bars that we had brought with us and had forgotten about. Good knows how many times they had melted and re-solidified in the heat as we moved from place to place. They still tasted good though. After this we finished off a game of travel Scrabble that we had started on the plane. We'd both thought the letters would be all over the place by now, but it didn't take Scooby long to rearrange them into order again. It was a close game, but I just got a couple of extra points at the end to win.

We needed to change some more money and so headed off to Pottuvil, the 'wild west', to 'raid the bank'. When we got there it looked like someone had already beaten us to it, as a man was coming out of the bank with a pump-action shotgun! No-one seemed particularly put out by this, so we headed inside so be greeted by a cashier with a 'what an earth are you doing here?' look on his face. When I asked if we could cash some travellers cheques he replied. "Ah, sorry, bank closes at 1.30pm every day, and 1pm tomorrow as it is Friday". Fair enough, but our tuk-tuk driver must have known this. However, if he had told us that the bank was closed he would have lost our fare! They are very cunning these tuk-tuk drivers. We had stopped at the post office on the way to the bank, to post some more cards, and had planned to visit the 2000 year old ruins of a Buddhist temple up in the dunes nearby. We had negotiated a price for all this with our driver, but when we came out of the bank and asked him to take us to the temple, he had lost all knowledge of the place. Ah well, we were philosophical about it; we could visit the ruins tomorrow if we had to come back to the bank anyway. We headed

back towards the Stardust and asked the driver to drop us back at the lagoon so Scooby could take some photos of the water buffalo. To our dismay, he still asked the same price, even though he had not had to wait for us at the bank, nor take us to the temple. We got him to drop the price by a quarter, which he begrudgingly did, and told him we would not be using him again. He drove off smiling.

Scooby took some photos, which drew a lot of interest from everyone passing on the road nearby. Before we knew it we had a young boy on a bicycle, two men on a motorbike, and two more elderly men on bikes, all asking to have their photo taken. Scooby obliged, and two of these people wanted copies of their photos, so we took their addresses after some confusion, as one of these people (the boy) started his address with 'Sri Lanka', and worked backwards from there! The other man was a Yamaha motorcycle representative from Kuwait. He was riding a new, immaculate bike without as much as speck of dust on it, and very proud of it he was too. He was also proud of his Kuwait driving licence and insisted on showing it to Scooby.

The Stardust has a couple of canoes for hire, and we had discussed the possibility of going out on the lagoon before, with the hope of seeing some wildlife. As our plans for the temple ruins visit had fallen through, we decided to hire a canoe instead. Scooby had never been in a canoe before, and I hadn't been in one for at least ten years, so we thought it would be prudent to leave the camera gear back in our room. As it turned out we didn't do too badly at all, although the arm action of paddling soon showed his affects on Scooby! Being a surfer I suppose I am more used to this action, and I was at the back steering and providing more than my fair share of forward momentum! We set off and were soon under the pontoon bridge, headed for a small island with some pelicans on it. They took off, seemingly in slow motion, as we approached and Scooby was cursing the fact that she did not have her camera. Everywhere we looked there were photo opportunities. We headed out across the open lake, and wondered if we would make the distant shore before the light ran out and we had to return. Our paddling skills improved with practice, and we were soon half way across this expanse of water, eyes peeled for any signs of wildlife and especially for elephants. We were straining so hard to discern shapes on the distant shore than we were soon hallucinating elephants out of rocks, village huts, water buffalo, etc; each one revealing its true form as we got closer. We spotted some commotion on a rocky outcrop, and found a colony of monkeys 'twatting around', as Scooby put it! I was trying to find a more pleasant way of saying this, but Scooby's description better suited the mood. They were play fighting and generally larking around on the rocks, and in the surrounding trees and bushes. They scarpered off and hid as we got nearer, but curiosity soon got the better of them, and they were poking their heads around corners and following us in the trees as we started to paddle off around the next corner. They seemed to be having great fun.

A little further on we spotted a pair of large birds of prey (possibly white breasted eagles), hovering and then swooping in the air currents over the jungle. We had given up on seeing any elephants by now, but as we rounded the next corner something large moved, and then disappeared just out of sight. Then we saw it. A wild elephant a few feet back from the waters edge, and about 100 metres from us. We were gob-smacked. I spotted it first and said, "look, an elephant". Scooby remained quiet, so I said, "No, honestly, it really is an elephant!". She replied, "You're not kidding, it's an elephant!". The momentum of our canoe took us closer and for a few seconds time stood still. Just as I was thinking it, Scooby said, "How close do you think we should go?". We had heard that wild elephants can be unpredictable and dangerous, so we put the brakes on and stuck the canoe in reverse, quietly. The elephant had spotted us from the moment we had rounded the corner and didn't seem too upset by our presence. Even so we wondered how fast it could charge and how it would fare in the water (apparently elephants are good strong swimmers and have been known to swim for miles in the sea to reach off-shore islands). There was none of the lifting up and down of ears, or nodding of the head, to signal that we were being warned, and so we stayed for a while just being in the presence of this great animal, until he decided to turn around and head off behind a rocky outcrop. We had seen a wild elephant! We had seen a wild elephant. We were still gob-smacked. We paddled back, passing fishermen who we exchanged a few words with, like the seasoned lagoon canoeists that we now were. "Hi, how are you?". "Fine, thank you. We have seen a wild elephant! How is your fishing?". "Fine, thank you!", and then we were off again, back across the lagoon, under the pontoon bridge and back to our starting point. We hadn't fallen out once.

We headed back to the Stardust and just sat out on the beach in the twilight, going over the day's events, and really feeling pleased with us. We showered and headed off to eat. We had ordered dosas and curry earlier but it was big on heat and small in amounts. I finished Scooby's as she had reached her heat threshold. Then we ordered more food as we were still hungry; salad for Scooby and bread and humus for me. We should have had this to start with. Then we followed this up with more sorbet. The flavours today? Coconut and vanilla, lime and coconut and passion fruit. Really good. Then off to shower once more and sleep.

#### Friday 11<sup>th</sup> April - "Lazy Day"

Another good night's sleep. Too good. When the alarm went off we ignored it and slept on. We got up at 9am, and I went for a quick surf straight outside the beach entrance to the Stardust. It wasn't really a proper break but some waves peeled for a short time, and I caught a few of those. Scooby braved the sun on a sun lounger then we had a simple breakfast of fruit and nuts. The sun soon got too hot and we went back to our room for showers. Once we'd cooled down a bit we got covered in sun cream and headed off for the bank and the ruins of the Buddhist temple in the dunes. Thankfully the bank was open, and after a wait of 5 or 10 minutes (who knows what for?), we were served and got our cash. There was a security guard stationed just inside the door, at least I think he was. He looked just like a soldier, only he had a pale purple uniform on instead of a camo one. He had a large rifle slung over his shoulder.

We headed off to the ruins, through a maze of dust and sand covered back streets. When we got there we could see that it was just back from the sand dunes that we had walked past on Wednesday evening, as we had trekked along the beach to Pottuvil Point. We both thought it was quite impressive. Set in a low walled red-brick enclosure, and approached by a central stairway, there were 3 larger than life carvings of a Buddha and two females. Our tuk-tuk driver told us that the scene depicted the Buddha performing a marriage ceremony between the two women. We had read that some of the standing stones were 'moon stones', and they reminded us of the stone rows on Dartmoor. The whole place felt very powerful, and did exude a kind of feminine/fertility vibe. There were a few places set out for ritual bathing and anointing of water, and one of these was similar to the Hindu Shiva lingam stones of India, with a carved bowl at one end and a central channel for the fluids to flow down. There was also a modern outbuilding that until recently had been the home of a Buddhist sadhu (or renunciate). Unfortunately he had been driven out of the place by hostile villagers from the Muslim community.

Scooby took quite a few photos, and I hit my head on a tree branch that unnerved me a little. I didn't feel right again for about an hour, and after we had returned to the Stardust, and drunk lots of water. We also had some great ginger beer, and I had a little lie-down. That seemed to re-charge my batteries. We sat out in the garden with more ginger beer, and read, and looked around and generally passed the time until 4pm, when we had planned to go out in the canoe again (to look for elephants of course). 4pm came and we went to get a canoe, but one was already in use, and the other had sustained a hole in the bottom this morning, and was out of action. Whoever had used it had run into one of many objects protruding through the waters surface on the edge of the lagoon. Ha! Amateurs! We were a little lost for what to do, as we had set our hopes on having this canoe for a couple of hours, so we could really explore the lagoon properly.

Instead we sat in the Stardust garden overlooking the beach and read. Soon the heat started to dissipate, as it seemed to do every evening at around 5pm, and we could just enjoy the cool breeze off the sea, and watch the clouds forming further out. We are not sure how many dogs belong to the Stardust, but three of them were out on the beach patrolling their territory, and doing those things that beach dogs do in Sri Lanka.....barking at other dogs, play fighting, scratching fleas, barking at passing Sri Lankans (but not at westerners for some reason). Scooby decided to join them in their play, but not at the barking or scratching! I finished what I was reading and joined them too, just passing the time in the reddy-orange glow of the twilight. This was one of our favourite times of the day. The temperature was just right, and a general sense of calm and peace descended

over the land. Pretty soon it was time to head off for a shower and freshen up before dinner, so we left the dogs "on patrol".

We had our usual meal; bread and humus and vegetable noodles for me, and chips and salad for Scooby, followed by sorbet of course. It had been a bit of a lazy day for us. I had decided not to join in the competition for waves at the point, and we hadn't been out in the canoe either. Somehow we had managed to fill our day though, even if it was with relaxation and 'chilling out'. And very enjoyable it was too!

At about 1.05am there was a loud bang which woke us both from a deep sleep and the dogs all around us started barking. Scooby asked me what it was and I said it was probably a firework, and promptly thought nothing more of it and went back to sleep. Scooby however found her imagination on overdrive, and got worried that we had been spotted cashing our travellers' cheques and drawing a large sum of money from the bank at Pottuvil. When we were there, they asked us where we were staying, so as I slept Scooby's mind was filled with images of masked raiders storming out bungalow and robbing us at gunpoint. She didn't go back to sleep for two more hours.

### Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> April - "A Big Bang"

The alarm went off at 6.10am, and we got up soon after. We packed on the sun cream and sun block, and headed out to the surf point in a tuk-tuk. There was a lot of wind on the wave from the side, and this was making the wave section and close out, and the wave face very bumpy. Not 'classic' Arugam Bay at all. Still, there was one guy out trying to make sense of it all, but he soon returned to shore. The locals said that the wind should drop at around 10am, and that it might get good then but it didn't.

We had some tea and bananas at the café overlooking the break, and Scooby took lots of photos of the kids playing on a swing, and learning the rudiments of surfing by sand surfing down the dunes at the back of the café, on cut down palm fronds. They even had foot sections cut out for extra grip, each one a different size and shape, with a kind of 'kick tail' section at the back. Scooby gave the kids some bubbles to play with as well, but they were shy about using them while she was there. As soon as she had sat down next to me again they were blowing bubbles like there was no tomorrow.

After a while we headed back, and I dropped my surfboard off at the Hilton, so save having to carry it back to the Stardust (the Hilton is much nearer to the surf point than the Stardust).

We had some breakfast, and packed ready to leave. It had been a good few days here, living the life of luxury in our 'bungalow'. We were both going to miss it, but we had to face up to how much it was costing, and return to more humble accommodation (We found out later that we actually had the cheapest rooms. The others were nearly double what we were paying, and had satellite TV and Internet connections!). Besides, we could always come back for the food (and water); and we were sure to rent the canoe again. We had already provisionally booked it for this evening.

When we went to settle our bill, we found out the true cause of the noise in the night. At the restaurant there were a few policemen milling around, and an Australian couple who arrived yesterday were sitting down at a table. I got chatting to them about the surf, but last night's events were more prominent in their minds. They had heard the bang too. It had been right outside their room. It had woken them, and like us, one of them thought nothing of it, while the other's mind raced with all kinds of possibilities. It wasn't until the bloke went out to his van that he found out exactly what had happened. Police were everywhere at the front of the hotel, and the drivers window was smashed, with what looked like a bullet hole in the windscreen. The whole area was cordoned off, and there were small chunks taken out of the front of the building spanning a distance of perhaps 30 feet. Someone had thrown a shrapnel bomb into the grounds of our hotel! In the garden there were branches missing from shrubs and trees, and one end of a pile of tiles had been scattered from their previous

resting place against the wall. It you took a quick look at the front of the place it looked like it had been peppered with gunshots.

Outside, ten posters had been glued to the walls with anti-American, anti-UK and anti-Australian slogans, with curiously, the phrase "are you happy here?". Two hours after we had been getting our money from the bank in Pottuvil, the streets had been filled with anti-war/anti-American demonstrators, who had just left their prayers at the Mosque. Holy shit! (literally!). The police were trying to brush off any anti-western motives, but no-one was convinced. The demonstration yesterday, and the posters on the wall told us otherwise.

We were a little freaked out by all this, and so were the Australian couple. The owners of the Stardust had never experienced anything like it in the 21 years that they had been here (or so they told us) and that included the periods of trouble with the Tamil Tigers. They did think that it was an isolated act by extremists, and didn't expect it to happen again. We were glad that we were leaving, but did discuss whether we should stay in Arugam Bay. We decided to see what the feeling was like at the Hilton, and decide from there. Scooby had the most sobering thought, and wondered what it would have been like if the bomb had been thrown earlier, or indeed if someone had been walking past at that time. They could easily have been killed.

I went out to flag down a tuk-tuk to take us to the Hilton, and was gone for quite some time. Every one that passed was full, or was going in the wrong direction. Minutes went past without as much as a bicycle going past. A couple of tuk-tuks stopped, but the man I had got talking to said something to them, and they went off on their way again. Meanwhile Scooby's mind raced with even more possibilities; that I had been kidnapped, bundled into a van and held to ransom. Her worst fears became more real for her when she came out onto the road and couldn't see me. I was just a little further on, under the shade of a tree, which was hidden from her view by a bush. She returned to the Stardust and was reassured by the owner that I was almost certainly OK.

In total ignorance of her worries, I was having a great time "talking shit" with the local drug dealer/neighbourhood alcoholic. He offered me everything and anything, and gave me a whole different take on last night's events. He actually brought up the subject of last night's bomb, and had an uncanny knowledge of the whole subject. He knew there had been posters put up too. He proceeded to tell me at least a dozen different stories about how the owner of the Stardust (he called him 'Goodman') had wronged him and the local community. He told me that if I were to offer Rs 5000 to any of the people around the neighbourhood and ask them to bomb the Stardust, they would almost all take me up on the offer. He said if I offered Rs 5000 before, and another Rs 5000 after, I could easily find someone to shoot him. He inter-dispersed all this information with almost hypnotic suggestion like interruptions about "having a beer", "having some arrack", "having some drink for thirst", etc. He also hinted about me giving him some money. I was nearly falling under his spell when a tuk-tuk driver pulled up (at last) and I was able to escape this mans amusing but ever so slightly psychotic musings (he did so some great impressions though of 'Goodman' when he was illustrating some of his stories. Rory Bremner should watch out!).

