

# A simple abode

High in the little-explored Knuckles Range of Sri Lanka, a grassroots tourism project is helping to sustain and preserve the traditional ways of a dwindling village community.

**Jini Reddy** reports

**W**alking uphill in the pouring rain with leeches nipping at your ankles isn't an experience for the faint of heart, but it's a small price to pay for a visit to the remote mountain village of Walpolamulla – population: six – the site of an inspiring small-scale ecotourism venture in the Knuckles Range, a conservation area in central Sri Lanka.

A 155-square-kilometre wilderness of misty mountains – the highest peaks reach 1,900 metres – waterfalls and rivers, it contains five major forest formations and an astonishing variety of endemic flora and fauna. With more than 1,000 species of flowering plant, 100 species of bird, 75 species of reptile, plus wild boars, civets, toque monkeys, sambars and porcupines – not to mention the shy and elusive leopard – the Knuckles are a nature lover's paradise, although, with little in the way of infrastructure, one that isn't easy to explore.

But that just makes the journey to Walpolamulla all the more colourful. The eight-kilometre hike kicks off in Rathinda village, the last point that a vehicle can reach. And it's certainly a calorie burner, involving balancing on the bunds (embankments) of terraced rice fields, crossing a mountain river, snaking through a village of stone-walled houses, and then a sustained uphill slog through dense forest that intermittently clears to reveal sublime mountain scenery.

## KEEPING IT SIMPLE

The Abode Project (named after the village house where guests stay) was set up three years ago by local guide Sidantha Ananda Elikewela, who grew up trekking in the Knuckles. Witnessing first-hand how unregulated development was devastating the lives of locals in remote areas (there are around 60 inhabited villages in the Knuckles area), he decided to create a tourism venture that would promote traditional village life without damaging the inhabitants' quality of life or the natural environment. 'I wanted to bring people here who would appreciate witnessing a way of life that is dying out,' he says.

To keep it simple, he focused on a single community, choosing Walpolamulla, which he'd stumbled upon while hiking. 'I was impressed by its pristine environment and the hospitality of the villagers,' he tells me. 'We became good friends, but when I first put the idea to them, they were incredulous. They'd never seen foreigners and were used to people in the surrounding areas – who have electricity and television – ridiculing them for their old-fashioned ways. They couldn't understand why their world would be of interest to outsiders. But I explained: "The way you are living is of interest, and the people who will come to stay are my friends from Europe and Sri Lanka."'

All visitors are carefully vetted by UK-based independent tour operator Experience Sri Lanka, which arranges the visits. (Elikewela met and became friends with co-founder Tom Armstrong when the latter was based in Sri Lanka.) In order

**Below:** villager Wijerathna Medagedera (left) and local guide Sidantha Ananda Elikewela, founder of the Abode Project, enjoy the view over the Knuckles Range in central Sri Lanka







Luke Duggleby

to minimise the impact, numbers are limited: no more than eight to ten people stay each year.

'They come to absorb the way of life of the villagers, to enjoy the views and the fresh air, and to take hikes,' says Elikewela. The energetically inclined can embark on a tough five-hour trek through thick undergrowth and sometimes impassable rivers to a waterfall beneath 1,600-metre Kalupahana Peak. 'There is a beautiful 100-metre drop, and at the base there's a cave where we camp.'

The exchange is mutually enriching: hosts Wijerathna Medagedera and his wife Bisomeinke, 70 and 60 respectively, are paid a wage, and are stakeholders in the project. 'More than that, they enjoy welcoming people into their home and exchanging views with those who lead lives so vastly different from their own,' says Elikewela.

Subsistence farmers, the Medagederas cultivate paddy, which they supplement with *chena*, or shifting cultivation. With stone and mud walls, roof tiling and a floor of buffalo dung mixed with water and clay, their 75-year-old home is snug and spartan. There's a kitchen, the couple's bedroom – which doubles as storage space – a narrow corridor, and a small but comfortable guestroom, simply furnished with a bed, chair, candles and a trunkful of books. There are no facilities, no electricity and candles and a kerosene lamp provide the only light at night.

