

# Our Second Trip to Sri Lanka

## May 2008

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day  
Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life

We arrived at The Beach Hotel in Negombo on Friday 1st May after a brilliant flight with Qatar Airlines via Doha – despite the stopover, such a joy after last October's dreadful flight with Sri Lanka Air. And for the rest of that day we were dying to know who had won the London Mayoral elections - so up at 5am with BBC World News and yes – Boris had done it so great jubilation. I hope we don't live to regret it.

We had an anxious night as we had seen the cyclone heading towards the south of Sri Lanka, where we were heading too, but it missed us and unfolded into the tragedy of Myanmar, Hetti, our Chauffeur/Guide and Yala Fund Co-Coordinator in Sri Lanka, collected us early the next morning and we set off on the daylong drive down to the south.

This time we stayed in a brand new hotel called Hibiscus Garden – opened just recently by Sarath, an ex National Tourist Guide friend of Hetti's – a very simple and beautiful main structure open to the elements on all sides, with little eco-lodges in the garden – very isolated, a long way down an almost impossible track then surrounded at the back by jungle – admittedly a little scary on the first night. Every day they cooked us the most wonderful rice and king or seer fish curry with local bread and fruit for breakfast and all for the sum of £18 each per night. There was nobody else there apart from the staff and the birds and peacocks – but one evening when an English couple came through on their way back from safari – inevitably we all chatted and they have kindly offered to donate a brand new hearing aid bought for their mother and never used

And so to work. First we visited our cases from last year and great success to report.

**The Santha 'Murder Widow'** for whom we finished the house – after finding her out twice, we sent word that we were coming and she greeted us with very black very sweet tea from a flask – somebody had to do it so it was me – and shop bought biscuits – an expensive treat. The house is complete and well finished. She still works on the roads by choice –she tried a garment factory but if she took one moment off due to child problems, she would have been sacked. We discussed other options but she doesn't sew, she doesn't know how to grow vegetables - and says this life now suits her. 2 days a month she has to do parent duty at her boy's school to guard the children against any potential terrorist attack. We are buying her a mattress and a cupboard as they currently sleep on a hard bed without one.



No further help needed here – success.

**The 'Suicide Widow'** - for whom we bought the fabric and sewing machine motor. She



now has a thriving business making slips and rugs for a local shop, for girls working at a local factory, for neighbours and for a market stall she runs. The depression over the loss of her husband has clearly started to lift. She now supports 1 child at school on an art scholarship and 1 on a computer course having taken 'A' levels. We asked if there was anything she needed but there was nothing – she is now totally self-sufficient thanks to our very small investment in October of around £30!

A thriving business was started for around £30

**Blossom!** This tiny elderly woman living in her shack on the edge of the lake stole the hearts of so many people who read our last report. And what a joy this story has turned out to be. The only thing she had really wanted was to have her hearing back and so, after we left last time, Kalu had taken her to the ENT doctor and got a hearing aid prescription and we then contacted Siemens. Enormous thanks go to Sarah Banks from Siemens, who spent weeks finally tracking down the discontinued hearing aid in their Singapore office; she then donated it plus spare batteries, etc and it arrived just 3 days before we left for our trip!



When we arrived to collect Blossom to take her to the ENT doctor, she was wearing her best clothes including a tiny black bra and a beautiful pashmina from Pickett in Burlington Arcade, which Tory had taken her the day before as a gift - despite her circumstances, somehow she was immaculate.



Off we all went in the jeep to Hambantota where we understood we had a 4pm appointment with the ENT doctor. It was not to be. Despite that morning's phone call, he was not actually at the surgery that day and we discovered that we were no. 39 in the queue to see another doctor. Who didn't know how to fit the aid. We spent several hours scouring around in the incredible heat and humidity for another doctor then found one back in Tissa who, using the instructions sent by

Siemens, managed to fit it.

Blossom's hearing is restored thanks to Sarah Banks at Siemens. We have taught her how to adjust the aid and switch it off when she's not using it to conserve batteries. Kalu will keep a check on her. She was ecstatic. Tearful, bowing over and over again, with her hands clasped and blessing us, she assured us that we would be protected in our next lives even from animals! We left her listening to the birds for the first time in so many years, in her isolation on the banks of the tank. The only thing she now wants is to come to England!! What we really want is to build her a house but we would need £2,500, which we just don't have at present.