When I pulled up into the Stardust Scooby was finally able to breathe again, and she told me all about her all too active imagination! We headed off to the Hilton Hotel and drank ginger beers in the garden once we had unpacked. We also got chatting to the main man at the Hilton, a very laid back but worldly-wise man of possibly 30 years of age. He was able to reassure us. He had not heard about the bomb on the grapevine yet, but was not overly surprised about it. Even though his business is promoted on the Stardust website, both as alternative accommodation and also for an 'Eco-Tour' that he organises, he had plenty to say on the subject of why someone would do such a thing. He told us many of the same stories as my drug-dealer 'friend' had told me, and more besides. He assured us that the attack was against the Stardust, and not against westerners, as they bring in much needed revenue. The general feeling locally was that the man who owned the Stardust was way too greedy and had overstepped the mark. He disrespected the locals. His wife however was very nice to everyone. If what we had heard about 'Goodman' was true, then yes, perhaps he had overstepped the mark, but I am

reluctant to go into too much detail here. Such is the nature of the behind the scenes wheeling and dealing of the tourist trade in Sri Lanka!

The days events had made us reconsider the set-up at the Stardust, and as they guy from the Hilton said, "When I saw their website I wondered if it was for real, if they were talking about the same place". All this however, was not enough to stop us hiring the Stardust's canoe for two hours in the later afternoon. We didn't tell the guy from the Hilton though! We headed around the edge of the lagoon, stopping for photo-opportunities where appropriate, until we rounded the corner where we had seen the elephant before. We got up a good amount of speed, and cruised silently around the corner to be greeted by not one, but two elephants! They spotted us immediately, but we were about 75 metres away, and they didn't seem too concerned about our presence. They just carried on with their business of drinking and sloshing around in the marshland at the waters edge. We had seen two elephants today!

Scooby took a few hurried photos, but then a Sri Lankan fisherman rounded the corner, closer to the shore than us, and the elephants turned tail and stomped off into the jungle. Aaaarh! We were sure we could have got a little closer if he hadn't frightened them off with his shouts of "hello" and his loud coughing. We went out a little further into the lagoon and "moored up" in a patch of thick weeds, to see if the elephants would return, but they didn't.

We moved off around the corner again and beached the canoe. I took relief in a much needed toilet break, and everywhere there was movement. Every step disturbed trails of ants, butterflies, grass-hoppers and dragonflies. We felt the gaze of the monkeys from the trees, although we couldn't quite see them. Water buffalo tracks littered the floor, and eagles swooped overhead. We felt like we were somewhere that we shouldn't quite be, but that we had been granted the privilege of seeing.

Time was getting on. It was starting to get dark, and so we headed back across the lagoon. About one third of the way back, Scooby looked behind her, and clearly saw that the elephants had returned. Maybe they were watching us much more closely that we had been watching them.

When we got back Scooby took some photos of the fishermen around the lagoon, and of the sunset and purple, silvery-orange clouds to the west. Then we walked along the beach in the twilight - our favourite time. It was obvious that the place was starting to fill up, and every hotel and restaurant along the beach had people sat in their gardens. Families of Sri Lankans braved the pounding shore-break of the main beach, some of them holding on to rubber rings or car tyre inner tubes that were tied by thick ropes to palm trees on the beach. No lifeguards here!

We had more ginger beers when we got back to the Hilton, and ordered dinner (pumpkin soup and vegetable fried rice x 2). We showered and dressed, and by then our food was ready. It was average. Scooby was left wondering what had happened to her appetite, while I was left to finish her food, which I did of course. Asmi, a young and good natured tuk-tuk driver called round to confirm our plans for tomorrow morning. He would pick us up at 5.30am to travel down the coast to an equally good but lesser known surf spot, and also to see another temple. We were looking forward to the ride there too. We headed back to our room just before 10pm for an 'early' night. It was a hot one.

### Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> April - "Puja"

We have some adventures we do. The alarm woke us at 5am from a deep sleep after a hot and restless night. The fan had been on full, but seemed to provide no downdraught whatsoever. We shook our grogginess off and got ready for our 5.30am start. We were off to Okanda (Ugandtha), which lies within Yala East National Park, with Asmi our tuk-tuk driver. I was looking for surf, and Scooby was after photos and wildlife. We both wanted to visit a temple, dedicated to Tamil Indian gods, that was near the surf spot too. We set off a little after 5.30am in total darkness, and headed off into the less densely populated area to the south of Arugam. About

3km into our trip, Asmi suddenly came to a stop on a bumpy road. This was to our first elephant sighting. The elephant was a big one, and quite close, so we didn't hang around as these elephants were not as used to seeing people as the ones that we had spotted at the lagoon.

The road surface was pretty poor, but still tarmac as we began to see more of our surroundings. We drove through paddy fields and marshland as the sun rose behind clouds out to sea. We saw another elephant from a long way off, just making out its shape from the herd of buffalo in the foreground, and we could still see it about 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  km further on as the road swept around the edge of a large lagoon. Storks, herons, kingfishers, cormorants, eagles, peacocks, native jungle chickens, and many other birds that were not recognisable to us, could be seen all around.

The road deteriorated further until we reached the only village on our route - Panama. It was quiet in the village as we picked up our freshly cooked vegetable rotties (a kind of spiced vegetable parcel in a thin doughy rice flour envelope). We got just outside the village, and the road became mud, sand and dirt. This section of our journey was like a tuk-tuk Paris-Dakar rally, with Asmi drifting the tuk-tuk sideways on the sandy corners, and rattling our bones on the extremely rutted straight sections. In places the sand got too deep and we were enlisted to get out and push. The bottom of the tuk-tuk could regularly be heard scraping the ground, as we tried to find the best line through the maze of dips, ruts, holes, etc, as well as places where the road had been washed away completely. In places we drove on the dry waters edge of lagoons, as they were the only passable route. The smoothest section of the trip was the short crossing on a concrete bridge over a dried up riverbed. It was perhaps 8 metres long and lasted 2 seconds and it was bliss! Then we got back to the rough stuff. In places the single track broadened out to include a dozen possible routes, where one route had become impassable and a fresh track had been made alongside. Asmi was familiar with these 'roads' though and skilfully guided us through this maze.

We came to a small temple below a granite outcrop, and Asmi pulled over to make a donation to the Tamil elephant god that it housed. This struck me as curious, as he was a Muslim, but maybe with all the wild elephants around he thought he'd better play it safe. We continued along the 'road' until we got to a large granite outcrop topped by a small temple. Again, the main route in was impassable due to a collapsed bridge, so we circled around to the right, and again got stuck in the sand. A quick push later and we were parked up in the shade of a tree, just outside the temple.

While it was not too hot, our first priority was to check out the surf. Asmi had told me that the wave here at Okanda was just like Arugam Bay, only no-one surfed it. He also told me that he was learning to surf, and when he got to the wave I realised he had a lot to learn about waves too. We were greeted by a heaving, rock slab-sucking barrel that lasted about 2 seconds then faded into deep water. The only trouble was that it only broke on the set waves every 10 minutes or so, and the wind from the north had pushed the take-off point to right onto the rock itself. Basically, on this day, it was un-surfable (I later heard that when Arugam Bay is too big to surf, people head here for the quick but gnarly right hand barrels). Asmi seemed surprised that I didn't want to surf this wave, but wanted to show me another one just 100 metres up the beach past another big rock, which was also un-surfable on this day. This wave looked like it peeled a little longer, but to compare these two waves to Arugam Bay was nonsense. Still, the beaches were beautiful and deserted, and we hung around on the rocks eating our rotties and enjoying the space and the emptiness.

Asmi rolled up a big fat joint, and on learning that we didn't smoke, he had it all to himself. A few minutes later when we headed back to the tuk-tuk he managed to head in the wrong direction and took us on a short detour. Upon realising his mistake he held his head in his hands and said "too crazy!". The drive back would be fun!

Before that though we visited the temple. Scooby asked if she could take some photos, and a man told her no. We later found out that he was the owner of the tea stall nearby. Oh well. Then an old priest came up to us and gave us the go ahead to take a few photos from outside, but when he saw how interested we were he invited us

inside the temple grounds and into the temple itself. Normally, in India, non-Hindus are not allowed inside the temples, but he encouraged us inside, and we were followed by a few more 'worshippers'.

Unknown to us we had entered the temple at 'Puja' time, when the believers receive holy water and food, and have a bindi, or marking, made up of sandalwood and other powders applied to their foreheads. We were to receive the same treatment! Scooby certainly didn't mind if someone wanted to bless her 'Poo-ja', if it made visits to the toilet less frequent! First a priest lit the holy oil lamps inside the temple and went through a few rounds of chanting mantras and some bell ringing. Then he brought a tray of smaller lamps around to us, and indicated that we were to 'wash' our hands and heads in these flames. Then he brought around a tray of powders and anointed our 'third eyes' with these powders and pastes, and finally he brought around a container of 'blessed' water, and a little parcel of 'blessed' fruits, flowers, nuts and leaves. We were to put the flowers in our hair (or behind our ears if we had none!), eat the fruit, drink the water, and offer the nuts and leaves to our chosen deity in the temple, or in the temple grounds. We don't 'believe' in this or any religion as such, but we both felt 'blessed' by the experience, and left the temple feeling a little elated, both by the ceremony itself, and the generosity and good will shown to us by the priests and others there. We made an appropriate donation to the temple, and also to the old priest who let us take some photos of him, and his beloved temple.

The temple stood in the shadow of a huge granite outcrop, and this too was topped by two smaller temples. We left our sandals at the base (like the larger temple, no shoes allowed), and made our way up. It was so cool at the top in the breeze compared to the heat of the plains below. It got talking to a young priest called Shiva, and although his English was very limited we got talking about our differing lives in England and Sri Lanka. Talk then turned to religion, and Scooby and I struggled to convey our beliefs, although when I mentioned yoga and meditation the young priest's eyes lit up and he said, "Yes, when I first see you I can tell you do this!". I didn't ask him how he knew; it was a puzzle to me. Scooby took some more photos, including (of course) one of a dog sleeping inside the cool walls of the smaller temple on the rock.

This place was a few kilometres inside Yala National Park, and to go any further we would need a special permit, as well as a guide, a jeep and a driver. It was beautiful but remote, and we were grateful just to be able to look out over the park stretching for miles to the south and the ocean to the east. It was breathtaking. We could see mountains off in the distance to the north west, but nearer to us, the horizon was dotted with other granite 'hills', some of which were also topped by small temples. It felt very sacred and special to us.

Then it was time for the second and return leg of our Paris-Dakar, or Arugam-Okanda rally. With more pushing through the sand to get the tuk-tuk going, we set off on our return journey. It was much the same as our earlier drive, only hotter due to the time of day (1.30pm). We didn't see any more elephants, but I spotted a Sri Lankan fox, which looked like a darker and slightly more 'bushy' version of our foxes back home. Scooby got her camera out, but by the time she had got the right exposure, the fox had disappeared.

We continued back to Panama, and at Asmi's suggestion, checked out Panama Point, another surf spot. There was no wave in evidence, so we headed back towards Arugam Bay. We also had a quick look at Crocodile Rock, another point break just a couple of kilometres from Arugam, but that too was not in evidence. It had been a bit of a disappointing trip surf-wise, but had exceeded all our hopes in every other way, so was well worth it.

When we got back to Arugam, the wave there was also small and affected by the wind, so we'd have been lucky to find a wave anywhere today as Arugam is the main 'swell-magnet' and indicator for the area. At the Hilton we ordered drinks and more rotties; sweet ones this time, banana, coconut and date. I also had a huge plate of rice and dall. This was followed by some tea and reading for Scooby, journal writing for me. We chilled out for a while, and then headed to the one spot in the bay where swimming is totally safe, tucked away in the 'natural harbour' of the fishing village. We stayed in the water for nearly an hour, and when we got out to have a quick look at the surf point I felt almost cold. There were still a few surfers out, but it was getting dark and they all came back to the beach soon after we got there. It did look better than expected though, and we were

reminded that it was always worth a close-up look. I had written it off for the day when we got back from our trip.

We returned to the Hilton, showered and ordered some food. We shared some rice, dall, eggplant curry and chips. It was really good food. There was lots of it too, and we both felt sleepy after eating. We headed off to our room to relax before sleep. It was another hot one!

#### Monday 14<sup>th</sup> April - "These rooms are crap!"

It was very noisy at the restaurant, which is right next to our room, until gone midnight. It was still stiflingly hot until much later into the night too, so we didn't sleep particularly well. When the alarm went off at 6.15am we both decided to sleep for longer. We awoke at around 9am, and slowly got our act together, and got ready to move rooms. When we first arrived here the main man had told us that we could have the best room, but we would have to move out for one night on the 16<sup>th</sup>, to a slightly lesser quality room, but we could move back into the better room after that. The reason for this was that he had taken a block booking for all the rooms in our row prior to us moving in. He had shown us the room that we would have to move into for the night and it was perfectly adequate. Yesterday at dinner he brought up the fact that we would have to move rooms today, the 14<sup>th</sup>. When we told him, reminded him, that he had told us the 16<sup>th</sup>, he accepted that he must have made a mistake, but that we would have to move into the other room today. Fair enough we thought, it didn't really matter to us which day we moved, so long as it was for one night only.

This morning, after we got up we packed up our stuff ready to move rooms. The main man had gone out to Pottuvil to do some shopping, so his brother was left to show us to our new room. The problem was, the room that we were expecting to have for the night had been taken, and so his brother showed us the only rooms left. Our hearts sank. They were awful. They were filthy, with birds coming and going, and bats sleeping in the roof. Droppings littered the bed. There was a thick layer of dust over everything, and the mosquito nets were full of holes. They had a shared bathroom, which was, to be honest, nicer than the rooms themselves. If there had been enough space to move a bed in, we would have been happy to sleep in the bathroom for one night! As it was, there was barely enough room to move around the beds in the rooms let alone unpack or house our belongings. The only 'window' to the outside world was a crude wooden shutter, which provided neither security nor any circulation of air. We were far from happy, and told him so. He seemed surprised at our reaction, and attempted to placate us, and like the good salesman that he was, he tried to 'talk up' the good points of the rooms. He didn't have much to say. I explained that every room has a level, or standard, and that we have levels and standards that we will not go below. These rooms were below that standard, and we would not stay in them. This left us both in an awkward position, as we knew that we would not be able to find a room very easily due to the holiday period, and he was not in a position to negotiate with us as he was only here helping out while he was on holiday himself. We again expressed our dissatisfaction, and he made a quick phone call to his brother, who would be returning soon. We made a few comments about leaving and went and sat in the shade in the garden to await his arrival. We pondered our fate for the night. We went over all the possibilities about what might be said, and had all our answers and arguments ready. The gist of our argument was that if we had to move out of our room due to a prior agreement, then the people who had taken the room that we originally agreed to should have to move out due to our prior agreement.

