



**Happy kids is the test of a good holiday**

#### Why Sri Lanka?

With so many tropical islands to choose from, what made us pick Sri Lanka? For the variety more than anything. On our journey around the island we marveled at ancient palaces, snorkeled on coral reefs, watched great herds of elephants and strolled barefoot on tropical beaches. Few places offer so much in such a manageable area.

Then there was a sense of passing things on to the next generation. In the years BC (before children), my wife and I travelled widely in India and Africa, and we hoped to share a similar experience with the kids - aged 12 and 15 - but without the tears or fears. What we wanted was easy travel, good-value accommodation and no hassle, and Sri Lanka ticked all the boxes.

#### First steps in Negombo

The children were a little unsure what to expect, but it was in Negombo, just north of the capital Colombo, that they had their first rickshaw ride, their first taste of a genuine, at-source South

Asian curry and their first sight of the Indian Ocean. It was wonderful to experience travel in the developing world through the eyes of our (very first-world) children. Days were filled with questions: 'Dad, why does the rickshaw have no seatbelts?' and 'Dad, why are there cows in the road?'

Negombo served up an education in Sri Lankan history as well. European powers have influenced Sri Lanka for 500 years, and in colonial times, the British filled the island with railways, the Portuguese built the churches and the Dutch, of course, built the Hamilton canal - which is still in use connecting Puttalam to Colombo. In seemed only appropriate to take a boat ride along this historic waterway depositing us at the unmistakably European St Mary's Church, one of the many that give this city its 'Little Rome' moniker.

#### Heading up-country

Journeying inland and farther back in time, our next stop was the complex of Buddhist cave temples at Dambulla, where natural caverns were filled with statues of the Buddha over many centuries,



**Dambulla's monumental reclining Buddha**

as local kings attempted to out-perform their predecessors with increasingly large and elaborate figures of the great teacher. Most impressive of all was Dambulla's gigantic reclining Buddha, where just the statue's toes were larger than a 12-year-old boy's head. We know because he checked. It was very rewarding to see our own enthusiasm for history and culture being picked up by our children.

#### Cultural triangle

The countryside around Dambulla is dotted with an abundance of temples and historic sites, hence its nickname of the Cultural Triangle. But the key to success for family travel, as every parent knows, is to not be too ambitious. Experience had taught us to focus on just a few places, rather than risk exhausting young minds and bodies by trying to see everything (something that only really works in Disneyland).

Rather than line up a string of temple tours, we opted for one more stab at history in Sigiriya, a vast ruined palace on a towering rock, soaring above the surrounding plains. It's a Sri Lankan icon,



**The rocky outcrop of Sigiriya soars above the plain**