

A Curried Favour

We're skating over children's toys in flip-flops. The floor is covered. And I'm up to my eyeballs in aubergines. Even in Sri Lanka, I curse the job of bringing the shopping in.

As I blindly juggle paper bags, something cracks under my foot. I scrunch up my nose in dread and look down. Through wrinkled eyelids I see a zig-zag scar across a tiny plastic car. A gaggle of Lego superheroes have seen my blunder, but none come to my rescue.

I wish I could yelp "I'm sorry!" in Sinhala but Mohammad doesn't even turn around. He's too busy waving us through the cool corridor, back into the midday sun. My other two friends just roll their eyes at my clumsiness as we follow.

Mohammed's wife, Ama, greets us in the whitewash concrete garden. She raises her eyebrows at my rustling bags which are spilling purple.

Chilli, coconut, murunga, fresh fish and tomatoes. We pour them all out, hoping we've got everything. Ama sniffs and prods each ingredient, checking that our choices meet her standards. Rice grains slip through her fingers like sand, spitting small stones like secrets.

Meanwhile Mohammed lets us find our own seats in the courtyard, as any old friend would. We're still a bit baffled we've only known him twenty minutes.

Sam, Ryan and I have completed daily 'challenges' on this road trip across Sri Lanka. But when tasked with finding some strangers to cook lunch with today, we'd confidently thought "no chance". Having friends pop round unannounced is every Brit's worst nightmare. The idea of appearing at a stranger's home with an armful of raw ingredients, felt frankly bonkers.

And then it happened. Mohammed's curious face had found us in the town centre, playing football with pebbles. We got chatting and within minutes he was bartering pumpkins for us in Mattala's underground market. His spot of choice had been humid as hell but with forest fresh offerings. Mangoes and brinjals danced on scales whilst chilli and turmeric played catch in our throats.

Back at the house, the swing of knives and scrape of coconut shells is our radio. We ease into the slow hours which good cooking demands. Small talk is forgotten for wordless exchanges. Silver scales wink in sunlight as Mohammed teaches me to gut fish. He smiles at my horrified face. Ama works kitchen pots like spells. Every now and then, she lifts the lids to let us look at the bubbles.

Whispers of spice draw two young boys from the house's shy shadows. We proffer tennis balls that we bought at the corner shop, and throw them between us while things simmer. The children's toothy smiles tell me I'm forgiven for my crash with their plastic car.

As the hours pass, the family moves around their home half curious to our presence, half oblivious to us being there at all. Homework continues, as do showers in the garden, and Mohammed attends prayer at the mosque for an hour or so. We're part of the furniture.

Eventually we all lick fish curry and coconut sambol from our fingertips, making light work of our afternoon's labour. The tourists among us gasp at the afterspice, whilst our hosts giggle. All of us concede that the lentil dhal is champion.

As shadows stretch, hurry tugs on our visit for the first time. The low-slung sun stresses the ground that we still have to cover. It's eighty miles to Mirissa. The boys and I had almost forgotten our beds for the night are in another city.

Before the three of us hit the road, the seven of us smile for one selfie. In a different world, we'd have said "let's do this again".