The main man returned, and asked if we had a problem. Scooby took the lead, stating in no uncertain terms that, "These rooms are crap, and we won't be staying in them!". Quick as a flash he told us, "Ok, no problem, you stay in your room", and it was sorted, easy as that. We didn't know how he dealt with the problem, and we didn't particularly care. We were relieved that we didn't have to sleep in those shitty rooms, or trudge around in the heat of the day trying to find rooms elsewhere.

We stayed sat in the garden, under the shade of the palm and ordered some food. I had potato curry rotti, and Scooby had tomato, onion and garlic rotti. Despite our many instructions that we didn't eat any milk, eggs or cheese, when our food arrived, the potato curry was obviously made with curd, and Scooby's rotti contained only

tomato, onion and thick wedges of cheese. We wondered if this was their way of exacting some kind of revenge over the rooms. Scooby sent hers back and received the correct order soon after. I queried my potato curry and was told that it was not made with curd, but coconut milk (a blatant lie). I was hungry and wanted neither an argument nor another  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour wait for my food, so I just picked the chunks of vegetables out of the wet sauce, ate my separate plain rotties, and left the rest.

The surf had been good this morning, but with our sleeping in late, and the hassle of the rooms, I just wanted to chill out in the shade in the garden. I wasn't desperate enough to brave surfing in the heat of the day, despite the old saying about "mad dogs and Englishmen". I was a little disappointed in my surfing here to be honest. I had set my hopes too high on our trip yesterday and had been disappointed. I had got up too late on quite a few mornings, or the wind had been wrong for the break here generally. I found it hard to believe that we had been here nearly six days and I had only surfed the point once. I really should make more of an effort, but the heat here makes me lazy. It's like the yoga. We had both hoped to practice what we know of our Ashtanga Vinyasa sequence, but the heat here just makes practising in such a vigorous way unbearable. We have been too lazy, or busy, to practice at a slower pace though. That's our excuse anyway, and we're sticking to it. In reality, we don't have any problems finding things to do to fill our days. We are on holiday after all.

Later on I went for a swim in the sea to cool off, and we shared some chips. When it cooled down further we headed to our swimming spot. There were many Sri Lankan boys showing an inordinate amount of attention, and we had to be a little firm to get them to show a little respect. A few wanted to take some photos of us, but we declined. At least they asked permission first. We call this problem S.L.B.S (Sri Lankan Boy Syndrome), or S.L.M.S (Sri Lankan Man Syndrome). It occurs throughout India too, and is known as I.B.S/I.M.S. by us there. The worst case I have ever seen is a group of 15 to 20 India men surrounding a topless girl on the beach in India. She had her eyes closed and was oblivious to their presence, as they hovered over her ogling her naked flesh.

One by one the Sri Lankan boys got out of the sea until there was only two left, and they went about their own business of swimming. The power of the herd instinct had been diminished and they could revert to a more respectful attitude. We took a few photos with my waterproof camera, and then wandered around to the surf point to watch the last of the few surfers catch their final wave of the day and do the 'Reef Dance' back to the beach (some more gracefully than others).

We headed back to the Hilton, had a quick shower, and awaited our meal. We had ordered our food earlier, and said we would like to eat at 7.30pm. Scooby tried our first alcohol of this trip, apart from on the plane over. She had a 'Lion Lager', and it was not too bad. Our food arrived promptly on 'Sri Lankan' time (approx  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour late), and it was as good as last nights. We couldn't detect any milk or curds either. I ordered a beer for me too, and we finished our meal. That is to say we finished what was on our plates. There was still some food left over, but we were stuffed. The food and beer had left us sleepy, so we retired for cold showers and some reading in bed before sleep. Jeez, it was hot in our room.

#### Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> April - "Right Hand Man"

The heat was unbearable in our room. The fan may as well have been switched off. We tossed and turned and sweated, until the sheets were soaked through. Only then did sleep come. Earlier in the night some Sri Lankans that are staying here had a party on the beach, with a fire and fireworks. Loud bangs went off into the early hours, and the restaurant was busy clattering pans and scrubbing pots until at least 1.30am. I don't think either of us slept much before 3am. Despite this, we got when the alarm went off at 6.15am, and had showers to cool off before we dressed and walked up to the surf point. Just as I was about to paddle out a dog walked by a Muslim Sri Lankan boy, and he kicked it really hard for no reason. I lost it and flew at him shouting, "Hey, how would you like me to kick you!". Apparently his face was a picture when I said this, but I was still too enraged to notice and gave him a good telling off. He later went up to Scooby and asked her to take a photo of him, saying "Friend, friend?" and "Photo, photo?". Scooby replied "No friend of mine kicks dogs, you are horrible!". He went

away, but Scooby saw him later with a group of friends, and the dog was trotting along behind them. It must be one of those canine co-dependent relationships.

The surf was smallish at first, perhaps 2-3ft and clean. Later on, bigger sets rolled through that were more like 4ft, and the wave peeled for a good 250-300 metres around the point. I started as I meant to go on and got a great first wave. I paddled back to the take-off point, but maybe I was sitting too deep, as my next two waves closed out in front of me, and I got washed up in the white water. I sat a little further inside and caught loads of waves. This was the best right hander I had ever surfed, and I was having the best time I had ever had surfing rights. I just hoped Scooby was getting some of the waves on film. Alas, she would stand out on the hot sand waiting, get too hot and go back to the shade. As soon as she had put her camera down, I would get a wave and ride it right through till it petered out further around the point. This continued every time I caught a bigger wave. She did however take lots of photos of other surfers! This was probably spurred on by me telling her that if she got a good photo of Arugam Bay then she could get paid for it if Surfers Path magazine wanted to use it. I just hoped that she could get some good ones of me too!

I stayed out for a little over two hours, and when I started feeling too dehydrated I caught another wave right through and came in. Scooby told me about the photo situation, and showed me some of the digital shots she had taken. Some of them were really good. I would have to wait to see the SLR ones.

One of the better Japanese surfers came up and complimented me on my smooth surfing style. I returned the compliment, as this guy had the aura of a Zen master, and was a fine surfer too. He 'charged', and had been getting lots of barrels last time I had surfed. It was very unexpected, but really nice to receive a compliment like that from a complete stranger.

While Scooby had been sat in the café grounds overlooking the point, she suddenly became aware of a few 'drops' landing on her skin, and wondered if she had just been shat on by one of the crows in the trees above! When she looked up to see, she was surprised to see a fine mist of rain, falling really slowly, like snow, and a small rain cloud passing above. This must have been what was left of the rain as it evaporated when nearing the hot ground. I 'tanked up' on water, and decided to try and take a few photos from the sea with my cheap waterproof camera. I got a few funny comments from the other surfers, asking if I was enjoying my swim, etc, and one guy on a long-board showed concern that I had lost my board. I showed them my camera, and told them I was taking photos. Some of the surfers, particularly the Japanese, were eager to get 'in shot'. At one point I looked back to shore and saw a large mongoose running across the hot sand where Scooby had been stood earlier. I stayed out there, swimming around and trying hard not to get worked over by the set waves, for around  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour. It was difficult to get close to the action and still stay out of the way of the other surfers and the bigger waves. I'll have to wait to see the results.

I swam in, and we headed back to the Hilton for showers, more water and food. I ordered another potato curry rotti, and Scooby ordered fried potato and onions. When the food came my potato curry looked as though it had curd in again, despite me telling the waiter that we wanted food without milk, curd, eggs, yoghurt, cheese, etc. Oops, my mistake though, as the waiter patiently took me through every stage and ingredient of the food's preparation, and it indeed had been coconut milk yesterday; and today. I ate the sauce as well today. It was delicious!

We retired to our room for a short snooze, and then went and sat in the garden. We both read for a while, and then headed off to check the surf, and maybe to go for a swim. The surf was okay, but I decided to save myself for tomorrow morning. We could have gone for a swim, but the S.L.M.S. was in full effect, so we just chilled on the beach and watched the surfers. We had hoped that the beach would be quieter on our way back, so that we could go for a swim, but it was even more crowded than earlier, so we skipped it and headed back to the Hilton for showers and food. Scooby had a mixed vegetable salad (a bit heavy on the lemon juice) and vegetable rotti. I had vegetable fried rice and 2 vegetable rotties. All the food here seems to be quite heavily salted, but apart

from that, it is good. Lots of people that are staying elsewhere come here for their food, as there isn't much variety elsewhere.

After our meal we went for a walk on the beach in the bright moonlight (it will be full moon tomorrow). There was a bright ring of light around the moon, and quite a few people were out 'basking in the glow'. We returned 'home' for cooling showers and then bed. We were already sweating.

### Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> April - "Poya Day/Remote Control Crabs"

We switched the end of the bed that we slept at last night, so our heads and torsos got more of the fan. It made all the difference, and we had a cooler nights sleep. We got up early and walked to the surf point. It was smaller than yesterday, 2ft with the occasional 3ft set wave. I did okay, but with the size of the waves it was not as enjoyable as yesterday. Yesterday's session would have been hard to repeat though, as it had been one of my best ever surfs. I caught a decent amount of waves, and started to get thirsty, so I came in after 1 ½ hours. I had also taken a bit of a knock to my right knee when I bailed a take off and went 'over the falls'.

Scooby had been taking more photos, and showed me the digital ones as we drunk water and sipped smoky black tea at the café overlooking the point. After a while I felt suitably refreshed, and went out for another session, which lasted about ¾ of an hour. I got out of the water tired and hungry, and we headed off to the Hilton for showers and breakfast.

It was a bit cloudier today, but when the sun came out it was really hot, and we were glad of the cooling breeze coming through the Hilton restaurants window as we tucked into our food. We had a short siesta this afternoon, and when we woke I was hungry. We had cold drinks in the garden and I had a coconut, banana and date rotti. We got into another conversation with the owners brother about the differing life-styles in England and Sri Lanka, and before we knew it, the time for our 'usual' evening swim had come. It was quite crowded with Sri Lankans in the sea, but we didn't get any hassle, and enjoyed just bobbing around in the small swells and watching the world go by. We stayed there for about an hour, and then walked up to the surf point. Only two people were out in the small on-shore conditions, and we carried on with our walk further around the coast until we could see 'Croc Rock' in the distance.

On our return the full moon was rising over the clouds on the horizon, and was a rich orange and pink colour. It was rising incredibly quickly, and had soon turned to a pale yellow, as the sunset inland was turning a rich orange, and creating purple hues among the white and grey clouds, that seemed to be every conceivable size and shape, over the palms. Today it was 'Poya Day', a public holiday, which occurs every time there is a full moon. Not a bad system! Then again, most Sri Lankans work at least six days a week, so maybe they deserve it.

We are trying a new restaurant tonight, which sits next to the 'A-Bay Surfshop'. The Australian guy from the surf shop recommended their lentil burgers, and we just wanted a change of scene, after eating every meal at the Hilton. He had lived in Arugam Bay for the past 4 years and had been coming here for 20 years in total. He had lots of stories about how the place used to be before it found its way onto the tourist map. He told us how he used to lend his copies of Penthouse and Playboy to the local fishermen, and they feed him in return! Lobsters, prawns, all kind of fish were his for the asking. They used to feed him really well anyway, but once he started lending out those magazines he was treated like a king. He was full of good information about the best times of the year for all the different surf breaks on this coast to work properly too. Good man.

As I write this, the moon is now a bright sliver, and casting shadows all around. Scooby had had a strange experience earlier when she went to put her shorts on for the walk to our swimming spot. She found a dried prawn in her pocket. We had no idea how it got there at first, but then wondered if she had inadvertently 'gone fishing' and caught it in her pocket, which is of course not very vegan! A more likely explanation is that she had put her clothes down on a fishing boat and it had found its way into her pocket from there.

Our lentil burgers were okay, nothing spectacular, but the chips were really good. All the chips we have eaten in Sri Lanka have been as good as the best chips from home. I don't know why this is, as chips in India are a very hit and miss affair. I think the staff at the restaurant think we are both writing about their place, as they are being overly attentive and constantly asking if everything is okay. Maybe they think we are travel writers, or that we can get their place mentioned in 'The Holy Grail' otherwise known as 'Lonely Planet' guide (a sure guarantee of success!). We pay our bill and leave a tip, hopefully calming their worries over what we have written.

The moon is incredibly bright; bright enough to read by, and we head back to the Hilton and take some chairs out to sit right at the waters edge. The effect of the waves lapping at the shore and the bright moonlight is almost meditative. I find myself closing my eyes and relaxing, just bathing in the light, and letting the sounds of the night wash over me. A group of Sri Lankans banging out a crude rhythm on the hull of a fishing boat, and singing along, and there is a really calm atmosphere on the beach.

We discover a new game. All along the shoreline crabs are coming out of their holes and wandering along the line of the shore-break looking for food. The larger ones seem to move independently, but the smaller ones move in 'gangs', scuttling along at quite a pace and pausing every time there is the slightest movement nearby. We discover that if we lift up a leg or an arm from our chairs as the crabs pass, they 'freeze' in position, and only move when we lower the limb and the 'coast is clear'. However, if we stand up they go running for the safety of the sea. We call this game 'remote control crabs', and it gives us hours of amusement! I started to feel sleepy, and try to drift off in my hard plastic chair. There is no way I can find a comfortable position though, despite my greatest efforts, and so we head off to bed.

We discover that we should have moved our beds out onto the beach, as there is a power cut, and that means no cooling fan for our room. We decide to try and sleep anyway, and get straight into bed from a cold shower. Within minutes the cooling water has evaporated and we start to sweat. Even Scooby confesses she is drenched in sweat, and I sweat much more readily than her. We pray to all the gods of electricity to restore the power soon, as the heat is driving us insane. But no, we must suffer for longer. The hotel is filled up with Sri Lankans again, and the restaurant and kitchens are busy. Pots and pans are clanging all over the place just outside our room. The phrase 'consideration for others' does not exist in the Sinhalese language. At one point I bark a loud 'Sssshhhh!' which seems to work for all of 2 minutes. I don't know how long our torture continued, but at some point the power came back on, our fan started to turn, and the sound of loud cheers and clapping resounded from inside every room, especially ours.

#### Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> April - "Me Tuk-Tuk Driver?"

We were woken from our deep sleep by the alarm, and we both considered ignoring it. We decided to get up though, to make the most of the cool of the morning, and also of the surf, as we were thinking of leaving soon. It was smaller again, 1-2ft, with the occasional 3ft set wave, and seemed to be breaking in two distinct sections. On a rare set wave, if you worked for as much speed down the line as possible, you could make it around these sections and ride the wave until it dropped off into deeper water.

