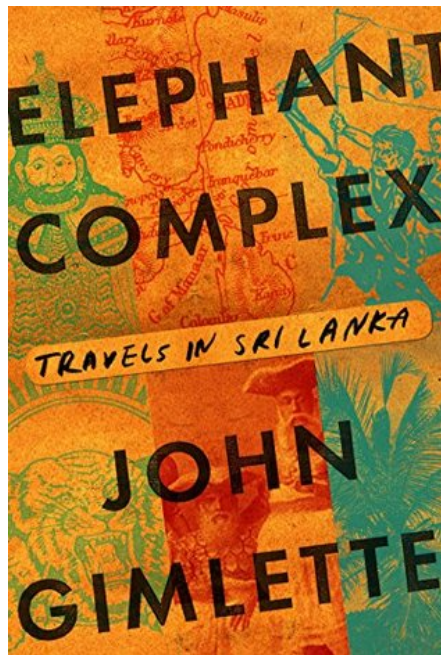




Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka

John Gimlette

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No one sees the world quite like John Gimlette. As *The New York Times* once noted, “he writes with enormous wit, indignation, and a heightened sense of the absurd.” Writing for both the adventurer and the armchair traveler, he has an eye for unusually telling detail, a sense of wonder, and compelling curiosity for the inside story. This time, he travels to Sri Lanka, a country only now emerging from twenty-six years of civil war. Delving deep into the nation’s story, Gimlette provides us with an astonishing, multifaceted portrait of the island today.

His travels reveal the country as never before. Beginning in the exuberant capital, Colombo (“a hint of anarchy everywhere”), he ventures out in all directions: to the dry zones where the island’s 5,800 wild elephants congregate around ancient reservoirs; through cinnamon country with its Portuguese forts; to the “Bible Belt” of Buddhism—the tsunami-ravaged southeast coast; then up into the great green highlands (“the garden in the sky”) and Kandy, the country’s eccentric, aristocratic Shangri-la. Along the way, a wild and often desperate history takes shape, a tale of great colonies (Arab, Portuguese, British, and Dutch) and of the cultural divisions that still divide this society. Before long, we’re in Jaffna and the Vanni, crucibles of the recent conflict. These areas—the hottest, driest, and least hospitable—have been utterly devastated by war and are only now struggling to their feet.

But this is also a story of friendship and remarkable encounters. In the course of his journey, Gimlette meets farmers, war heroes, ancient tribesmen, world-class cricketers, terrorists, a former president, old planters, survivors of great massacres—and perhaps some of their perpetrators. That’s to say nothing of the island’s beguiling fauna: elephants, crocodiles, snakes, storks, and the greatest concentration of leopards on Earth.

Here is a land of extravagant beauty and profound devastation, of ingenuity and catastrophe, possessed of both a volatile past and an uncertain future—a place capable of being at once heavenly and hellish—all brought to vibrant, fascinating life here on the page.

From the Hardcover edition.

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From Reader Review Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka for online ebook

Meghan says

Can I give this 4.5 stars? I really love John Gimlette's way with prose. His descriptors are other-worldly and imaginative: aging soldiers ridden with pock marks are boils are "barnacled," backhoes and tractors are "hulking crustaceans" in on a salty field (can you tell I'm drawn to ocean imagery? haha!). My favorite line, perhaps was this one: "The rain trees were dripping caterpillars and, in the canopy, thick clusters of fruit bats were slowly unbuckling themselves and flopping away across the forest." Enviably crafted prose aside, I also enjoyed the format—the way the narrative flip-flopped between the author's more present-day experience and vivid, well researched and equally detailed historical stories from the place where the author was at that point in the book.

However, despite being beautifully written, I sometimes felt distracted by the abstract descriptions and had trouble following and remembering details as I went along. I feel victim to and got mired down in the beautifully written details and often lost sight of the bigger picture. As a result, this book felt like heavy reading and I could only complete a chapter or two without setting it down for a pause—in that regard it was like an incredibly rich and dense chocolate dessert. I'm glad I didn't give up, because it was a good read down to the end. And, of course, now I need to go to Sri Lanka.

Barbara Usak says

A beautiful (if a little heavy) book that is best read whilst travelling through Sri Lanka. Full of beautiful thoughts, the brutal history of the island is brought to life by his descriptive writing and I often found myself giggling at the quirks he pointed out that I also have already noticed and laughed when I experienced them later. A fantastic blend of travel writing and history.

thereadytraveller says

Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka is an unforgettable travelogue centred around a wide range of vignettes assembled by Gimlette as he travels around the country formerly known as Ceylon. Providing a wealth of information on the country's ancient history, colonial era and most especially its civil war, this book provides a great primer for anyone looking to visit the country and understand why it is indeed, paradise damaged.

