

Road to Sri Lanka

# Gambling in Kikkaduwa

By STEPHEN FROST  
Herald Special

## Around the World in 380 Days

15th in a series



PATRONS PLEASE NOTE:  
NO ANIMALS, PETS OR  
BARE-BODIED GUESTS  
ARE ALLOWED FOR  
HYGIENIC REASONS.

Interesting? That's Colombo, Sri Lanka. Interesting all over.

John and I found ourselves in Colombo after a short 1,200-mile flight from Singapore. The night we arrived, we found accommodation in the local YMCA and then ventured down the street for a meal and one of the worst beers, bar none, that we experienced on our trip. It was so bad, in fact, that I wasn't tempted to give it another chance. It was called Lion beer for those who may be headed thirstily that way.

The next day, John and I meandered down to the train station to check out the cost of a ride 65 miles down the coast to a little town called Hikkaduwa. The ride there cost us 7.5 rupees or about 40 cents for second-class accommodation.

One of the things I liked about Colombo was the fact that the streets were crowded with cars as well as 1963 Austin Minors. Very few North American cars. Just as well; it was hell keeping the streets clean as it was.

One thing very noticeable about many native Sri Lankans, or Cēlonese as they still prefer to be called, is their friendly attitude toward strangers. This is consistent even when they are trying to con you, which many youngsters do. The "hustle" is a way of life on the streets and if you look remotely European or North American, you have to be prepared to accept people constantly trying to sell you something at inflated prices.

**FIRST LESSON**

John and I headed for Hikkaduwa early in the morning and learned our first lesson about train travel in this country. There are no line-ups, and the fighting for seats is just terrific.

Some Australians on the platform warned us about that when we first arrived and it was something to see how they solved the dilemma of finding good seats.

When the train pulls in, there's a mad rush for the doors. There is an equally mad rush from those on the train to disembark, so it becomes nearly impossible to squeeze aboard when you are encumbered by a backpack.

The Australian solution is to

wait for the train to come to a full stop and for the people in the coach to get up. Then they send two of their numbers through the nearest open windows. The packs follow seconds later and are shoved into the vacated seats and then the last of the group fly through the windows to grab the seats. By the time J.P. and I got on board, we were lucky to get a seat, let alone sit together.

In Hikkaduwa, we found our way to the guest house of a retired gentleman who put us up in our own room for about a dollar U.S. a night. Hikkaduwa was the Sri Lankan version of a one-horse town, but it was nice and quiet, with a super restaurant, the Green Dragon, which featured Chinese food but no Chinese.

From my journal - "The snorkeling here isn't too bad, but not as good as the Great Barrier Reef. It is better than the coral in Phuket and it does have the advantage of being close to shore."

"Been eating fairly well lately and for the cheapest prices we have found in our travels. You just have to pick and choose carefully. J.P. says he saw one of the restaurant employees carry a pig into the kitchen yesterday. I told him it is simply a pet."

**LAST FID**

"They certainly wouldn't use a full-grown dog for food anyway, they are the mangiest animals you've ever seen. I suppose that in any third world country, dogs are the last animal fed, if at all, the pup in the restaurant being one of the few exceptions that I've seen. They breed like crazy and no one stops them."

"I often wondered why I rarely saw any pups and found out there is a natural if somewhat grisly method of birth control. It is also a little after the fact. The pups are so hungry that they are lucky to last a day before ma or pa eats them."

"In Colombo when we were walking along the waterfront, we were accosted by a young lad who plunked himself down

and opened a basket he was carrying. Inside there was the nicest cobra you've ever seen. The kid played his flute while the cobra made ineffectual lunges at him without ever really coming close. Probably realized it couldn't do much without fangs. Apparently the charlatans these days defang them. Do I hear cries of outrage from the purists out there?"