I stayed out for a little short of two hours, and refuelled at the café on the point. With the surf so small, I was left in really shallow water a couple of times when I fell off but I was amazed I didn't receive any cuts today. Scooby had been doing her best to get some photos, but the waves just weren't very photogenic today. She did get some more photos of the kids playing, including one of a young Sri Lankan boy in 'mock U.S. Army' camos, which was both funny and a little disturbing given the current war in Iraq. We had 'made friends' with the café proprietors, and Scooby had been giving out school pens and bubbles left, right and centre to their kids. We were a little surprised then, when we got a full sob-story about how so and so had been stabled, leaving the kids orphaned, and school is so expensive, etc, etc. We had been leaving large tips after every visit, so maybe they thought we were made of money, as they were definitely after a hand out. We both felt really uncomfortable with this, and tried to hint that relatively speaking we were quite poor. We had to work hard all

year to afford to come here for a month. Maybe they just saw Scooby's (borrowed) cameras, and my new surfboard, and thought we must be loaded. They however had a prime piece of 'Real Estate' overlooking the best surf point in Sri Lanka, their café did a roaring trade, and besides that, the Australian from the surf shop had already told us that they were loaded. With all this in mind, we ignored their "poor me Third World vibes", and kept our money in our pockets.

We headed back to our room for cold showers. The power was off again. This seemed to be happening more and more often recently, and we again prayed that there would be enough power for our fan tonight. We could cope with the darkness. We had some food at the Hilton; fruit salad for Scooby and my usual 'brunch' of potato curry rotti. They threw in some dall for free too, and it was a good sized meal that I struggled to finish. We both read for a while in the garden, and then I went for a swim in the sea. It was very hot in the heat of the sun, so I was soon back sitting in the shade with Scooby. We were waiting around for Raheem, the main man at the Hilton, to return, as we wanted to speak to him about a taxi back over to the west coast. We were told he would be back soon. I went for another swim and then went for a shower to get rid of the accumulated layers of sea salt from my skin. Still no sign of Raheem. He would certainly be 'back soon'. We waited a little longer, and then headed off to the post office for Scooby to post a card to her parents.

Our normal way to travel anywhere is just to start walking along the road, and we would then almost certainly be approached by a passing tuk-tuk driver, who we could then negotiate a price with. We had walked a little way, and no sign of a tuk-tuk. Sri Lankan locals sat in the shade along the road calling out "Where going?" and, "Come, come", beckoning us to their restaurant/café/rooms or just for a chat, and amazed that we were walking in the hot sun. A U.N. jeep (4WD) sped past us as we walked; flags flying, making all other traffic veer off the road on its high speed journey to who knows where. We asked around and no-one knew anything about it or what it was doing here.

Our lift arrived eventually, from a cheeky driver who had tried to enlist us on every scam and tourist trip going every time we had met him previously. We had never fallen for any of these though, and I think he must have respected us for that. Half way to our destination, he pulled over to the side of the road and asked, "You want to drive tuk-tuk?". Amazed, I replied, "Me, tuk-tuk driver?". He slid over on his wide front seat and gestured for me to join him. After the briefest of descriptions regarding the controls, I (over) revved her up, slipped the clutch, and we were away. I was driving a tuk-tuk! On a Sri-Lankan road! Scary!! I would describe it a bit as like driving a three-wheeled moped, as far as controls are concerned. The left hand is clutch lever and twist grip for gears, all in one unit. The right hand is throttle, lights, and the all important horn, except his was broken. The only foot control was a brake pedal in the right hand side of the foot well. I progressed quickly through the gears, over revving at every change! We were following a truck, which cleared the road before us, so all I had to do was stay behind that. The tuk-tuk cornered like it was quite heavy, and I think subconsciously I was expecting to 'lean' into the corner, but of course it stayed bold upright. It felt like it would tip over though, and I was reminded of Asmi and our trip to Okanda on the really rough road. I was now in awe of his tuk-tuk driving skills, because he really did hammer it along those back roads!

Suddenly the driver said "brake", and then shouted "BRAKE!", as the truck we were following came to an abrupt halt, slowing down quickly for an unseen speed-bump outside an army checkpoint. I stood on the brake pedal, but it was like there was nothing there. I was reminded of an old VW camper van I used to have, with useless brakes, which made me really have to read the road a long way ahead to avoid any other vehicles. I pressed even harder on the brake pedal, and we pulled up in just enough time. Somehow I had managed to co-ordinate slipping the clutch and changing down to first with this 'emergency stop', but when I went to pull away I stalled it. I decided not to push my luck any further and gave the controls back to the expert. The army guys at the checkpoint were in hysterics, and this was probably to my benefit, as I would not have had any insurance or other documents should they have pulled us over and asked to see them. I hope we get this driver again though, as I wouldn't mind another go at driving his tuk-tuk.

We gave him a big tip, as a 'thank-you' when we got to the post office. Scooby had already got a stamp for her card, so it just needed to be franked by the teller. He stamped it with his stamp, and Scooby asked how long it would take to get to its destination. He looked at the card, then back at us, and smiled. Scooby had forgotten to put an address on it! She completed it, and handed it back. He then told us, it should arrive in 7 days, so it would just beat us home.

We walked back from the post office, past the still smiling army check-point guards, and headed to the Stardust for some ginger beer and their wonderful sorbet. We had obviously got back to into budget-traveller mode, as even though we knew their prices, when we got the bill it still surprised us. It cost as much as a full meal elsewhere. It was worth it for the coconut sorbet.

We headed back to the Hilton along the beach, and just chilled out in the restaurant and garden. Raheem was there, so we arranged a taxi to the west coast for 6am tomorrow, easy as that (we had wondered if it would take a couple of days to find a taxi, but they have their own taxi and driver so it wasn't a problem).

The chef approached me as well, and told me that they were going to be very busy later on, as more Sri Lankans had turned up, and so we ordered our food and hoped that they wouldn't be too noisy tonight. Then we headed off for our evening swim. It was busy in our 'swimming corner'. Scooby had to stare out a few Sri Lankan men, and I had to field the repeated questioning of a Sri Lankan man who couldn't get his head around the fact that I didn't understand a word he was saying. I swam off over to Scooby when I couldn't stand it any more. We headed back to our room for showers, and to start to pack for tomorrow morning.

For our meal this evening I had rice, curries and poppadoms, and Scooby had vegetable rotty and chips. It was all good, especially the eggplant, which was done in a way that reminded me of an Indian dish, being heavy on the cumin. Huge amounts too. Too much to eat it all. We walked along the beach after our meal, taking in the moonlight. We were offered drugs again, and maybe we were a bit 'short' with the men, but we just wanted an enjoyable walk. We didn't want any hassle.

On the way back we were approached by two more shadowy figures, but there were soon joined by friends, family and children, all eager to shake hands, exchange names and socialise. They were all quite 'merry', and had probably been 'on the Arrack', a local spirit made from the coconut 'toddy' or sap. One man reached out to shake my hand, and ask my name. I replied "Phil", and asked his name. He replied "Answer" (probably not the correct spelling, but phonetically correct). I couldn't resist saying "Answer? What's the question?", but the joke was lost on him. One of his friends was also called 'Answer', so I once again had the pleasure of saying, "Answer? What's the question?". Again they didn't get it, but Scooby and I were laughing nearly as much as they were at all the confusion. They wanted us to join them in sitting on the beach and chatting, but we had to finish packing and hopefully get to sleep at a reasonable hour before we left at 6am tomorrow morning.

We said goodnight and headed back to the Hilton. Raheem was around, so we got our bill and settled our account. It seemed like a large amount until we split it, and converted it back into English pounds. It came to £45 each, for our room, all our food, drinks, and water, and a six hour taxi ride over to the west coast tomorrow. Not bad!

#### Friday 18<sup>th</sup> April - "Bucket of water anyone?"

The power stayed on all night, thankfully, and so we got a reasonable night's sleep. That didn't stop us from groaning when the alarm went off at 5.30am though. We packed up our last few bits, and made sure we hadn't forgotten anything. Miraculously, the taxi was early, so we said a hurried goodbye to Raheem, and some of the kitchen staff who were around, and went out to the taxi.

Before we drove off, the driver and his mate (they always seem to come in pairs, although the 'mate' never seems to do anything constructive, like help with the driving), had to pause for a moment as a horribly 'tinny'

sounding call to Prayer rang out from a tiny plastic speaker on the dashboard. This seemed to be a small plastic self contained unit. When they played music further into the trip, it came through the normal radio cassette, and the speakers in the front and back of the van. It was still horribly 'tinny' though, as is all the music we have ever heard here; apart from Bob Marley. Scooby suggested that when a bus passes playing music it sounds like everyone is banging tambourines, and this is a great description of the 'tinny' sound. Why all the music sounds like this, we're not sure, but whether it is to do with the way the music is recorded, or the equipment it is played back on, the result is always the same; a bass-less metallic sounding tune, that seems to plod along blandly and change instruments at every opportunity, or at least every 10 seconds. You find yourself trying to follow a tune on the guitar, which then turns into an organ, which then turns into a sitar, which then turns back to a (probably sampled) different guitar, until the song finishes, and then the next one is the same. Maybe it's just a fact of life that all popular music sounds the same, whatever country it is from.

Anyway, back to the journey! Just a few kilometres outside of Pottuvil is Lahugala Kitulana National Park. It was here that we spotted our first elephants of the journey back. A group of six adults were feeding, about 100 metres from the road. Some were much older and larger than others, and Scooby tried to take some photos. It was quite dark though. We moved on after a couple of minutes, but two more kilometres down the road we came to a larger group of about a dozen, this time around 80 metres from the other side of the road. They too were feeding, and they had a few infants in their 'extended family'. Scooby took some more photos (there was better light on the opposite side of the road), and again after a few minutes of watching from quite close, we moved on. The next elephant was huge and only about 10 metres from the road. It looked a little upset by our presence, and instead of stopping for a photo-opportunity, the driver shouted something to his mate in Sinhalese and put his foot down! This elephant wasn't to be messed with! We were gone before Scooby had a chance to get her camera out again.

On the way to Arugam, I had noticed larger 'fence posts' than seemed necessary for supporting the barbed wire, or thin wooden slats around some of the properties and military installations. I also wondered why these huge fence posts had a sharp point carved into the top, but then I realised that these fences and posts were designed to keep out elephant intruders more than human ones. The barbed wire was for the humans, but the 5-7ft stakes were for the elephants! Indeed, there are roads that some of the locals won't use at night, for fear of attack, and I have just read in a national paper about one elephant killing 13 villagers in another district. So far the villagers have not 'taken any action' against this rogue elephant, but if the killing continues they may be forced to.

Last night there had been a lot of rain, the most since we had been in Sri Lanka, and there were small puddles in places on the road. The paddy fields looked fuller than usual too. It was still a little overcast, and this made for a cool first part of our journey. The road from Pottuvil to Monaragala is the bumpiest section of our route, and we were glad we were getting this out of the way first. In the past this section had been a 'hot spot' for terrorist acts by the Tamil Tigers, and this was evidenced by the number of police and army checkpoints along the road. We had heard horrific stories of bus passengers being massacred on this section and were very glad that it was now safe to travel along.

We stopped off for refreshments at Monaragala. The driver and his mate had tea and breakfast at a Muslim restaurant and I had a coconut water and 'flesh', from a shack opposite. Scooby didn't have anything, to avoid the embarrassment of being caught short and unable to find a loo. Us men can just go and pee behind a bush, but you never see a Sri Lankan woman doing this. God knows how they cope with this aspect of life.

At Buttala we turned left onto the Tissamaharama road. We had come on a different road, so this part of the journey was all new to us. At first we were flying along at 80kms per hour, and this continued as we drove through a section of Yala West National Park. It was thick jungle on either side of the road, so our hopes of seeing more wildlife were a little deflated, although we did see a couple of mongooses. Just before Kataragama, the road worsened considerably, as it was being rebuilt. Progress was slow. Kataragama is Sri Lanka's second

biggest pilgrimage site and attracts Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus alike, as it has places of worship for all these faiths. At certain times of year the place fills up with Hindu devotees, many of whom perform acts of 'ritual masochism' as Lonely Planet called it. There is fire walking, piercing of every conceivable kind, and other gruesome shows as the faithful attain altered states of consciousness through acts of self abuse.

The road continues on to Tissamaharama, or 'Tissa' for short. There are Toyota minibuses everywhere, and this is where most tourists head to before they explore Yala National Park. As such, there's not much here besides, and we are glad when we get through the chaos on the road and head out the other side. We join up with the road from Wellawaya, and from here there is much that we remember from our journey to Arugam. One thing that puzzles us though is the road running race that seems to be taking place on one of Sri Lanka's busiest roads. For miles and miles we are held up by, and then overtake a great procession of runners of all shapes, sizes and ages. Each one is accompanied by a cyclist, shouting encouragement and drenching the runner with water at every opportunity. People are lined up at the side of the road, and they too throw buckets of water over the runners as they pass. I suppose this is how they deal with the heat of an athletic activity in this climate. We notice that all of the runners are barefoot, and wonder how they cope with the surface as the road deteriorates in places. We also wonder how far they are running, as they seem to stretch out for at least 10kms.

The road hugs the coast from Tangalla, and I start to stare out of the window looking for surf breaks. Every now and then I spot a wave breaking, and then it's obscured by houses or shops, as we race by in the taxi. I have heard of a few spots to surf on this part of the coast, but there must be hundreds of waves that work well on the right day, with the right conditions. We are on a mission to get to Hikkaduwa though, and the sanctuary of Sukhawathi.

From Matara, we know the road well, and I get that 'I just want to get there now' feeling. I'm sick of inhaling black diesel fumes, sick of the near misses, and the driver is obviously tiring. But no, there are more obstacles to cope with! Just like the road runners of earlier, we come up behind a cycle race! This too stretches out forever, as the cyclists 'tail-gate' passing tuk-tuks and trucks, getting that little bit more speed from following along in the slipstream of the vehicle in front. Many of the cyclists have their heads down and hands well away from the brakes, and I wonder what will happen if the vehicle in front had to brake suddenly. None of the cyclists are wearing helmets. They too are willing victims of the 'buckets of water gangs' at the side of the road. Just for a moment I wonder if it is a triathlon. I half expect to get to Hikkaduwa and see the faster competitors setting off out to sea on a 'round the island' swim. It isn't of course.

Finally we get to Sukhawathi; after 7  $\frac{1}{4}$  hours of travelling. We are greeted by Kasanjith and his family and some of the guys who work in the kitchens take our bags up to our room. Well, we have the choice of two, so we head upstairs and choose the noisier one nearer the road, but it has a balcony and is bigger than the other one. We will have to see if we've made the right decision tonight, and assess the noise levels in the morning. Kasanjith kindly invites our driver and his mate to have some free lunch. They only eat for a few minutes and then leave without saying goodbye. We can't understand why as the food is delicious (we have the same rice and curries), but Kasanjith speculates that as they are Muslims, they have probably gone off to find some meat or fish.