While Gimlette's writing style does take some time to get used to, as he bounces from one person to next, given the quality of what he produces, it is most assuredly worth the effort and we are rewarded quickly for our perseverance.

Gimlette uses an even-handed approach when detailing the reasons behind Asia's longest war that spanned a quarter of a century and in providing the necessary background information to its main protagonist, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been heralded as one of the worst terrorist organisations in the world and responsible for inventing the suicide bomber, in addition to the role that the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) also played.

Beyond the conflict, Elephant Complex delves deeper into the history of this perplexing country which seems always to have been divided by race, religion, class and caste. Taking a combination of trains, buses, tuk tuks and private car, Gimlette tackles a large and diverse range of topics. Pearl fishing, the irrigation reservoirs of the North Central Province, Sri Lanka's cinnamon trade, the underbelly of paedophilia and people-trafficking are all thoroughly examined, in addition to the obligatory information provided on our favourite pachyderm, of which there are an estimated 3,000 running wild and wreaking havoc amidst the Sri Lankan countryside.

I doubt that there is a better primer to Sri Lanka's history than that which Elephant Complex provides. Sensitively written, Gimlette provides a wonderfully researched and impartial account of Sri Lanka's civil war, its history and its people that is essential reading for anyone trying to understand this complex and bewildering country. This is a book that presents Sri Lanka's history and much more in an extremely accessible fashion and unquestionably is one of the best all round books for trying to understand more about this fragmented and complex country.

Ella Wall says

An extraordinary book, by far the best I've ever read about this beautiful, magical, tropical paradise with its tragic, even sordid underbelly. I'm not a special fan of the travelogue, but Gimlette manages to capture Sri Lanka--its history, culture and peoples--in a way that constantly had me saying, "Yes, that's exactly the way I remember it!" or "I missed that. I must go back." Or in the case of Negombo, "I never caught a glimpse of the perversion. I can't believe a reputable tour company booked us there." In fact, after that early chapter, I had to lay the book aside for awhile, before I could continue.

While Tamil ex-pats and sympathizers will disagree with me, I found Gimlette's description of the long civil war the fairest and most objective I've read. Both sides committed atrocities; both sides were dishonest with the public and with their own people. I first went to Sri Lanka, near Hikkaduwa and Galle in the southwest, as part of a volunteer group a year after the tsunami. To prepare for that trip, I read all I could find on the country and subscribed to daily Google news alerts. While I was there, the civil war broke out again. Meeting, living and working among those beautiful, graceful, gracious, serene people, I fell in love. When I left, I left part of my heart.

So I returned three years ago to bring closure. I rejoiced to see the economic progress, to see the country at peace, to be able to travel safely into the historic center. Now, after reading Gimlette, I want to return a third time. I recommend the book to everyone who might consider a trip to this beautiful island, and I want to read more by Gimlette. His descriptive language, the depth of his research and his eye for detail are extraordinary.

Apratim Mukherjee says

Big books take a lot of time(I attempted three times before to read it).Its taken me a month and at best I was not reading more than fifty pages a day.Finally,here the review.

The book covers the author's travels all over Sri Lanka but later on focuses more on the civil war and its aftermath.The big books have a lot of text.Hence,they have a few problems.First,is lack of photographs.Then,the author didn't really dive into the history of LTTE.If he was not doing that,he shouldn't have raised the issue in almost every chapter.Third thing was the volume.In my opinion,the book could have been shortened by at least 150 pages.The editing was not that great.

Coming to the positives,the author makes reference to history of the site he visits,which is very

essential. Then, he tells all about his experiences honestly. Further, the bibliography is also rich. Its a book which is enjoyed with patience and considering its flaws, I give it three stars

Edoardo Albert says

Elephant Complex is the best contemporary account of Sri Lanka. There, that's short and to the point. If you have an interest in the country - and I have, since my father is Sri Lankan - then this book is required reading. It also has a secondary function, that I will concentrate on here, in detailing the sort of preparation, work and temperament that is required to make an exceptional travel writer, and John Gimlette is an exceptional travel writer. What makes him even better in this capacity is that his full-time, day job is that of London solicitor, but every so often he takes off for some far-flung part of the world and brings it back with him in exquisite prose. He even looks like a solicitor! He is the Wallace Stevens of travel writing.