Currently, the venture brings in about 400,000 Sri Lankan rupees a year (around £2,000). About 15 per cent of the income generated goes to the

couple and a helper from Rathinda. 'It might not seem a lot of money, but to those who don't have easy access to hard cash, and who live in an ancient and remote village – Walpolamulla is believed to be more than 300 years old – it's a quite substantial sum,' says Elikewela.

A further 20 per cent goes towards visitor and administrative costs, and 15 per cent pays Elikewela's own wages. The balance goes into the Abode Trust, which is administered by Elikewela and Liverpoolian Susan Bennett, who visited the village in 2006 and has since returned three times.

The trust money is used for the benefit of the village as a whole. 'It's earmarked for medicines or improvements to the villagers homes, for provisions when crops fail, for lorries to take crops to the market in Matale, and to help the villagers when tourism is slow. The trust will also look after their welfare when they are too elderly to participate as hosts,' says Elikewela. Those in need in Rathinda and Atanwala also benefit, as there are close ties among the three villages.

'We don't want to expand or build more homes in Walpolamulla,' he continues. 'We just want to retain its character and charm. If anything, I would like to take the impact off it a little and replicate the idea in other remote villages in the Knuckles.'

#### LIFE IN THE KNUCKLES

When I arrive in Walpolamulla, wet, filthy and leech-infested, my hosts lead me to the nearby rock pool to bathe. Fed by a mountain stream –

**Opposite:** seventy-year-old Wijerathna sits inside his home eating lunch; **Below:** Wijerathna's wife, Bisomeinke, 65, cooks a meal over a clay oven in the kitchen. The village is without electricity or modern conveniences





## Village tourism

which, like 60 per cent of the streams in the Knuckles, feeds into the Mahaweli, Sri Lanka's longest river – the water is instantly reviving.

Back at the house, I warm myself by the clay hearth in the kitchen and am handed a mug of the toddy that had fortified me on the walk up here. Made from sap from the *kitul* palm tree, the strong, sweet-tasting drink contains eight to ten per cent alcohol and certainly packs a punch.

The couple only speak Sinhala, so Elikewela, who has brought me here, translates as we get acquainted. Bright-eyed, kind and gentle, they treat me like a daughter, tenderly cleaning my leech bites and making sure I'm comfortable and warm. Bisomeinke cooks dinner with a practised hand. Like all the meals here, it consists of the staple fare on which the couple themselves live: roti made from *kurakkan* (a grain similar to wheat), coconut rice, sambal and potato curry, with the additional treat of dried fish. It's simple, but delicious. After dinner, Wijerathna sings folk songs: a village tradition. There is no particular meter or intonation, but the joy with which he sings is clear.

My hosts, like all the villagers, are Buddhist, but have animist leanings that involve the worship of mountain gods and the trees. 'During our annual harvest ritual, a shaman comes to us

from Pitawala, south of the Knuckles,' Wijerathna explains. 'We make an altar out of coconut leaves and twigs by a stream, and prayers, rice-flour pancakes, and sweetmeats made from rice flour, coconut and *kitul* honey are offered to the deity in return for blessings for the following year's crops and protection from evil spirits.'

The couple tell me they're natural health practitioners: in the absence of a doctor, concoctions of herbs and other plant material are used as first aid. Common cures include heated coconut oil to treat migraines and oil extracted from the nuts of the *mee* tree for soothing wasp stings and joint inflammation.

The following morning, I inspect the couple's crops. The 16 hectares of paddy fields, ringed by mountains, are terraced and maintained using a basic rain-fed irrigation system of canals made with bunds fashioned from earth and rock. Water buffalo are used to plough the rich soil, which needs no fertiliser, herbicides or pesticides, and to thresh the paddy come harvest time in June.