We had hoped to arrive earlier as Kasanjith had told us that he would be giving alms to some monks today. Scooby would have liked to have got some photos of that, but alas, they were all gone by the time we arrived. They were from a local monastery, and all followed a strict lifestyle which involved not eating after midday everyday. They would rise early, meditate, and have breakfast around 6am, then continue with more 'monkly' activities until they sat down for their last meal of the day at 11am. I had previously read about this purifying practice in some of the Buddhist books that Kasanjith has in the restaurant and I wondered how I would cope with this lifestyle. Sometimes I'm still eating at 10pm! A little later, Kasanjith brings us some 'special strings' to be worn like 'friendship bracelets' around the right wrist until they fall off. They have been blessed by the

monks and infused with the power of their chanting. We both feel welcomed and heartened by this gesture, and as though we were still a part of his Alms giving, even though we arrived here after the monks had gone.

We follow our meal with a banana, coconut and treacle pancake. Delicious! We catch up on some news, and news of the war. We are happy to be still, unmoving, in one place after this mornings journey. We have some more water, and fruit juice, and just relax. At about 5pm we go upstairs to do some yoga. There is a great space for it on a huge balcony, just outside our room. It's the first time that we have done any yoga since we were last in Hikkaduwa, over a week ago (apart from a few stretches before I go surfing). It's just been too hot for it on the east coast, and there was no space for it at the Hilton either. We have both been missing it both psychologically and physically. We have both tightened up 'physically', and we each decide to just do our own thing, addressing the needs most appropriate for our bodies, rather than stick to a set routine. We both feel the benefits after.

We decide to try and write another article about Sukhawathi, to help promote his business. We had previously got this place featured in 'The Vegan' magazine, so we decided to concentrate on the Ayurvedic and healing aspects of Sukhawathi, and go for publication in Yoga and Health magazine. This place would make an ideal yoga retreat venue. As I continue with my journal, Scooby has already got the bones of the article assembled. I wonder if I will get any input. I have been quite busy with my journal, so maybe it will be a solo project for Scooby; we will have to see.

We shower, and go downstairs for some food. It's so good to be staying here. I ordered Tempura and miso soup and Scooby ordered chick pea salad and stuffed tomatoes. As usual with the food here, it was delicious. Actually the soup and tempura were fantastic; strips of mushrooms, potato, plantain, squash and mixed vegetable tempura, with a really tasty miso soup and sweet soy sauce. Scooby couldn't finish all her food, and I helped her out, so I can personally confirm that hers was also excellent. We relaxed in the restaurant after our meal, and later headed up to bed.

The room was lovely and cool, and as an added bonus for me, the beds were a decent size so I could finally stretch out my long legs. We both slept well, but Scooby slept a little better than me as she wasn't bothered by the traffic noise.

#### Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> April - "A Big Turtle" ("It's Down There")

We woke up early, but dozed on and off for a long time. I also started reading my first book of our trip, "The Alchemy of Opposites", by Rudolph Scarfalloto. I had read some of it before, maybe as long as 3 years ago, and I'd not touched it since. I think I had even forgotten I had it. I had also forgotten just how stimulating this book is. It makes you think about everything! (and "nothing"; that being the opposite of everything!). I looked forward to reading more of it, and accepting the challenge of understanding the introduction, my Robert Anton Wilson. I'm not sure it's possible to do this without being stoned! Read the book and see!

We got up and headed downstairs for a late breakfast. We both had the herbal porridge with tropical fruits. Amazing food. The porridge uses a special grain that is said to build strength, but it just tastes really good to us. We also ask Kasanjith more about this place, focusing on the Ayurvedic side of Sukhawathi, as we hope to get a decent amount of information together for the article for Yoga and Health magazine. It turns out to be a joint effort after all, and Scooby is on the lookout for photos, whether of the rooms, the garden, or the Ayurvedic treatment rooms and equipment. She also takes some photos of the food. I write the section on yoga here, as we are sure it would make a great exotic yoga retreat location. We get lots of information from Kasanjith and his wife, and get busy writing. Before we know it a couple of hours have flown by and we order some more food for lunch; soya sausages, chick pea salad, and tofu and avocado dip with toast. We share all of this, and have some coconut milkshakes too.

We do a little more writing and then go and get changed into "wet gear", for exploring the coral reef further up the coast (about 3kms). Scooby has the idea of taking her bum-bag and putting her clothes inside a plastic bag, so that we don't have to leave any clothes on the beach. I am just in surf shorts. When we get there, the wind has made the water very choppy, so we just decide to go for a swim instead. Scooby leaves her clothes tied to a railing which forms part of a small "harbour" outside one of the hotels. A couple of minutes later a large wave swept in and soaked the lot! So much for keeping her clothes dry. We are enjoying our swimming, but staying close to the shore. Further out a group of four people are gesturing to something in the water. They turn out to be from Holland, and one of them came up to us and explained that they had been watching a huge turtle, just metres away from them. I swam out to where they had just been, and the turtle surfaced to breathe. It seemed to do this every 20 seconds or so, and was just 4 metres away from me. It was huge, and its shell alone being at least a metre long. I decided to get a closer look, as I had some goggles with me. The next time it surfaced I swam towards it and then headed underwater. It was just underneath me, and close enough to reach out and touch! I didn't though, as I wasn't sure how it would react, and I know they have powerful beaks. It was an amazing creature, and I could clearly see all of the markings on its shell. I came up for a breath, and when I went underwater again it had gone. It kept re-appearing about 5 - 10 metres from the reef, but never quite as close as before. There was also a smaller turtle around about that only showed itself a couple of times. This part of the reef is popular with boat crews who ferry an endless supply of tourists over the reef in their glass bottomed boats. Some of them had spotted the turtle, and they circled their boats over it every time they spotted it. The funny thing was, most of the Sri Lankan men were more interested in looking at Scooby in her bikini. When I had enough of this, I gestured underneath their boat, and shouted "It's down there!" (meaning the turtle), but this didn't make any difference. After this Scooby got a little braver and went into the deeper water where the turtle was; okay so she jumped on my back every time a big wave came through, but hey, I'm not complaining. We enjoyed our swim and seeing such a huge turtle, but I wanted to see what the wave was doing at the surfing reef.

We made our way back around the coast, and I was surprised to see how much the sand had shifted around on the beach. It looked like a different beach to when we were here previously. Even though the wind was light, there was only one guy out surfing the main peak. Well, I say surfing, but we watched for ten minutes and he didn't catch anything. Normally there is a wave here that breaks both to the left and the right. Today the right was nowhere to be seen, and the left only peeled occasionally. I have never seen the wave here work so poorly. There is almost always a surfable wave here. I hope it will be okay tomorrow.

We continue our walk back along the beach, as dark clouds gathered inland. We hoped there would be another storm. Scooby spotted some lightening quite a distance inland, but out over the sea the sun was setting majestically behind a few white clouds, as the regulation evening game of cricket took place on the beach. Not a drop of rain in sight.

When we got back to Sukhawathi we ordered some food for later, and then went upstairs to shower and change. I ordered stuffed eggplant, a favourite of mine, and a dish I hadn't tried before yet, couscous and spicy vegetable stew. Scooby had read some positive comments about the shepherd's pie in the visitors' book, and decided to give this a try. This was another dish that we just haven't got around to trying yet. Scooby was good and did some yoga before we went down for food. I wasn't, and chilled out under the fan on the bed.

Scooby's shepherd pie was as good as expected, and my couscous and stew was okay too, but not quite on a par with some of the other dishes here. There was nothing wrong with it, it's just that given the choice I would opt for other things on the menu, like last night's tempura for instance. We had our food, read for a while, 'fed' a few mosquitoes, and then went up to our room. Scooby had yet another shower, and I read for a while before sleep.

### Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> April - "A Cooking Lesson" ("How to Make Tofu")

There was a loud storm last night, with thunder, lightning, and torrential rain. We were asleep before it started, and dozed on and off throughout its duration. I played the game of counting how long the interval was between the flash of lightning and the clap of thunder. It stayed very constant at around 6 or 7 seconds. I'm sure someone may be able to tell me how far away the storm was from this, but all I know is that it was very bright, and very loud. I could feel the ground shake when the thunderclaps came.

The alarm woke us at 6.30am, but there was still torrential rain outside, and the wind was on-shore so I didn't bother going to check the surf. We both went back to sleep, despite the growing traffic noise from outside. Then again, I did have cotton wool in my ears. Scooby could sleep through nearly anything. We woke up again at around 9.30am, and just relaxed in bed reading, enjoying the cool and stillness after the storm. It was still overcast and drizzling outside, our first day here where there had not been bright sunshine to greet us in the morning. Outside our window there were more shouts of encouragement as more runners and cyclists raced past, still being soaked with buckets of water despite the drizzle.

We headed downstairs for a late breakfast of herbal porridge with tropical fruits, and a few cups of tea. We were asking Kasanjith more questions about life here in Sri Lanka. Everyday he brings us an English language newspaper to read while we eat breakfast, and I had noticed that all of the job advertisements asked the prospective employees to provide 'Bio-data'. I hadn't heard this term before, and thought that it meant a horoscope or something, but apparently it just means a kind of CV. It sounds more like a DNA genetic profile, where the employer can weed out the unsuitable applications through looking at their genetic code. Actually, that kind of thing probably isn't too far away from reality in the USA. Big Brother is coming, to keep us all safe from those nasty terrorists.

When we finished our leisurely breakfast/lunch, Kasanjith invited us into the kitchen to watch him make tofu and soya milk, so that hopefully we could learn how to do it ourselves when we get home. He invites us into his kitchen as if he is inviting us into his home, and in a way he is, as he is totally at home in the kitchen, and we watch a craftsman at work. The soya beans had been soaking overnight, and he blended them finely with lots of water. Some were set aside to make the soya milk. The blended beans were then brought to the boil and simmered for 10 - 12 minutes, and then the mixture was strained. First the mixture was passed through a metal sieve, and this removed the larger particles of bean and shell, or 'Okara'. Then the mixture was passed through muslin, which removed even more Okara, and this was squeezed to remove the moisture, and set aside for use in sausages, stuffing, burgers, etc. Any moisture that was squeezed out was returned to the tofu mixture. This was then returned to the heat and simmered for 30 minutes. After this, some vinegar was added to the boiling liquid. Almost immediately the 'curds' of the tofu started to separate from the 'whey'. The mixture was boiled for a few more seconds, and then taken off the heat. While Kasanjith had been doing all this, his wife had been preparing the wooden 'mould' for the tofu to set in, lining the wooden box with fine muslin. Kasanjith scooped out all the curds of tofu into the mould, and poured off the whey. Then the lid was added and excess moisture was pressed out of the tofu. Finally this was left to set for 10 to 15 minutes before being removed from the mould and left to cool. The finished tofu could then be kept submerged in water for up to 2 weeks, if it was kept refrigerated and the water changed once a day.

Next on the menu was the soya milk. The remaining beans were boiled for 5 minutes, drained and then blended with 3 times their volume of water. This mixture was again passed through the metal sieve and the muslin, the okara was removed and all that was left was the milk. Kasanjith heated some of this up with some cinnamon and treacle, and it was absolutely delicious. It was really smooth to drink, and you could just feel it doing you good as it went down.

Scooby had been keeping a photographic record of all these stages, to remind us when we go home. She had already thought of asking her dad to build us the wooden mould for the tofu, as he is handy with wood, and would (no pun intended) enjoy the project of building it. We thanked Kasanjith for showing us how to make these

things. I had read how to do it before, but had never gotten around to trying it. Now that we have seen it done, we will be sure to give it a go when we get home, especially as the results taste so good.

We went back up to our room after this, and read and relaxed while we waited to see if the sun would come out. It didn't though, as predicted by one of the elder members of the kitchen staff. He must have been late 40's, early 50's, and had the physique of Bruce Lee. We watched him climb up a tall coconut palm in no time, getting coconuts for our evening meal. Pretty impressive for an 'old' guy.

While the weather was overcast and cool we decided to do some shopping for presents. We walked up to the main shopping area, and quickly found quite a few of the items we were looking for. We had a little 'hard-sell' from some of the more desperate shop owners, but if we didn't like something we weren't about to hand around and haggle for it. We found some nice wood carvings, some other local crafts, and a few items of clothing. We also found a pretty good supermarket, and bought tea, wood apple jam, kurrakan flour (for herbal porridge!), palm treacle and a few other odds and ends. A little further up the road we found a really interesting little shop with lots of cheap (read 'Pirate') CDs, and some really interesting oils, and a few handmade cards, as well as some citronella oil to try and keep those pesky 'mozzies' away. All in all a good few hours of shopping, but we both needed a few more items to complete our presents list. That would have to wait until another day. We got a tuk-tuk back to Sukhawathi, and went upstairs to do some yoga.

Just before we started we heard a screech of tyres and a crash from just down the road. We went to see what had happened, but our view was obscured by trees. We did however see a mass exodus of Sri Lankans on foot, bicycle and motorcycle, all rushing to see what had happened. We found out later on that a cyclist, who was a little 'worse for wear' due to drinking Arrack, had veered into the path of a passing motorcyclist, causing them both to crash. No-one was seriously hurt, but the cyclist had been taken off to hospital.

We carried on with our yoga, until it was nearly 7pm, and our food would soon be ready. We had ordered it earlier. Before we went down we covered ourselves in the citronella oil that we had bought earlier, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The 'mozzies' still made a meal of us. For our meal Scooby had lentil spaghetti Bolognese, and I had my favourite stuffed eggplant, and Thai tofu curry with rice. Scooby's was delicious, and so was mine, but the tofu curry sauce seemed to be made mainly from minced green chillies, and it certainly made me sweat. Each mouthful had the delicate flavour of coconut and lime, and then the chilli would 'hit', and leave me staring into space. If I order this again, I may ask for a few less chillies! We were both full after this, and weren't tempted by dessert.

We headed up to our room and did some washing in the sink (of clothes). We hung them on a clothes horse, and in this heat they would all be dry by the morning. We had showers, brushed our teeth and headed off to bed. Scooby read for a while, and I caught up on my journal, and then we settled down to sleep. We hadn't really done much today, but then we are on holiday, so we should be okay about allowing ourselves to laze around a bit. I hope there is some surf tomorrow.

#### Monday 21<sup>st</sup> April - "Mosquito Wars"

There was more rain last night, and when the alarm woke us at 6.30am, it was still raining hard. The wind was on-shore too, so I didn't bother to check the surf again. I wonder if I will get to surf here in Hikkaduwa again before we leave. We go back to sleep until about 9am, and doze and read for an hour after that. We eventually decide to get up, and have showers before we go downstairs for breakfast.

Kasanjith has made us Hoppers and curry. Hoppers are like a crisp pancake that is cooked inside a bowl shaped pan, so they provide a perfect receptacle for the curry. They are made from rice flour, and we normally end up eating them with our fingers and getting messy. The best way we have found is to scoop your curry into the middle, fold over two sides to make a kind of 'roll' and then eat them from either end of the roll. We kept

eating, and Kasanjith kept bringing more Hoppers, more curry, more Hoppers, more curry, until we had to say "Enough!". It was a filling meal.

