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## THE FRIENDS OF SRI LANKA ASSOCIATION

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### Newsletter Autumn 2015

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How history will judge the events of the past few months is obviously impossible to say at this point. To some observers it has been a watershed in Sri Lanka's story since independence. To others it has been a confusion of steps forward and back. Whatever the judgement on President Sirisena finally turns out to be, he does appear, as one commentator put it, to have manoeuvred deftly through a presidential and general election, major constitutional changes, handling a minority government, dealing with a charismatic and politically powerful former President and holding the country together. He has now achieved what had seemed the impossibility of a National Government. He has also started to deal with corrupt practices and taken steps to defuse a human rights problem that has threatened to disrupt the country both internationally and domestically. But then one has to stop and say "so far so good". The Tamil minority is still asking for politically difficult, maybe impossible, constitutional changes, the international community is pushing for an enquiry into alleged human rights abuses and an economy which is over-borrowed and facing problems with some of its main export products. It is still a work in progress, but in January 2015 few would have foreseen such dramatic changes.

The last Newsletter covered the passing of the 19th Amendment which restricted the President's powers and established a Constitutional Council to oversee appointments to important institutional bodies, such as the judiciary, senior public servants and police. It proved impossible for the President to obtain agreement on the 20th Amendment, which would institute a new electoral system, so, having gained agreement to use the current system for the next general election, he dissolved Parliament on 26 June and set 17 August as the date for choosing a new Parliament.

#### **The General Election**

As predicted in the last Newsletter, discussing a new system aroused many passions. The President and the parties put forward varied plans, most of which proposed an increase in the number of MPs and played with the balance of First Past The Post (FPP) seats with Proportional Representation (PR) seats as well as the number of National List MPs - a limited list of politicians nominated by parties and elected in proportion to the their sponsors' popular vote. Politicians being generally viewed with suspicion, an increase in numbers was not popular, while the demands of the smaller parties, especially those representing ethnic minorities, made it hard to devise a system that would protect the interests of these groups without splintering the electorate into an unmanageable plethora of minor parties with little influence.

Throughout the run up to the election a major concern of the President was how to keep his own SLFP together. A serious split had developed (see last Newsletter) over the role of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who sought to lead the election campaign for the UPFA alliance, which of course includes the SLFP, and also nomination as the alliance's candidate for

Prime Minister (PM). Initially the President said that Rajapaksa could stand in a constituency of his choosing, but he could not be candidate for PM. This pleased the pro-Rajapaksa UPFA members, who had been upset by the President's message to the nation in July urging citizens to vote for candidates who would implement the promises of the 8 January election. But it also alarmed the UNP, who currently form the majority of the Cabinet. He followed this in early August with a statement to a ministerial meeting that he hoped to be working with them, ie these ministers, after the 17 August election. The dismayed UPFA leaders then received a letter from the President saying that even if the UPFA won 113 seats - half the current Parliament of 225 - Rajapaksa should not be PM. (Under the new 19th Amendment the President can nominate the PM.) He urged Rajapaksa to respect public opinion and promised that he would have a political career. At this point the President also dismissed the General Secretaries of the SLFP and the UPFA, both strong supporters of Rajapaksa.

The UNP and SLFP fought the election under their own symbols despite being in the government together. The JVP campaigned on its own, but the Muslim SLMC fought under the elephant symbol of the UNP. The TNA campaigned on its own in the North and East under the ITAK banner. (TNA is not a registered party, but ITAK has the same constituent parties.) Wickremasinghe refused to take the Democratic Party of former General Sarath Fonseka under the elephant symbol thus pushing him onto the sidelines. The manifestos of the two major parties promised constitutional reform, large salary and pension increases and jobs. The JVP wanted to abolish the Executive Presidency and the TNA wanted devolution and the merger of Northern and Eastern Provinces, which in turn was opposed by the SLMC.

There was much discussion about who would emerge as the winner. In the event the UNP emerged with a modest overall majority of votes - 45.6% to 42.4% for the UPFA. After allowing for bonus seats, the seat count was 106 for the UNP and 95 for the UPFA. The TNA, campaigning as ITAK, received 16 seats with 4.6% and the SLMC 1 seat with 0.4%. The Democratic Party received only 28,587 votes. The EPDP led by Douglas Devananda received 33,481 votes and others 169,227. Importantly, the UNP share of the vote in Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy, as well as Polonnaruwa - the President's home - increased significantly over the 2010 election figures while in other major areas, although the UPFA won, it was with a much smaller share of the vote. A majority of the SLFP MPs, some fifty plus of the SLFP's 82 MPs who in turn constituted the majority of the UPFA's 95 seats, were opposed to Mahinda Rajapaksa. Rajapaksa accepted the decision of the voters with "humility". Sirisena moved to form a National Government with the UNP, which he envisions as lasting for two years. He resisted the idea of a broader coalition. There has been negotiation between the UNP and the SLFP on a memorandum to settle policy. Former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga has been heading a committee to study this MOU. Interestingly she has refused to rule out the privatisation of SOEs (State Owned Enterprises).

Most observers agreed that one of the heroes of the election was Election Commissioner Deshapriya. In mid-July he published a Code of Conduct banning candidates from inviting voters to their residences, making false allegations and promises of financial assistance. It was only a code, but he followed his rulings firmly, including the ban on large cut outs and posters, and encouraged the participation of foreign monitors including a group from the Commonwealth Secretariat and the EU. There was some violence but local organisations such as CaFFE noted less political pressure from the government and use of state resources. The Inspector General of Police, Ilangakoon, also came in for praise for having kept the polling peaceful - one of the quietest for many years.

### **Post Election Manoeuvring**

Almost immediately after the election President Sirisena swore in a new cabinet. At 51 members plus some 40 Deputy and State Ministers, this greatly exceeded the previously agreed 30 full cabinet members, but the new 19th Amendment allows for a larger Cabinet in the case of a national government if Parliament approved. This duly happened. There was much debate about the division of posts. Wickremasinghe pressed hard for recognition for the UNP as the winner of the majority of votes. Kabir Hashim, the UNP General-Secretary, said the party could form a government on its own, as did party Chairman Samarawickrema. The Acting SLFP General Secretary pointed out that the UNP lacked an overall Parliamentary majority, so either the UNP or SLFP could form a government. As some observers said, it was not an auspicious start.

