

# SUKHAWATHI Searching

by Phil Chapman and Scooby Gill

For Sri Lanka, the long stretches of white sandy beaches, tall swaying palms and smiling faces that greet you at every turn go a long way to reinforce its reputation as 'Paradise Island'. And as a predominantly Buddhist country, the average food loving vegan could easily be excused in choosing Sri Lanka as an ideal travel destination.

However, although nobody could deny the beauty of the island and its people, when your search for good vegan food begins, you may find the Buddhist teachings of non-violence somewhat misleading, shocking even. A stroll down most tourist streets and a glance at most restaurant blackboards and menus will reveal a surprising amount of chicken, beef, pork and fish on offer. And it's not just it seems, to service the needs of the increasing amount of western tourists travelling to Sri Lanka. We were told that it is now common for Buddhist monks to eat beef and fish, which seems ironic given the Buddhist doctrine of 'Ahimsa', or non-violence. As with modern Hinduism in India, many essential teachings are conveniently forgotten or have become lost.

But all is not lost in paradise, for hidden away, waiting to be discovered, are vegan delights that you will definitely want to write home about. You just need to know where to look.



Phil off surfing. Sri Lanka, December 2000.  
Photo: Scooby.

## Paradise Found

Hikkaduwa, 100km south of Colombo, is the most popular tourist resort for Western travellers on the south-west coast. It stretches out for about 3km along the main Colombo to Galle road and with its myriad of colourful clothing and souvenir shops, hotels and restaurants, beach boys and touts it has a reputation as a 'party capital' and seems to cater for the tackier side of tourism where anything is on offer, for a price. Thankfully, our adventurous natures, coupled with our excitable vegan palates, drove us away from the hustle and bustle of the main tourist traps in search of the real Sri Lanka and the culinary paradise that we knew must exist somewhere. Two kilometres south of Hikkaduwa, set back very slightly from the main Colombo to Galle road, we found Sukhawathi.

Sukhawathi, which means 'Pure Land' in Sinhalese, is a vegetarian restaurant run by people who truly understand the ethics of Buddhist beliefs. They aspire to create their own 'Pure Land' amongst a culture with an increasing disregard for the wisdom of its ancient teachings. As a result, Sukhawathi has managed to create a very special atmosphere that we felt needed a little more exposure to those who would benefit from the excellent food, company and 'special magic' it offers.

Kasanjith Wickramaarachichi, the owner of Sukhawathi, first became involved in the restaurant business in 1983 when one of his uncles opened the Unawatuna Hotel just south of Galle. They very quickly built up a reputation for healthy, tasty and interesting food. Some of the menu was adapted from recipes shared with them by "peace corps" cooks at Unawatuna and with the addition of their, as they call it, "own special magic", a tempting mixture of both western and eastern dishes was established. In 1992, with the knowledge and experience that he had gained while working for his uncle's business, Kasanjith took over the management and promotion of the Unawatuna Hotel. Five years later, Kasanjith concentrated his efforts on his own business and opened Sukhawathi and incorporated into this business, an Ayurvedic Residential Clinic and twelve rooms available for accommodation. The Unawatuna Hotel still remains in Unawatuna but is now being run by the original owner.

## I am a plant eater/We eat greenery

Although Sukhawathi is a vegetarian restaurant, you can rest assured that they have a perfect understanding of what it means to be vegan. Some of the restaurants we visited could barely understand the term vegetarian, let alone vegan. In this respect we thought

the "Vegan passport" would be invaluable. However, we were made aware a little too late that instead of "I am vegan/we are vegans" the translation reads "I am a plant eater/we eat greenery", which caused much amusement at one of the guesthouses we stayed at! Thankfully Sukhawathi, although equally amused by the translation, were at hand to provide us with the correct version (we have now forwarded this on for correction in the Vegan Passport!).

All of the food at Sukhawathi is freshly prepared. Some of the vegetables were completely unfamiliar to us and often had no western translation but an explanation was always given and recipes enthusiastically shared (their Yogi tea was so amazing that we couldn't leave without a recipe!). The dishes (especially the local curries) can vary from day to day, changing as the local ingredients come into season. For this reason the food can occasionally take a while to prepare, but it is always well worth the wait, and as the delicious aromas come wafting in from the open kitchen, this can only serve to heighten your appetite, and leave you with more time to enjoy one of their freshly squeezed juices. And from, on average, £6 per meal for two people, it won't break the bank either (but it might expand the waistline!).

