

KANDY: A HIDDEN TREASURE *in the Land of a Thousand Smiles*

By Dr Desmond Wai



The Elephant Orphanage. It was the first time I saw elephants outside a zoo.

During my last visits to Colombo in 2007 and 2008, most Sri Lankan doctors I met would ask if I was going to visit Kandy which is a must-see place in Sri Lanka. So when I got an invitation from Dr Vajira Weerasinghe, President of the Kandy Medical Association, to give a lecture there, I was much delighted.

On my previous trips, I would take a morning Singapore Airlines (SQ) flight and arrive at the Colombo Bandaranaike airport by lunch time. This time, however, the flight left Singapore at 10.20pm, and arrived at 12 midnight Sri Lankan time. I was so sleepy that I missed the first part of the GI Joe movie playing on the inflight entertainment system.

I was told by a colleague that in the past, the only SQ flight to Sri Lanka left Singapore late at night daily. But during the civil war (1983-2009), the Tamil Tigers managed to bomb the airport at night so the Sri Lankan airport authorities cancelled all night flights. Now that the civil war was over, the local authorities had put the flights back.

We arrived at Earl Regency Hotel at 3am local time, and were greeted by an orchestra of birds, insects, and frogs. We had a good night's rest in the beautiful resort hotel. As usual, I went jogging the next morning to explore the surroundings. The landscape was just beautiful. Many locals smiled at me on the street. I soon realised I was the only Chinese in the vicinity.

After breakfast, I went to the Kandy General Hospital to give a lecture on live donor liver transplantation. I arrived early and was greeted by some local doctors there, and we chatted about our daily work. My talk went smoothly. As usual, I enjoyed interacting with the local doctors, and learning about their lives and their jobs.

After the talk, I went straight to a local spa to have my Ayurvedic massage. I particularly enjoyed the Shirodhara, which involves dripping of warm oil over the forehead. The spa owner told me the "third eye" was located in the middle of the forehead. Dripping warm oil onto the "third eye" revitalised the nervous system. The only troublesome thing was that after the whole

treatment, my whole body was soaked with oil and it took me quite some time to wash the residue off. Indeed, I felt really refreshed and relaxed after the treatment. The 90-minute treatment cost about S\$50, which is very worth it by Singapore standards.

I then visited another hospital to have case discussions with a local oncologist. According to him, oral cavity cancer was the number one cancer in Sri Lanka, representing about a quarter of all cases. Its high prevalence was thought to be due to the chewing of betel nuts. We had a lively discussion on our thoughts on his patients, one with cholangiocarcinoma and another with hepatocellular carcinoma. I was pleasantly surprised at the high quality of PET CT scan results of his patients. He explained that though the procedure was not available in Sri Lanka, his patients would take a 45-minute flight to Hyderabad, India, to have the scan done. I also learnt that the cost of a PET CT scan in India was less than half of that in Singapore.

Day two was my free day and we visited one of the most revered temples in Sri Lanka, the Temple of the Tooth. As its name implied, it housed the tooth relic of the Buddha. The temple was more than 400 years old and very grand. There were lots of old paintings and sculptures detailing its history. We had a guided tour led by an 80-year-old guide, and were impressed at the fluency of his English. We later discovered that Sri Lanka had a literacy rate of 92%, a very high figure among developing countries. According to the guide, even our Minister Mentor had visited this temple in the past. Sadly, we did not manage to see the tooth as it was only displayed publicly during the Festival of the Tooth in the month of July.

We then proceeded to the Elephant Orphanage. We saw about 100 elephants bathing and playing in the river. Their bathing time was 10am to 12.30noon daily, and we enjoyed a cold drink at a nearby café while watching the elephants. I have seen elephants in zoos before but this was the first time I saw them enjoying themselves in the wild. We also discovered that elephant dung, which contains lots of fibre, could be recycled to make paper!



The Kandy Lake, icon of the city. The gold roof is part of the Temple of the Tooth Relic.



Greenery and nature filled most of Kandy.



The Buddha tooth was kept inside. Regular ceremonies are held throughout the day.

We headed back to Colombo and the journey was unpleasant as the road was winding, sloping, and filled with traffic. We tried to catch some sleep and eventually reached Colombo by early afternoon. We had an authentic Sri Lankan lunch at a local restaurant. Coconut milk was present in most of the dishes, including rice. In fact, the one local dish that every visitor must try is coconut milk rice with curry dhal. I was a bit disappointed that the Sri Lankan crabs were small. My host explained that the big crabs were mostly exported and locals have to be contented with the smaller ones.

A few local friends who joined us for lunch told me about various aspects of life in Sri Lanka. They were particularly proud of being able to end the civil war and claimed that Sri Lanka was the first country to eliminate terrorism at home.

The next day, I had a great breakfast with an old friend, Professor Janaka, former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Kelaniya. Prof had stepped down after nine years as the Dean, and I complained to him about the poor road conditions to Kandy. Prof explained that now the civil war was over, the country was focusing on rebuilding the country and a Malaysian company had been awarded the contract to construct a highway linking the whole island. Soon, travelling to the northern part of the island would be a breeze.

Prof also lamented about the severe brain drain the country faced. The country had sent two promising young surgeons to the UK to train in liver transplantation. Unfortunately, both decided to stay in UK after their training. Another three surgeons have since been sent to the UK and Australia for training, and the University is hoping to start a liver transplant unit over the next few years.

We then proceeded to the College of Surgeons, where the Annual Academic Meeting of the Gastroenterological and Digestive Endoscopy Society was held. The College was a huge colonial black and white bungalow. It was donated by a former surgeon as a gift to the nation. Prof Janaka and I spoke at the same symposium on various aspects of liver cirrhosis.

I met another friend, Dr Upali, a local gastroenterologist, for dinner. Like most specialists in the country, Dr Upali was very well-trained in the field, and had spent two years of further training in the UK (something like our HMDP). And like most

others, Dr Upali worked at a government hospital from 7am to 4pm, and then ran his private clinic from 4.30pm till 9 or 10pm. I said that in Singapore, we were either in or out, meaning we were either in public service or private practice but Dr Upali said in Sri Lanka, they were both “in and out”.

Dr Upali had recently referred a patient with hepatocellular carcinoma to me for consideration of liver transplant. I explained to Dr Upali that the cancer was well-controlled by transarterial chemoembolisation (TACE) so liver transplant was not indicated for now. I also commented on the high standard of TACE at his hospital but Dr Upali then lamented that the only trained intervention radiologist at his hospital had just migrated to Canada, and TACE would not be available at his hospital for the time being.

Statistics showed that over the years, 7,000 medical specialists have been trained in Sri Lanka, of which only 800 were still working in the country. Brain drain is a serious problem in Sri Lanka. When we talk about brain drain in Singapore, we mean senior doctors leaving for private practice but they remain in the country and many continue to serve the public hospitals as visiting consultants. In Sri Lanka, brain drain means trained specialists leaving the country.

Leaving for home after my three fulfilling days in Sri Lanka, I found my return flight equally poorly-timed. We arrived at the airport at 11pm and the flight left Colombo at 1.30am. The only good thing was that I caught the other half of the GI Joe movie which I had earlier missed.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country with warm and hospitable people. Wherever we went, we were treated with warm and courteous smiles. Now that the civil war has been over for more than six months, most Sri Lankans I spoke with had high hopes about their future. I do look forward to exploring this beautiful country again after the completion of the national highways. In addition, hopefully the timing of the flights will also improve. **SMA**



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