In the event, Cabinet positions were split 32 UNP and 11 SLFP. The main posts were filled by Wickremasinghe as Prime Minister and Minister for Economic Policy and External Resources, Mangala Samaraweera (Foreign Affairs), Ravi Karunanayake (Finance), Wijeyadasa Rajapaksa (Justice), Rajitha Seneratne (Health), Samarawickrema (International Trade), John Ameratunga (Home Affairs), Champika Ranawaka (JHU: Urban Development and a new portfolio created by the PM and called the Western Megalopolis covering planning for the area from Negombo to Kalutara). SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem took Cities Development and Water Resources with the undertaking to have the Western Megalopolis portfolio later. Nimal Siripala de Silva took on Aviation and Internal Transport and Amunugama Higher Education - both had been Rajapaksa supporters.

There was great competition for the National List seats. Despite reported appeals GL Peiris was dropped, as was Tiran Alles, but Fowzie and Amunugama were among those included. Also added to the list were SB Dissanayake, Mahinda Samarasinghe and Yapa Abeywardena plus several others. Further important decisions were the appointment of Karu Jayasuriya as Speaker. He has had a troubled relationship with the UNP, having challenged Wickremasinghe for the leadership, crossed over to the UPFA and then back again, but he has always been seen as a talented moderate. In the event he was proposed by Wickremasinghe. The appointment of the Leader of the Opposition caused some eyebrows to rise: it was Sampanthan, leader of the TNA. He in turn appointed JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake as Chief Opposition Whip. According to the new Gen-Sec of the UPFA, Vishwa Warnapala, the divided SLFP, which has 82 of the 95 UPFA MPs, would not be seeking the post of Leader of the Opposition although some who oppose the government pressed for this. Many anyway are in the government (see above), so the next largest non-government group was the TNA as the UPFA had only 13 non-SLFP MPs.

### **Alleged financial wrongdoings**

One of the main issues has been dealing with allegations of corruption. The President made clear in July and again after the election that the investigations by the new Financial Crimes Investigation Division or FCID (see last Newsletter) would continue, but that no arrests would be made before the election. This was an important point as many in the UPFA had been alleging a witch hunt since Wickremasinghe as PM decided which cases to pursue. One matter widely reported in the press was the huge sums authorised by the Central Bank and by Vass Gunawardena, the Supervising MP for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the previous government, for lobbying in the USA. Between 9 May and 16 September 2014 the Sunday Times calculated that \$6.5 million was paid out to US companies, mostly for work which the paper alleged would have been well within the remit of the Embassy. One transaction was questioned by the Federal Reserve as the name of the beneficiary was not given. Lobbying paid for by foreign groups is kept under surveillance by the US federal authorities.

Other issues to be investigated were mentioned in the last Newsletter and include the MIG fighter purchase, the Avant Garde floating armoury and its bank accounts, the activities of Sri Lankan Airlines' senior management, the failure of a project to build houses after the tsunami even though rupees were claimed, and the inflated costs of some major projects, notably those financed by China. A Cabinet committee with the President and PM as members was set up to investigate. The President is reported as saying that ten high profile cases would be looked at.

Another matter which concerns the government and the recently appointed Governor of the Central Bank is the huge bond issue. The previous two Newsletters report this, but controversy still continues. The Sunday Times printed a long technical analysis of the subject concluding that the highly unusual and unprecedented action by the Public Debt Department (PDD) and the improbable action by one Primary Dealer points to collusion between the dealer, Perpetual Treasuries, the PDD and the Bank of Ceylon. (Perpetual Treasuries had links to Governor Mahendran's family.) The Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), Parliament's watchdog, had prepared a report, the draft of which had leaked out, but Parliament was dissolved before it could be officially released. It has thus died. Doubtless the debate will continue.

### **UN Council on Human Rights (UNHCR)**

Previous Newsletters have covered the debates in Geneva about alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka in the closing weeks of the war. Last year's resolution by the Council called for a report into these allegations by March 2015. The new government has taken the line of co-operation with the Council and succeeded in postponing the Report until this September largely by undertaking to hold a credible domestic inquiry. The government has also taken steps to meet some of the demands of Tamil parties, such as the return of some of the land requisitioned by the military and scaling down the military presence in the North. The report was drawn up by Maarti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland, Dame Sylvia Cartwright, a former High Court Judge in New Zealand and Asma Jehangir, former President of the HR Commission in Pakistan, working with the new UN High Commissioner for HR, Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

The Report says that patterns of grave violations of HR in Sri Lanka between 2002 and 2011 strongly indicate war crimes and crimes against humanity by both sides. Prince Zeid has said that it will take more than a "domestic mechanism" to give confidence to all Sri Lankans that the process of investigation and determination of accountability is impartial. The government's promise of a more credible domestic enquiry is welcome, but prosecuting a few emblematic cases will not be sufficient. UNHCR can help design a hybrid special court to tackle this, i.e. involving non-Sri Lankan members. Foreign Minister Samaraweera's first reaction was that the Report was more of a narrative and not as "hot" as he had expected. He thought a hybrid court was one of the possibilities that would have to be explored. It is already clear that that this hybrid proposal is going to cause a lot of problems.

The Report also states that there are reasonable grounds for believing that the Security Forces (SF) committed unlawful killings, that the LTTE did the same and targeted rival Tamil organisations. On the shelling of hospitals there is doubt that these were accidental and there were no reasonable grounds for believing that the premises were used for military purposes, but it did note that the LTTE stopped civilians from leaving these areas. The government also knew of the state of the civilians in the area and restricted food and medical supplies.