### **Debarahela School**

The children who we met last trip and the new ones who were intrigued by these new strangers turning up in the middle of the school day greeted us with great joy. Jon had visited earlier in the year and equipped them all with new shoes and uniforms so we took treats of flavoured milk drinks and biscuits.

Alex Smith had again donated pens, pencils and other school materials so we presented a good selection of items to this school. We had taken out 2 huge bags of other treats for children – balloons, bubbles, glowsticks, calendars depicting golden puppies and kittens, which they all absolutely adore over there.



The children with their treats of mango flavoured milk and chocolate biscuits



The bubbles were a huge success despite their initial fear of them – overcome once we showed them how to 'catch' and burst them! They absolutely loved the glowstick bracelets too and we taught them where Sri Lanka and England are in the world, with the use of the maps donated by National Geographic.

Tory shows them England and Sri Lanka thanks to National Geographic magazine

The garden we planted is quite unbelievable – banana trees 10 feet tall, trees already bearing fruit, all immaculately kept by Sunil, the caretaker and his wife.

Fiona Vandersluys had donated to our fund in honour of her mother who died recently and now Sunil is planting passion fruit around the protective wire fencing to commemorate her. We had promised Sunil a bicycle if he maintained the garden and so took him off to our usual shop where he proudly waited for more than 2 hours while they prepared his chosen



gift. It was apparent that his wife had also worked very hard to maintain the garden and we bought her a sewing machine as she had originally worked as a machinist – another business set up. We also bought hoses and tools to maintain the garden and have ordered 4 benches to enable to staff and children to work there in the shade. As a parting gift to us, Hetti presented us with an engraved plaque for ‘Neil’s garden’, which will be installed very soon.

Can you believe that this was only planted last October!!!

### **Other Follow-up Cases**

The 16-year-old girl from the 2 families living in the paddy fields near the tank did not, after all, want to leave home and be found a job – family pressure we think. We had looked after them well last time and felt no need to go back this time – the same with the disabled boy’s family who Jon had also visited on a previous visit. We visited the family who were found by Jon living on the street – the father is still drinking Arak but we built their house and have a responsibility to the children so we again took basic foodstuffs and will all continue to do this.



### **Old Couple in Kirinda Fishing Village**

Kirinda was where Yala Fund started and we had visited the old couple last time and taken basic foodstuffs parcel. We took the same this time but were delighted when we arrived to find that their son had managed to sell a parcel of land and build them a house. We will continue to keep an eye on this couple in the future and just supply them with food.

The wonderful old man outside his new house

– his wife had gone down to the river to do the washing

### **Rathna, the Shop Boy**

There have been some problems with Rathna due to the responsibility he had to take on to support his family at the age of only 17. He extended credit to too many of his neighbours and ran into cash problems – but Lanka Perera, who runs the Sith Sevana home, is now overseeing this project and the shop is up and running again.

### **Sith Sevana**

Rathna's sister, Kumari, is the little girl at Sith Sevana Home for Mentally Handicapped Children who lost her mind when her father slit her mother's throat in front of her a couple of years ago. When we went last time, she sang and danced for us and there were high hopes of rehabilitation some time in the future. Tragically, she went home to the family for their New Year in April but has come back into the Home very much regressed. It is not known exactly what has happened but it's thought that going back into the family has brought back all the horror. Amazingly, she recognized me and clung to me during the entire visit repeating 'I love you' over and over again. Clearly in desperate need of affection. We presented Lanka Perera with a cheque for nearly £2,000 donated specifically by Asoka Kodikara from Chambers Travel, Karen Mordaunt from Prudential and Tory to support these little girls. We also took flavoured milk and biscuits for all the children, boys and girls, and we all had a party! The house is immaculate with beautiful well-kept gardens tended by Mr Perera and some of the children themselves. Most of these children will never leave and are, of course, becoming adults so there is a project now to raise funds to set up a workshop where they can be taught to make saleable items to maintain themselves.

Mr Perera also runs an outreach programme – some disabled children whose families are able with help to support them and some children who are too uncontrollable to be taken care of in the home. Yala Fund has already donated £2,500 towards this programme and we went to visit two of the families.



First there was Amalie, a 20 year old mentally disabled girl, who had gone down to the river and been raped, resulting in a baby. She was obsessed with this naked baby but is unable to take care of it so her mother has had to give up work to take care of both of them. She happily handed him over to Mr Perera when we arrived but was anxiously dragging Tory and me to coo over him too. An extremely poor family, supported by Sith Sevana for food and medication - we bought them both clothes and basic foods.

