

ISLE PROGRAM --2002

Since 1982, the ISLE Program has provided 281 students with an opportunity to observe and participate in the fascinating multicultural environment found on the South Asian and of Sri Lanka. Located a few miles off the southern tip of India, modern-day Sri Lanka -- formerly known as Ceylon -- is a synthesis of indigenous and foreign influences that have shaped the island's cultural and religious heritage since the pre-Christian era. The system of government, social organization, cultural attributes, and religious traditions and practices are products of a history that has seen Sri Lanka as a migration destination, trading partner, military ally and/or foe, exploitable resource, and repository of "original" Buddhist teachings. Among its many other historical names, it has also been called *Ceilao* (Portuguese), *Serendib* (Arabic), *Taprobane* (Greek), *Dhammadipa* (Pali), & *Simhaladvipa* (Sanskrit).

Sri Lanka: Then

Migrants from northern and southern India, arriving at least as early as the 5th Century BC, brought both Buddhism and Hinduism to the island, along with distinctive cultures from their respective regions of India. Some of the world's earliest (c. 300 BC.) and most sophisticated irrigation technology transformed the dry -zone of northern Sri Lanka into a bountiful agricultural center. The ability to produce surplus food to support a sizeable contingent of non-productive artisans, craftsmen, religious practitioners and royalty allowed a complex civilization to grow and flourish in the area. Traders sailing between southern Europe or Arab countries and the Far East, and military expeditions crossing the straits between Sri Lanka and South India, also provided a constant flow of new information and ideas to keep this civilization alive and vibrant over the centuries that followed.

European colonialists began to have a significant impact on Sri Lankan society and economy with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th Century. Other than for religious conversion even today, Roman Catholics make up close to 8% of the island's population. Portuguese interests in Sri Lanka were primarily commercial rather than territorial. They neglected to secure support of local rulers in many parts of the island, leading some rulers to form alliances with the Dutch. By the 1650's the Portuguese were displaced from their port city strongholds, only to be replaced by this other European colonial power. Dutch control, like that of the Portuguese, was

limited mainly to coastal areas and ports, since their goal was to control the spice trade with Europe and the Orient. With the arrival in 1795 of the powerful British navy bent on expansion of empire, Dutch-controlled areas quickly fell to this third foreign power. It took an additional 20 years for the overwhelming British forces to defeat the last remaining Sri Lankan ruler and take control of the central highlands kingdom of Kandy.

It was only after World War II, with the retrenchment of European overseas powers and the abandonment of empires, that Sri Lankans regained the right to govern themselves. A legacy of parliamentary-style democracy left by the British served as their political model; an entrenched elite of primarily English-educated politicians, bureaucrats and civil servants carried on as the new nation's leaders.

The newly independent nation was faced with a daunting task of trying to satisfy the diverse and often conflicting interests of a multi-ethnic, linguistically heterogeneous populace through a representative, avowedly egalitarian political system. The problems created by attempting to capture the votes of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, while not alienating minority populations of Tamil Hindus, Muslims or Christians, were enormous in the earliest postcolonial days and remain so today.

The leaders of Sri Lanka also had to deal with an unbalanced economy that for more than 150 years had been overly concentrated on colonial plantation and raw materials exports, and import of finished goods. Local markets, and production infrastructure, had been badly neglected, along with the education and training of the largely rural, agriculture-dependent majority of the populace. To truly unite the nation, the entire complex of economic, education, civic and social services had to be restructured in a way that would provide equal access and support for all its citizens. As with most other nations of the world, this was (and remains) a challenging, frustrating, and at times communally divisive project. Nevertheless the goal remains clearly expressed by all political parties, no matter what their electoral support base and the vision of social stability, built on a foundation of economic strength and political integrity, is perhaps stronger today than at any time in Sri Lanka's history.

Sri Lanka - Now

While still a place of tremendous natural beauty, and captivating cultural and religious diversity, Sri Lanka is no longer the island of "serendipity" that

it once was proclaimed to be. For several decades, the country has experienced political and social turmoil as attempts were made to deal with the problems generated by its past and present circumstances. A conflict in the northeast -- between Tamil separatists and government forces -- has been going on since 1983. Also, a militant opposition group created a climate of fear and human rights abuses in the south in 1988-89, until it was suppressed by the government. Brutal actions by both sides led to anguish among the general populace, and a near breakdown of traditional "civility." (While this was a very difficult period in the nation's history, it is important to note that the central highlands, where ISLE is based, is an area that over the years has been least affected by troubles in other parts of the island.)

Recent events have brought about significant transformations in the political and social climate in Sri Lanka. Elections for national Parliament (August 1994) and President (November 1994) brought to power a new set of leaders, headed by Sri Lanka's first woman President who is also daughter of the world's first woman Prime Minister. This new government set as top priorities bringing an end to the ethnic conflict in the north and rebuilding economic infrastructure throughout the island. These goals are sure to take years to achieve, and sporadic incidents of violence will likely occur during the process. Consequently, as has been the case since 1983, ISLE participants will continue to be encouraged stay away from areas of the country that are recognized as potential trouble spots.

