



Roisin coordinated the ferries and B&Bs



Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka at last

After a two-year delay, **Robin** and **Yvette Youngs** finally toured the island off the tip of India

OUR JOURNEY HAD been long in the planning. We had been CTC Holidays and Tours volunteer tour managers, and this tour – originally scheduled for 2021 – was to have been our last. The pandemic and the end of the tour company scuppered these plans. Yet we were determined to complete the trip. We travelled to Sri Lanka with a group of friends in February this year.

The Foreign Office advice did not bode well. It told of the “severe economic crisis” in Sri Lanka, with shortages of medicines, fuel and food. It also warned of violence against peaceful protest, with possible curfews.

We wanted to visit the coastal areas, particularly on the eastern side where predominantly Tamil communities live. We started in Negombo on the west coast and were able to visit the sacred sites of Yapahuwa, Dambulla and Sigiriya. Our route took us through small communities, often along dirt tracks and occasionally accompanied by torrential, warm downpours.

We arrived on the east coast at the city of Batticaloa, with its lagoon, vibrant market and fishing industry. From there we headed south to the surfing centre of Arugam Bay, continuing eventually to Galle in the south. During the day temperatures reached 40°C, so early starts were essential. Along the way we saw elephants, crocodiles, turtles and amazing birdlife.

Tourism accounts for 12% of Sri Lanka's economy, and we found a country desperate for the return of foreign visitors. A warm welcome and an unforgettable experience are guaranteed.



Scotland

Islands and Highlands

Last summer **Tom and Roisin McGonigle** explored some of the most scenic parts of Scotland

Last July my wife and I cycled up the Outer Hebrides and down the Great Glen. The logistics looked complicated but Roisin rose to the challenge from her Covid sickbed that Easter. The route was beautiful and there were few problems with wind, rain or traffic. Most importantly, there were no midges! Knowing the area's reputation, I had been watching the smidgeup.com website closely.

We chanced upon the North Uist Highland Games, and we sampled all the local fare. The Hebridean route profile was nearly all flat. A man in Tarbert exhorted us to take his friend's taxi up Aird Asaig to Rhenigidale but we cycled it easily – the climb was nowhere near as bad as predicted. There was a little more climbing along the Great Glen, but nothing untoward.

We made nine ferry crossings in total. We were glad we had a reservation on the boat back to the mainland at Ullapool as it was full of returnees from the Stornoway HebCelt festival. The B&B accommodation was decent, though several provided beds only: post-Covid staff shortages meant breakfast often consisted

of yoghurt, cereal and fruit packs that were left for us in the fridge. It was particularly difficult to get evening meals on the Hebrides; we always had to book a table at a local hotel.

The entire Hebrides were spectacular but the best cycling stretch of all was the Ballachulish-to-Oban cycle path. Unfortunately it was preceded by a horrible, unavoidable seven-mile ride on the A82 from Corran to Ballachulish. We were so glad we had at least heeded the advice to take the 7am ferry from Fort William to Camusnagaul, then cycle the 10 quiet miles to Ardgour before taking a ferry back across to Corran on the mainland.

We covered 320 miles in nine days of cycling, finishing up with an ascent of Ben Nevis for good measure – without bikes!

Two rear panniers each was enough

