



Flair and Make-up: Saranga Dinesh | Pic by Sunath Perera/Photomax

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Fall in love with Sri Lanka's Other Half

By Rathindra Kurusita

"I fell in love with the country, the people, and the way of life which were entirely different from everything in London and Cambridge to which I had been born and bred."

- Leonard Woolf

Suddenly it has become 'cool' to travel to Jaffna. Everyone you know seems to be taking the bus, car, van or helicopter to the North and the East after the end of the war, an area which has been closed to the public for nearly three decades. And with the *New York Times* naming Sri Lanka as the top place to visit in 2010, a large number of foreign tourists are expected to join the locals in the coming months.

So what does every avid traveller have when s/he travels into unknown lands, apart from a passport and hard currency? A travel guide, obviously. However, there are no modern travel guides to the North and East of Sri Lanka - two of the country's most exotic and interesting geographical swathes, mostly because the ethnic conflict made extensive travelling there impossible.

The market is virtually untapped. Well, it was untapped till this week when Juliet Coombe and Daisy Perry, authors of *Around the Fort in 80 Days* launched their travel guide to the North and East, *Sri Lanka's Other Half* - a book that the authors hope will help the reader "wow the friends and family with tales from a part of Sri Lanka that has been totally cast off from the rest of the country for the last three decades and therefore preserved from intruded tourism."

Travelling with toddlers

Most parents I know don't like to go on vacation with their children simply because they think they will be a pain in the neck. Kids simply get in the way and hamper travel arrangements, that's what I always hear. Imagine travelling around the North and East with a two and a half-year-old kid and a two-month-old infant in tow. (You have to breast feed them and stuff you know) but according to Juliet Coombe (who actually did travel with her kids), having a child with you makes people open up to you more, that is, as soon as they get by the initial shock.

Initially people are a bit shocked when I turn up with my son and young baby, but not for long. And despite all the challenges involved I can't imagine travelling without my two children. They always get me to the front of every queue, get me waived through checkpoints and the word 'no' no longer exists, which allows me to go into just about any building or site even if it is closed at the end of the day. "Our books would probably still be stuck in customs now if it wasn't for the award-winning smile of baby Anzar, my No.02. Pooza area I even ate, sometimes people don't

charge anything and I am touched by how many people have helped in every single spot I have been to, carrying the baby, so I could take the best photos or have my hands free to write up an interview."

She added that people have always offered to help take care of the baby. The universal concern and love for children helped her get through language and cultural barriers that she encountered during travel.

Particularly in Jaffna for example everybody looked after the baby and at Jippo Pavilions (hotel, Jaffna), the staff were so nice they not only bought her a rare, baby clothes and toys but also became so close to her whilst they researched the book that I have ancient malle to return anytime I like. A couple I met in Jaffna, who are also featured in the book.

Sybil and Barton have even invited me to their wedding. Now I can't understand why sympathy doesn't want to have a baby. It makes the world a much more fun, open and an equal place to live in. *Sri Lanka's Other Half*, our guidebook, doesn't come with a free baby, but it does have a complimentary photographic guide at the end, to help you improve your travel photography and take pictures that might appear in our future updates.

Why Jaffna?

Even as kids Juliet and Daisy were fascinated by Jaffna. This was some what before the beginning of the civil war, and yes they ARE kind of old. Juliet who is an avid reader was especially interested in the Jaffna libraries which at one time was one of South Asia's best libraries and has been attracted by its restoration in the late 1990s.

"From childhood I was fascinated by Jaffna and its ancient ruins submerged in the shifting sand dunes and stories of the Nallur Kandassamy Hindu temple of self-mutiliation that brings millions of devotees together every year in grotesque rituals of faith. My parents talked of the magnificent public library."

Jaffna - with over 10000 books to pick from and the joke between my mothers and aunt was that I was such a voracious reader that they I ran out of books to send me to go to. I would have to start writing my own. I now have the stories of the Jaffna public library made covering the region, totally translated with



Pankudativu village elephant doorway - Jaffna



Sewing nets



Hauling water in temple

"But writing a travel guide is not as easy as it seems. Until now I thought it was all about funding, getting permission and a four wheel drive, crisscrossing around, having a chat with the occasional bystander and the hotel staff and taking 'pretty pictures'. But apparently it's not that easy -- one has to spend months researching places. This is a mix of things from reading old newspapers on line, looking for the unusual and quirky stories in the feature sections and reading books, usually literary titles, linked to the areas that should be covered."

"Also some Victorian guide books for amusement value only and talking to just about anyone who have been to the areas we were planning on including. Daisy Perry and I divided the book up and researched as much as we could based on a tight time-line and the official government permissions required to go. Some of the places in the book took weeks to get official clearance for. Jaffna in the end due to all the paper work required was written almost completely by myself with some help from Burton and Jivitha, who have a chapter in the book dedicated to them."

Focus points

The authors tried to cover every place that was open in the region in a systematic way and focused on the subjects rather than the places that would most interest readers and could not be found in any other guide. Since both writers have a 'personal pet hate' to replicate information that is already out there, they often read only the contemporary guides after their books have gone to the printers.

"The North and East - a mere 50km journey can take over seven hours depending on the state of the roads or the tides and river levels if ferry crossings are involved."

But it is more than worth the effort to see Jaffna's Portuguese-Dutch fortress even if it is in ruins, picturesque off shore islands, in particular Delft, with its wild ponies brought over by the Portuguese in colonial times and take a ride around Jaffna in a classic car, listen to singing fish at midnight in Batticaloa, watch the blue pigeons return at sun set to Pigeon Island just off Trincomalee."

"You can learn how to cook a delicious romantic meal using tea, find out how to travel Sri Lanka's tea country discovering a hidden world of tea factories used as art galleries, luxurious planter's bungalows and the best roadside tea stalls to stop for a cuppa. Plus follow our trails and meet the tea artists and wildlife experts that make any trip to the tea country unforgettable."

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its possible new sources of literary inspiration. Combined with the chance to see a city and areas of Sri Lanka that had been pretty much closed off from the world for three decades were the main reasons I went ahead with the project," Juliet said.

