

# WALK TO THE CENTRE

WALKING TOUR FROM 20TH DECEMBER TO 29TH DECEMBER 2006

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**STARTING POINT : NEGOMBO-DANKOTUWA**

**DESTINATION : KANDALAMA HOTEL, DAMBULLA.**

**CLIENTS : LUCY & KEITH LANGHAM**

**INTERPRETER : NAY ANA WICKRAMASINGHE**

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It was the uniqueness and the unusual idea of the tour that made me really interested. It was a pleasure to design the tour and joining itself from the beginning. Although I couldn't exchange a single Email or the basic intensions/ideas with my to-be-clients at Kent-UK, I just imagined them as great people with great ideas.

Finally the day arrived. It was the 19th of December 2006, the day Lucy and Keith Landed Sri Lanka. Nishantha, Eco Team's Administration Manager and I joined together to visit Lucy and Keith Lanham who have arrived Negombo, at the hotel. Our first meeting proved that I was correct and the two smiling faces promised a great deal of experience, and I was relaxed instantly. I am always a little nervous before meeting a client until I learn about them. But in this specific tour, Lucy and Keith, even at the moment

they had suggested this tour, hinted that they are "cool".

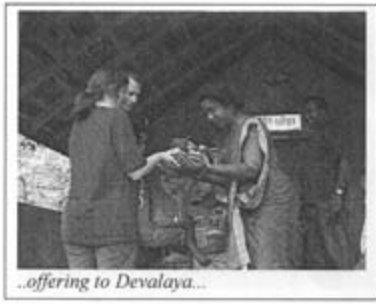
After Nishantha and I detailed a few necessities of the tour, I promised to meet them next morning at the hotel. The time they liked to meet me was 8.00am. Before leaving I asked them their interests on Nature. I needed to know what their likings as I'm a Naturalist, not a Tourist Guide. They said they were interested in Birds, Butterflies, Plants and Culture too, and they both said they were looking forward for the Walk!

Next day, on the 20th December 2006, driven by the anticipation, I arrived at the Beach Hotel by about 7.55am. Lucy and Keith were just coming down to the lobby after settling their hotel bills.

We all got into our backup vehicle and drove to Dankotuwa where our walk starts. Got our back packs ready with Water, Snacks and First Aid, which I had prepared last evening. I sent the van ahead of us to wait at our lunch site near the Hindu Shrine, a nice and cool spot for us to relax and lunch. I had an idea of giving them a chance to take part on a program at the Shrine.

The day was cloudy, but humid. The road was getting busy with honking busses and lorries. People along the road were eyeing at us with astonished look on their faces. Three Wheeler drivers were eagerly watching us hoping they'd get a hire.

Lucy and Keith were enjoying the walk and I too was, just because they were. It's my responsibility to make the walk a happy one, even if some folks wouldn't let us. I was a little upset as a few idling young men were making odd noises at Lucy and Keith. But they took it easy and I too started thinking it's a part of the "weird" culture we are heading in Sri Lanka today. As we passed the urban areas to enter the villages, everything was changing. People were smiling in villages, while people in cities laughed at us, (Three wheeler drivers were same everywhere.) and even the shades seemed cooler.



At about 12.15 in the afternoon, we reached the lunch site, relaxed a few minutes and had a chance to take part in a "Pooja" at the shrine.

After lunch we started walking towards Pannala. The roadside was getting narrower and the busses honking without reason. Even the motor cycles, three wheelers and all the other vehicles passed us from both ways except for a very few, were honking. Maybe in a friendly way, or teasing, we never had a chance to learn. But it was the little children who made us feeling much better, by waving and smiling running towards the roadside.

After a few kilometres walk we saw a coir factory (not to mention numerous clay tile factories) and managed to visit it. Keith took a few photographs; while I had a chat with the owner and explained Lucy and Keith how they do it.

Finally, we arrived at our first camp at Makandura Temple premises. Roy and other boys were waiting for us and welcomed with fresh lime juice. I was really happy to see that the camp was set up beautifully.

Relaxing at the camp we chatted to summaries today's walk, and after a wash, at about 7.00pm, visited the temple to look round. The chief incumbent of the temple was happy to receive the guests, and we all joined a Buddha Pooja. It was the culture Lucy and Keith learnt.

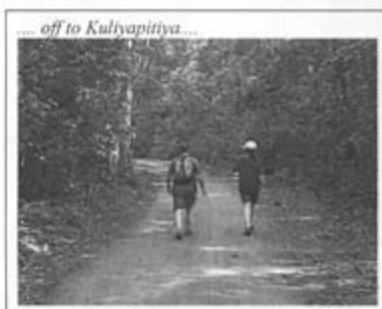


After having dinner (vegetarian, free of alcohol of course, as we were camping in the temple premises.) retired hoping more experience tomorrow.

