

## **LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON, *Discovery*, October 1994**

AT COLOMBO'S KATUNAYAKE AIRPORT we are asked to pose for a photograph with our hosts. There is sufficient interest, apparently, in the fact that my father is returning to Sri Lanka more than half a century after his first visit, for a photographer to have been dispatched the 30 or so kilometres from Colombo. He is a short, smiling fellow wearing a sarong and the traditional white Muslim cap that identifies him as a haji, one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

“Are you the son?” he asks me as he gets us arranged in a row. I look at him incredulously, but he seems to be serious. Either Pa has aged exceedingly well or I haven't. I think back to the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore, where the pretty receptionist looked at our names on the check-in form, then at our faces, and smiled. “You must be brothers,” she had said sweetly. Perhaps she wasn't joking. Let's just assume that our photographer is zealous, doublechecking his facts with care. Anyway, at 78 my father is as active and curious as many people half his age, and raring to check out his old haunts.

In due course, our photo will appear under “local news” in *The Observer*, the oldest English newspaper in southern Asia, founded in 1834. There, sandwiched between a picture of a cabinet minister inaugurating a rural electrification scheme and a report of a cholera outbreak out in the northern city of Jaffna, a caption tries to explain why we are on the island.

“Jack David Scott,” it begins, “second from right, author of three books . . . lived in Sri Lanka 50 years ago during World War II.” The caption, generous but inaccurate, goes on to ascribe my own writing credentials to my father also. I loom gormlessly out of the page, without apparent

purpose. We both look a bit dishevelled and stunned, as if we can hardly believe we are here. This at least is true.

IN 1940, MY FATHER finished officers' training and was sent "east." He had elected to join the Royal Artillery, but the most coveted postings—to units in Malaya—were taken by the time that "S" was reached on the personnel lists, and he ended up in what is now Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. In 1940, it was part of India.

Japan's entry into the war, in December 1941, changed everything. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces raced down the Malay Peninsula, sank the Royal Navy's two most important warships in the region and, in February 1942, took Singapore. Australia was now at risk, and the Allies feared a Japanese thrust across the Bay of Bengal at India and Ceylon. In April 1942, Japanese planes did indeed bomb several southern Asian ports, including Colombo, Ceylon's capital and main city, sinking a number of ships.

Pa, meanwhile, had been posted to the newly formed 20th Indian Division. Its first mission was to entrain for Ceylon, where it was to relieve a battle-scarred Australian division diverted in haste to the island's defence while sailing home from North Africa. The Australian government, understandably, was eager for the return of its soldiers. As it happened, the Japanese decided to advance on India overland via Burma, and Ceylon was never in serious danger. But the Allies were not to know this, and so, in the early summer of 1942, my father's 6,000-man division, raw as a crate of bright green mangoes, found itself rolling through southern India en route to the pilgrimage centre and port of Rameswaram.

A captain by this time, Pa looked after supplies and ammunition for the divisional artillery regiments, which sported 32 4.5-inch field howitzers. At Rameswarum, a train ferry ran to Talaimannar in Ceylon, across Palk Strait.

For the final leg of the journey, everything had to be unloaded from the Indian trains and reloaded onto Ceylonese trains, which use a different gauge. For my father, not yet 27, Ceylon was unknown territory, a strange and exotic adventure.

Fifty-odd years later, our journey to Colombo is somewhat different. We are in a comfortable minibus, accompanied by Vernon, our delightful host from the Ceylon Tourist Board—who explains that his organization changed its name from Sri Lanka Tourist Board back to the original “because no one knew who we were”—and Ramachandra, our Tamil driver. They will be our constant companions for the next two weeks.

The two-lane road from airport to city is jammed with trucks and three-wheelers. But some things, perhaps, haven’t changed much: there are few streetlights, and in the sultry darkness we pass bullock-powered carts, young women walking hand-in-hand and small groups of cigarette-smoking men clustered around the insignificant flames of portable food stalls.

And here’s another feature of Sri Lanka that remains as it was in 1943, when Pa saw it last: the Galle Face Hotel, where we have arranged to stay in Colombo. The hotel remains much as it was in 1864, in fact—oceanside, facing the long promenade of the Galle Face Green, now brown and eroded from use. The brightest stars twinkled here when the hotel was the best in town: Indira Gandhi and Ursula Andress, George Bernard Shaw and Yuri Gagarin. There’s a list beside the entrance, with quotes; “Time is experienced in a different way,” the Queen of Denmark claims, while according to the Aga Khan, “Happiness is the GFH.”

