

Leg-Strong in Lanka

Travelling on Two Wheels

Cycling is an excellent way of seeing the country from the quieter back roads and trails, and particularly enjoyable if you travel with a companion. But there are certain factors to take into consideration, such as extreme weather, adverse road conditions, chaotic traffic, and the behaviour of both people and animals. So here's our guide to travelling on two wheels in Sri Lanka.

by Ethan Gelber

Most people cover long distances in Sri Lanka by vehicle. They live under the spell of speed and engine propulsion. Inside their din-mobiles, they also falsely imagine that there's no corner of this country free of the unfortunate by-products of combustion engine acceleration: noise, noxious spew and mortal danger.

There is, however, another way to travel, one that relies on the humility and forbearance of the human spirit and its physical shell. The bicycle is, for me, the only way to go. The machine is open to the elements and to the people who live by

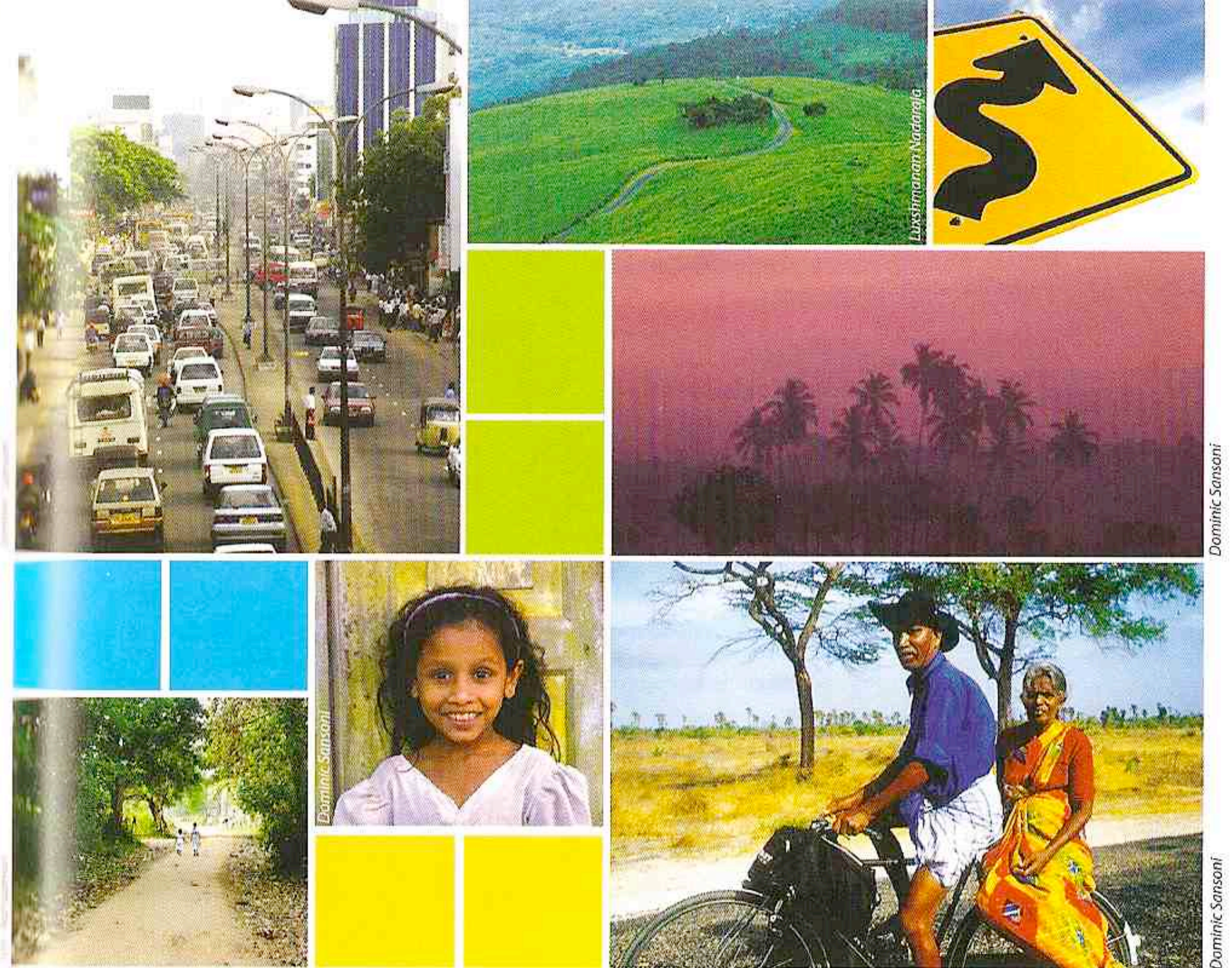
their rhythms; gauged to a human pace and need for freedom of movement; and environmentally sound. It's no louder than the rhythmic clicking of its mechanism. It's little more dangerous, on a road unencumbered by cars, than getting out of bed. It's a joy.

