



# Darshan Dreams

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**Worlds apart, two Sri Lankan women live infinitely different lives, for the simple reason that one of them dared to dream.**

## "You're going where? WHY??!!"

Because after five years spent on a ridiculous number of airplanes travelling to a ridiculous number of countries for ridiculous jobs offering pittance for wages without a break, I didn't care if I had to fly to the Arctic to chill out; because all I wanted to do was sit on a beach, read, eat, drink, sleep, get up, sit on a beach again, because I had experienced the Indian Ocean in India and found it profound; because my travelling companion didn't want to return to India; because I was desperate to return to India and thought its neighbour would be similar enough; because it was close and cheap.

## "Why not?!"

So I went to Sri Lanka with preconceived ideas so strong I was convinced the plane had been hijacked into some other dimen-

sion in which I surely didn't belong. My eyes were hungry for something wet and green and fresh, not the hot and dusty mélange of modern ills and ancient disrepair I witnessed driving from the airport into Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo. The longer we drove, the further down my chest my head hung. My exhausted mind wouldn't allow me the luxury of fantasy; I seriously couldn't imagine anything other than the entire country of Sri Lanka filled with anything but the madness and mayhem of far too much vehicular and pedestrian traffic, shops vomiting their goods onto cracked pavements, half-naked children being dragged around by harried mothers in clothes that defied the heat and humidity, men shouting out their wares and girls and boys in various stages of wild, abandoned youth.

If I had known it was to be the last time for a while that I would see so many

women in one place I would have lifted my head from its despairing laptop position and taken more notice of them.

My friend and I met and we lazed our way down the West coast fairly aimlessly; it was a journey neither particularly disturbing nor exciting. Just sort of... mundane. My eyes were stirred by the lollipop-pink sunsets, but my soul was left wanting. My ears were tickled by a Brit called Rupert who sang of The Scotch and the Weed and River but my heart remained inert. I was too tired to be disappointed and too disappointed to care. I wanted India.

And then, with an awe comparable to Columbus rediscovering America, we rounded the bend onto Sri Lanka's South Coast and entered Mirissa like snails on speed.



## Sri Lanka surprised me. Like falling in love with a friend.

Sri Lanka surprised me. Like falling in love with a friend. And the Milky Way was clear. My eyes were opened slowly. At first, all I could see was the stunning array of tourists in various shades of pink. And all I could hear was the quiet. Other than the commotion of shipping the new white ones in and sun-burnt ones out every two weeks, Mirissa seemed a relatively quiet place - and a relatively male-dominated one.

In the beginning, I was far too busy doing nothing at all to take much interest in anything more than basking in the ferocious sun, swimming in the translucent blue-green waters of the Indian Ocean and having my every want catered to by the guys who ran Water Creatures, a reggae-flavoured beachside restaurant that became our regular hangout. After the first ten days, however, I began to miss something, although I didn't know what that something was. I had grown so used to all the men that it took me a while to realize that aside from the odd female

shop clerk or the little girls playing in Mirissa's dusty roads, there was a profound absence of women. They didn't appear to be a significant part of the work force, social force or any other visible force for that matter.



It took a beautiful sixteen-year-old local girl with dark, wavy hair down to her knees for me to realize that most of the women in Mirissa do what all the Sri Lankan women in Jordan do - maintain households. Except they weren't getting paid for it.

Kiki, as we called her, was a rare aberration in the traditional female energies of Mirissa. She painted her nails blue, wore shorts and hung out on the beach. She rode a bicycle and spoke to foreign men. She knew what she wanted, and knew she'd never have it. One night, while we sipped acrid whiskey-like local Arak, she whispered to me, "I will finish my studies. I will get married. I will have babies. I will have everything I never wanted to have."

I tipsily turned to her, my Western freedoms overshadowing what little I understood of her world. "But Kiki, you can move to Colombo. You can find a job there and actually use your education. You can wear make up and short skirts and decide when and whom you want to marry. And it's only three hours away. You can see your family easily." Kiki rolled her eyes and shook her head. Impossibility reigned for many reasons, the most significant of which being her family's adamant disapproval. My eyes were pruned open even more. Like many of the few local women I met, Kiki remained tethered by the cultural and physical

boundaries of her village. Her frustration was strong; her relentless determination to satisfy her hunger for something outside the norm of village life before it became too late was stronger. Despite her conviction that her future had been determined from birth, she pursued activities that brought her relief in the short term.