Many of the meals at Sukhawathi are vegan anyway, but they are very flexible and can easily adapt most meals to suit the vegan diet, for example substituting tofu for cheese. In addition to the main menu, each day has a choice of several meals but we quickly discovered that this made little difference to our preferences as they were happy to cook anything from the menu at any time (for example, herbal porridge as a dessert in the evening!). Nothing seemed too much trouble and even the power cuts that frequently plunged Hikkaduwa into pitch black could not prevent them from fulfilling our often very large orders! At the end of the evening we would waddle back down the beach, intoxicated with the wonderful food, having left behind a little 'puddle' of sand from our feet underneath the table. On our return the next day, not only would the sand have disappeared but also the familiar, friendly faces would be there to greet us.

Whilst we stayed in Hikkaduwa, despite the fact that the twelve rooms at Sukhawathi were of both excellent quality and affordable (ranging from about £6 to £10 approximately per room per night), we chose not to stay there. Had it been closer to the main surfing part of the beach then we would not have hesitated. But this, of course, did not stop us from doing our nightly trek there and back. Even when we travelled south-east along the coast to stay for a week, we could not resist



# for 'Pure Land' in Sri Lanka



Beach scene in Sri Lanka.

Photo: Scooby.

travelling the two hours there and back to have our Christmas dinner at Sukhawathi. We also wanted to spend our last night of our holiday enjoying their good food and company and were very kindly rewarded by the offer of a night's free accommodation in one of their excellent rooms.

The clinic at Sukhawathi includes an Ayurvedic shop, meditation facilities and therapy rooms for herbal massage, herbal baths and herbal steam bath and is attended, for full diagnoses and treatment, by fully qualified Ayurvedic doctors and nurses. We did not make use of these facilities ourselves but, was it not for the long walk there and back to our guesthouse, the fat therapy may have been an option to counterbalance our over-indulgence in the wonderful food!

For vegans, meeting people of a like mind is always a joy and quite often a pathway to friendship. Such was the way with the friendly and knowledgeable characters at Sukhawathi and we always looked forward to our visits. We shared many thoughts, ideas and questions. Kasanjith told us about his plans for the future. He is currently looking for suitable land in the beautiful "hill country" around Kandy (the spiritual centre of Sri Lanka), in order to start an Organic Permaculture Project.

There is already a co-operative in Kandy who specialise in growing and promoting Soya products, and who make the most delicious snacks ("short eats" as they are called in Sri Lanka), as well as Soya milk-shakes and ice creams. The first time we came across them was when we saw one of their Soya ice cream vans doing a roaring trade outside an athletics

event at a stadium in Kandy. It's amazing to see the wide variety of people who frequent their main store; students, travellers, business men, mothers and babies, truck drivers, anyone who passes seems to pop in for a Soya ice cream. You can check them out at the Soya Food Centre, next to the YMCA. You won't be disappointed.

Kasanjith is hoping to purchase about 15 acres of land, which will house an educational

project to promote organic agriculture and the vegetarian/vegan way of life. There will be accommodation and, of course, a restaurant to expand their unique catering abilities using their own organic produce. They will grow fruits, vegetables and both culinary and medicinal herbs, and are keen to "spread the word" of the Pure Land philosophy. Visitors will be able to stay, help out, and learn all about organic gardening Sri Lanka style. So far a suitable piece of land has not been found to house this project, but they will let us know when they have, and we will be sure to return to the Magic of the "Pure Land" that they create.

Unfortunately, this would mean that he would possibly have to sell Sukhawathi because, as magical as it is, its location away from the main 'drag' doesn't always make it financially viable to hold on to when the money could be utilised for the new project.

For us, even though the planned project at Kandy sounds wonderful, the loss of Sukhawathi would be a great shame. The political climate in Sri Lanka seems to have led many Sri Lankans into a very money-orientated ethic but, although Sukhawathi is a business, the people who run it have managed to escape the money-grabbing environment that often surrounds every tourist. It is a sanctuary away from the hawkers and touts, a place where friendship and trust prevail and where every vegan will feel like they truly have landed in paradise!

## *A selection of our favourite items from the menu;*

(Prices converted approximately into Sterling)

- Fresh Spring Roll with Miso - 50p
- Stuffed Eggplant (ask for tofu instead of cheese) - 60p
- Sri Lankan Rice and Curries (Rice, four curries and poppadom) - £1
- Mexican Burritos with Tomato Salsa - £1
- Indonesian Gado-Gado with Peanut Sauce (ask for no egg) - £1
- Special Meal (veggie-burger, grilled tomatoes and chips with tomato and avocado salad) - £1.50
- Thai Fried Banana - 40p
- Mangoes with Sticky Rice - 70p
- Herbal Porridge - 70p
- Coconut Milk Shakes (made with various fresh fruit) - 50p
- Fresh Vegetable Juice - 50p
- Large pot of Yogi Tea - 70p

For more details and further enquiries please contact: -

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