The government response to the Report has been cautious but non-confrontational. Speaking to the Sunday Times about the Report. Samaraweera said that the justice system in Sri Lanka was

so run down that there may be a need to consider overseas consultants or even judges. As far as the domestic process was concerned, there was now a Committee headed by Austin Fernando, the Governor of Eastern Province, to look at a South Africa style Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, also joining with the ICRC to look for missing persons, to consider reparations as well as measures to guarantee the non-recurrence of events such as the insurrection in the south and the war in the north. It was necessary to examine how these events came about and to understand that many were acting on orders.

The U.S. Delegation had introduced a draft resolution, but this was then revised after consultation with other Council members including Sri Lanka. As a result the revised draft was sponsored by the U.S., the UK and others as well as by Sri Lanka with the aim of passing it by consensus. This later happened. The resolution recognizes the government's commitment to address issues of violence, torture and intimidation and emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach. It welcomes the engagement between the government and UN High Commissioner's Office and the acceptance of the principle of accountability. It lists a number of steps that the government is encouraged to take. The question now is whether the government will be able to carry out its more consensual approach and whether the western countries will give Sri Lanka the leeway for this to happen. That in itself is an issue as many in Sri Lanka believe the international community has no locus in this matter and is critical particularly of the hybrid court proposal.

### **Other issues**

The press has commented on the size of the Sri Lanka delegation to previous UN General Assembly heads of government meetings. These take place annually at the opening of the Assembly's year in September. The previous President led a huge delegation with expenses for hotels etc running up to almost half a million dollars. This year the delegation was only 22 strong. It offers a good chance to meet with world leaders and President Sirisena was to see Prime Minister Modi and several other leaders, including Secretary Kerry and the UN Secretary General. A brief meeting with President Obama was also scheduled.

A vehicle with GPS equipment, mobile telephones and cyanide capsules was found in Tamil Nadu at a pier opposite Talaimannar. This and other leads have aroused fears in intelligence agencies of renewed LTTE activity. The arrest of a young man in March 2014 led to the uncovering of an LTTE network operating in Europe. In July the press reported the formation of a new body, Crusaders of Democracy, involving former LTTE cadres. Another report states that there was campaigning by them under the spider symbol.

Following concerns expressed over the presence of politicians on the Constitutional Council, three persons representing civil society have been nominated and approved by Parliament. They are Dr Ahangamage Ariyaratne, Shibley Aziz and Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy.

The issue of employment visas by the Italian Embassy in Colombo has led to an enquiry by the Italian government and the removal of some local staff. A press report states that thousands of visas have been issued on the basis of questionable documents with some local staff living a "luxury life style".

The Meteorology Office has reported that the March/April monsoon largely missed Sri Lanka because of the El Niño effect. It warns that this could affect crops. Last year's extreme drought in N Central was El Niño driven.

Mobile phones have been banned at peak hours in Yala National Park because they are used by guides to attract tourists to see animals, resulting in the gathering of huge crowds at one point. Separately the press has reported the deaths of two leopards, one of which was run over by a guide's jeep.

### **Economic News**

Over the past few weeks politics have tended to push economic issues to the side, but one commentator has noted that "daunting " problems still remain. The budget deficit at 6% has overshoot the target of 5.2% and foreign debt has grown to \$49 billion, or 75% of GDP. However an IMF mission visiting in mid-September found the overall financial system stable, but noted that the rise in consumer demand fueled by budget wage increases and tax cuts - car imports have risen strongly in recent months (+198% Jan-July) - would push inflation up from the present zero to 3% by the year end. The Mission welcomed the freeing of the rupee - it has risen since the mid-August decision to let it float - from Rs132/3 to about Rs 140 to \$1. By the end of the quarter this was already making imports more expensive. It also recommended the ending of tax exemptions. In August reports from Moody's noted a stable outlook, but that strong growth had been constrained by high government debt. Figures indicate that development is funded by borrowing with interest taking a third of revenues.

Government statistics were rebased in August, which has led to a lowering of growth figures. Keeping track of the national accounts has now been moved from the Central Bank to the Department of Census and Statistics. A long article by Prof Authukorale of Australia National University in the Sunday Times of 9 August looks at the statistics post 2009 and notes that many are estimates. Main growth drivers have been non-tradable goods such as construction and utilities. These have been largely financed by debt and account for the bulk of the incremental growth in GDP 2004-14. Manufacturing growth has been modest and is a declining share of GDP. Poverty level figures cloak large regional differences, which are high for the north and east despite infrastructure investment. The drop in unemployment owes much to an increase in public sector recruitment and overseas employment. Exports have contracted as a share of GDP because of a failure to develop export oriented firms - garments are an exception - and competitiveness has been eroded. Debt has also shifted from concessional to commercial and does not generate immediate income as, for instance, the Mahaweli projects did. The private sector is a net saver but the public is a borrower. His conclusion is that present growth dynamism is not sustainable. Economists will doubtless find many faults with this analysis, but the cost of the war, both in terms of foregone investment and military expenditure as well as the outlay on some of the Chinese financed projects such as the Mattala airport, give some substance to this sombre picture.

The budget outlines for 2016 have been made public. The growth target is 6% and the budget deficit is 5.5% of GDP. The government is to follow some of the IMF proposals to cut state spending and raise taxes. It is also proposed to re-structure State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) immediately with the aim of making them profitable. This is against the backdrop of continuing losses at CPC (Ceylon Petroleum Corporation), which was forced to cut prices during the election in January 2015 but has failed to benefit from the decline in world oil prices.

The Finance Minister has re-introduced some of the proposed budget measures which dropped away because of the election. They include a super gains tax on companies reporting more than Rs. 25 bn in profit as well retrospective taxes on casinos, bars, direct home satellite services, mansions, dedicated sports channels, export of capital on emigration and motor vehicle importer licenses. There is a proposal for a public wealth trust to ensure citizens get a

share in the country's growth. This would be modelled on Temasek, Singapore's successful fund.