21.12.2006

It was the birds who made us up in the morning, and whispering from kitchen hinted the breakfast being prepared. We sat for breakfast in front of the Makandura Wewa watching birds and beautiful rays of morning sun touching mildly through coconut leaves.

We set off to walk and the way goes through a forest and it was nice to get away from the traffic. Watching birds chatter among leaves of the thick forest, we walked about 6-7 kilometers to pass the forest and walked through a village and stopped near a shop to have a break. There were some bananas in the shop and we bought a few to regain some energy to carry on until lunch. The sun was blazing now, our speed slowed. While Lucy and Keith getting redder and redder, I was getting darker.

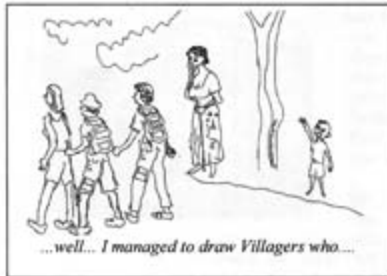


We stopped for lunch by the roadside after we entered a forest patch passing Yakwila. After lunch we proceeded towards Kuliapitiya and by this time the traffic was a little less, but the sun was really hot and I knew that the children who encouraged us must be staying indoors.

The total distance for today was 26 kilometers and by this time we have covered about 16. On the roadsides we passed many paddy fields, home gardens and except for an occasional White throated Kingfisher or a Little Egret the life was still and warm.

When we reached Kuliapitiya it was about 4.30pm, and we were exhausted but it was achievement after all. We were to stay overnight in a Tourist Resort in Kuliapitiya and just after we arrived there, Keith ordered cool beer. He said it's the tradition to have a beer after a long trek, in England, so we must stick to it.

While having a seat in front of Keith and Lucy while chatting about the today's walk, I noticed that my face, neck and arms were covered with salt powder. It was a result of sweating too much and when cooling down, the sweat vapourising and the salty particles leaving on the skin just like table salt. When I wiped it or the powdered salt could be picked with two fingers. Noticing this, Keith started calling me "The Salty Man of the Walk".



We ordered dinner earlier than usual, at 7.30pm, and were happy to have a good night's sleep after a tiring day.

22.12.2006

The breakfast which was a feast, as Keith said, was ready by 7.45 in the morning. We had Hoppers and Egg Hoppers etc. and after settling our bills, left Kuliapitiya towards Narammala, where our

next camp is.

The day was bright again and the breeze welcomed us while noisily passing by busses gave us a few near-death experiences. A few time I managed to pull Lucy back when overtaking busses passed just half an inch away from our ears. We were watching the sunny atmosphere with children waving as usual and older people wondering why not using a Tuk-Tuk.



Keith managed to get a few good photographs of a paddy field, while I took photograph him taking photographs. Lucy teased both of us for having fun saying quotes from the cartoon "The Jungle Book".

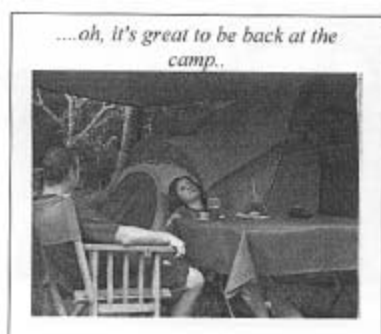
When it was hungry, it was lunch time. We saw a Catholic Church near Kithalawa and went on to see it. We took some photographs inside a dilapidated old church; a patch of heart shaped sunlight was visible just beneath the cross, which actually fascinated all of

us. After taking the photographs, when we were about to leave, the hunger overtook us. So we sat down and ate heartily.

When we reached Narammala, it was about 5.30pm, and Eco Team camp was ready for us. "It was a lovely sight when Roy took photographs when we entered the camp, saying the beer is ready!" said Keith later in the evening relaxed and sipping beer.

23.12.2006

The walk today was along the main road again and usual honking of vehicles bothered us but Lorries full of coconut husks was an exceptional view. The Lorries were almost covered with husks except for the windscreen. One such lorry was fortunate enough to be remembered in photographs in Europe when it was parked along the road. Keith took many snaps even the close-ups of the steering wheel.



On the way we had some King Coconuts leaving our water bottle in the bags. Although it was sunny and warm, the shades along the road were a gift. After walking about 10km, we stopped for lunch in a shady place. Whatever remote the place we select, the dogs managed to get at us, and were waiting for us to offer a bit for them. To be frank, they were not bad at all. They offered a little fun and thankfulness if we gave some.