As to the elements of being a travel writer, first there is the preparation. So far as I can tell, Gimlette has read everything that there is to read, at least in English, about Sri Lanka, from Robert Knox's account of his 20-year captivity in the 17th century, through the accounts of Victorians such as James Emerson Tennent, through to the many competing and conflicting accounts of the long war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers. He says in his prologue that he spent two years researching Sri Lanka before visiting the country, and it shows in his writing. But his research was not confined to reading: he made contacts with many of the most significant players in contemporary Sri Lanka, interviewing them either before he went or during his three months in the country. For that is the next remarkable aspect of the book. Gimlette only spent three months there. That might sound like a long time, but having spent six weeks there myself recently, I can only marvel at how much more Gimlette managed to pack in to his schedule. Now that was no doubt helped by travelling there on his own, but what is even clearer is that, to be as accomplished a travel writer as Gimlette, the first requirement is an inexhaustible curiosity coupled with the desire to always open oneself to the country and the people among which you are travelling. Personally, I can manage that for a while, but then I become overloaded and have to withdraw behind the barricades of privilege that being a (comparatively) wealthy in a poor country allows. I simply don't have the stamina for human interaction that Gimlette has.

So, while the idea of being paid to write about what I did on my holidays might initially appeal, during my own trip to Sri Lanka I realised that I did not have the combination of qualities required of a great travel writer. Gimlette has. Read his book.

Nathan Albright says

I am not unfamiliar with the author [1] thanks to being a fond reader of travel books. Admittedly, Sri Lanka is not a nation I am familiar with myself [2], although my mum and stepfather did visit there one time. Even so, like the author's other books I found much to appreciate here and much to think about and ponder concerning the complexities of Sri Lanka as a society in the face of its deep conflicts as well as its troubled and complicated history. The author appears to be one who is not content to enjoy the superficial but he really wants to understand the places he visits and as much of their history as possible, which frequently involves questions of culture, imperialism, immigration, politics, and related concerns. In this particular book the author manages to divide his chapters in an interesting way, providing point and counterpoint about a particular part of the country, showing both positive and negative perspectives and letting the reader decide for oneself which perspective to believe in the fact of the writing that follows. As for me, I found this book to present Sri Lanka as a deeply troubled nation, one not inclined to dig too deeply and all too quick to blame

others, especially Americans, for their home-cooked problems.

In terms of its structure, this book is divided based on regions, which seem surprisingly complicated for an area as small as Sri Lanka. To give some idea of the complexity of the regional geography discussed by this book, the author has chapters on the following area: Colombo, the elephant reservoirs that were interior kingdoms once upon a time, the cinnamon forts, the the Buddhist "Bible Belt" of eastern Sri Lanka, the high road to Kandy, Kandy, the tea plantations where "Tea Tamils" work despite a lack of citizenship and legitimacy, the wild east where Sri Lanka's last indigenous people reside, the area o Trinco, the mostly Tamil part of northern Sri Lanka, the Jaffna Peninsula, and the area of Millaitivu where the Sri Lankan army finally defeated the resistance of the Tamils in a bloodbath. The author explores the complicated human and religious history as well as the origins and tragic course of the conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils, pointing out as well the sad fate of those who were caught in the middle like Sri Lankan Muslims, who were disliked and mistrusted by both sides, as well as a few decent people on all sides of Sri Lanka's complicated cultural mix.

Ultimately, this book is a sad one that demonstrates the troubles Sri Lanka faces. The author does not hide either the horrors and abuses of the Portuguese or the violence of imperialism or the horrors that have resulted from the chauvinism of the Sinhalese in recent decades, where populist political leaders stirred up among Sri Lanka's majority a disrespect for minorities that has had tragic consequences. The author even points out the problems faced by India and Norway and others who have tried, unsuccessfully, to encourage peace between the warring cultures of the area who once lived more peacefully before democracy and electoral politics made it politically beneficial to appeal to the basest of instincts among Sri Lanka's Buddhist majority. This book, and the horrors that it discusses in violence and rapine and destruction in the course of decades of ruinous conflict, are the kind that remind us that even places which may appear on their surface to be beautiful and even edenic often have longstanding and great evils that are only waiting to come to the surface before they cause horrible consequences. I have no particular plans to go to Sri Lanka anytime soon, but if I do visit, I will likely do so in a more melancholy way than many other visitors likely do, particularly in light of its continuing exploitation of the young in the global sex trade as well as its horrible treatment of minorities.