So she asked us to teach her how to swim. And we did, in a hidden cove tucked away from Mirissa's main beach. She asked us to teach her how to curse in English. And we did, during whispered *rendezvous* in our room. She tried on our bikinis as she interrogated us about our jobs and what we wore to work. She wanted to know the possibilities of everything that could never be before she melted into the collage of women that formed the background fabric of Mirissa. And we told her.

I began to move around Mirissa in subtle but drastically different ways. No matter how late I stayed up the night before, my body naturally woke me up the follow-

ing morning in time to witness in perfect silence Mirissa's perfect sunrises. I drank the local water and ate food from the tiny local food stands without ever once feeling anything less than fine. I began saying "estuti" instead of thank you, "ayuboan" instead of hello and sent my friend off with "mama abdahray" instead of "I love you" when she left to get back to work in England. The locals taught me how to make curry and I taught them how to make jewellery. I found a home and a whole new way of being.

Different languages pepper the air the way Buddhist temples and lotus flowers pepper the landscape in Sri Lanka. I swallowed many of my English words and spoke slowly, concisely and so much less. My tongue became simplified and my thought processes did as well. It was as if a big, beautiful blue Indian Ocean wave pounded all the rubbish out of my brains and left me with a mental, and consequently spiritual, purity and clarity so profound it bordered on the divine.

I went for a three-week holiday and stayed for a two-month journey.

I cried leaving my newfound Sri Lankan friends with promises of return and a longing to stay so fierce I turned my back on the airport once I entered only to find the doors locked behind me. I was leaving and no matter how much I inhaled the spicy air, no matter how wide I opened my eyes to the smooth, dark beauty of Sri Lankan skin, no matter how many times I flipped through the snapshots in my head, I knew I would return home to an emptiness and longing that wouldn't be satiated until I happened upon Sri Lanka again. I already missed the simplicity. I missed the big skies in my eyes and the relentless pounding of waves in my ears.

So I came home to Amman and immediately began seeking out the Sri Lankan community. Finding it was like trying to find a good fingernail file in Mirissa - close to impossible. I eventually learned that in order to avoid issues with the men and authorities that can potentially make





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their life hell, the Sri Lankan maids tend to gather in their respective homes.

Exchanging one kind of predetermined restrictive fate for another seems self-defeating, but the freedom afforded by getting paid to be a maid is a far more desirable circumstance to many Sri Lankan women. Living and working in the Middle East is an ironic, yet relative, form of independence.

I finally met Giva, whom I wish I had met before I went to Sri Lanka; perhaps with her story I could have convinced Kiki that she could stretch herself beyond the intense beauty of Mirissa to find her dreams. Giva, who comes from a small but dynamic city in the middle of Sri Lanka called Kandy, whispered her life to me in her humble home in Ashrafiya. Like many women in Jordan, she wanted to

escape the confines of her culture. So she rebelled against her cultural and physical boundaries at home, albeit in more provocative ways than Kiki. She partied. She smoked. She drank. She had a boyfriend who eventually dumped her because he couldn't handle the time apart when Giva moved to Jordan to work as a maid for two years. "I was devastated. I came back to Amman to forget my life in Sri Lanka."

She wanted to forget. I wanted her to help me remember. Oh, the irony and frustration!

Giva cooks, cleans, does the laundry, takes care of kids and shops for other people. Like many of the maids in Amman, Giva ran away from her first assignment because she was treated badly. Unlike many of her colleagues, Giva fell in love, got

married and is expecting a second child with her husband Ahmed, a Sudanese driver who works for a family in Abdoun. I couldn't write a better fairytale myself.

"All my life, I changed it," Giva told me poignantly. "I want to be a good mother for my children, a good wife for my husband, and I will take a computer course!"

Giva and Kiki, who unknowingly share Buddhism, escapism and a fierce nationalism, live in polar opposite universes - Giva in one filled with fulfilled dreams, Kiki in another saturated with bitter-sweet reminders of unattainable freedom. I straddle their worlds in ways I couldn't have known before I went to their homeland.

I've been back from Sri Lanka for just over four months; it is with great difficulty that I remember more than just a few women I had the pleasure of hanging out with. It seems that promised journey back is inevitable, necessary even, for my own selfish reasons as well as to find Kiki, hug her again and tell her about Giva before she is forced to live the rest of her life thinking about what might have been in the place of what was. **10**