"That was the first time I saw a cobra here. Yesterday when we were on the beach, some of the local lads wandered up with a quart bottle. Inside was a small cobra. Fascinating, really. The little gents wanted to sell it to us and I admit that I was tempted. However, this country has very strict laws about the exportation of its wildlife, including, I would imagine, cobras. We declined with thanks."

"Later I saw the same lads on the breakwater drowning the snake. They couldn't sell it so they filled the bottle with salt water and threw it in the ocean. I asked one of the lads why he just didn't let it go and he looked at me as if I was crazy. 'I don't make friendly with cobras,' he said. Fair enough. He caught it by a hotel in the village."

**INCREDIBLE BUSES**

One day I decided to travel down the coast to a city called Galle, I rode one of the government buses, which are nothing short of incredible. What follows is a description from my journal.

"If British Leyland could see these buses, they would be amazed. Like the Austin Minor taxis of Colombo, they are ancient but not in nearly as good a shape. In most of them, the original steel floors have long since given way and been replaced by heavy wooden ones. The engines run on gallons of oil and a prayer as the bus flies through the little hamlets with the clutch slipping and the transmission shuddering when the driver thrashes through the gears, and then tests the breaks by slowing from 40 mph to 0 in 50 feet."

"Yesterday I got a real treat

when the driver had to get out and referee a fight (a minor altercation, really) between the conductor and a would-be passenger, irate because he couldn't get on an already overcrowded bus. They have no compunction about cramming people on.

"The purpose of the visit to Galle was to see the old Dutch fort which the Cēlonese still use. A typical colonial outpost, with its guns guarding the harbor and huge stone ramparts encircling a small and cramped interior.

"In the harbor was a Dutch or English ship which had sunk under mysterious circumstances eight months ago. All that can be seen is part of its superstructure and a communications mast. No one seems to be in a hurry to raise it."

From my journal dated October 7 - "Good! John has become one of the local favorites around here, seeing as he's English and they get the racing forms from England over the wire. Now, like any true-blooded member of those British Isles, John likes to gamble a little."

**FIRST TRY**  
"On his first try, J.P. managed to pick a winner, which won our favorite waiter 10 rupees, or about 66 cents. The waiter thinks John is very bright. After all, he probably never wins."

"The next day, we get the line-up for the Arc de Triomphe, which was being run that day and, seeing that John knew even less about that, he let the boys bet themselves so as not to ruin his record."

From Oct. 8 - "Breakfast as usual today, only J.P. didn't

win any money on the races the day before. Of course, he blamed it on the fact they were French races. It didn't deter him, though, as he bet on a few more today. After all, the amount he bets only amounts to pennies. However, the boys love to see him come in, and many of them ask him for tips on the horses, which he graciously declines to give them.

"They probably think he's keeping everything to himself. Little do they realize he couldn't tell his ear from his elbow, let alone a winner from a loser in one of these races. Provides for good service from our favorite waiter, though, and it's kind of fun to see how John did every morning."

**WHICH BETS**  
"It's a very pleasant atmosphere in the morning. J.P. and the waiter, Bunja, talking about what bets to make, me listening with half an ear, watching all the young ladies saunter in and out."

"This morning, John had two winners, but one was disqualified and relegated to last place, while the other was bet in combination with another, so it didn't make any money. The boys were still impressed, however, since it was a better effort than the French race, which came up empty all around."

"Today I bet for the first time on two horses the waiter assured me were surefire winners. I bet 10 rupees on two horses, which is about 66 cents U.S. and is a fairly hefty bet around here. Whoopee, says big time Charlie. Afterwards, J.P. says that only one of the horses has a chance of coming in. So all of a sudden, he's an



Fishermen spend hours on the coral reefs of Hikkaduwa, casting away until the tide drives them in. Their catch is kept in their loin cloths and bait can be anything from small fish to different types of larvae. (Herald photo by Steve Frost)

authority. I think the boy's starting to believe his own press, so to speak."

For those of you who want to find out whether or not my bets were better than John's, read next week's exciting installment. I will also be discussing our trip inland to the ancient former capital of Kandy.

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