Later, seated on the terrace with a drink, Pa rakes through his memories and finds nothing is actually as he recollects. In 1943, the carpets and the furniture were new; the foyers and public rooms pulsed with energy and anticipation. This was the place to be in Ceylon; the hotel was

thronged with the affluent and powerful: planters, government officials, army brass, visiting dignitaries and their satellites.

Now the musty, cavernous hallways echo. The handful of German and Italian tourists is lost in the vast spaces. The elderly staff, who carry themselves with enormous dignity, outnumber the guests. Like the hotel, they have seen better days. Eccentricities have crept in: “GFH admires your decision not to smoke,” one sign proclaims; another, at the top of the stairs, says, “Please walk down. It’s good for you.”

We are given enormous adjacent suites—the Royal Thai and the Royal Commonwealth—for two nights, the only period in three weeks of travelling together that we won’t be sharing a hotel room. I haven’t spent this much time in such close quarters with my father in years. We went on a holiday together once before, to Yucatán, but that was in 1980. I was 33. I seem to remember that we got on each other’s nerves a little, that I found it difficult to accept him. In retrospect, I think my real difficulty was in seeing how alike we are—another way of saying that it was myself I couldn’t accept, not him. Fathers and sons are such mirrors for each other. Accepting all one might see there—weak and strong, admirable and irritating—is a longer journey than the one we’re on today.

And even this journey, which has taken much time and tribulation to put together, feels like a quest of some sort. My father is revisiting a fondly remembered scene from his youth, when everything was possible. I’m just along for the ride, hoping to get to know him better—and thus, of course, myself.

Our plan in Sri Lanka is not only to visit the places where Pa served during the war but also to see some famous spots he was never able to get to. We especially want to take in the island’s spectacular ruined cities and Buddhist temples. The road to the past, however, is a celebration of the present. Schoolchildren in neat white uniforms walk beside it, and gorgeous

female cashew-nut sellers, sirens in bright saris, beckon passers-by. We pass pineapple stalls, the Daily Needs grocery, the Walk Nice footwear store. Here, plodding down the pavement on his way to haul a little hardwood, our first elephant. But not our last; in fact, we break our journey at the Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage, where the feeding and bathing rituals of the 55 large, leathery inhabitants fill us with unexpected joy, and we are loath to depart.

On the dry northern plains, where many inhabitants still live in thatched huts of mud, and go barefoot, we immerse ourselves for two days in history. We collect fallen leaves from Sri Maha Bodhi, the sacred *bo* tree, tended with devotion for more than 2,000 years in the ancient city of Anuradhapura. We climb the rock fortress of Sigiriya and ponder the frescoes of bare-breasted, wasp-waisted damsels that have adorned its walls since the fifth century.

On the way to Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka's other great derelict metropolis, where huge Buddha images have been carved from a single ridge of granite, an excited motorcyclist puts his arm in front of his face and makes waving motions at us as he passes. Around the corner, a wild elephant is calmly stripping leaves from a roadside tree. At the cave temples of Dambulla, so cunningly painted that the rock walls seem to undulate like rich, patterned fabric, we fend off monkeys and squint through the gloom at golden statues. But at Mihintale, birthplace of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, we grow reluctant to haul our aching bones up any more flights of steps to any more relics. And at Kandy, 500 metres high and refreshingly cool, we rest.

I'VE MELLOWED, APPARENTLY, since 1980—or else I'm more willing to look in the mirror—because Pa and I are travelling well together. We're close, but not demonstrative. We're competitive—hell, we're both writers—but our rivalry is also a form of companionship, a sharing of

common interests. There's still a lot that I can't share with him, though. I can't reveal, for instance, that some timid part of me hopes this trip will result in a closer connection between us, a deeper understanding. We seem suspended somehow in a subtle web of unspoken thoughts, unconscious agreements, unexplored feelings, unfinished business. We are old souls, I think, with old obligations and old secrets, together again.

At Kandy we're joined by Vernon's wife Yvonne and her sister-in-law Pushpa. Pa had been here before, when his commanding officer had given him a motorcycle and a few days off, and he'd headed to the hills. The Queen's Hotel, where he'd stayed—a venerable pile right in the centre of town overlooking Kandy's tranquil artificial lake—is still there, its genteel façade faded but correct. And the Peradeniya Botanic Gardens, where, in 1942, Lord Louis Mountbatten was busy setting up the headquarters of the South East Asia Command, haven't changed much in 50 years. Nice spot for a command post, I thought, up in the hills, surrounded by orchids and palms, well away from the heat.