Kasanjith also took us into his kitchen again, and showed us his recipe for 'Yogi Tea'. This was Scooby's favourite hot drink here, and although it was made with garlic, I quite like it too. For a small pot of tea, the recipe was; 2 tbs coriander seeds, 2 to 4 cloves, 3 to 6 cardamom pods, 1/3 tsp cinnamon powder, ½" cubed fresh ginger, 2 cloves of garlic (crushed), and a 1" piece of some kind of vine/creeper that grows in the jungle. Kasanjith didn't have an English name for it. This is probably the only ingredient that we will have to leave out when we make this tea at home. Kasanjith has said he will give us some to take home with us though, and it can be stored for up to 3 years! All of these ingredients are put in a pot and simmered with the desired amount of water (probably 2 ½ cups for a small pot), for about 15 - 20 minutes. This is then strained and sweetened to taste.

We read the papers and then I went for a walk up the beach to check the surf while Scooby did some reading on Ayurveda for our article, from an Indian book that Kasanjith had lent to her. It is a vast and complicated subject, and we were surprised to read that there are many animal products used for some of the treatments. These were not only ghee (clarified butter) and milk, which we had heard about before, but animal dung, animal flesh, and curiously the drinking of cows urine. Our minds boggled at the years of research that must have taken place before it was decided that these ingredients would make good medicine! Then again, in a poor country you use what is at hand (or maybe it's like western medicine and you use anything that you can get the poor suckers on the receiving end to take as long as they believe it's doing them good). We asked Kasanjith about this later on, and he told us that these animal ingredients are for very specific and rare complaints, and as such are very rarely used. He had never known anyone to use them in Sri Lanka.

When I got to the surfing reef it was as expected. A big old mess. One lonely surfer was out there trying to catch a wave. I watched him for half an hour, and he didn't catch a thing. After this he caught some white water in, and just sat on the beach looking frustrated. I think that the surfing season here must be finished. It looks like lots of sand has been moved around on the reef and no two waves break in the same place or in the same way twice. The wind was only light, so this wasn't the cause. Every time I looked at the surf here since we got back from Arugam, there has been an obvious change in the swell direction, and I think this has mucked up the sand on the reef. I am beginning to wish we had stayed a bit longer in Arugam, but I can't change that now. The beach is also deserted apart from a few fishermen and the odd traveller here and there. I recognise the 'feel' of the place from the end of the summer in Cornwall. It's definitely the end of the season for some people, as restaurants are boarded up and sand bagged, and quite a few of the shops and stalls on the main road aren't bothering to open. The only person who I speak to on the beach is a toothless Sri Lankan who offers me Hashish. He tells me how good it is, and I tell him I'm sure it is, but I'm not interested.

When I get back from my walk Scooby joins me upstairs. I have a quick shower to remove sand, and then inspired by the reading about Ayurveda, I give myself a massage with some oils. The sun is out on the balcony after I finish my 'oily rub down' so I go and lay out in it for a while. I end up dozing off. When I awake I can hear Scooby breathing hard (!) and I wonder what is occurring. I have a look around the corner and she has already started her yoga practice. I decide to join her, so I get changed into my shorts and lay out my mat. Scooby temporarily interrupted her practice to take a few photos, as the light was good, and then she went back to her routine.

We both had a good long session, and then showered and changed into our evening clothes. We had ordered our food earlier on, and for earlier in the evening than usual, thinking that we would beat the rush of mosquitoes (6.30pm). We then learnt from Kasanjith that our tactics would have the opposite effect, as there are many large mosquitoes around between 5.30 - 7.30pm, and then they disappear and the less voracious smaller ones come out after that. Kasanjith called it their 'timetable'. Sure enough, within seconds of us sitting down we were 'clapping' all around us, and grasping into thin air to try and get as many of the little buggers as possible before they got us. At the end of the evening, it was probably a draw, with us killing about 15 of them, and

between us getting about 15 bites. Our attitude may seem a little contradictory as animal loving vegans, but I'm sorry, I have to draw the line somewhere. I won't go out 'looking for trouble', but if mosquitoes or any other creatures want to bite me then they had better be prepared to be bitten back!

Sure enough, at 7.30pm we started to notice that their attack had calmed down, and we could relax a little. In our hopes of living a 'pure' life, we have tried to avoid the chemical cocktails of most anti-mosquito lotions and sprays, instead opting for ones that contain essential oils. This trip finally convinced me that these 'natural mosquito repellents' are in fact totally crap! We have tried all kinds of essential oils and combinations of oils, we have doused ourselves in lemongrass, eucalyptus, and citronella, and they have all proved little more than totally useless. Tonight I regretted not bringing a bottle of 'Jungle Formula' (containing DEET) with me on this trip, that had been kindly loaned to me by my friend Kim. Why oh why did I leave it behind? It was only out of some kind of purity trip, and notions of not wanting those 'nasty chemicals' on my skin. Tonight I would have rubbed radio-active Plutonium on my skin if it had kept the bloody mosquitoes off! Luckily Kasanjith noticed our clapping frenzy, and came to the rescue with some Sri Lankan anti mosquito oil, containing DEET of course. It seemed to work. Well, it seemed to work on the areas where it had been applied, but those crafty mozzies soon found the minutes of areas on knees, thighs, feet and arms where there was not sufficient coverage either by oil or clothing.

Anyway, as I have said earlier, they 'clocked off' at 7.30pm, and we could relax (although there were still a few on overtime and productivity bonuses 'bringing in the blood'). As a result of these mosquito wars, I didn't pay as much attention to my food as usual, but it seemed to be fine. I had tempura with miso soup again, as it's one of my favourites and Scooby had falafel with vegetable salad. We both had room for desserts this evening, and I had banana fritters, while Scooby had Thai fried banana. They were both delicious, but I preferred the crunchy coating of my fritters to Scooby's choice. They were both good though as we sampled each others choices anyway.

We chatted for a while and before I knew it I had ordered more food. Scooby couldn't believe that I was still hungry, but I was. I ordered a peanut butter, banana and treacle 'Jaffel', or toasted sandwich. They are quite a common item on the travellers' café menus both here and in India. It was delicious.

We got the bill for our food, paid Kasanjith, and headed up to our room to read before sleep. Kasanjith had very kindly omitted charging us for the Hoppers that we had for breakfast this morning, as he was cooking them for his family anyway. Yet another example of how generous he is. Good man!

#### Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> April - "Hello, coconut milk?"

We had another good nights sleep, and slept and dozed until 9.30am. We showered and dressed and went down for some breakfast; our favourite of herbal porridge and tea. I also had a Jaffel, same as last night, as I had enjoyed it so much.

The sun was out today. There were a few clouds on the horizon, but it was bright sunshine overhead, and the temperature was rising as a result. I had a quick surf check, but again there didn't seem to be much happening. Scooby took some more photos in the garden, and then we headed off to Ambalangoda, the next big town to the north of Hikkaduwa, about 14 kms away. We negotiated a price with a tuk-tuk driver, and headed off up the coast. Scooby gave me the seat overlooking the sea, so that I could check for possible places to surf on the way. There wasn't anything worth a closer look.

Just as we were leaving Hikkaduwa, our driver told us about an old Buddhist temple that was only a short diversion from our route. He was a Buddhist himself, and from how he described it, it wasn't on the main tourist map, so we decided to pay it a visit. It was about 4kms up the road from Hikkaduwa, and 150 metres down a turning to the right. We are ashamed to say that we didn't catch the name of the place, but it was quite impressive. Within the grounds of a small monastery we were shown inside a large room that housed two huge

Buddhas, one sitting in meditation and the other reclining on his right hand side. There was also a statue of Vishnu, a Hindu god, that the priest said was the largest such statue in Sri Lanka. On every wall, and covering the ceiling there were illustrated stories from the Buddha's life, and beautiful paintings of natural scenes. Over the entrance to the reclining Buddha there was a huge dragon, and also over the exit, symmetrically poised over each door way and ready to do battle with any demons. Many other smaller statues lined the wall. We were told that this room dated back to 1805, and because it was so old the monks weren't allowed to re-paint the statues, or the walls. Everything must remain in its original condition, even though some of the plaster was peeling from the walls, and the paint had obviously faded. It was very impressive. There was a tangible sense of stillness and of something very sacred inside this hall, and we could have stayed in there for a long time, if left to our own devices, just soaking up the vibes. We were however being escorted by a monk, so when he gestured for us to move on, we did so. We didn't want to outstay our welcome.

The next place we were shown was a smaller hall, but containing almost the identical scenes and statues from the previous hall. It obviously followed the same formula, only this room was even older. I think I heard the figure of 1400 mentioned, but I can't be sure. This was a little more run-down than the previous place, and we were again told that it was forbidden to renovate it due to its age. The plaster on the walls was made from a paste formed from crushed corals, and all the paints used were made from tree resins, barks, herbs, and other natural substances. It was still remarkably well preserved for something so old, and we were told another interesting fact about it. This was the only reclining Buddha statue to face west, out to sea. All the other statues in Sri Lanka, according to Vatsu/Feng Shui type rules, had to face the east, and the rising sun. This one was different, because it was actually a replacement for an even older statue that had been washed out to sea in a huge storm. Hence, this statue faced in the direction in which the old one had departed.

We were told another interesting story about a very famous Buddhist sage, who also happened to be the head of this monastery. When he knew that death was coming to him, he drank a special cocktail of herbs, and even after death his body did not decompose. Again, we did not catch his name, but we were told that the British and Portuguese were so fascinated with this that they put his body under glass, and it could still be seen (apparently), somewhere else that we didn't catch the name of. Who knows if these stories are true, but I have read many other accounts of saints and sages whose bodies stubbornly refused to decompose after death. These stories must have some basis in truth. We were also shown an old drawing of this sage lying in his glass case, and a few other relics. We were invited to write some comments in a visitor's book, and also to make a donation, which we were both happy to do. I wrote, "Thank you for allowing us to see this very special place. There is a great stillness here". And there was. This had been a very welcome diversion on our journey to Ambalangoda, and a welcome relief to the usual tourist rip-offs and scams that you can sometimes find yourself in, if you agree to visiting somewhere suggested by the more unscrupulous tuk-tuk drivers.

We arrived at Ambalangoda and headed straight to a mask museum, and attached shop (of course). This town is famous for its mask carvers, and there are several well respected craftsmen in business here. We had a quick look around the museum, made a token donation, and headed upstairs to the shop. Although there were some very impressive pieces of wood carving, most of the stuff on offer could be found at any number of tourist shops along the main street in Hikkaduwa. The only difference was here, it was over 100% more expensive! We didn't buy anything. I also had enough of being followed around the shop by a young salesman. He was obviously watching me to see if I would steal anything, so I made a game out of turning first one way, then another, heading one way, changing my mind and walking down a different isle, each time looking at him and having a little chuckle to myself as he tried desperately to remain inconspicuous, even though he was only a couple of steps behind me. He gave up when some more tourists entered the shop, and attached himself to them.

We headed back to the main part of town, and told our tuk-tuk driver we would meet him in an hour. An hour seemed like a reasonable amount of time to spend walking around, and it had seemed quite an interesting place as we had rushed through in a taxi on a couple of previous occasions. Once we started walking though, in the heat of the day, we soon became aware that one Sri Lankan town is much the same as another to a couple of hot

sweaty travellers like us. We had enough after only 15 minutes, and wondered what we would do with the remaining 45 minutes. We headed into a 'Sathosa' supermarket, which is quite a favourite pastime of ours. They have branches all over Sri Lanka, kind of like a Sri Lankan Tesco's only without the variety, or customer service. We were followed around by an overweight, bossy clerk, who had an annoying habit of saying "Hello, coconut milk?" to whatever we showed an interest in. "Hello, jam?", "Hello, coriander?", "Hello, grape?", "Hello this, hello that?". It drove us mad, and out of the shop without buying anything. We only went in out of curiosity, but that is something that shopkeepers in India and Sri Lanka just don't seem to comprehend. Why would anyone go shopping for the sake of it? It can be such a hot and troublesome thing, that it seems crazy to them we would choose to enter a shop without the intention of buying anything. Perhaps they think that we have no mind of our own and will simply buy anything that is suggested. Who knows.

Forty minutes to go. We walk further along a side street, past shops selling dried fish, onions, garlic and other supplies. Then there are the 'plastic' shops, selling chairs, bowls, buckets and assorted other plastic items. In smaller, equally run-down shops we spot a mobile phone shop, and an electrical shop, looking slightly out of place in these surroundings (to us anyway). We loiter around the bus station for a while, and watch a man perform some kind of ritual dance, martial arts, Chi Gung type exercises. He is incredibly focused and seems to be in some kind of altered state. He is performing these movements seemingly in time with the music that is emanating from a CD shop nearby. He has a very well defined upper body, and strong arm muscles. After a while, the music stops, and so does he. Well, his arms stop moving, but he is quite unsteady on his feet. We watch as he unrolls a small parcel of something, tears a little bit off of whatever is inside, and eats it. It could be herbs, tobacco, or grass. He then wanders off slowly down the street, leaving us confused as to whether we have been watching a traditional dancer busking, a martial artist practising, a drunk begging for money for Arrack, or a man in a drug-fuelled haze freaking out.

Thirty-five minutes to go. We spot an air conditioned clothes shop, and go inside to escape the heat. There are rows and rows of western style clothes, all looking like a large collection of designs that didn't sell in the west over the last 20 years. Now we know what happens to all the clothes that are 'this years fashion', but never sell. One particular design we have seen a lot of is a shirt or skirt with a band of flames around the bottom, kind of like the front of an American hot-rod car. Lots of people have those.

We soon exhaust all the shopping possibilities and decide to go for a drink at a café. We both want ginger beer, but none of the café's we try has any. We slowly wander back towards our meeting place with the tuk-tuk driver. We arrive 15 minutes early, but he is there, god bless him. Scooby reminded me of a time in India, similar to today, when we found ourselves wandering around an Indian town in the heat of the day. She had said to me, "If I ever suggest walking around somewhere like this in the heat of the day, please stop me". Well, I had forgotten to, but hopefully we will remember before we find ourselves in this position again.

We headed back towards Hikkaduwa and to the 'Cool Spot' restaurant. Our tuk-tuk driver however had other ideas. He went straight past the Cool Spot and headed to another place overlooking the beach, trying to convince us of their merits on the way. He must be on commission from them. We remained unconvinced though, and made him take us back to the Cool Spot as we had previously asked. We usually visit this place at least once when we are in town as they do great juices, and a really good 'Coconut Candy Hopper'. I also had a plate of vegetable noodles, and Scooby had a vegetable Jaffel. All of it was good. So good in fact that I had to have two Hoppers. We both had a little more shopping to do for presents, so we again found ourselves wandering around in the heat, shopping (how soon we forget!). At least we knew what we were after this time, and we wasted no time in finding it. I got oils for my mum, and Scooby got some wood carvings for her mum. We had a quick surf check, as the reef was just down the road. It didn't look too bad, but there was still no-one out. Not a good sign, but maybe I will try again in the morning.