Amalie and her treasured baby

Then there was Pryanthi – actually 35 years old but appears so childlike as she is severely physically disabled by cerebral palsy and unable to stand or take care of herself in any way- she drags herself around on a dirt floor. She had been raped in her own home, there

are no doors, and given birth to a child 10 years ago, the child had been taken away when was taken into a nunnery; 5 years ago it happened again, again in her own home, but her sister has been able to take on the child this time.

Prayanthi clearly understands what is going on around her – very much a “My Left Foot” scenario – she was trying to ask us for clothes and earrings and food. Tory immediately decided to give her many of the clothes she had taken out there. There was a very tiny kitten lying in the dirt, should have still been with its mother and clearly not long for this world, but she had been trying to feed it some sort of milk from part of a coconut shell. Again, the mother has given up work to take care of her daughter. Prayanthi sleeps on the



floor – no furniture – so we bought them mattresses, bedding, 2 plastic chairs, basic foods, clothes and some cheap fun jewellery. We also bought her a teddy bear as she is clearly a nurturer – a doll would have been inappropriate of course.

We were all 3 deeply distressed for several hours by these 2 visits, the worst cases we had come across yet. Thank god for the bottle of gin we had stashed at the hotel.

Prayanthi – a severely disabled body but a very able mind

Alex Smith and her friends have already offered to collect children’s clothes and toys and so we are now investigating the costs of sending over a shipment to Sith Sevana for use in the home and in the outreach programme. If anybody knows of any courier company who might be able to help we will be eternally grateful otherwise we will have to pay for this personally. We have decided that we really want to focus on this project – we can reach dozens of families living in dreadful circumstances – already we have a list of new families in need of help for which we are now awaiting full details. We also bought Mr Perara a computer and printer – he has been working on 2 manual typewriters, which the V&A Museum would probably be proud to own! He had been given a 2<sup>nd</sup> hand computer, which didn’t work despite the money he had spent on it.

### **And so to the new cases.**

We bought bicycles for a couple of boys who were walking miles to school. We devised a simple test – with parental approval - jump in the jeep and show us where your school is – they loved the ride and we got the proof. Sujith’s father works away from home taking care of cows and only comes home once a month – they are very poor and the mother makes a living from a roadside ‘shop’ so we bought her a



kerosene cooker so she can cook hoppas to passers-by.

Sujith's mother's roadside shop where she is now making and selling hoppas



Sujith so desperately wanted a BLUE bike – you should have seen his face when we turned up with it in the jeep a couple of days later.

Jayanthi's father works away from home too in a saltpan – also very poor and dependent on the mother – a shiny black bike changed HIS life.



Just along the road we met the young daughter of Samadasa, whose wife was killed in the tsunami and for whom Yala Fund had built a house a couple of years ago – she proudly told us how she is now top of her school – but when we asked her if she would like a bicycle to get her to school said she didn't walk far and didn't need it.



We asked her if there was anything she wanted – books, dictionary – but she said she had everything she could need. Lovely girl. The good news is that the mother's sister now lives with the father – better than a stranger for a stepmother.

Our clever girl is on the left

### **The Koholankala Family**

The mother of this family had watched the tsunami from Hambantota, and then asked her fisherman husband promise to give up the sea - he had lost all his nets and equipment in the tsunami so he now works as a labourer in the paddy fields. We believe they also lost their house in the tsunami as various NGO's had given them money towards building a new house - they had handmade the bricks themselves and got it up to basic structure stage but the money had dried up so our builder Neil has now completed the job.



Father comes home from working in the paddy fields

The walls of the shack they currently live in are infested with snakes – although the house is now complete, they won't actually move in until a full-moon auspicious date later this month, so this family of 5 still all sleep in an old bed in the old house. The middle daughter, Chalani, had drawn some beautiful pictures for Jon, one of elephants, which he gave to me, so we took her charcoal pencils from home. We bought them beds, mattresses, bedding and a locking cupboard –and 2 blouses for the mother who clearly spends their little available money on her children not herself. They are a truly lovely and hard-working family.