The hotel we were to stay tonight was big and clean, but the staff were a bit non-professional I would say. After getting our room keys, Keith ordered what they want for dinner, and before I tell them the time we wanted dinner, the waiter was well gone. I left my baggage in my room and was going to stay with one of my cousin's place. As 24th was our rest day, there were no plans. But before arriving at the hotel, I managed to visit the Anglican Church in Kurunegala to meet the

Bishop to get the time of Christmas day Service, as Lucy and Keith may liked to take part in it. Of course, they liked it.

25.12.2005.

It was Christmas. Early in the morning, we all gathered to Church, and after the service, went back to the hotel. When I reached my room, it was open! I myself locked the room and handed over the key to the front office. I complained to the front office, but could not find any reason. Fortunately nothing was lost. It was a bit queer to get the service of such hotel as they have no professionals. When they were asked to prepare the breakfast in the restaurant, they bring it to your room! When they were given your socks to laundry, they don't count them as pairs, but individual socks. It's OK to do so, but if your socks return less in numbers what would you do?



That was exactly what happened to Keith and Lucy. Today they were wearing odd looking socks that left and right do not match.

Keith said they were glad even to think about Eco Team camp that we were heading today. None of us liked the hotel in Kurunegala, even the driver of our back up van.

Today we took our course a little changed. Instead of walking right from the hotel on the main road, we drove up to a place called Badagamuwa Forest. We started our walk from the edge of the forest, which was cool and shady but a little longer. We found a Kukri Snake which was trying to terrify us by coiling its upper parts when I tried to catch it.



We reached the main road again, turn left to walk towards Dambulla, still in the forest. Passing the forest Keith found an old Ford Prefect parked by the roadside for sale, which he peeped inside and said, by the smell of slightly petrol and leather inside the old car remembered his childhood. Lucy said it was lovely to have the smell of an old car that is not possible to get in new cars.

When it was time to lunch we were almost a kilometre closer to the camp. So we walked to Ibbagamuwa camp where Raj greeted us by saying Aayubowan was the best sight of the day. We relaxed in the camp under a Bamboo Bush in front of a paddy field memorising the day's walk. The owner of the land, Mr.Amarasuriya had done a great deal of work to set Eco Team Camp. It was the best site.

Keith and Lucy were overjoyed and invited Amarasuriya family for dinner, and we chatted till about 10.45 at night. After all, it was Christmas!

26.12.2006



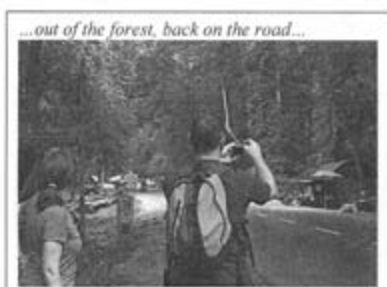
After breakfast, we started the walk. In front of Mr.Amarasuriya's garden, there was a load of just plucked coconuts. I took one and showed Keith and Lucy how the husk is taken away using a steel blade set in the back of his garden.

When we were walking towards Melsiripura, our team overtook us in the lorry after dismantling the camp. They were rushing to ext camp to set it up before our arrival. It's a fat lot of work to prepare a camp in just a few hours time.

Now we have got the rhythm of it, feeling not very tired even after walking 10-15km. However, it was a nuisance the noise of the busses. The silencers are to reduce the noise, but in these busses the silencer is the gadget that made the world rumbling. I wonder why the authorities like Central Environment Authority do not take action against this noise pollution.

It was great again to enter the forest where we camp tonight. The roaring of the busses ceased, chirping of the birds increased, relaxing at the camp after a cold bath from the large well, I felt the whole world, one peaceful nest, under millions of stars shining up above.

27.12.2006



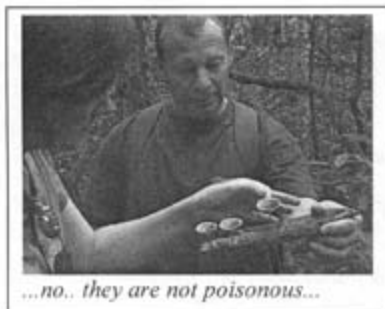
The breakfast table was excellent, while watching an Emerald Dove busy building a nest, shot passing the table once in two minutes. Before the walk we went on a stroll round the coconut plantation, I explaining about Banana, Coffee, Pepper and various other crops.

As it was getting delayed, and we've got about 18km to walk we rushed to get a move on.

We walked to a possible lunch site by the roadside, where a closed shop was. We laid down lunch, which was rice and curry. No spoons! Well, I of course have no problem, but the first timers certainly do have. Keith found an alternative, while Lucy did the best she could. Keith broke a corner of the Lunch box and made a scoop.

Walking by the main road makes no new things except for occasional Heron or a Kingfisher and a possible Water Monitor or a Land Monitor. It was about 5.00pm, when we reached Galewela camp. We had the pleasure of the company of Mr.Hearath Wanninayake, the land lord of the site at dinner.