We got another short tuk-tuk ride back to Sukhawathi, ordered our food for later, and went upstairs. Scooby took a few more photos of the place for our article, and then we did our yoga, and got very sweaty indeed.

After this we had showers, got covered in 'placebo mossy cream', and headed downstairs. We had ordered our food for 7.30pm tonight, to beat the mosquito rush hour, and it seemed to work. There were far less of them buzzing around than yesterday. Our food was good as usual. I had vegetable pakora and Gado Gado (Indonesian fried rice and vegetables with mushrooms, peppers, tofu and soya sausages). It was a huge amount of food. Scooby had enchiladas with salads. We were both too full to have any dessert, but we did have some more soya milk with cinnamon and treacle.

We were all in a chatty mood tonight, and we got chatting with Kasanjith, his wife, and a friend about food, Kombucha, bean sprouts, tuk-tuk, cars, cars in Sri Lanka, cars in England, foxhunting, more cars, etc. We told Kasanjith about a crazy idea we had. We thought about buying a tuk-tuk and driving it back to England, and writing a book about our experiences. We wanted to know how much a new tuk-tuk was, and it turns out they are quite cheap - about £1400.

As the evening wore on, and we became more tired, we talked about how much it might cost to ship one back to the UK. We were too tired to drive it all that way now. We had no idea how much that would cost, but we vowed to find out. It would make a great run-a-round back home. With that thought, we headed upstairs, and a short while later, off to sleep.

### Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> April - "Ayurvedic Hospital"

I slept until about 5.30am, and had lots of dreams, but then I couldn't get back to sleep. The alarm went off at 6.30am and we both slowly got up. We seemed to be really taking our time, but we were still out of the door by 7am. We got a tuk-tuk to the surfing reef, and it actually looked okay, so I decided to go for a surf. It was 3-4ft and clean. Scooby sent further up the beach and looked for wildlife both on the beach and in a shallow section of reef. She was joined, as is customary for her, by one of the beach dogs. She saw lots of hermit crabs fighting for better homes (their shells), a sea snake, a kind of 'sea snail' complete with shell, and lots of small silvery fish flying around in the waves and white water. I saw a couple of turtles while I was out surfing too.

The waves were okay, nothing to rave about, but it was a pleasant enough way to watch the sun come up over the palms inland. When I first paddled out, there was only one other surfer out there, but after half an hour we were joined by about six other surfers. After another half an hour about four others came out, and there were just about the right amount of us out there without it being too crowded. Soon after that a Sri Lankan paddled out, who obviously didn't feel the same way, as he shouted something in Sinhalese to each person that he paddled past. He obviously wasn't happy, and seemed to be saying something like, "I wish all you foreigners would f\*!k off somewhere else and leave the waves to us Hikkaduwa locals". He was only a small guy, and everybody just looked at him blankly, and carried on surfing. He was very aggressive at first and paddled for every wave, but he soon tired from paddling back out again, and seemed to mellow out. He even chatted happily in English to some people. I have no idea what his problem was earlier, as there were plenty of waves to go around.

By 9.30am I was starting to tire, and I had spotted Scooby on the beach so I caught a wave in. We walked back to Sukhawathi along the beach, had showers when we got there, and went downstairs for some much needed breakfast. We started with papaya and coconut-milk shakes, and then had herbal porridge and fruits. Scooby started writing out the article neatly, for Kasanjith to read over to make sure we had got all our facts right. I went through a copy of Vegetarian Britain guidebook that we had brought over for Kasanjith, as he could use it to help him find work in the UK. He wants to get some experience of working in England for 3 to 6 months, and I went through the book marking what I thought would be suitable places for him to contact. This took well over an hour, and was quite interesting for me too, as I got a good idea of some places to eat and drink when Scooby and I are out and about on our travels.

Scooby wanted some Yogi tea, and I was getting hungry by now, so I ordered some pakoras to munch on. I also started writing a letter that Kasanjith could send out to vegetarian restaurants in the UK, detailing his experience and what he would like to do. In the mid afternoon we went up to our room and had a bit of a siesta. Later on Scooby did some yoga, but I had a rest from it today as I had surfed this morning, but mainly because I was feeling lazy. I just relaxed on the bed.

We went downstairs at 5.30pm to meet an Ayurvedic therapist that Kasanjith had arranged to come in and demonstrate some of the treatments for us. Scooby wanted to get some photos of him working, so he very kindly gave me a short massage with Ayurvedic oils, and then a short period of 'Vaspa Sweda' or 'steaming with herbs', in a special handmade wooden cabinet. The therapist had over 20 years experience, and worked at the Government Ayurvedic hospital in Galle, the nearest city. He had worked in Europe as well. He obviously knew what he was doing, and even though it was only short, I think that my massage was one of the best I have ever received, except for ones from Scooby of course! She got photos of everything, and had a chance to question the therapist more about some of the treatments that were used in Ayurvedic medicine. We have both learnt quite a lot about it from writing this article.

When we had finished with the 'journalistic' stuff, we have a couple of ginger beers and sat down to decide what to have for dinner. It's always a balance between trying something new from the menu (it is vast), or sticking to something that we know. We both opted for dishes that we hadn't ordered before, although I went for the lentil Bolognese that Scooby had recently ordered. Tonight though, she went for the baked potato and lentil stew. Oh, and I also ordered a stuffed eggplant, as I hadn't had one for a day or two, and was getting withdrawal symptoms.

After we had ordered our food, we returned to our room to avoid the peak mosquito biting time. We headed downstairs again at 7.30pm, both quite hungry by now. We ate far too much food, and we followed our main courses with coconut and treacle pancakes, and coconut-milk shakes. I ate so much I felt as though I just wanted to sleep. Just as we were finishing our meal a taxi pulled up, and a group of Sri Lankans came and sat down. It is always nice when there are other people in the restaurant, as quite often we are the only ones there, especially now it is the end of the season. It turns out that these Sri Lankans are from London, and have come over for a family wedding. We got chatting about lots of things and also about nice places to visit. It was strange for us to be recommending places to visit to these people, but they did the same for us, and after all we both lived in another country. We headed upstairs after this, and read a little before sleep.

#### Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> April - "A Polite Israeli? Where?"

We got up just after 6.30am again, and got ready to head to the beach. I had been awake from 5.30am again and Scooby from 6.15am. We got a tuk-tuk to the surf, and I went in while Scooby explored some of the shallow sections of reef, looking for more wildlife and assorted creatures. The surf was okay for an hour or so, and I got lots of waves. It was 3-4' and clean. It seemed to calm down after this, and there were long periods of just waiting around. When I first paddled out there was only one other surfer out, and we were surfing slightly different peaks anyway. He was going right and I was going left. After a while three more surfers came out, but by then there were not many good waves rolling through. There was absolutely no hassling for waves, and the atmosphere was really relaxed out there.

When I had enough of waiting around I caught a smaller wave in and met up with Scooby on the beach. She had been hassled a little bit by two Sri Lankan fishermen/'masseurs', but a firm "No, thanks" left them in no doubt about their chances. One of them claimed to recognise us from 'before' but this is an old 'trick' they use to get you talking. I can't imagine that it ever works though. I'd never seen him before.

We decided to explore the reefs a bit more, and see what little creatures we could find. If you stayed perfectly still for long enough, some of the fish would venture out of their nooks and crannies, and there were plenty of smaller silvery fish buzzing around constantly. We also saw lots of sea cucumbers, but the most

enjoyable thing was just sitting in the sandy sections in waist deep water, watching the waves pound the reef a short distance from us, and the residual waves just gently washing over us. The sun was out, but we were partly shaded by some palms, so it wasn't too hot, and it suddenly hit home that we would be leaving all this in a few days time. We consoled ourselves with the fact that we lived in a nice part of the UK, and summer was on its way. If it wasn't for work we would both be quite happy to be going back to England at this time of year. It occurred to me how nice it would be if I was looking forward to going back to work, but that's not likely in my current job.

We walked back to Sukhawathi along the beach, and passed more unsmiling 'too cool to acknowledge you' travellers. It might just be coincidence, but most of these were Israelis, and we had noticed a 'certain attitude' that they had each time we had met them on our travels. We are not referring to one small group of people, but to any Israelis we have met, over a wide variety of places and situations. For example, yesterday as we were walking along the beach, we noticed a surfer who had lost his board swimming in to the shore. His leash had snapped, and his board was tumbling around in white-water, and might have got damaged on the reef if Scooby hadn't gone and picked it up for him as we waited for him to swim in. When he eventually reached us (he wasn't in a hurry), Scooby handed him back his board and he just gave the very slightest, almost imperceptible nod of the head, and walked off. We both agreed that we wouldn't bother next time, he could find his own board in future. Another example; last time we were here, two years ago, we were waiting for a train at Hikkaduwa station. An Israeli man came up to us and asked us if we could look after his rucksack as he wanted to go outside to get a drink. "OK," we said, "No problem", but when he came back with his drink he just picked up his baggage and walked off. No 'thank-you' or nothing. Just rudeness. Maybe they have no word for 'thank-you' in Israel. We have come to recognise Israelis by a few character traits; an attitude of 'the whole world revolves around me', a total lack of acknowledgement to anyone other than fellow Israelis, an aversion to politeness, and finally a childlike regression to temper tantrums and shouting if things don't go their way, that borders on a persecution complex. Imagine a whole country full of such people and the complex political situation between Israel and the rest of the Middle East suddenly seems much simpler. Scooby works with a couple of Israeli students at her college, and they are always friendly and polite, so she said she would ask them about our experience of Israelis here and see if they could shed any light on our experiences. I look forward to hearing their views.

Anyway, when we got back to Sukhawathi we spotted a couple of large mongooses in the garden. They ran off and hid, but allowed us to get a better look at them again before we got too close and they ran off through the fence in the land behind. We went upstairs for showers, and had breakfast/lunch when we came down. Scooby had two jaffles, one sweet and one savoury, and I had tabbouleh and chick pea salad. We both had coconut-milk shakes, papaya for her and banana and chocolate for me. Delicious!

After our food and a quick read of the papers we went up to our room. I had a short siesta and Scooby sunbathed on our balcony. A little later on she went downstairs to take some photos of Kasanjith and his family, while I read my book. When she got back, we went out to see a family that we had befriended up by Eldorado guest house. This was the family that Scooby had taken some photos of, with the grandfather holding the flower, and we had sent them some copies too. When we saw them a couple of weeks ago, the 'old man' was in hospital, but today he was there to greet us with a handshake and a big smile. We were invited inside and caught up with their news. The old man would be okay, as long as he doesn't smoke, but his mischievous grin told us that this was perhaps unlikely, and as soon as he is well enough he will probably have the strength to walk to the main road to ask for a smoke from a passing tourist. The only two English words he knows are "Hello, cigarette?"!

We were told about an uncle who is also in hospital with liver failure due to his strong liking for Arrack. The prognosis was not good. We were offered coconut water, which we gladly accepted, and I made a right mess of my vest as a result of spilling it down my front. There were children everywhere, and again the subject came up as to why we didn't have any. Scooby was asked her age and told that "now is a good time!" and any older and

"it's not so good". The whole family wished us luck with trying for children! We exchanged information about the difference between life in England and Sri Lanka, and Scooby gathered the whole family around for a group photo, that we would of course send some copies of. They were very apologetic about not having any food prepared for us, but we had turned up unannounced so we weren't expecting any. It was a kind gesture. After the photo-session we said our goodbyes and shook lots of hands, and promised we would try and return to Sri Lanka soon.

Not far from the house was the shop that Scooby and I had bought most of our presents from and Scooby wanted to go there again to buy a wood carving of Buddha in meditation. She spent a while considering the merits of each one, and decided to one that was "pleasing to the touch", and "just felt right". It was a good price too.

We headed back to Sukhawathi in a tuk-tuk, ordered food for later, and went upstairs to do our yoga practice. I started a little later than Scooby as I had some washing in the sink to rinse out from earlier. God only knows how I manage to sweat so much when I do yoga! By the end of my practice sweat was running off me, into my eyes, down my arms and legs, soaking my shorts. My mat was soaked too. Even Scooby sweats though, doing yoga in this heat. It was a satisfying practice for me. Today I felt the benefits of practising regularly again, and I felt both strong and flexible. My left knee, which had been troubling me a little during the last few days of yoga was much better today too.

We had showers, read for a while, and went downstairs for our dinner. Well, Kasanjith really excelled himself tonight with the curries and rice. There was the usual rice, and dall of course, but also one of the most delicious 'melt in the mouth' vegetable dishes I have ever eaten. It was young jackfruit, in a mild curry sauce, and if we had been served this dish anywhere else we would have had to question its origin, as it looked like meat or fish. There were large chunks of this jackfruit in a grey sauce, and it really did look like cooked flesh, but tasted divine. There was also a tofu and green pepper dish, and another really mild creamy dish with okra, or 'ladies fingers'. Kasanjith told us that he cooks the young jackfruit for 'reluctant vegetarians', who aren't really vegetarians, but might be eating at his restaurant with friends who are. He said he has never heard any of them complain when they have tried it. Scooby had her turn for the stuffed eggplant tonight, and she also had Arabian chick peas with spinach. This was a huge mound of chick peas and spinach, with onions, cumin seeds and other spices. It was nice, but not one of her favourites. There were just too many chick peas, so of course I had to help her eat it. Ha ha! Scooby was full after her meal and so just had some yogi tea, but I wanted something sweet and so had banana fritters.

Scooby had noticed something on one of the windows all day, and during tea, curiosity got the better of her. It turned out to be a large tree frog, and Scooby got in close for a better look. When Kasanjith saw this, he told her to be careful, as they have sharp claws and can jump at you quickly! Scooby backed off a little!

We had a game of chess after our meal. Scooby looked like she had a cunning plan, but it fell apart just before she could execute it, and I ended up winning. There was another couple at the restaurant tonight, probably German, and they too ordered the rice and curries. When it arrived at their table the man couldn't help but exclaim "Jeezus Christ!" at the amount of food and variety. Kasanjith certainly gives you your moneys worth!

Scooby gave Sujeewa her remaining pens, as she is a teacher and could make good use of them. We headed up to bed with huge bellies and soon drifted off to sleep.

#### Friday 25<sup>th</sup> April - "Aawhumpff"

We got up at what had become 'our usual time', 6.30am. There was hardly any wind, just a light off-shore breeze so I knew the surf would be okay. We got a tuk-tuk to the reef, and again I went surfing while Scooby relaxed and looked for wildlife in another part of the reef. The surf was good, 3-4ft with the occasional larger set. Again there was just one other surfer out when I paddled out, but later on we were joined by four others,

and later still by a couple of moody Sri Lankans. God knows what they had to be moody about. I had a good surf and after a couple of hours caught a wave in to meet Scooby on the beach. She told me that she had stared at while she was on the reef, and so had told the Sri Lankan man that it was rude to stare at women when she left. She wasn't sure if he had understood, and it probably wouldn't make any difference to his attitudes, but sometimes you just have to let off a little steam.