[1] See, for example:

<http://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018/...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

[2] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

John Benson says

John Gimlette's travel books on Paraguay, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Guyanas of northern South America, really helped me understand those places well, both their histories and geographies. In the same way, he tries to make sense of what I think was his most complicated country to try and understand, Sri

Lanka. As he traveled through the country, beginning in Colombo, then into the Sinhalese parts of the country, before finishing in the more devastated Tamil parts of eastern and northern Sri Lanka, he allowed me to get a full picture of the history and geography of this country, too. I am not sure after all his travels and research that he fully understood it, but he allows us to go along with him as he tried to make sense of it all.

Andrew Doran says

Read this before and during my holiday in Sri Lanka. Gives an excellent overview of the country and its history which reveals itself to the reader gradually, culminating in an account of the end of the civil war. The chapters are sequenced and themed in a general anti-clockwise journey around the island starting in Colombo/Negombo.

On my travels I met a scientist from England who said that he found this book quite dense; I was grateful to find that it wasn't just me who felt this! I think that the subject matter is so complex (as per the title) that it couldn't be anything but dense.

A very worthwhile read if you are visiting or have been to the island. A fascinating book about a unique country.

Gaylord Dold says

Gimlette, John. *Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2016 (339pp.illus, maps, \$28.95)

Master travel writer and London solicitor John Gimlette's journey to Sri Lanka began with a modest bus ride from his home in southwest London, where nearby he tell us, some 8,000 British Tamils live in Tooting, all originally from the town of Velvettithurai, and many of whom are members of tough urban gangs with names like "the Tamil Posse" or "the Jaffna Boys". Unlikely as it sounds for England, these toughs had run amok on a beach in Norfolk in 2001 stabbing and beating holidaymakers. He'd been given lots of advice about Sri Lanka before leaving—that it was a lush land scrabbled with land mines left over from the long civil war (1983-2009), with jungle chocked full of rabid dogs, marauding elephants and poisonous scorpions. If there was one thing people loved telling him about Columbo, the island nation's capital, it was that more people die there of snakebite than anywhere else in the world. "With hundreds of miles ahead, none of this was particularly encouraging," Gimlette concludes.

What follows is an enchanting, intelligent and riotously engaging book that spins vividly through an island that is at once charmingly paradisiacal and innocently menacing. Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon under its many colonial (Portuguese, Dutch, English, Japanese, then English again) conquerors, is a famously ancient civilization, a redoubt of Buddhist culture amid a Hindu world. In Colombo, Gimlette encounters a charming polyglot world, visiting ancient ruins and the old forts of the Dutch and English alike. At ease with everyone he meets, Gimlette demonstrates on every page his discerning eye for nuance, speaking with Test cricketers, slum-dwellers, British tea planters, academics, and the scions of wealthy Sinhalese families who've run the country for centuries. Driving with a guide along the southern coast, he views the ruins of the 2004 tsunami; farther along the coast the road peters out in sand dune and acacia scrub and he's in the country of the legendary Vedda-forest dwellers, scrawny yogi-types who represent the aboriginal inhabitants with their magic incantations, potions and mystical theology. In the central mountains surrounding the ancient traditional Sinhalese capital Kandy, Gimlette forges intrepidly up narrow paths to view the huge

reservoirs constructed more than two thousand years ago when Sinhalese hydraulic culture dwarfed that of nascent Rome.

Although the civil war between Tamil (Hindu) and Sinhalese (Buddhist) is over, it was a brutal struggle, with horrors on both sides and hundreds of thousands of deaths, slaughters in battle, suicide bombings, and massacres. In the hardscrabble towns along Sri Lanka's west coast—towns like Karaitvu, Trincomalee and Mullaitivu, Gimlette wanders amid the unmarked graves of the combatants. Despite a decade of peace, the Sri Lankans seem not to have come to terms with the past. There seem no signs they intend to dredge it up now in the name of “reconciliation”, as did the South Africans.

Part of the glory of reading Gimlette is his colorful language, as captivating as travel writing can be: Writing about a Dutch fort-- “It wasn't easy to take it all in: the sky full of stone and parallel lines; a great pentagon of defenses, sheer, colossal, and technically perfect; twenty-two hectares of ravelins and glacises, and ramparts up to ten meters thick.” And then one day, Gimlette grabs a bedraggled train out of Colombo headed for the town of Ambalangoda, partway to the highlands: “The train wobbled out of Colombo and was soon amongst sawmills. Pencil-scented breezes gushed in through the windows and at last the carriage began to cool. The Marxists had worked through the woodwork, and covered everything in stickers. The man next to me was a healer, with a briefcase of unguents and stones. He said nothing until a man appeared out in the sawdust, beating a dog. “An unfortunate sight, no? But our dogs here are dirty.” “Can't they be culled?” Gimlette asked him. The healer winced. “Killed? That would be against our beliefs.” On this particular trip, Gimlette learns that ginger is the best cure for colds, and wild lily for baldness. A man must never appear before his superior with his hair down, or with his sarong drawn up. There are omens everywhere. Nor should you swim at twilight. Those who become possessed need to make offers of puttu, or fried food, and rooster's blood. The people of Colombo are horrified by the magicians, but wouldn't use anyone else.