KANDY

The ISLE Program's base of operations is Kandy, a traditional but modernized city located in the central highlands, about 75 miles inland from Sri Lanka's capital of Colombo. Kandy is a hill station (c. 1,500') with a moderate climate and lush semi-tropical surroundings. The city of about 100,000 offers in microcosm much of the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that makes up Sri Lankan society. Kandy and its suburbs are home to a population that includes Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, speaking Sinhala, Tamil and English. Many residents from the low country also seek refuge, during holidays or vacations, from the heat and humidity of their home towns in Kandy's more pleasant climate.

As the last stronghold against colonial domination, Kandy has remained the center for traditional Sri Lankan cultural and artistic activities. Kandyan dance, music and other forms of art and crafts, as well as dress

styles and tempo of life, all carry with them a feel for the distinctiveness of this part of Sri Lanka. One of the most sacred Buddhist shrines, the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic), stands on the banks of Kandy Lake near the center of town. Numerous monuments and shrines of all of Sri Lanka's religious groups - some of recent origin, others dating back to the 14th Century - are scattered throughout the city and surrounding countryside.

ISLE PROGRAM OPERATIONS

The ISLE Center is a large spacious house located close to University of Peradeniya. The Center houses the program's library, office, and a part-time classroom, and is the residence of the Faculty Director and Program Assistants. During open hours, students use the Center as a social gathering place, a reading/study area, and to collect mail and share daily experiences with the Director, Assistants and other students.

Professor Steven Hopkins, Associate Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, a specialist in South Asian religions, will be the resident faculty director of ISLE in the fall of 2002 and will supervise all aspects of the program in Kandy. Professor Hopkins has extensive experience living and conducting research in South Asia.

Dr. Sree Padma is ISLE's Administrative Director. Her office is located at the program's agency institution (Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine). With the program's Faculty Board of Directors and the Faculty Resident Director, she is responsible for all aspects of program planning and implementation.

Support for both the Director and students is provided by one or two former ISLE students, who serve as Program Assistants. They provide orientation, information and advice regarding cultural, academic, and personal issues before departure from the U.S. as well as during the program in Sri Lanka. The Assistants are capable peercounselors, since their personal experiences on ISLE make them aware of the sorts of problems and concerns that ISLE students face in adapting to totally different cultural and family environments in Sri Lanka.

ISLE is affiliated with the University of Peradeniya, one of the premier educational institutions in South Asia. Most program teaching faculty are professors at the University, and some classes are held on its campus. The

sprawling University campus, surrounded by lush green hills, is adjacent to a century-old botanical garden of more than 150 acres -- once a royal park of the Kandyan kings -- containing a wealth of plant and tree specimens from around the world

Program Schedule

Immediately on arrival in Sri Lanka, ISLE participants travel into the hills to Kandy to begin a week of orientation and intensive language study. This is a time for lessons on ways to act, dress and speak that help students become accepted by Kandy residents as culturally sensitive individuals (in contrast to often intolerant, chauvinistic "run-of-the-mill tourists"). Individual and group forays into the town allow everyone to practice these lessons while learning about the layout of the town itself. A day is also spent on the University of Peradeniya campus, to meet with Sri Lankan faculty and students and sign up to use the University's main library.

After this period of acculturation during which, with a little luck from the lunar calendar by which Sri Lankan holidays are determined, Kandy's largest and most colorful festival will be celebrated, students move in with middle-class host families for the remainder of their stay. The families provide a place to live and eat, but their overall role in the learning process is much more significant. Students participate in daily and special occasion activities along with others in the household. Since much of Sri Lankan life is kin-centered, family members and other relatives who live elsewhere often drop by for brief or extended visits, adding new elements to the pattern of family life. ISLE students are almost unanimous in agreeing that host families are one of the most important elements in their Sri Lankan education.

The schedule of coursework that follows includes continued language classes, a required course on Material Culture, optional courses in a variety of disciplines, and a required independent study project. The course on Material Culture is a study of archaeological sites in the northern parts of Sri Lanka. The independent study project, formulated and refined during the term and completed in the final weeks, provides each student with an opportunity to pursue in depth a topic of personal interest.

Rigorous classwork in Kandy is interspersed with field trips to sites of social, religious and historical importance in several other parts of the island. As part of the study of Material Culture, fairly early in the program

comes a week-long tour of the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya, all sites of tremendous historical, religious and artistic significance. A leading archeologist gives preparatory lectures, then accompanies the tour to provide background and on-site explanation. A second week of touring, later in the program, traverses the central highlands and southern coast of the island. Included are stops at a temple for the Hindu/Buddhist deity Kataragama (where people of all religions worship and make vows), a wildlife sanctuary, a beach resort, a fortified colonial port city, and an area where famous Sri Lankan sapphires are mined. In addition to these extended tours, a number of shorter excursions (required and optional) are made to visit villages, tea estates, temples, festivals and ritual events.

On completion of the fall term in early December, ISLE students have a number of options. One alternative to returning to the U.S. immediately is to pursue further studies in Sri Lanka in the spring, taking one or several ISLE-arranged tutorial courses relevant to the student's particular interests. Also, it is quite easy to travel in South Asia before returning to the U.S. Most ISLE students spend at least some time in India before heading home.