The tea industry has been under much pressure in recent months. Production has declined and prices have also been dropping because of adverse trends in overseas markets. Pressure from the unions for a substantial pay increase has hindered plucking. The problems are well known, particularly the high cost of production in Sri Lanka and the declining work force. Merrill Fernando, the force behind Dilmah, has once again urged companies to concentrate on value added product and to abandon the "mass market syndrome".

A bumper paddy crop in the east has brought pressure on the government to increase purchases by the Paddy Marketing Board. There are also problems of finding storage for the crop. Some is now being placed in hangars at the new and virtually unused Mattala Airport.

### **Miscellaneous**

India has revived talk of the CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) which has been on hold for some seven years. The aim is to cut tariffs in India/Sri Lanka trade and promote investment. This has been stalled mainly because of fears that the much larger Indian firms would benefit disproportionately. The President is to discuss this when he meets Prime Minister Modi.

A proposal to channel water from the Mahaweli to the northern provinces has received provisional loan approval from the World Bank.

The government has indicated that it will look again at irregularities in the stock market. This was a live issue under the previous administration.

### **Sports report**

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Sri Lanka hosted a test and ODI series against Pakistan.

This consisted of 3 tests, 5 ODI & 2 T20 matches.

Results were as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> Test in Galle was won by Pakistan by 10 wickets.

In the first innings, Sri Lanka made 300 (JK Silva 125) and Pakistan 417 (Asad Shafiq 131)

Second innings Sri Lanka scored 206 with Pakistan needing only 92 to win.

2<sup>nd</sup> Test in Colombo was a different matter, with Sri Lanka taking the match by 7 wickets.

First innings saw Pakistan all out for 138 with Sri Lanka making 315 (JK Silva 80 and AD Mathews 77)

In the second innings Pakistan made 329 (Azhar Ali 117) but Sri Lanka's 153 was sufficient for the win.

3<sup>rd</sup> Test in Pallekelle was won by Pakistan by 7 wickets and taking the series 2 to 1.

In the first innings Sri Lanka scored 278 (FDM Karunaratne 130)

Pakistan made 215, however in the second innings Sri Lanka's 313 (AD Mathews 122) was insufficient with Pakistan making 382 (Shan Masood 125 & Younis Khan 171 not out) to take the series.

In the ODIs the scores were as follows:

First match was won by Pakistan by 6 wickets with 28 balls remaining.

Sri Lanka 255. Pakistan 259 (Mahommad Hafeez 103)

Second match was won by Sri Lanka by 2 wickets with 11 balls remaining

Pakistan 287 and Sri Lanka 288.

In the third match Pakistan won by 135 runs, making 316 and bowling Sri Lanka out for 181. Fourth match was convincingly won by Pakistan with 55 balls remaining, passing Sri Lanka's 256 for the loss of only 3 wickets.

In the fifth and final match Sri Lanka turned the tables by winning by 165, with 368 (MDJK Perera 116), bowling Pakistan out for 203.

However Pakistan won the series by 3 to 2 matches.

Finally the T20, which were both won by Pakistan.

In the first by 29 runs Pakistan 175 and Sri Lanka 145.

Second by 1 wicket with only 4 balls remaining. Pakistan making 174 to Sri Lanka's 172.

In August India arrived for a 3 Test Match series:

In the first match at Galle, Sri Lanka won by 63 runs, with scores as follows:

First Innings Sri Lanka 183 and India 375 (S Dhawan 134 & V Kohli 103)

In the second innings Sri Lanka went on to score 367 (LD Chandimal 162) and bowled India out for a mere 112.

In the second Test India won easily by 278 runs.

First innings scores were India 393 (KL Rahul 108).

Sri Lanka 306 (AD Mathews 102)

Second Innings India made 325 (AM Rahane 126), but bowled Sri Lanka out for only 134.

In the third and final Test India won by 117 runs.

First Innings scores India 312 (CA Pujara 145) Sri Lanka 201

Second Innings India made 274 but Sri Lanka only 268 (AD Mathews 110)

India taking the series 2 to 1.

The West Indies are arriving in Sri Lanka for a 44 day tour starting on 8<sup>th</sup> October, It will consist of 2 Tests, 3 ODIs and 2 T20s.

### **New books published by our members**

***The Architectural Heritage of Sri Lanka*** is written by **David Robson** with a foreword by Michael Ondaatje. (Laurence King London 2016)

This beautiful book explores Sri Lanka's rich architectural heritage with handmade drawings from the studio of architect C. Anjalendran.

It is a celebration of two millennia of building, ranging across the great Classical and Medieval Periods, the Colonial Period and the Post-Independence Period, as well as being a celebration of the art of architectural drawing.

Anjalendran has been inspired by his guru, the master architect Geoffrey Bawa, whose office pioneered a new way of representing tropical architecture in a phenomenological manner, and by his close friend, the fabric designer Barbara Sansoni, who led a campaign to record and save old buildings during the 1960s and who recorded her efforts in her book *The Architecture of an Island* which was published in 1998.

The book includes measured drawings of ancient Buddhist temples, Hindu shrines, Colonial railways buildings, contemporary houses and modern tropical gardens, all amplified by the beautiful photography of Barbara Sansoni's son, Dominic. It will serve as a useful companion to any traveller and as the perfect bedside companion for anyone contemplating or remembering a trip to Sri Lanka.

.....and we are delighted to say that David will deliver an illustrated talk on his book at the High Commission at 6 pm on Wednesday 25 November!

**John Gimlette** has just published ***Elephant Complex***.

John is a barrister and widely praised travel writer. Many members will have enjoyed his



pieces in the travel sections of the Telegraph, Times and Guardian. In 1997 he was awarded the Spectator/Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize for travel writing and his *At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig* (a journey into the heart of South America) and *Theatre of Fish* (set in Newfoundland and Labrador) were among the New York Times's "100 most notable books of the year". Last week the Daily Telegraph named *Wild Coast* (a journey along the north-east coast of South America) as being amongst their "Best Twenty Travel Books of all time". His New York publishers tell us that *Elephant Complex* is written "with his signature eye for the unusually telling detail, his sense of urbane wonder, and his investigative desire for the whole story". John travelled all over Sri Lanka and, while recognising tragedy when he saw it, delighted in it all. In his book he talks about the island's colonial history and the recent civil war, describing encounters with "test cricketers, terrorists, a former president, ancient tribesmen, British expatriates, survivors of the civil war massacres, and with the island's amazing flora and fauna, including the world's greatest concentration of leopards". An insightful, delicious cornucopia is promised – and with these two new books (to say nothing of paintings: see page 16) our Christmas present quandaries are resolved.