BEYOND KANDY, WE FOLLOW the same route upcountry that Pa took on his motorbike—climbing through tea plantations that look like green brain coral, then higher still, to vegetable country, where Tamil farmers tend leek and lettuce, radish and rhubarb. At 1,900 metres, Nuwara Eliya (pronounced “*nu-rel-ya*”), the favorite British hill station, is wet and foggy, as it was when Pa was there in 1943. Unlike Captain Scott, who pushed on in search of sunshine, we stick around and check into the Grand Hotel, a wood-panelled relic of Empire, complete with billiard room, fireplaces and a waiter named Muthu Banda, who has worked there for 58 years and served Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in 1937.

Nuwara Eliya, with its pink post office, churches, horse track, country houses, gingerbread-trimmed cottages and lush, empty golf course, looks

like a slice of Sussex plunked down in the jungle. We stroll over to the Hill Club, where the hallways are hung with hunting prints and stuffed trout (the British stocked hill-country waters with their favorite fish and the hatcheries still operate). A liveried attendant signs us up for a temporary membership, and we drink our Lion Pilsners in the solitary splendor of the men's bar.

We have begun to develop a nice, relaxed rhythm on this journey, one of friends touring together. Just being able to meet and talk to so many Sri Lankans—a gentle, outgoing, physically beautiful people—has become our biggest pleasure. He couldn't do this in wartime, my father regrets, because the army kept itself aloof from the locals. But with Vernon's enthusiasm and knowledge, and with the van at our disposal, we are getting an intimate introduction to the culture—including the cuisine. Last night, for instance, I sampled snakeroot *sambol*, cuttlefish *badhum* and curries made from eggplant and immature jackfruit, all delicious.

For breakfast, we often stop at government rest houses, where the menu includes string hoppers, a kind of noodle served with curry. Many of these red-tiled bungalows, designed in a gracious Anglo-Indian architectural style with airy verandas and dining rooms and neo-classical trim, date from the last century. The rest-house network was basically a system of simple, small-town hotels for travelling officials, and Pa was no stranger to them. Some are a bit run down, but they are usually set in stunning locations: on a promontory with a view, perched beside a lake or "tank" (the immense, artificial reservoirs built all over the island 2,000 years ago in an amazing display of engineering skill), or nestled snugly in the nicest curve of the best beach. The one at Ella, on the southern edge of the highlands, where you can dine alfresco surrounded by flowering shrubs and gaze through a gap in the hills right down to the coastal plain, tops the lot.

From the hill country we head south to the beaches, spending the next few days visiting waterfalls and communing with wildlife. At Bundala Park

we take a jeep safari and see marabou storks, ibises, spoonbills and dozens of other bird species, as well as monkeys and elephants. We also find elephants at Handapanagala, a sugar-cane producing area which has become something of a national cause célèbre. About 150 animals had become cut off from the wildlife refuge at Yala by electrified fences set up to protect the cane fields. They'd rampaged through the countryside, and both villagers and elephants had been killed. Things are somewhat better at Yala itself, Sri Lanka's huge, southeastern park. Again we see elephants, including Kota, a big bull who has been coming for 15 years to the backdoors of the local hotel kitchens for scraps.

At Hambantota and Weligama on the south coast, an area that my father remembers well, we visit more rest houses, ones he had stayed at 50 years ago. As we cruise the island's famed beach resorts and I listen to old stories, I get the impression that life for a young army officer in wartime Ceylon, though constrained and often stressful, was not unpleasant. The work—testing and calibrating the field guns, organizing jungle training for the troops—appears to have left adequate time for swimming and riding in outrigger fishing boats like the ones littering the beach at Hambantota. The island paradise of Ceylon was a reprieve of sorts, because there would be no swimming in Burma, where the division was sent and saw action in 1943.

The final part of our quest is to find Matugama, an inland town, right off the tourist track. My father was stationed here, at divisional headquarters—in the rest house, naturally. The question is: will there be any traces from 50 years ago? I think Pa is getting a little disappointed—not with Sri Lanka, which we both love—but with memory itself, so unreliable, so deflating for one's expectations.

As we wander around Matugama trying to identify old landmarks, the citizens, attentive but shy, treat us as minor curiosities, in the same league



as the three-metre water monitor lizard that shuffles across the road just ahead. It looks fierce but it's harmless and so are we. We find the rest house boarded up and abandoned. It did such poor business that the manager was inspired to set up an illegal arak distillery on the premises. But he was caught, and now he languishes in the local jail.

Nothing on this trip is turning out the way we expected. In fact, everything is turning out better than we expected. But then, the island's old name was Serendip, from which comes the word serendipity—the faculty of stumbling on good fortune by accident. What I've stumbled on here is that this trip is not about needing to deepen the father-son bond, whatever that means. It is simply about friendship. About reinvigorating ours. And about beginning a friendship (after appropriate parental introduction, of course) with the remote, romantic place that Marco Polo described as “undoubtedly the finest island of its size in all the world.”