Still, cycling in Sri Lanka isn't exactly easy. Road anarchy, the callous car-is-king conduct of drivers and the disrepair of the byways are just three of the many hazards. But don't let this stop you! The rewards are undeniable. As is the appeal and peace of the people and places you will see.

Elements

Weather is no joke in Sri Lanka. When it rains, it sheets down. When it's hot, the tarmac sizzles. When it's dry, dust eddies are punishing. During monsoon times, avoid the monsoon areas or choose routes anticipating the need for shelters and long rain breaks. In hot, low-lying zones, rain jackets are stifling; ponchos are better, but don't repel a downpour.

When temperatures are high, carry lots of water. Bottled water can be purchased everywhere, but toting it can be tough *and the plastic containers are a serious litter problem*. Bring bike-ready water carriers with you. *Dispose of plastic bottles with care*, or experiment with purification methods or portable filters. Also bring sun lotion and a hat! Rely on protective eyewear. Don't let the sun, the wind and the dust get the better of your vision.



Traffic

Buses rule the road. Next come minibuses, then vans, cars, trishaws and motorcycles. The bicycle is near the bottom of a pecking order without room for readjustment. Don't think you can change it or educate drivers by aggressively taking the space a cyclist deserves. In Sri Lanka, defence is the best offence. When in doubt, get out of the way. Of oncoming traffic, even if it's in your lane. Of traffic from behind, especially when it's a bus honking an

increasingly desperate warning. Of turning traffic, even if you have right of way. Of a parked car, even if it's obstructing free flow. Pulling off the road is always better than being pushed off.

Bring a bell or horn, the bigger and louder the better. It will help you alert some vehicles and all pedestrians. And no matter what anyone says or does, wear a helmet!

Road Quality

The only notable exceptions to Sri Lanka's dilapidated road network are the trunk thoroughfares between urban centres, which cyclists should avoid anyway. The most peaceful lanes – the secondary and tertiary roads – have unfortunately not been resurfaced in the longest time. Some are so ravaged that rolling progress can be painfully slow.

Don't expect to cover large distances quickly. Ogle the scenery only when you're sure you won't plunge into an abyss. Use equipment (wheels, tyres, saddles) that can withstand the punishment of neglected and incomplete roadwork. And bring ointment for you and your bike when wear begins to tear!

People and Animals

Sri Lankans are some of the friendliest people on earth. And you, on a bicycle, wearing a helmet and sunglasses and perhaps garbed in tight-fitting gear, may be one of the strangest things they have seen in a long time. You will hear "Hello!" hundreds of times, each person you meet seemingly compelled to broadcast greeting. Try to be kind. Everyone just wants to make you feel welcome.

Watch out for dogs sleeping in the road. Most of them are so inured to traffic that they won't even bother to look up. A few are as fierce as anywhere in the world – and they are unshackled. Near parks or areas of low population density, stay alert for elephants, water buffalo and deer. Give them a very wide berth or patiently wait for them to pass.

Security

You will probably never have a problem, but you should be prepared. Lock your bike whenever you leave it. Carry anything you would despair of losing in a bag you bring with you whenever you step away from your panniers. If there's somewhere

secure you can leave your panniers, do so. If you think of purchasing a drink or "short eats" (snacks) from a cool spot or food stall, impress upon the owner to watch your belongings while you're absent. Thank him by buying more when you return.

Road Signs

If you are unsure about a turn, ask not one but several people for directions to get a consensus. Don't ask yes/no questions, and if the response isn't immediate or confident, don't embark without confirmation.

Roadside kilometre posts are common, but can be a mystery. There are still some mileposts from the days before kilometres were adopted. There are

also frequent and baffling intermediate markers that look like fractions. The bottom number is the nth marker on the way to the top number, which is the kilometre. Thus, 11/5 is the fifth marker on the way to the 11th kilometre. Until you see two markers in a row, you won't know if you are moving toward the 10th or 11th kilometre and there may be two and 20 markers. Once you get the hang of things, you will find them useful.

Bike Shipping

Bike shipping is easiest by train. Report to the parcel office at any station and strip your bike of anything detachable (as a precaution, not a matter of policy). Register the bike (its brand and serial number), as well as any extra pieces (racks, bells, etc.), and get a shipping receipt made out for its delivery to whatever station you choose. Officially, I was informed you pay Re1 per rail kilometre, but unofficially I can't figure it out. There is a distance fee plus a handling fee (all registered on the receipt).

Be prepared with two cardboard tags inscribed with your name, address and the delivery station. Attendants will place your bike, with attached tags, on the next train to your destination, where they will unload it. If you wish your bicycle to travel

with you, bring it to the station 60-90 minutes in advance (two hours in Colombo). However, the bike does not have to travel on the same train. It will be held in safekeeping until your arrival. To retrieve your bike, present the shipping receipt and sign the register.

Most parcel offices are in the stations themselves. Colombo's is on E. W. Bastian Mawatha, the road closest to the tracks a few hundred metres east of the Fort station. Walk around the back to the outgoing parcels area.

It may also be possible to move a bike by bus, but you would have to get authorisation and help from the driver and/or bus attendant (not guaranteed) to place and secure your bike to the roof.