

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 17 September 2006 11:59  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka

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Pupil/Staff update.....Arrived in Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka after a 11 hour flight, broken with a three hour halt in Doha airport in Qatar. Qatar Airlines were wonderful....the plane was virtually empty so plenty of space to chill out....certainly not like easyjet!

Route was very interesting...crossing eastern Turkey.....hundreds of miles with no evidence of human habitation....just brown hills. The route then took us south , skirting Iraq and travelling across Iran....strange to think what was going on 40,000 feet below.We approached Doha across the Persian Gulf, the night sky lit up by the large number of oil rigs burning off the excess gas....very spectacular....wonder how much a gallon of unleaded is there?

Final leg overnight was rather bumpy to say the least.....temperature in Doha was 32c degrees at 8.00 in the evening, and huge thunder clouds were building up in the east.

Colombo airport at 7.45 local time....no idea body time, but could do with a shower. Journey into the city took about 45 minutes. Very much a Less Economically Developed Country. Plenty of advertising showing western products, but most would be way beyond the means of ordinary people people.

Main road into the city lined with a string of small one room shops...most quite dodgy looking, selling everything you can imagine; used car parts, freshly slaughtered meat, clothing,pots, fast food, etc.....and beggars and scrawny looking dogs everywhere....good job I had the anti-rabies jab afterall.

Even though it is a Sunday...a normal work day here ...children going to school....and everywhere the motorised scooter taxis, driven at great speed and breaking all the rules of Health and Safety;saying that I tried one and was good fun.

Lots of roadside shrines ....Christian and Buddhist. As you approach the city centre and in view of the downtown area, you pass real shanty town area, no more that bits of metal nailed together.

The hotel here is of western standards, and quite a contrast to what we had passed through from the airport. I only have two nights here before I head off towards the east of the island.

There are soldiers everywhere. Peace talks have recommenced between the Government and the Tamil Tiger separatist group, but there have been a number of violent attacks recently on military targets. Roadblocks all the way in from the airport!

Walk along the seafront facing the Indian Ocean; sounds wonderful but in reality the sea here is quite dirty...noone actually bathing. As I walked along thre sea wall I could see why; warning notices were up because of dangerous currents; what put me off was the raw sewage running across the beach, and all the litter washed up with the tide.

At this time of year, as the monsoon arives, thunderstorms build up each day. Humidity is amazing...approaching 90%....which means probably three shirts a day, two showers , and regular sessions with the antiperspirant. Will be interesting what it is like away from the capital and out into the coutryside.

The group of ten of us are due to have a reception with trhe government officials this evening. They are still not happy that I have made separate arrangements to visit our link school instead of staying in the capital at the selected private schools they have chosen. They have tried hard to get me to change my plans , but there is no way after coming all this way , and after all we have done for our link school that I am not going to get there. It will be interesting what they say to me this evening....may be banished to a table on my own....whatever!

Tomorrow we have briefing meeting for most of the day about the education system in Sri Lanka, and what we should be looking for with our link visits.

Really excited about the trip across the country. All the other Headteachers are envious and wish they were also coming.

Best wishes to everyone.....time for another shower!! IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 18 September 2006 08:41  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka....Monday Sept 18th..Part 1

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Pupil/Staff update.....email system is a little temperamental so i will have to send separate short messages to guarantee they get through.  
We met the Representatives from the British Council last night to finalise details of the link school visits. Everything seems to be in place which is reassuring. I was expecting a grilling about going off to our link school in the village of Panama; however , when talking to one of their reps here it seems....hard to believe .....that they had been informed that for four days I was actually going to Panama ,as in Central America!!!!!!!!!!!! ..wow!....Our village school is a very small place which, I can only assume was unknown the the British Council. Seems to explain why they were not happy for me to be away...how silly.

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 18 September 2006 08:55  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka Monday 18th...Part 2

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Pupil/Staff update.....Spent most of the day in meetings at the hotel with people from the Education Ministry and Headteachers of the host schools here in Colombo. Very interesting.....education is free to all pupils..that means the government pays for the school uniform..which is good news. the bad news is they also supply the uniform, which is the same in every state school in the country.....white dresses for all girls of all ages. Boys white shirts and white shorts (it is hot here remember) although some can wear navy blue shorts! No problem with fitted shirts and bear midriiffs here. Looking forward to seeing if the smart city schools look like a John Travolta convention with all these boys dressed in white !  
The state provides all pupils with a text book for each year group...one book, covering all subjects, about the size of a large yellow pages, and pupils work from this in every subject. Teachers have no control over which school they teach; they can be sent by the government to any school in the country. School year runs January to January. Traditionally the first week of a new year is given over to cleaning and painting the school for the coming year...all pupils and staff participate!  
Tomorrow I meet up with the charity group to take me to Panama..village not country! Best wishes to everyone IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 19 September 2006 02:48  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka Update... Early Tuesday

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Pupils/Staff.....Up early to see rest off group off to their school visits. School starts at 7.30 so they were away at 7.00. Heavy rain during the night has raised the humidity considerably...could be a three shower day. Went for a walk during the rush hour. ....very noisy as seen to sound car horns all the time. Everywhere are little motorised taxis...called Tuck-Tucks.....no more than a lawn mower engine and a simple seat open to the traffic.