28.12.2006



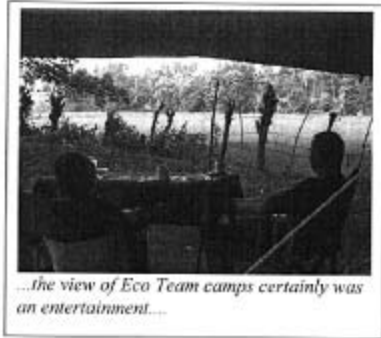
Leaving the last Eco Team camp for Dambulla was scheduled. The team bid good-bye and Lucy and Keith thanking ad promising them a possible re-visit next year, we set off for Dambulla. I bid good luck for the team and Raj who made arrangements with wonderful logistics to make the clients happy.

The walk seemed easier today. Possibly because of the breeze and the cloud that followed us from the start. When we reached our lunch site, we could see Dambulla Rock Temple far away.

After lunch and many photographs taken, we reached Namala Resort in Dambulla at about 4.30pm. Before dinner, refreshed, we discussed about the past 9 days and the last leg of the walk tomorrow. Lucy wrote a few things in my autograph while Keith and I were punning about this and that and quoting from our favourite cartoons as usual.

29.12.2006

In the morning, Lucy and Keith wanted to go to a bank and after breakfast I arranged it and after banking, we drove to Dambulla Cave Temple and the last leg of 10km walk started at about 10.00am.



When we reached the Kandalama Hotel, there was a great welcome, escorted by a traditional horseman from the gate and at the hotel welcomed by the GM, traditional dancers and photographers, astonishing other guests.

After a little chat with the GM, Mr. Sherif Deen, refreshed, had lunch. Ishan from Eco Team head office joined the occasion, and after lunch there was a press conference.

...the view of Eco Team camps certainly was an entertainment....

Press conference took about an hour and I bid good-bye to Lucy and Keith who did an excellent walk, giving much credit on Eco Team and Sri Lanka stating and leaving a message for all other Europeans that it is safe to travel to Sri Lanka. Keith said, "Sri Lanka is exactly as safe as London".

Finally, I find the liberty to quote what Lucy wrote on my autograph:

"In early 2006 Keith and I started to plan our Christmas holiday.

The starting point was a visit to the Kandalama Hotel. With this as our inspiration we decided upon a holiday that would involve the following:

Kandalama Hotel

Meeting the people in Sri Lanka

Walking

An ecologically sound holiday (once you discount the flights!)

As we sit here on the last night enjoying our final meal together I have a chance to reflect on the holiday. In particular - did we achieve our aims?

Tomorrow we reach the Kandalama Hotel. Apparently there is a press conference awaiting us in recognition of this unusual holiday idea. As anyone who knows me will tell you 'Lucy does not do public speaking!' More of this later....

So, **did we meet the people of Sri Lanka?** We have had the pleasure of spending time with Eco Team and met many people along the way. We have shared dinner and cups of tea and we have shared smiles and friendship.

Of the various countries we have visited, Sri Lankans are surely the most content, friendly, polite and welcoming. It has been a pleasure spending time here and we shall take away many happy memories of the people we have met.

**Did we walk?** In all we have covered 174km. There was some wonderful scenery and some near death experiences. The drivers here are surely mad! Luckily whenever we were feeling tired; there was the sight of Manjula and his van up ahead. He was always there with a seat and a drink. Overall it does not feel as if we have walked such a distance. The walk has been neither gruelling nor challenging. Instead it has been a pleasure and I feel this is due to number of reasons: The weather, the company, the wonderful scenery and people, the welcoming tent team, the variety of scenery, camp sites and experiences.

**Was the holiday ecologically sound?** It was our aim to visit the country without having a negative effect on it. I hope we have achieved this. I believe we have aimed to repeat the country, its people and

culture. It is unfortunate though that in order to visit we have to fly which has a negative effect on the environment.

In conclusion, 'The Walk to the Centre' has been so much more than a walk. As the days passed it became less about achieving the distance and more about the journey - in the wider sense of the word. This journey would not have been possible without your company. From you, we have learnt so much, not only about plants, trees & wildlife but also about ourselves. We have also had a small insight into the Buddhist culture which has been enlightening and inspiring. For this, we are truly grateful.

This brings me back to tomorrow's press conference. Whilst it is unexpected - I find that instead of feeling daunted I am 'ready to face the challenge!' This I feel is a true reflection of how relaxing the holiday has been and the influence of all that I have mentioned above.

It has been a wonderful experience, I very much look forward to returning - but this time with an indoor toilet and shower!! "

Thank you.

Lucy