Rice is exchanged in the village shop in Rathinda for provisions – potatoes, coconut, chillies, lentils and kerosene oil – or, if a lorry is available, sold in Matale's market. ('Local traders who come to Rathinda fleece the villagers,' says Elikewela.) Otherwise, baskets and fan-shaped

**Below left:** Panasala, 59, the nephew of Wijerathna and Bisomeinke, offers a prayer upon reaching the pass that leads down to the village;

**Below:** Bisomeinke sets out to collect buffalo dung to make a new floor for her kitchen;

**Bottom:** a storage hut in the village's *kurakkan* field. Known in the West as finger millet, *kurakkan* provides much-needed nutrition for poor communities throughout South Asia



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sieves made from rattan, ladles fashioned from coconut shells, and hardwood stools are sold to the neighbouring villages for small sums.

*Kurrakkan* is grown over 1.2 hectares on an adjoining plot. Less popular than wheat – delicious though the grain is – there is little demand for it in the market, so what isn't used is sold to villagers in neighbouring Atanwala and Rathinda, or even to guests.

Wild boar, porcupine and torque monkeys are a constant threat to the *kurrakkan* fields. To protect against the damage they can cause, the villagers build close-knit spiked fence systems from stumps and vines, and make traps from twigs and branches. When the crop starts to mature, my Abode hosts sleep in a hut in the fields to keep guard. 'If we hear any noises, we flash our torches, beat a tin can with a stick or kindle a fire,' says Wijerathna.

A graver threat – not only to the fields, but to the villagers themselves – comes in the form of marauding elephants. In July, following my visit, the elephants, believed to be part of a herd of 12, entered Walpolamulla in search of food. The eldest villager, Kapilaratne Banda, was gored in the leg and had to be treated at Matale hospital. The villagers reluctantly evacuated.

'Elephants have been seen in Walpolamulla before – theirs is a seasonal movement, and over the past eight years or so, they have been penetrating the boundaries of the Knuckles in July and August,' says Elikewela when I speak to him about it on the phone from London. 'A scarcity of food and water near their home, on the outskirts of Wasgamuwa National Park [north of the Knuckles] due to drought, is to blame, as is the damming of the Amban Ganga river on the northwest coast of Wasgamuwa, which has affected their jungle corridor. But this is the first time anyone has been injured.'

With the onset of the rains in the lowlands a few weeks later, the elephants retreat and the villagers are able to return. 'However, we need to think about safety measures; hiring elephant trackers to keep an eye on their movements is the obvious short-term solution,' says Elikewela. 'Still, we are optimistic that the Abode Project will carry on, to everyone's benefit.'



**Above:** paddyfields at Rathinda, the village at the start of the trek to Walpolamulla, where the Abode Project is located. Rice is the staple food of Sri Lanka, and paddies cover an area of 770,000 hectares – representing about a third of the island's cropland. The villagers of the Knuckles Range are subsistence farmers, and the country at large is all but self-sufficient in its rice production, providing 95 per cent of the rice requirements of its population of 20 million people



### Co-ordinates | Sri Lanka

#### When to visit

Sri Lanka has a tropical climate that is subject to two monsoon seasons: the Maha season (October–January) affects the north and east, and the Yala season (May–August) brings rain to the south, west and central highlands. The driest time in the hilly areas is December–March, although this

is also when most European tourists visit the island. Temperatures in the hills are somewhat cooler than on the coast.

#### How to get there

Sri Lankan Airlines ([www.srilankan.aero](http://www.srilankan.aero)) offers direct flights to Colombo from Heathrow, while several other

carriers operate flights via various airports en route.

#### Further information

For further details about the Abode Project, go to [www.theabodetrust.com](http://www.theabodetrust.com). To arrange a visit to the Abode, contact Experience Sri Lanka ([www.experiencesrilanka.com](http://www.experiencesrilanka.com), 0845 638 1415).