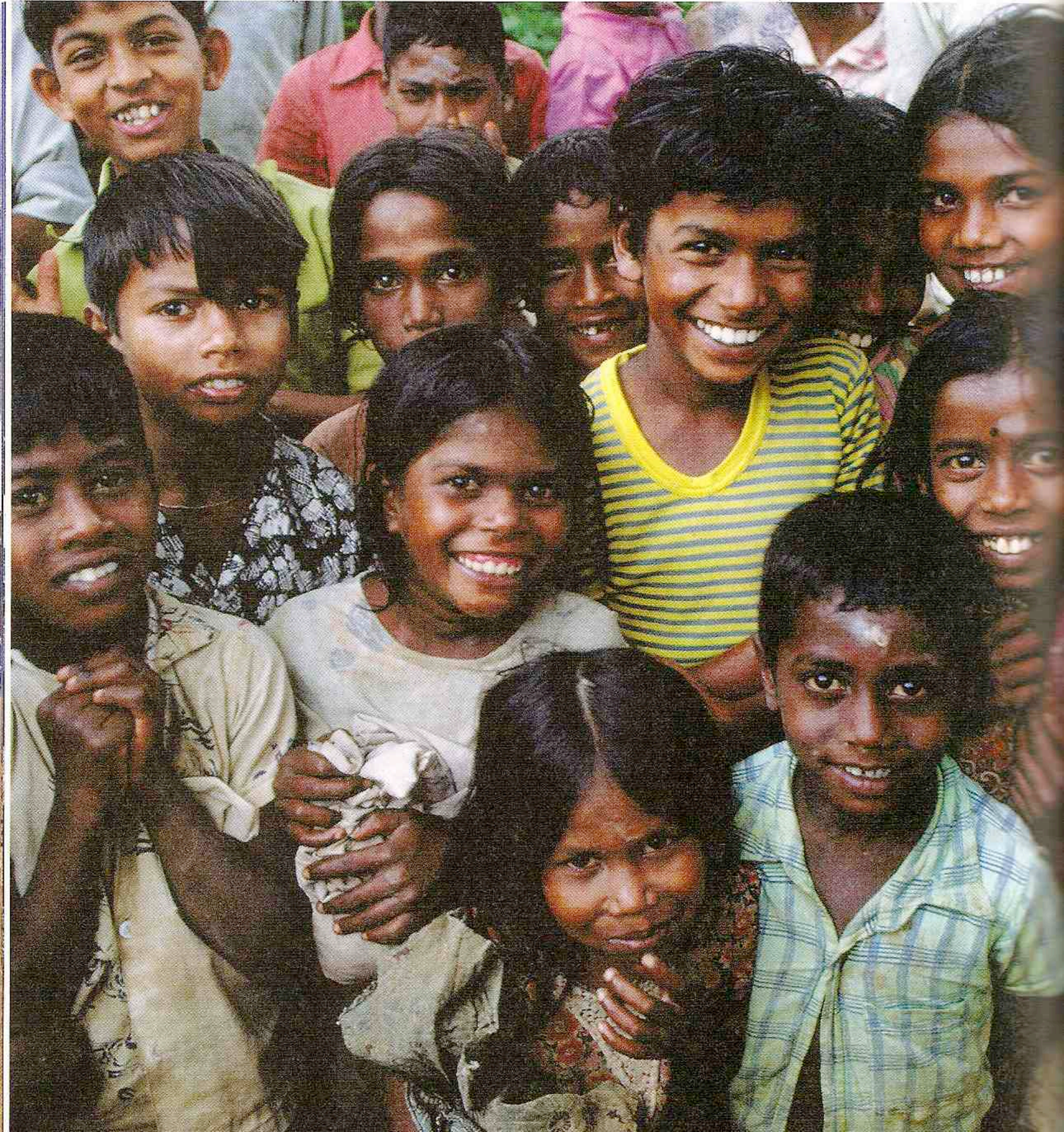


SRI LANKA ~ UNAWATUNA: HELPING OUT, POST-TSUNAMI

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WHEN TO GO

Sri Lanka is a year-round destination. Beset by two monsoons, in general (but with frequent exceptions), the southwest sees wet from May to August and the north and east from October to January. Inter-monsoonal downpours strike anywhere in October/November and May. The hill country is always cooler than the tropical coast.

GETTING THERE

Direct flights depart from Europe and throughout Asia. In-country transport is affordable and easy via train, bus or private/hired vehicle.

The contrast between the pristine pre-tsunami beach I first beheld and that same sandy cove four months later was striking. Gone was the practiced invulnerability of a sheltered vacationer's paradise at the southern bay of Unawatuna. Nothing was as it had been before much of the Resplendent Isle's seashore became a place of remembrance for the 30,000-plus lives lost on 26 December 2004.

However, I was in Unawatuna to join scores of people – locals and foreigners alike – labouring in cross-cultural teams to haul rubble from the shallows, gather debris from the beach. A commitment to home had inspired residents to overcome their losses, repair the damage. A burgeoning sense of responsibility had also moved many foreign travellers to do the right thing: put everything on hold, sometimes for months, and volunteer their energy and resources to change lives for the better, others' lives and their own. Travel had brought people together and crisis had united them. Cultural divides had been bridged by common cause. The guiding spirit of travel – to connect disparate communities – had found form.

As a writer living in Sri Lanka, I also volunteered my pen to a local NGO. However, some of the most heart-warming tales of traveller outreach came from the people for whom Sri Lanka was only a holiday haven, but who had taken the country and its citizens to heart and acted instantly to requite the kindness they had received.

Like Cynthia Palermo, an American film and television producer: 'I knew I had to do something, anything to help. I knew I could offer logistical and organisational support to any group willing to accept my assistance. Now that I've done it once, it will be the way I "relax" between shows and not just in Sri Lanka.'

Today, new tsunami recovery projects continue to be initiated as old ones are completed. New volunteers are always welcome. Responsible travellers remain active in Sri Lanka and, more and more, all around the world.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL CREDENTIALS

- **Disaster damages the land, leaving it littered, uncultivable, hazardous. Cleanups, structured restoration and culture-sensitive development help to put the land and its people back on the road to recovery.**
- **Some things cut across all cultures; little rewards more than the joy of a community that has made you feel at home in the village you helped resuscitate. Little tops the sense of accomplishment when a traumatised child smiles in the rediscovered safety of a school or hospital where you volunteer.**
- **In devastated areas, travellers and volunteers live in small guesthouses, eat at local restaurants and rely on other services suffering from the absence of regular business. It puts money directly into the hands of affected people and lifts their spirits.**