Post card from Sri Lanka

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The soldier fidgeted with his machine gun and smiled, 'Just moment, I will get you ride'. It's 2am, and on the deserted backstreets of Colombo, the soldier's friendliness seemed at odds with both his appearance and our surroundings. Myself and fellow volunteer Toby Philp had all but given up on getting a taxi after a party nearby and had stumbled across one of the many security checkpoints in the city. After a brief chat about cricket and his relatives in Melbourne, the soldier abruptly strode out onto the road and stopped the next car. Casually leaning his gun on the bonnet, he enquired if the driver would be interested in giving two Australians a lift. Twenty minutes later we were home, following the well wishes of the soldier and surprising amiability of the Sri Lankan who just had his car commandeered.

I have encountered this same unexpected friendliness throughout my time in Sri Lanka. Despite widespread devastation following the 2004 tsunami, local people are typically generous and warm-hearted. Hemantha Jayasundera, the local manager of PIA's project in Sri Lanka, is also a director in the Urban Development Authority (UDA) who oversaw reconstruction efforts in the first eight months after the tsunami. He offers some insight: 'Even before the government or NGOs could respond, local people were helping each other. I think Buddhism has had a big impact on this. The man next door may be your enemy but if he is in distress we would be the first to help them'.

This attitude is evident in Hikkaduwa, where with other PIA volunteers Jacqui Monie and Asanthika Kappagoda, and I have been working with local planners to complete a development plan for the town. Hikkaduwa is located on the south-west coast of Sri Lanka and lost 800 lives and over 3,000 homes when the tsunami hit. Since then, reconstruction of the town has been swift. The mutual assistance of residents and business owners has been aided by NGO development and also contributions from sympathetic tourists who had stayed at the town's many hotels and guesthouses.

But this rapid reconstruction has also caused some problems. The amount of development being carried out in the years following the tsunami meant that local authorities were unable to regulate new construction. Laws requiring setbacks from the ocean and major roads were largely ignored as locals sought to quickly re-establish their businesses and homes. Many also took advantage of this opportunity to claim additional land, in some cases building over the beach itself to the water.

Of course it is difficult to criticise such actions in light of the adversity faced by so many locals, but it has exacerbated issues which seriously threaten Hikkaduwa's tourist-based economy. These include the

Half of the train which was swept 50m from its tracks by the tsunami just north of Hikkaduwa. 1200 people were killed, the worst train disaster in history.
ongoing degradation of the beach through illegal development as well as the increasing pressure placed on existing roads and very limited sewerage and waste management systems. The absence of any specific planning regulations for the town has compounded many of these problems.

Our task in Hikkaduwa has been to investigate opportunities for improving the town's natural and urban environment. This includes the identification of specific infrastructure improvements, assessment of potential for sustainable tourist development as well as providing basic planning and zoning regulation. This has proved to be challenging in several ways. The staggering complexity of Sri Lankan bureaucracy has been a major obstacle: there are 53 ministries in the country, containing over 200 government departments who barely communicate with each other and do not share information. The limited capability of local authorities to enforce development controls and carry out basic municipal services (such as waste collection) is another. Existing environmental attitudes will also prove hard to change (dumping untreated sewage directly onto Sri Lanka's only marine park is common practice by Hikkaduwa's hotels and guesthouses).

One key response of the Development Plan to address these obstacles is the inclusion of simplistic regulations which can be easily understood and enforced. Far from the ambitious Dubai-style development which is being pursued elsewhere on the coast, we are also only proposing relatively minor urban design projects and road upgrades which are economically and politically feasible. Notwithstanding these hindrances, working in Sri Lanka with PIA has been a very rewarding experience. I have developed a lasting friendship with the other planners in our team, Daya, Daham, Damayanthi and Vishaka, as well as many others. The warmth of the local people has left a positive impression on all volunteers I've worked with and hopefully the many more that will follow.

Stuart Carr
Stuart went to Sri Lanka as a volunteer on the PIA’s Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Planning Support Project in July, 2007 for 5 months and has recently returned to Sri Lanka for a second stint volunteering on the project.