### **Tikirisina Montessori School**

A lovely little school in a deeply rural area -the school is open to the elements and the



dogs come in at night and make a mess everywhere. They had no toys other than clay bricks and there was no desk or chair for the teacher. The children are all very disciplined and beautifully dressed. We bought the desk, chair and a locking cupboard; a large selection of toys from stuffed animals, musical instruments, building bricks, a radio cassette player and cassettes to the highly popular animal face masks; and ordered the grilles for the windows which will be handmade and will

take about a month. Lali, the teacher, has asked for a bell and a First Aid box which we will try to supply although neither is available in that area – she has also asked for a

moped as she is a single girl and travels 8km each way to school and back so we are looking into it. We took bubbles to all the children – none of them had ever seen them before.



We decided to take them on safari to the beach a few miles away a couple of days later as a never-before treat. So on Thursday morning the 3 jeeps congregated in the centre of Tissa to collect the furniture we had ordered to deliver to the school at the same time. After a half hour delay caused by the jeeps blocking traffic outside the furniture depot resulting in one driver having his licence confiscated – a great deal of plea-bargaining went on to get it restored – we finally turned up with the furniture, milk drinks and

biscuits on board – we were greeted by the group of 18 children, immaculately clean in their white uniforms, each with a folded hankie pinned to their chests, and singing – Tory and I were presented with flowers – then we loaded them all up and headed to the beach.



The convoy arrives at the beach on a hot sunny day. We brought milk and biscuits; the mothers brought tiny delicious bananas.

These children are too young to know about the tsunami – their mothers certainly are not.

Tory ran beach games with the football we took out there and balls we had bought, organised English and Sinhalese singing to the cassettes we bought and generally ran herself into exhaustion. We handed out the drinks and biscuits, many of which were tucked by the children into their uniform pockets – in that heat – you can imagine. After a couple of hours we actually had the mothers paddling in the sea with the kids – quite a breakthrough with their history. Think about the chocolate biscuits in the shirt pockets..... This was a wonderful treat, which cost less than £50, and we will do something similar with different schools each time we go.



The first jeep heads for home

### **Somagi Montessori School**

This is on the same road as Tikirissina but a few miles further on. These are tsunami families who were moved inland after the disaster - the school has been well supported by other charities because of their circumstances but they have never been given toys! The teacher here is very keen on them learning singing and dancing so we took them the same collection as the other school plus the cassette radio player and cassettes – all delivered on the same jeeps we hired for the children's safari.

### **Kumudumali Family**

Kumudumali is a little girl of 13 with diabetes whose expensive medication is part-funded by Yala Fund, as it is only available by private prescription – she lives with her family behind the Debarahela School and is a great favourite of Jon's. We have never visited this family before but Jon is building them a house as 6 of them were living in a shocking mud shelter with 1 bed for all, no windows, no toilet, leaking roof. He asked us to visit to look at installing electricity and buying furniture. On arrival at our hotel in Tissa, Kalu had met us with the story of a little girl living opposite this family who had died the day before of epilepsy – the family had asked if we would pay the funeral expenses. We had to refuse – we would have set a precedent and every family hearing about this would have gone to Kalu for help. And we knew that the prices of everything needed would have rocketed once they knew that a charity was picking up the bills. A tough decision but a necessary one. What I only discovered yesterday is that each village has a funeral fund, which we could have contributed to without creating these problems so he will deal with this next week when he is there.

The house was not completed so furniture will wait. The quote we have received for electricity for 5 houses was for wiring only – we were told that the electricity board would

only quote for supply once the wiring is completed! Potentially a bottomless pit, so Jon will deal with it next week. We took no photos here because of the recent death of the little girl whose funeral had taken place the day before.

### **Kumudumi the Musical Girl -**

Anna Reavey, my English friend who lives in Greece, donated money, which she wanted, spent on education if possible so we looked for the best candidate. We came across a 16 year old who is a gifted musician – especially violin and flute. She has just gained highest marks in her ‘O-levels’ and is now working towards her ‘A’s’ in music and social science– with the ambition of studying music at Colombo University of Music and going on to teach. All this would be achievable if she had her own instruments so not reliant on those at her school so we chose to buy her the violin and flute – these could not be purchased anywhere in the area but Hetti knew of a music shop many miles away on our route back to Colombo.



Kumudumi with her family – she is on the left.