What is strange , given Colombo is on the coast , is that there are no seagulls around. Perhaps they don't live in these latitudes. The city is full of large black crows , which roost in large numbers on trees....looks like a scene out of a Hitchcock movie!

When I was out ,I saw what seemed to be large amounts of dried blood on the pavements.....in really it is the juice of the Betel nut, which is chewed as a snack by many people and generates bright red juice which they seem to spit everywhere!

You almost start to get used to seeing soldiers with guns on every corner. In a sense it is reassuring...they are all very friendly and smile when you go passed...you cant forget there is a war in this country; very difficult to take photographs as most things seem to be regarded as sensitive for security...when the guy with the machine gun says no photographs you don't argue! IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 19 September 2006 14:32  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka Update... Tuesday Evening

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Pupil/Staff update.....I am sending this from a very run down Internet cafe in the old city of Kandy, which lies about 125 kms inland from Colombo. I said farewell to the group this morning and was met by my hosts from the charity. Despite another attack in the east of the country they assure me things will be fine and they are happy to travel to Panama.

The journey to Kandy took 5 hours...the roads are packed with all sorts of vehicles.The good news is they travel slowly....the bad news is this seems to give all drivers the confidence to overtake where and when they want; blind bends, no problem!

Lunch was fresh pineapple and a coconut , in roadside stand in the middle of no-where. Very aware that no one would know exactly where I was! . People are so friendly, but now away from the capital starting to see real poverty.

Stopped on journey at the elephant orphanage...cute or what. Then on up to the hill town of Kandy.

My guide , who is a high profile business man arranged a special visit to the inner shrine of the famous Buddhist temple which contains a relic of the lord Buddha. Foreigners usually not allowed ....but a mention of Astley was enough. Really very moving.

Accommodation tonight is along the lines of Milkhope with mosquitoes....good job I brought my own net.

Tomorrow , up to leave at 6.00am for the 7 hour drive to Panama. Very aware that I am the racial minority as there will be no foreigners there.

Off for a shower as this place is like a sauna and I stink like a beast. Unsure when I will get to another computer for a fee days, Best wishes ...!GK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 20 September 2006 15:23  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka..Wednesday evening Part 1

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Pupil/Staff update.....There are some days when it is ...challenging to be a Headteacher. There are other days when it is the best job in the world. Today I have experienced both emotions.....

A group of six of us left the safety and civilisation of Kandy this morning to travel overland to the south east coast to visit our link school in Panama. We departed at 6.15 this morning and arrived back at 8.00 this evening.

We had contacted the Panama area yesterday to see if it would be safe to travel. A few days ago there was a massacre of Muslims about 5 miles from Panama. Rioting followed, but we had been reassured that it should be safe to travel. We made the decision to try....given we were accompanied by Rev Dhammananda, the Buddhist monk who heads up the charity. He is extremely well known and respected. The other reason for trying to get there was because the group wanted the children of Panama to meet me and to thank us....Astley ..for all we have done for them.

At 2,00pm we contacted Panama, which by that time was only 50 miles away, to see if it was safe. We were told that there had been fresh shootings, and more deaths. The police had declared a curfew and all roads were closed for indefinite period.....There was only one realistic decision we could make in the circumstances , and that was to turn back.

You can understand my emotions in having to do this given how far we had travelled . The pupils of Panama were planning some formal presentation to me for tomorrow.....but none of us could sensibly proceed given the current situation....i did my best.....however....see part 2,,,,,,,,,,,,,IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 20 September 2006 15:39  
**Subject:** Cunning Plan

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Part 2.....The plan always had been to stop off on the journey to Panama to visit some other rural schools: what I didn't realise was that these schools were also in receipt of some of the materials you all collected. So many pens, books etc were sent our that the priest decided to spread them around some other schools in this extremely poor area which would benefit.

What I didn't realise as we drove in to the schools was that a presentation had been planned to greet me and to say thankyou for our donations.