Gimlette, winner of the Shiva Naipaul Memorial Prize and the Wanderlust Travel Award, not to mention a Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year Award for “Wild Coast”, his wonderful last book, has taken on the mantle of “best” travel writer last worn by the likes of V.S. Naipaul and Paul Theroux. Like all great travelers he is intrepid and fearless, sharp-eyed and open to experience. He strips away veneer and penetrates every page with the lucidity of his opinions. Witty, gregarious, patient and humble, Gimlette practices his trade with the same ornery genius as Robert Byron, and with the same knowledge of architecture, history and art. Despite the grayness of his visage and his pot-bellied body, Gimlette has the courage of Marco Polo. On his last morning in Colombo he said his goodbyes—to Elmo, Ravi, and at dinner with Mohammed out at the golf club; he said goodbye to Professor Wijesinha at the Green Café, and met up with an investigative journalist who'd been on the run during the civil war, but now looked resplendent in an all-white suit. He also went to Gangarama, for one last moment with the temple's elephant.

Then Gimlette flew home to his suburban house in southwest London.

Kim Elith says

Grimly fascinating account of this country and its dark ancient and contemporary history. Hard to imagine how much horror and trauma recent generations have lived through here when there is a veneer of incredible natural beauty everywhere we've been. I found myself bewildered by how this civil war unfolded and how there are clearly no good guys on either side. Glad I read it while traveling so my eyes were opened to the truth no one here wants to talk about.

Jennifer says

John Gimlette is one of my favorite travel lit authors, and this book did nothing to change that opinion. He is insightful, objective and never dull.

So why only 3 stars? Perhaps because I did not feel this book was on the same level as *At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig*. I read that book more years than I care to count and it has remained with me to this day it changed how I thought of Paraguay completely. This book did not do the same for Sri Lanka. This could be because I had already read some excellent books on the Tigers and the war that I felt provided deeper insight.

But I think the biggest reason I didn't fully connect was the vignette-style of writing. I never felt fully invested in any particular story, person or location. The vignettes were interesting, but too disjointed for me. I always wanted more.

I recommend this book as an enjoyable introduction to Sri Lanka, but if you want a more in depth look at the Civil War I would read *The Cage* by Gordon Weiss.

David says

Great. I read it twice. I am now a SriLanka bore.

Pam ?Because Someone Must Be a Thorn? Tee says

I've read a good number of travel books. From my armchair I've mused across snows, climbed Everest and K2, even descended into the bowels of the earth and trekked across Asia. This book by John Gimlette is unlike Krakauer's, Viesturs', Danziger's or even Sarah Marquis' journals.

Gimlette takes a different, more erudite approach. His approach is part history, part investigative journalism and part travelogue. I think in part he takes this approach because so many people are not up-to-date with the turbulent history of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. As such there's something to be learned about how that history effects the people and the environment as they live today.

The book begins then with the recent history and the Tamil struggle. But throughout the book there is information about all the peoples that have come to this paradise: the British, the Moors, Indians, Portuguese and more. Each have left their imprint and as he travels throughout the country we get to see remnants that survive. Some of the relics of the British Empire are quite amusing.

What is less amusing is the child-sex industry. And here we get a bit of investigative journalism. Gimlette writes about how the perverted use of children has been driven into hiding, but that it's just as bad as it ever was. An unpleasant topic, to be sure, but nothing will change unless good people know about this sort of thing and find ways to combat it.

So this is what you need to know going into *ELEPHANT COMPLEX*. It's a well written book by an author

who has done his research and knows his stuff. The book isn't just a simple book of here's-what-I-did-and-saw. It slips in bits of history (which I found easily digestible), and it includes a bit a journalistic inquiry. It's serious at points and funny at points. A good read.

~review copy
~book #15 for 2016

Jack Laschenski says

Sri Lanka.

21 million people, half the square miles of New York State.

Island off the coast of India.

Beautiful geography.

Murderous people. Tamils and Sinhalese killed each other for 15 years.

Before that, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English murdered them.

Tourists come and don't care.

Fantastic book - the world is diverse,