We have sent messages to Kumudumi that we have bought them as promised but Hetti cannot deliver until he next has a tour down south, which may not be until July. Jon cannot deliver as he gets around on a motorbike. A long wait but perhaps something unexpected may come up for Hetti in the meantime. Later on we will also set up a standing order to pay for extra lessons for her if she needs help.



Sitting in the jeep while we discussed her schooling.

This is again something we want to actively invest in for the future – monthly support for gifted children who need extra education. Yala Fund has already set up support of £10-15 per month for children to attend University or to learn English – the tuition is free but they need money for lodging, buses fares to and from Colombo, books etc. We were told of social engineering going on in Sri Lanka

– children being deprived of sufficient education in daily school so being forced to go without basic essentials to pay for extra expensive Sunday schooling to enable them to pass their exams. Often run by the same teachers. We visited one of these schools and the shiny teachers’ cars in the drive spoke volumes. The poorer families cannot of course

afford to do this – the children fail their exams, thereby creating a pool of cheap labour for the future. This may or may not be true of course!! But we will try to raise funds to support the gifted kids.

### **Our Last Afternoon**

And then it was our turn for a treat. Yala National Park has just re-opened one section after months of closure due to the terrorist activity there. It was too good an opportunity to miss so we went off on a half-day safari looking for leopards. We were warned that people spend days without success – somebody was smiling down on us as we first found a teenage boy leopard – and a few minutes later found his mum hanging in a tree waiting to have her photo taken. Both of them highly photogenic! Hetti has developed a keen interest in wildlife photography and is planning a series of 6 postcards with a percentage of sales going to Yala Fund.

Judging by his leopard photos I don't think we will have any trouble selling them. It was a truly magical afternoon – not only the leopards but also wild elephants, monkeys, water buffalo, wild boar, hyenas, crocs and the most incredible birds. Kalu has a well-deserved reputation as an excellent leopard tracker – anybody fancy a safari?



An elephant in the wild

And then it was the day-long drive back to Negombo – we met Mr Perara of Sith Sevana in Tissa so he could collect the food boxes, furniture and clothes for Pryanthi and Amali, the outreach programme girls, then accompanied us to Hambantota where we purchased his computer and printer then parted company. A few hours further on we got to the music shop and bought the violin and flute – and Hetti bought his family a guitar.

We stayed the night at The Beach hotel again – where the hotel ironworker made Tory a template of the most amazing light fittings that we had seen last October and had been trying to source – she paid the enormous sum of £2 for it – more than he asked for to cover the cost of the metal. And, despite being about 5" long, we wrapped it in newspaper and an old water bottle to protect the pointy end it actually made it home.

It was when we arrived at Negombo and were able to access news again that we discovered the full tragedy of Myanmar – the count had risen to 22,000, this was of course followed quickly by the earthquake in China – we had been so close to two appalling disasters.



## **Between the trips**

A few weeks before we left on the trip, The Times had published an update on Yala Fund, written by Jon, and I was contacted by Melvyn Hodges of The Royal Mail. They have donated 10,000 bicycles in the last 8 years to African countries but, having read our website, Melvyn has offered to help us by donating 300 bicycles and perhaps helping in other ways too. He says they are an organisation of 200,000 employees with a very robust charitable ethos so hopes there is a lot they can do to help. We are currently investigating shipping costs which we hope won't be prohibitive and discussing other possibilities with him.

Back in April I had been invited to do a broadcast on Barnet Hospital Radio and was delighted to receive over £100 as a result. Tory has acquired a large collection of fine art photographic prints from her friend, Stacey Bogey, a well-known New York photographer. Tory's husband, Murray, has stood the shipping costs through his company, The TAG Group, and we are planning a sale at the Independent Photographer's Gallery in Battle in Sussex in the near future. Many friends have donated masses of stuff for car boot sales – unfortunately the weather before we went deprived us of any opportunity of car booting but we will keep trying. We were delighted to be able to sell some photographic equipment given to us by friends Fred and Ena Docker – thought to be of no real value – for £78!

And so it goes on. We will continue to do our best to raise funds – small and large donations are all equally valuable - and plan our next trip for probably early next year – it's very expensive as we of course continue to pay all our own flights, travel, hotels etc ourselves. Jon will be down there in the meantime and our friend Kalu will keep an eye open on everybody in the meantime – Hetti too when he is down that way on his bird-watching tours.

There are too many people to say a personal thank you to but you know who you are and we are incredibly grateful for your support.