### **Galle Literary Festival 2016**

This most mouth-watering of festivals is resurrected – and in three locations!

Kandy 9 – 10 January

Galle 13 – 17 January

Jaffna 23 – 24 January

Keep an eye on [www.galleliteraryfestival.com](http://www.galleliteraryfestival.com) – the full programme will be announced at the end of November.

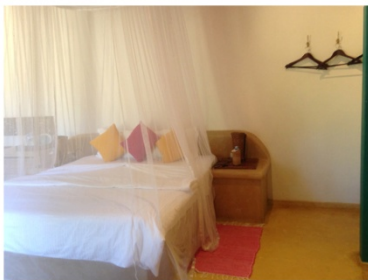
### **Notes from the Field**

#### **Dutch Bay, Eluvankulama entrance to Wilpattu National Park, Kalpitiya- Mannar Wildlife Circuit and Knuckles**

Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne

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Given recent improvements in road infrastructure and access, a national park with leopards is just 2.5 hours away and wild elephants a mere two hours (outside periods of heavy traffic) from the commercial capital of Colombo. The improved road infrastructure and a new entrance to Wilpattu now permits the development of a wildlife circuit combining Kalpitiya-Wilpattu-Mannar with extensions to mountain areas such as the Knuckles. In this field note, I will share some practical information that will be of use to members of FOSLA.



Left to Right: Palagama Beach (Kalpitiya Peninsula, Palmyrah House (Mannar Island) & Sir John's Bungalow (Knuckles)

### **The Old Mannar Road**

On a recent visit to Sri Lanka (August-September 2016) I had two opportunities to visit Wilpattu through the new entrance at Eluvankulama opened in 2014 and also to travel to Mannar along the so-called 'Old Mannar' Road. The shortest route to Mannar from Puttalam runs along the 'Current' Old Mannar Road. I used the qualifier 'Current' for the section of road currently used from Puttalam through to Marichchukkaddi on the northern boundary of the park. This is the B 379. This uses much of the 'Original' Old Mannar road, but some parts of the road are new and have come into public use after the separatist war which finished in 2010. Some of the original sections of the 'Original' Old Mannar Road have fallen into disuse and can only be seen after gaining ticketed entry into Wilpattu National Park. The old fallen mileposts can be seen if you ask one of the park trackers to point out the old sections. From a practical point of view, for most travellers there is little difference between the 'Current' Old Mannar Road and the 'Original' Old Mannar Road. A potential source of confusion is the 'Unfinished New Mannar Road' which also runs through the Wilpattu National Park. This is a 100 foot wide road near the coast which was cleared in the park by a previous government. It was halted after legal action by environmentalists and remains un-surfaced. It is not connected at either end although it can be entered by turning off the 'Current' Old Mannar Road. I have had wildlife enthusiasts say that a better environmental outcome would be to finish the new coastal road and to allow the 'Current' Old Mannar Road to fall into disuse. The latter 'splits' a larger section of the park and cuts through the Pomparippu Plain which is known as an area in which elephants gather in the evenings.

### **The Eluvankulama Entrance to Wilpattu**

The 'Current' Old Mannar Road (the B379) is surfaced from Puttalam almost up to the point it fords a tributary of the Kala Oya. This is around the 30km mark of the B379. Across the river is the new office of the Wilpattu National Park, which I refer to as the Eluvankulama entrance to distinguish it from the traditional entrance at Hunuwilagama which is reached by turning off the Puttalam-Anuradhapura Road (the A12). Just before the park office and on the south bank of the river is a naval checkpoint which will restrict access from Eluvankulama if the river is in flood. The bridge at the time of writing is a concrete bridge with no side-railings. After rains the river runs over the concrete bridge and is potentially dangerous. Across the bridge on the northern shore besides the park office is a gate which is kept open up to 5pm.

Within certain hours there is free and open access on the B379, but one cannot go off the road into any of the side roads into the park without a ticket from the park office. Those who buy tickets will continue along the B379 for a few kilometres, pass a turn off to a church and turn right to travel towards Tala Wila in the heart of the park.

From Kalpitiya, it is quicker by more than an hour to use the recently opened entrance at Eluvankulama rather than the traditional entrance at Hunuwilagama on the Puttalam-Anuradhapura road. However the new entrance had only two wildlife department guides at the time of my visit. If you rock up in your private vehicle and the two guides are not there for whatever reason, you will be turned away. So it is important to book a vehicle with one of the local safari tour operators. The local safari drivers know the park roads and are allowed in without a park guide.

### **Safari Vehicles**

The people at **Wilpattu Nature Resort** (WNR - a private/ public partnership with the local authority) have two good safari vehicles for hire with comfortable forward facing seats and powerful engines. On request, they can also hire-in safari vehicles from the Hunuwilagama

entrance if these are needed. The local safari vehicles are allowed in without a department guide as they know their way around. They also have 4 clean and comfortable rooms and provide meals. For direct bookings for rooms or meals contact the Manager, Anil Premadasa. Alternatively, if you are staying at a resort in Kalpitiya ask them to book local safari vehicles which are allowed in without a guide.

To reach the Wilpattu Nature Resort, turn left at the 27km post into a road signed to a Holcim Quarry and the Rapid Boat Squadron, at the first Y junction take the right. After around 5 km after crossing a disused railway track you will see the resort signed on the right. The resort has a lagoon front and can be reached by boat from Kalpitiya.