We walked back to Sukhawathi along the beach in the bright sunshine. There was hardly any wind still, and the only noise was the 'aawhumpff' of the waves on the shore-break crashing down on the steeply shelving beach. Back at Sukhawathi, we went upstairs and had showers, and then came down for our last breakfast of our trip. It had to be herbal porridge and fruits, and juices/coconut-milk shakes. I followed this up with a tofu, onion and mustard jaffle.

During the night we had heard some noises on the roof of the hotel, and suspected intruders. Kasanjith told us that there were often mongooses scuttling around at night, and sometimes they get up onto the roof. He had heard the noises too, and at first he thought there might be intruders, but then realised the cause.

After breakfast Scooby and I collaborated on a letter that Kasanjith could send out to prospective employers in the UK. We had already been through the Vegetarian Guidebook to Britain to find suitable restaurants where he could work. Scooby then jotted down a framework for a CV that he could send out with the letter. While we were doing this we were approached by Kasanjith and Sujewa, and they had some presents for us! In a couple of woven baskets there was a bottle of pure palm treacle and two blocks of 'jaggery', or solid palm sugar. These were wrapped and tied in the traditional way with leaves and rice straw. It was a nice touch, and very nearly brought Scooby to tears.

We went upstairs to pack, but the sun was glaring down on our balcony, so we took it in turns to heave  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour shifts of alternately packing and sunbathing. Later on we did our yoga practice, and the successive days of practice showed their results as we both felt back up to maximum flexibility (for us). I got as sweaty as usual, and had a very peaceful relaxation, despite the traffic passing on the road out front. I found that if I concentrated on the sounds of the waves instead it took me deeper into relaxation. We decided to leave showering until later on, and went straight out onto the beach. We walked, played with some dogs, watched the sunset, and generally took in the ambience on the beach. There were the usual games of cricket taking place, and the weather was in for a change as dark clouds formed out to sea, and a strong southerly wind was blowing. The sea looked like it did a week ago when we returned to Hikkaduwa, and the surf was messed up again. We made our way back to Sukhawathi as the sun turned a deep orange, and dropped behind the clouds on the horizon.

We showered, packed a few more items, and then headed down for our meal. Kasanjith had obviously been taking note of how much we have been eating as he provided even larger portions of everything for our last night's meal. I am sure he is trying to find our limit of food intake. While we were eating, Scooby (as she is prone to do) noticed a large spider on the ceiling. It was about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter, and had thick legs. When it scuttled off to a far corner it sent shivers down her spine, and she was on edge for the rest of the evening. At one point it lowered itself by a thread onto a plant, and Scooby was both amazed and repulsed by this, and involuntarily stood up to distance herself from it. I also admitted that I wouldn't like to pick it up, which made Scooby feel a bit better about her reaction.

Tonight, I had rice and five curries (instead of the usual four!) and Scooby had tempura with miso soup. There was so much food that I had to finish some of Scooby's for her, and there was no way that we could fit in a dessert. We remembered an advertisement in 'Yoga and Health' about a retreat centre in Crete that needed a vegetarian cook for their summer season, so we gave Kasanjith the details, and he seemed quite keen. He had been giving us little bits of bobs to take home with us all day and this evening he gave us a plant to bring home with us. He told us that, "Every time you see that plant grow, you can remember us".

We paid our final bill, including for samosas and jaffles for our trip, said our goodbyes to everyone that we wouldn't see in the morning (i.e. 2.30am), and headed up to our room. I had a shave and did my final small pieces of packing, then had a shower to cool down again. It's funny how you only appreciate a place like this when it is time to leave. I won't miss the mosquitoes and their keen taste for my blood, but I will miss nearly everything else. The things that I will miss the most are the sunshine, warm seas, and Kasanjith's lovely food and company. With all that in mind, we headed off to sleep.

#### Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> April - "Disorganised Chaos"

Our alarms went off at 2.30am, but I had been awake for about 30 minutes before hand. We hadn't slept much, or particularly well, but we were focussed on being ready for 3am when our taxi was due. This was the only motivating factor for getting us up in the 'middle of the night'. We showered quickly and dressed but I was still brushing my teeth when Kasanjith knocked on our door to tell us that the taxi was here. I gargled a quick "O.GGK. We'ggll gbe gown in a mingit". The taxi was actually 10 minutes early. We double checked the room to make sure we had left nothing behind, and headed downstairs. Kasanjith and Sujeewa were waiting with our 'packed lunch', and one of the kitchen staff wanted to help with our bags, but we had brought them all down before he had a chance to. We loaded up the taxi, and it was our first glimpse of our vehicle; an old VW minibus. This was not the luxury Toyota van that we have been driven to the airport in the last time we had used 'Sam's Taxis'. Not much we could do about it now though.

We said our last goodbyes, promised to return soon, and headed off into the night. Our van and driver both seemed okay, although I was a little concerned that the temperature gauge was well into the red. VW's can be like that though, and it stayed happily there for the remainder of our journey. Just out of Hikkaduwa our driver pulled over to make a donation and bow his head at the Hindu temple. Presumably he asked for a safe journey too. He was a slower and more careful driver than we were used to, but we were happy with the pace, as long as he got us there on time.

We could see the waves breaking on the beaches and sea defences along some stretches of the road; just making out their rushing white shapes, and wisps of spray. We seemed to be making good time until we hit Colombo, where we started to be held up by the traffic, the people wandering in the road, and scariest of all; the dogs sleeping on the edge of the road along a section of triple carriageway. The heavier traffic of Colombo made our driver move up a gear and he became as aggressive as the other taxis on the road. We still had a way to go, as the airport is quite a distance from the city, and 'undertaking', as well as racing other taxis to the next set of traffic lights became the norm. By now we were running late. When we arrived at the airport we were  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour late, and wishing we had set out earlier. We paid our driver and wished him luck with his other job of the day, a gruelling 12 hour round trip to Arugam Bay in the evening, with a bus full of Israelis. I had no idea how he would cope! Just getting to the airport had taken its toll on him, and that only took  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours. I hope for his sake that he spent the rest of the day sleeping to prepare for it.

When we had to show our passports and tickets just to get into the airport, we remembered how much bureaucracy we would have to deal with here, and when we got inside we both remembered why they recommend getting there 3 hours before your flight. We had only allowed two and we were  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour late (oh, oh!). This wasn't even organised chaos. If there was an order, it wasn't apparent, and yet we remembered some of the stages from our last visit here. Once inside the airport all our baggage was x-rayed, and we passed through a metal detector. Next we proceeded to another round of x-ray machines, in order to get a 'security cleared' sticker on each item. There were huge queues so we just ignored this step. Nobody stopped us, or seemed to mind. Then we had to show our documents again before we could progress to the queues for checking in. Before that though, we were supposed to have our luggage inspected again by more security people. Again, politeness went out of the window and we carried on to the check-in regardless. At the check-in desk, the reasonably ordered queue was being hi-jacked by a few pushy Muslim travellers, but I found that putting myself and my surfboard between them and the desk worked quite well. When they still tried to barge around me and Scooby I lost it

and pushed one of them 'lightly back' with my arm. Scooby also tapped one of them on the shoulder and gestured to him to move back. By now we were at the front of the queue, our baggage was being weighed, and they were still reaching over my shoulder with passports and tickets to try and get served first! By this time some of the airport staff had noticed their tricks, and had a few stern words with them. Unbelievable rudeness!

We got our boarding cards and went to the next stage of the ordeal. We queued to pay our departure tax, then queued to submit our embarkation cards, passports and tickets for more inspection and stamping. Guess what? Then we had to queue to be admitted to the departure hall, but not before the receipts for our departure tax had been stamped! Ridiculous! All of this could be done in one go, at one desk! Surprise! Once we were in the departure hall we had to queue to have our hand luggage x-rayed again, and go through another security check. Then it was a reasonably simple job to show our boarding cards to gain entry to our departure lounge. There was however no time left in which to 'lounge' as there were already passengers queuing to get on the bus to take us to the plane. We joined them, and took our seats on the plane with three minutes to spare before our scheduled 7am take off. Relief! Thank God that was over! After all our rushing, there were still passengers boarding the plane after us, and we took off about 20 minutes late. Five hours after we had woken up, we were finally leaving Sri Lanka.

Despite some initial confusion, Scooby and I were both happy that we had our vegan meals as requested. We had our packed lunch from Kasanjith as well, but it makes a big difference to our enjoyment of flying if we actually get the meal that we have requested. So far Czech Airlines has been really good at honouring their word as far as our food goes.

A little over four hours later and we were landing at Dubai. Thankfully the rude and noisy Muslim family behind us were getting off the plane here. In fact, we all had to get off while it was re-fuelled, and then make our way around the airport to get back on it again. At least we had a chance to stretch our legs and use a decent toilet. About 50 minutes later, and we were air-borne again, and headed for Prague. This leg of the journey would take 5 hours and 50 minutes, and then we were in for a  $3\frac{3}{4}$  hour wait in Prague before our connecting flight to London. The flight to Prague was quite turbulent, and we had to wait a long time for this to clear before we could be served our food. We had a hot meal and a snack, and the journey time seemed to go reasonably quickly. We passed some of the time by watching an unbelievably implausible Hollywood movie. The landing was not so smooth, and we swerved sharply when we first touched down, causing a few people to make comments. I was near the wing, and could see thick black smoke coming from one of the tyres too, so perhaps the brakes had stuck on one side. I had joked to Scooby that one of the tyres looked a bit bald, when we boarded the plane at Colombo, so our jerky landing could explain why.

It was warm and sunny when we landed at Prague, and we passed some of the time sitting outside in a viewing area. It was warm enough for shorts and T-shirts, and we hoped England would be the same, but accepted that it would be unlikely. The flight to Heathrow took 1 hour and 40 minutes, and there were the most amazing layers of clouds as we came down to land, lit up by the setting sun with deep shades of orange and purple. We entered and exited the layers at different heights, and from above the clouds looked so solid that I almost expected them to slow the plane down as we flew through them, but of course they didn't.

The landing was much smoother than the one at Prague. It was slightly overcast outside, and there were wet patches on the ground at the airport, but it wasn't too cold for us to bear after the heat of Sri Lanka. We had a short wait before our luggage came through, although my surfboard took the longest. I took it out of its bag to check it, as I have had boards damaged on every flight I have taken them on in the past. There were a few new 'pressure dings' on the deck, but nothing that would need repairing.

We headed through customs and passport control, and outside to meet Scooby's parents. They were there waiting to greet us, and I was amazed to see that they both had good suntans, and Rob was as brown, if not

browner than we were! We quickly said our 'hellos', and Rob explained that since we left at the beginning of April the only rain that they had was in the last couple of days. There had been many fires in their local woods, across the country, and also on Dartmoor, as the land had been so dry. Trust us to go away during the longest period of uninterrupted good weather in the year (so far).

After a bit of confusion over exactly where the car was parked, we approached it and saw two friendly faces eagerly gazing in our direction. Kizzy and Kenai, Scooby's parents' dogs, could see us approaching, and were going crazy to get out and greet us. When Rob let them out they didn't know who to run to first, and so ran to each of us in turn, jumping up to us, whining and whimpering, and in Kizzy's case when she got to me, wetting herself with excitement! Apparently she had never done this until she met me, and now every time we haven't seen them for a while she greets me by going crazy, running round in circles, and squeezing out a little 'wee' onto the floor! It's nice to get such a welcome from them, and Kizzy in particular could not calm down for some minutes, jumping up to us and trying to lick our faces and 'bop' us on the nose with her snout. When they had finally calmed down we loaded up the car and headed to Pembury, to Scooby's parents house. We got there at around 10pm, and although we were tired, we didn't feel too bad. As the food on the plane had been so good we weren't hungry either, and so didn't eat anything else, in case it affected our sleeping later on.

Scooby unloaded some of her presents, and gave them to her mum and dad, and also couldn't resist showing them her wooden Buddha that she had bought in Hikkaduwa. Kizzy was a little unusual around it, treating it with caution, and then licking its face! We chatted about our experiences for a couple of hours, and caught up with the news from home too. We were both nearly asleep on our feet though, and so decided to head off to bed.

#### Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> April - "Re-orientation"

We both surprised ourselves by sleeping quite lightly, and being wide awake by 6.30am. This was particularly ironic as Scooby had made a point of warning her dad not to wake us too early as he has a habit of doing, with his enquiries about cups of tea while we are still sleeping. The tables were turned as we found ourselves awake and wanting to get up while next door Scooby's folks were fast asleep and snoring! After a while Scooby got up to let the dogs out, and soon after this we all got up.

We ate an unusual breakfast of vegetable soup and toast, but then again we have been eating 'green porridge' or curry for breakfast in Sri Lanka, so maybe it wasn't so weird. We went out walking in the local woods after breakfast, and the evidence of recent fires was all around us. It was a nice way to start the day, and it was interesting to think that the vegetation and trees here would probably seem equally as exotic to a Sri Lankan as their flora and fauna seemed to us. That thought made me really appreciate just how green and lush England can be in spring and summer.

We walked for a couple of hours (they are large woods), and then returned home briefly before going to visit Scooby's Gran. She was just about to eat when we got there, so Scooby gave her a present, some wood apple jam, and after a quick chat we were on our way again.

The TV was on at Scooby's folk's house, and it was a strange experience to feel 'drawn' to watch it for no particular reason. There was nothing we were watching as such, it was just 'on' in the background, but we both felt the seductive lure of it, as it grabbed our attention and drew us into its world, stopping our thoughts and replacing them with a numbing sense of acceptance of whatever was 'on'. We hadn't watched TV for nearly a month, and had forgotten how 'normal' it is for people to have TVs on and just passively accepting the vast amounts of information without question. We both resolved to watch less TV in future, if we could possibly resist it.

We ate lunch and then packed up Scooby's car for our journey back to Plymouth. We said our goodbyes and thank you to her parents, and made a fuss of the dogs. They looked very confused as we drove off, as we normally stay for a least a few days, but we had to get back for work. We would be seeing them again, and

looking after them for a week in a couple of month's time. We could make it up to them then with lots of walks on the beach.

We drove back to Plymouth as fast as all the people hogging lanes 2 and 3 would allow. Does anybody use the first lane of motorways anymore? As we pulled onto Scooby's estate, she said, "It feels like we've never been away". I understood what she was getting at; the realities of home life and work would soon be upon us, but we had some great experiences, and some great memories. We knew we would be going back to Sri Lanka again, and our task now was to try and make our life here as healthy, happy and carefree as it had been while we were away. There would surely be some obstacles in our way, but with summer just around the corner, we had a lot to look forward to.