Hopefully some of this will be recorded on video for you to see; sufficient to say , for once in my life I was actually speechless....hard to believe I know....to be treated in such a manner by children from the poorest families in the country....homes without electricity, often with just soil floors.....and to have memorised a speech in very good english.....I am not too proud to say that at more than one stage as the pupils showed me with pride their classrooms , which even by Sri Lankan standards are awful, I was in tears. At one stage they started coming up to me, probably the first foreigner they had been in contact with, to request particular books or materials.....none of which were extravagant. The whole experience and the associated emotions will stay with me for a long time. Despite not getting to Panama, Ive met pupils from two schools who already have a far better chance of succeeding at school due to your generosity,,,,,,,,,,,,,wow!.....quite a day....IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 21 September 2006 15:36  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka Thursday

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Pupil/staff update.....Pretty shattered still after yesterday, but my hosts want me to see as much as possible in a short time....so up at 7.00, fighting my way out of the mosquito net to assess the damage from last night!

The guest house here is pretty basic by western standards...windows have to be barred close to keep the wild monkeys out!

I managed to arrange an extra visit to a school in Kandy today. It is the top girls school...4000!!!...girls from the age of 5 years to 18 years...all immaculate in white uniform , all friendly and smiling ...and all stunning!!

Meeting with the Principal for about an hour then an extensive tour of the school. Still not well equipped by our standards , but far better than yesterday....50 girls to a class, most lessons in the same room, at the same desk all day.....and extremely hot ..Later in the day had a meeting with the charity group to discuss future projects. Every school I have visited wants us to help them.....

Its now 9.30 and I am shattered. I need to go and shower , and see in which direction the line of ants are moving across the floor, then wrestle with the mosquito net.....Best wishes...IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 24 September 2006 12:57  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka update....Sunday

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Pupils/staff.....I have at last met up with the rest of the group of Headteachers. Yesterday, before leaving the city of Kandy, to join the rest of the group in the hill country, I had a final meeting with members of the charity group.

The Buddhist priest, Rev Dhammananda had arranged for someone to transport a present for Astley, to be brought right across the island...a very difficult trip as I know, from the pupils and staff in Panama ,to thank us for our support to their community....an inscribed shield and a plate with an inscription ....I will let you all see it when I return, but it was really moving when you think of all that community has gone through .... how little they have yet they had organised this.

On then for another very long journey , travelling from the steamy heat of the lowlands up to the cool of 5000ft above sea level and the tea plantations. Looks very picturesque but the work is incredibly hard...the women have to pick 17 kilos of leaves each day before they can finish work and get paid...regardless of the weather.

Such were the change of conditions at that altitude that there was an open fire in the hotel...and a hot water bottle was provided...Sri Lankan ideas of cold are not the same as Northumberland.

Today we have returned to Colombo in preparation for tomorrows last round of school visits. I suspect the contrast with country schools will be considerable.

And if you think it is sunny all the time.....always hot, generally overcast although last few days have been very sunny.....today travelled back through monsoonal rain, avoiding flooding, cattle that are free to wander across the road, pedestrians who do their own thing, and traffic that comes at you in all directions.....its never boring! Looking forward to seeing you all soon.....IGK

**From:** I G Knight  
**Date:** 25 September 2006 08:55  
**Subject:** Sri Lanka update....last one!

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Pupils /Staff.....Monday. Last full day here and final round of school visits. Spend the day in a very large state school ..all girl with 3500 pupils. We arrived at the start of the school day at 7.30 am to witness a prize giving ceremony...3500 pupils sat out of doors under the trees for over an hour whilst prizes were awarded for a variety of sporting achievements. This is a selective school with high achievers. The whole event was organised and run by the student prefects. The staff were there as guests. Students supervised the tutor groups as they sat and listened to the speeches...all delivered unscripted by pupils to an audience, including adults , of nearly 4000. I was asked to present some of the prizes which was really good of them...all at the initiative of the prefects.

We spent the rest of the day visiting lessons and talking with students and staff. Facilities are no way near what we have , but much different to the poor country areas. This school actually had glass in some of the windows and ceiling fans. Still over 40 students per class. At lesson change the group follows the class leader in single file to the next lesson. If the teacher is absent a prefect will come to organise the work.

The system is so different because the culture is different so it would be wrong to say our school system is better or worse. Massive city schools , with a single sex population from the age of 5 to 18 years seems to be the preferred model here ..and the academic results are good....but on what are they missing out ; what have we lost in terms of family values and traditional culture. The kids have very little compared with Britain but they are universally happy and friendly. We meet with the British Council representatives this evening and we have a group debriefing tomorrow before flying home. Stop over in Qatar again in middle of the night, Gatwick 7.00am Wednesday, Newcastle Airport by 1.30.pm.....bed by 2.15! Hopefully see you in school Thursday morning. Off now to try to get a few presents. Weight allowance on plane only 20 kilos so will have to leave some gear here...quite interested with the elephant dung writing paper!  
IGK