Some of our group which took a boat ride in the lagoon from Wilpattu Nature Resort saw a tusker coming to water and returning from a game drive after dark we had another elephant cross the road.

### **Across Dutch Bay by Boat**

On a day trip recce hosted by **Palagama Beach** I travelled with Ayanthi Samarajewa, who handles some of the marketing for them, and also with Ajith Ratnayaka from the **Palmyrah House** in Mannar. Palagama Beach asked Anil Premadasa to arrange for us to cross Dutch Bay by boat, which gave us a chance to see migratory birds (gulls, terns and waders). There is a very slim chance that you may see 'Pink Dolphins' (Indopacific Humpback Dolphins) on a boat trip in the bay. On our crossing we did not see any and I suspect it will require a focused search if you are keen to locate them as I have done before. A highlight of our boat crossing was that we saw a pair of Oystercatchers (on Tuesday 1 September 2015), a striking black and white wader with a red bill and legs. This is a rare migrant and a big draw for bird photographers.

### **A North-West Wildlife Circuit**

An interesting way to visit the park from Kalpitiya is to start with a boat crossing and then be picked up by safari vehicles at Gange Wadiya. If you did this from a hotel in the Kalpitiya peninsula, it is likely that you will need a pick up vehicle to be sent up from Kalpitiya to the park entrance for the return journey. My visit with Ayanthi and Ajith was because of a common interest in developing a wildlife circuit which connects Kalpitiya, Wilpattu and Mannar. This combines whale and dolphin watching in Kalpitiya, big game safaris in Wilpattu and migrant birds in Mannar, thus forming a north-western wildlife tour. Although I am not a commercial investor in tourism, in my role as a wildlife populariser I am interested in advocating conservation through commerce. Mannar is now just over an hour away from Puttalam (which is the turn off to the Kalpitiya peninsula). As Mannar is rich for birdlife and is also historically significant, there is now scope for a logistically convenient wildlife tour of the north-west.

### **Knuckles Conservation Area**

It is also possible to continue to the hills, to a less touristy and beautiful area of the Knuckles such as at Riverstone. I was also hosted at **Sir John's Bungalow** in Riverstone on the Rattota-Illukumbura road, an area of outstanding beauty and rich in endemic species. On the way there with my family, our driver opted to take the Colombo-Negombo road circumventing the busy Colombo-Kandy road. Similarly, people staying in Kalpitiya-Puttalam area can travel to the Knuckles at the end of a north-west circuit without needing to join the busy Colombo Kandy Road. From Puttalam, it will take over 4 hours to reach Riverstone and visiting Knuckles is best done with one or more nights booked. Sir John's Bungalow has the benefit of the bungalow and staff being managed by Nadeera Weerasinghe who is an excellent naturalist. I was able to see a loris, a nocturnal primate. Some speculate that the species in the Knuckles

may even be an un-described endemic species. The Knuckles is also good for endemic lizards including the Leaf-nosed Lizard. Nadeera, being a keen herpetologist, was also able to show me the endemic Dwarf Lizard, which had eluded me for many years.

### **Logistics Support**

My visit to Mannar was hosted by Palmyrah House in Mannar and I travelled up with Ajith Ratnayaka from the management team. My private family visit to Wilpattu from Eluvankulama and the introduction to Wilpattu Nature Resort was organised by Nigel Forbes (known as the Villu Man and an active member of the Friends of Wilpattu), and my second visit through Eluvankulama was organised by Palagama Beach, a resort in the Kalpitiya Peninsula. I was hosted in the Knuckles by Sir John's Bungalow. I hope these travel notes are useful to FOSLA members. However please note that, although correct at the time of writing, any of these details can change.

### **Useful Contacts**

**Friends of Wilpattu**, <https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-Wilpattu-Sri-Lanka>

**Palagama Beach**, [www.palagamebeach.com](http://www.palagamebeach.com)

**Palmyrah House**, [www.palmyrahouse.com](http://www.palmyrahouse.com)

**Sir John's Bungalow**, [sirjohnsbungalow@gmail.com](mailto:sirjohnsbungalow@gmail.com). For reservations:

[laggalabungalow@gmail.com](mailto:laggalabungalow@gmail.com) or Dilkie on +94(0)773 936 103

**Wilpattu Nature Resort**, [info@wilpattunatureresort.com](mailto:info@wilpattunatureresort.com), Anila Premadasa +94 (0)772 381 215

### **The Ancient Monastery at Ritigala**

This year I visited Ritigala mountain range for the first time. It is not far from the Cultural Triangle en route to Anuradhapura. The mountain range comprises four peaks and a strict nature reserve. Ritigala is the highest mountain in northern Sri Lanka. I recommend seeing the ruins of the ancient monastery at Ritigala on the eastern side of the mountain range. As you climb you feel a much-welcomed cool breeze. Tropical colourful, shiny insects scuttle away under stones and beautiful butterflies add to the serenity of your journey.

The ruins are set out over 50 acres of land and begin with an ancient man-made reservoir, commissioned by King Pandukabhaya (437-367 BC). I was amazed by the polygonal planning of the Monastery, stones were cut into perfectly straight rectangles with proper right angles or beautifully curved pathways which wind through the forest connecting the different rooms and halls of the Monastery such as the perfectly circular "danasala" (dining rooms). We picked up a tour guide at the entrance to the Monastery who works for the Department of Archaeology. He stated the reservoir was probably designed as a place for monks and visitors to bathe before entering the Monastery. The construction of the Monastery is a feat of engineering and includes a water purification system, interlocking stones to strengthen corners of structures and primitive yet rather effective air-cooling mechanisms.

There appears to be the ruins of a monastery hospital. Ritigala is known for producing medicinal herbs and ayurvedic treatments. The hospital or treatment area comprises what might have been a hot water bathing area, a doctor's couch or massage table, large stone cut ayurvedic oil baths and roots-grinding stones. Ancient Sri Lanka is rich in civilisation. Ritigala is an archaeological marvel.

