



Field studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Before arrival

We first heard about field studies during a lunch presentation in our second year at KTH, and later spoke with a friend in their third year who was about to go on their own field study. That inspired us, and we quickly decided it was something we both wanted to do. We share a strong interest in travel, and for me personally, the idea of living in another country for an extended period, not just going on vacation, was very appealing.

During summer 2024, we started reaching out to embassies and potential collaboration partners. We weren't fixed on a particular country, but agreed that it had to be relatively safe and have a warm climate. Eventually, through a contact in Sweden, we connected with SEBSA in Sri Lanka. Before this, neither of us knew much about the country.

In August, we had an introductory meeting where we presented ourselves, and SEBSA offered us four potential project options. Since we had just completed a course in optimization and enjoyed it we chose the project related to optimization.

I had few expectations going in, as I had barely heard of Sri Lanka before. I expected warm weather, potential language barriers since English isn't the first language, and beautiful nature.

Before departure, we got vaccinated and started applying for visa. The visa process was straightforward, and it took about three days to be approved. Unfortunately, it only covered 30 days, so we had to apply for an extension while in Sri Lanka.

Upon arrival

When we arrived in Sri Lanka, we had already begun our bachelor's thesis from home. Since our project wasn't within SEBSA's core area of expertise, we received support mainly to understand their needs rather than develop the mathematical model itself.

We were warmly welcomed at the airport by two people from the company, and spent the day with them trying go-karting for the first time! The following day, we visited the office and were introduced to the team.

We stayed in Sri Lanka for eight weeks, but since we started the project earlier, we were mostly done after six weeks and used the last two weeks to travel and finalize the report.

Financials

Of course, an eight-week trip to Asia comes with costs. Our flights were around 10,000 SEK, the visa and extension added another 3,000 SEK, and vaccinations were about 2,000 SEK so the grant of 15000 SEK was mostly gone after that.

Generally, Sri Lanka was cheaper than Sweden. Many clothes are produced locally, so we found stores selling Zara, Abercrombie & Fitch, and other brands at lower prices (without tags). Eating out was also very affordable, a typical meal cost around 100 SEK, and local Sri Lankan food could be as low as 30 SEK, often enough for two meals.

We used an app called PickMe (like Uber), which was very budget-friendly. To save money, we recommend eating local food, using cash instead of cards (some places charge extra for card payments), and asking locals for tips to avoid tourist prices.

Accommodation

We found our accommodation through Airbnb, a house located 15 minutes by tuk-tuk from the office. We stayed on the top floor with a private entrance, while our host lived downstairs. We hadn't realized the house didn't have AC when we booked, but we managed for the six weeks we stayed.

We had some unexpected visitors, like flying cockroaches but also saw adorable Indian palm squirrels in the garden. Our host was amazing and often helped us with groceries, transportation, and even provided meals.

When we traveled during weekends, we stayed in hotels and were consistently met with friendliness and hospitality wherever we went.

Project

Our bachelor thesis focused on creating a mathematical algorithm using mixed-integer programming to allocate developers to projects efficiently.

A typical day involved taking a tuk-tuk to the office and working from around 11 AM to 6 PM. We'd then return home and either eat out or cook. As many employees worked remotely, the office was usually quiet.

Since our contact person wasn't specialized in mathematics, his support was mainly in defining the business needs. We developed the algorithm without a user interface, as we were more interested in the mathematical aspects. SEBSA plans to implement the interface themselves.

We also held a final presentation and shared the algorithm along with an explaining how it works.

Country

Sri Lanka is one of the most beautiful countries I've ever visited. We lived in Colombo, but we also explored smaller towns like Hikkaduwa, Hiriketiya, and Bentota. The contrast between Colombo and these towns was striking. While the coastal towns were full of tourists and had a relaxed atmosphere, our home in Malabe, just outside of Colombo, felt much more local, and we rarely saw other tourists there.

Colombo truly embodies what you expect from a large city: busy streets, heavy traffic, and constant movement. In contrast, the smaller towns were much calmer, offering a slower pace of life.

Culturally, one of the most memorable aspects was how incredibly kind and welcoming people were, even to strangers. We always felt very safe. Although people sometimes stared, it didn't feel uncomfortable but more like it was out of curiosity. We also observed a strong presence of Ayurvedic traditions and a preference for natural remedies over conventional medicine.

Leisure and social activities

On weekends, we took trips to other cities to explore the many sides of Sri Lanka. One weekend, we even went on a road trip with the office, which was a highlight.

Language could sometimes be a barrier. English is widely understood but not always fluently spoken, and conversations often switched to Sinhala. Still, many people spoke excellent English and were easy to talk to.

Our first day included go-karting with our contact and another employee, and we also found our favorite shopping mall, which we visited often. We spent a lot of weekends on the beach and went on three safaris, where we saw a wide variety of animals.

Sustainability

Flying across the world is, of course, not sustainable. Additionally, Sri Lanka isn't designed for pedestrians, so we relied on tuk-tuks or cars to get around. While local buses were available, they were considered unpredictable and sometimes unsafe by locals, so we avoided them.

For longer trips, we often used trains which not only reduced emissions but also offered stunning views of the ocean.

Other recommendations and observation

I strongly recommend taking the opportunity to do field studies it's truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Start your preparations early, and be realistic about your project goals, you won't change the world in eight weeks, and that's okay. Make sure to also take time to enjoy the experience and immerse yourself in the culture!