After climbing Ritigala, I would suggest heading to the independently owned Forest Rock Garden Hotel which rightly claims to "give its guests the once in a lifetime experience to go

back to the golden days of the Anuradhapura Kingdom in the 21st Century with utmost luxury and a great sense of royalty, serenity and peace." The suites here have their own swimming pool and the whole hotel is set above ground level to allow elephants to walk underneath. Apparently only three trees were destroyed in building this hotel and the owner who is passionate about the preservation of the environment is part-way through a fabulous reforestation programme and has already won an international green award for this eco-friendly hotel.

Chamali Fernando



The ayurvedic treatment area at Ritigala

### **Annandale Distillery**

As well as running a successful market research business from New York to Shanghai, our members Teresa Church and David Thomson have a house in Sri Lanka and are active in many charitable concerns both there and elsewhere – and now they have resurrected a Scottish whisky distillery!

Annandale Distillery was founded in 1836 at the port of Annan in Dumfriesshire but had long fallen into disrepair. Love and respect for their countrymen (in the 1830s Annan was an established embarkation port for emigrant Scots) led Teresa and David to take up the challenge and on 15 November 2014 their first cask was filled. As a tribute to those intrepid Scots who embarked at Annan in the nineteenth century they turned the “A” of Annandale into the image of a billowing sail and on 10 September this year HRH The Princess Royal formally opened the site.

Annandale Distillery is now open for tours, tastings and purchase of new-make spirit (which they call Rascally Liquor), casks and other whisky-related merchandise.

Do have a look at the website ([www.annandaledistillery.com](http://www.annandaledistillery.com)) or telephone 01461 207 817

**A Tea Dance to celebrate the Sri Lanka Women's Association UK's Founders Day  
The Holiday Inn, Empire Way, Wembley 3 – 6 pm on 17 October.**

Our member and SLWA President, Calista Jayasinghe, invites FSLA members to a Tea Dance on 17 October. There will be live music and an afternoon tea of savoury and sweet treats. The event is being held to celebrate SLWA's foundation and to raise funds for two Sri Lankan charities: the Heart to Heart Trust Fund and Water Purification Systems. Please contact Calista on 020 8848 9793 for tickets, which cost £25 for adults and £10 for children under 12.

**Democracy, governance and media reform in Sri Lanka and the Commonwealth  
A seminar to be held by The Institute of Commonwealth Studies and The Democracy  
Forum in Senate House, University of London, on Tuesday 20 October.**

Our member, David Page, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, is organising this seminar invites interested members of our Association to attend. The seminar is linked to the publication *Embattled Media: democracy, governance and media reform in Sri Lanka*, an edited volume on the Sri Lankan media published earlier this year. The seminar will begin with a session on Sri Lanka and the wider South Asian context with speakers from Sri Lanka and India. The second session will discuss "Media Policy and Governance in the Commonwealth". In the afternoon there will be one session on "Safeguarding Media Freedoms" which will focus on issues of impunity and the protection of journalists, and a final session on "Lessons for Academia and Development policy". There is a charge of £10 to cover the cost of refreshments and a sandwich lunch. Please contact David on [djhpage@gmail.com](mailto:djhpage@gmail.com) (07810 277766) if you are interested.

**Migration and Global African Diasporas**

**A seminar to be held by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the Bedford Room  
(G37) of Senate House, University of London, from 5.15 to 7.45 pm on  
Tuesday 3 November.**

Our member, Dr. Shihan de Silva, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, is organising this seminar. At 5.15 pm she will deliver a presentation and film which explores the cultural memories of the largest Afro-Sri Lankan community. Dances and songs (in creolised Portuguese, the language of trade and commerce for 350 years on the island), connect the Afro-Sri Lankans to Africa, now no longer an imagined homeland. Africans were prominent in the Indian Ocean World in various spheres but now the majority of Afro-Asians are pushed to the margins. Performing tradition enables Afro-Sri Lankans to carve out a niche in the cultural arena of their hostland. Fading memories of slavery and the slave trade can still be heard in the narratives of their oral histories. At 6.30 pm Dr. Toby Green (King's College London) will speak on the way in which diasporas and migration shaped both statebuilding in West Africa and also the Atlantic diaspora. Entrance is free. Reservations may be made with Shihan at [shihan.desilva@sas.ac.uk](mailto:shihan.desilva@sas.ac.uk)

## Association events

### **An architectural evening in May**

In May FSLA member David Robson and Robert Powell collaborated to launch their book, *The New Sri Lankan House* at the High Commission of Sri Lanka in London. Having spent substantial parts of their careers in Asia, the two architects first met as visiting professors at the National University of Singapore.

Robert has published over 30 books, most of them on the architecture in South Asia. David helped to start Sri Lanka's first School of Architecture during the late 1960s and later worked as a housing advisor to the Government of Sri Lanka. He has published a number of books on architecture in Sri Lanka, including the celebrated *Bawa: the complete works*.

David delivered a brief history of the Sri Lankan house and placed the new book in its context, describing the inheritance of the great classical and medieval periods and the effects of the three colonial periods and tracing the evolution of the architectural profession since independence. He described the work of pioneers like Minette de Silva and Geoffrey Bawa and their efforts to design houses that suited the climate and related to the cultural traditions and natural landscapes of Sri Lanka. He repeated Anjalendran's maxim that every tree is the equivalent to an air-conditioner and showed a house that he had built around an existing mango tree.

Robert gave detailed accounts of the houses that are featured in the book, highlighting some of their architectural features such as the use of external louvres or the positioning of windows to encourage the "venturi effect" to keep a cool breeze flowing through a building.

The architects featured in the book belong to Sri Lanka's third post-independence generation, most of them born after 1965, and demonstrate that, in architecture as in cricket, Sri Lanka punches well above its weight.

All in all, an educational and entertaining evening and we are delighted that David has agreed to deliver another lecture at **The Sri Lankan High Commission on Wednesday 25 November** when he will tell us about his latest book, *The Architectural Heritage of Sri Lanka*. An application form is attached and we look forward very much to seeing you there.

**Tour of Stationers' Hall and City walk.** On Monday 5 October, the first rainy day of Autumn, 22 members enjoyed a perfect day in the City. It might have rained, but we were thoroughly stimulated. The Deputy Clerk of the Stationers' Company led us through their great rooms, pointing out everything of interest and telling us the history of the Company. Queen Mary Tudor granted the Company a charter in 1557 and an enchanting little portrait of her hangs in the first of the enfilade of rooms. One of the very few livery halls to be left standing after the Blitz in 1940, the rooms are those of the rebuild of 1673. It was here that scholars from all over Europe gathered to decide on the text of the first Bible printed in English and evidence of this was everywhere. The eagle of St. John in a stained glass window, tiny books of Psalms integral to the panelling in the Hall – here we were asked to look for a seventeenth century mistake: the artisan who had painted the tiny wooden books had included the name of Jesus..... We saw the portrait of Stephen Colledge, the "Protestant Joiner" who was contracted to panel the Hall for £300 in 1674, but who also made the disastrous mistake of publishing seditious pamphlets about Charles II's brother, the Duke of York, because he feared for the loss of the Anglican Church to the power of Rome. The King had Colledge chased to Oxford where he suffered the horror of being the last man to be hung, drawn and quartered for printing treason. And we saw the portrait of Thomas Cadell, who suffered a lesser horror in being the publisher who turned down *Pride and Prejudice* and the early eighteenth century portrait of a penniless young man called Matthew Prior, whom the

then Master found reading Homer in the City markets: Matthew was given an education and a life worth living. The decoration of all of the rooms is exquisite and the history of books and civilisation alive in every one. We took tea (an excellent slice of cake!) in the most beautiful of the rooms, the Court Room, and it was here that we met our favourite guide, Stan Medland. Gathering our umbrellas, we started on our walk and were enchanted. Stan promised to show us things we might not have noticed before, and so he did. He showed us the tiny screw in the Temple Bar behind which a time capsule is hidden - ten years ago the Temple Bar was rebuilt on its present site in Paternoster Square and the capsule dates from this time – and he pointed out the figures from the Empire gathered into the skirts of Queen Anne, sitting with her back to the Cathedral. Apparently this poor lady had 22 children, none of whom survived, her tragedy driving her to drink. Stan related a ditty of the time, something about “Boozy Nan sitting with her back to the Church and her face to the City”. And on and on we went, over Lord Foster’s pedestrian bridge to the south bank, past the Globe and the site of a bear baiting pit to Borough Market, a market for a thousand years and once, surely, full of the scent of Ceylon spices.....about which we shall hear more on 19 October.....

**At 2 pm on Monday 19 October** we shall return to the **Linnean Society** to hear **John Keay** deliver an illustrated talk on the **Spice Route**

John has been visiting the sub-continent for over forty years as a journalist, author and lecturer and many of his books are considered standard texts.

He leads tours of India for Martin Randall Travel, the leading cultural tour organiser in this country, and is a first class communicator.

He promises us a sweeping account of the spice trade, in which Sri Lanka plays so important a part, and describes his talk, “From the dawn of history to the ends of the earth, the quest for spices triggered colonial expansion and provoked the earliest phase of globalisation. Pivotal in the trade was Sri Lanka. It was the production of cinnamon that first put the island on the map and it was from there that I first took up the spice trail for my book, *The Spice Route: A History*.”

[www.johnkeay.com](http://www.johnkeay.com) will tell you more about our speaker. I think it is safe to say that we are in for something special.....after which we shall of course go upstairs for tea and cake!

Tickets cost £18 and an application form is attached.

**At 12 noon on Thursday 12 November** we shall meet again at **The Rifles Club** for our **Annual Lunch**. Always the happiest of occasions, Lion lager will be on sale at the bar and Philip Gunasekara is already mixing the spices; the price remains the same at £27:50 per person.

An application form is attached and we look forward enormously to seeing you there.

Also this year Martin Valentine, both one of Mohan Samarasinhe’s teachers of English in the SPICE (Speaking, Promoting and Involving Children in English) programme and an established painter, will hold a small selling exhibition of his Sri Lankan paintings to benefit SPICE. He paints houses and landscape which often reflect an aspect of personality and he believes passionately in the Renaissance ideal that the human form is a mirror of the soul. He has been sketching, painting and sculpting both here and in such far-flung places as Brazil, Mexico, the Pakistani Karakoram – and Sri Lanka – for some 30 years. He exhibits in this country and abroad and his works are found in many private collections worldwide. It will be a delight to see his paintings of Sri Lanka, which will mainly be rendered in acrylic on canvas and measure some 25 x 35 cm.

And, finally for this year, don’t forget **David Robson’s lecture on the Architectural Heritage of Sri Lanka on 25 November** (see above and the attached application form).



### **Membership dues**

Members who pay their annual subscriptions by cheque are urged to send in their 2016 subscriptions as soon as possible. Cheques should be made out to “**The Friends of Sri Lanka Association**” and sent to the **Honorary Treasurer, Annette van Maurik, at Montague Villa, 4 Lyncombe Hill, BATH, BA2 4PG.** Subscriptions remain at **£15 for an individual member and £22:50 for a joint membership.** Alternatively, if you prefer to change to payment by standing order (an altogether easier method of payment for all concerned), please contact the Honorary Treasurer (Email [vanmaurik54@gmail.com](mailto:vanmaurik54@gmail.com)) for the necessary form. **This method of payment is much preferred by the Association as it avoids the need for costly reminders if subscriptions remain unpaid, which sadly often happens.**

### **Members Directory**

At the March meeting of your FSLA Committee it was agreed that, unless they indicated otherwise, all new members elected since that time would be entered in the Directory with the “Reason for Joining” on their application form as their biography.

This we have started in the attached New Entries list.

We should of course far prefer a longer entry and the editor, Sue Marsh, would welcome any additions at [jands.marsh@virgin.net](mailto:jands.marsh@virgin.net) telephone 01903 882755