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## A trek before tragedy

by **Ann Chadwick**

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**While the world watches the devastation in Sri Lanka, the news has left one Guernsey couple reeling after their fund-raising trip narrowly avoided the largest global disaster in memory.**

IF you asked me what was the main thing that struck me about Sri Lanka,' said Lynn Cherry's husband, Bob, 'it was the butterflies. They were majestic, as big as a saucer. Beautiful. They looked like ballet dancers.'

This seems to be the most appropriate image to begin the story of Lynn and Bob Cherry.

It is a story, after all, about the precariousness of life. And how delicate it is. And, in turn, it's about recognising how to live it.

The couple missed being caught up in the tsunami by just three weeks. Just over five years ago, Lynn and her family became so very aware of how precious life really is when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Lynn, now 55, was 50 when she went for a routine scan.

'There was no evidence of cancer, so the scan saved me. I went to

Southampton for an operation. Everyone's lives were thrown on their heads. It hit Bob hard.'

Lynn saw an advert in a national paper asking for people to trek for charity. 'Every year, I put it in the cupboard because I thought I wouldn't physically or mentally be able.'

In 2004, she found the resolve.



**Bob and Lynn Cherry's trek through the now-devastated country has made them sensitive to its suffering. (0159741)**

Her doctor was happy for her to go.

But she was worried facing a group of people with so many stories of cancer to tell. 'I was worried I'd get caught up emotionally; I'm a very emotional person.' So her husband agreed to go with her.

She wouldn't have got through the cancer, she says, without Bob.

She is, by nature, a worrier.

'When you are struck down with cancer, it does give you a different outlook,' said Lynn. 'But Bob always believed that life isn't a rehearsal.'



**The beach three weeks before disaster struck. (69826)**

The couple's trip to the now-devastated country has made them sensitive to the suffering.

Tragedy hits all our lives at some point, they said. But that doesn't mean giving up. Lynn said that before she was diagnosed, she used to worry about stupid things, but not any more. She knows that family and home are the important things, especially in the light of this

disaster.

'I haven't been able to watch the news much,' she said. 'But I did last night;

I can't get over it. A woman had lost her husband and four kids. She'd lost her home. She had no food. She was desperately asking for help,' said Lynn in tears.

Thanks to their trip, the couple know the character of the Sri Lankans will help to see them through the tragedy.

Lynn and Bob's trek led them away from tourist sites. 'One of the ladies with us, Pat, had brought a small packet of balloons and pencils with her,' recalled Lynn. 'One day, she was giving them out to the children and if you could see their faces, you would have thought they were given the Crown Jewels.'

The fate of these and many other children is now unknown. Having been there makes the pictures of devastation seem clearer, said Bob. It would have been easier not to have seen the country at all. They saw some children attending a Buddhist Sunday school during their trip, Bob remembered. 'They were dressed in pristine white clothing, all wearing beautiful smiles, displaying their beautiful teeth.'

The couple also watched the farmers working the land, saw a grandpa sit at the lagoon while the women washed their clothes and as fishermen unloaded their catch. Two young boys hunted for food along the beach. 'What happened to all of them?' asked Lynn, bewildered. Two men who made a particular impact on them were the trek's doctors, Primal and Champ. At one point, Lynn injured her calf and spent a lot of time with the men. 'Champ was tickled that I was the same age as his mum. He wanted to know why I was there. I told him and asked about cancer in Sri Lanka. He said it was almost non-existent. They had no pollution, no processed food. They live out of the sea and off the land.'

It is estimated that more than a million fishermen in the north-east of the country have lost their livelihoods. And one million Sri Lankans have been displaced by the tsunami. The future of these men, even if they survived, is uncertain.



**Sri Lanka boasts some stunning scenery. (69830)**

'The doctors trained in Russia,' said Bob. 'They spent seven years studying, the first year learning Russian. A lot of skilled

professionals, who are needed more than ever, could have been casualties. We still don't know.'

The pair have been frantically checking emails to find out what news they can. The trek members have found a new bond, apart from their experiences with cancer. One of them is drumming up recruits to volunteer to help with the aid effort.

One of the things the couple struggled with on the trek was the relentless rain. All they could do on some days was keep their head down and trudge through the swamps. And as the monsoon season hits the east of the country, flooding is seriously hampering the relief operation. Disease will spread as the rain falls.

The couple trekked from Kandy, in-land at the heart of Sri Lanka, to the coastal towns, ending up in Ranweli, on the west coast. The southern and eastern coasts have been devastated. But the Sri Lankan Government is eager to encourage tourists to return to this tropical island, which has beguiled travellers with its palm-fringed beaches for centuries. Tourism is vital in providing much-needed livelihoods.

One glimmer of hope is that the Tamil Tiger rebels have laid down their arms to help the relief effort after almost two decades of civil war. 'I'm sure something good will come, but at the moment it must be very difficult to see anything coming right,' said Lynn. 'It's been estimated that it will take 40 years, but they'll never be free of it.'

In a way, it's a bit like cancer. It wrecks lives, but some survive. And those who do remind us how we shouldn't take life for granted. And not give up. Even if the emotional fallout has just begun and the aftershocks will be felt by generations to come.

'It's the same way I felt about fighting cancer,' said Lynn. 'As individuals, we can't do much, but if enough people rally together, and there's been a fantastic response throughout the world, and if the money is used correctly, it can make a difference. We felt that with cancer research, coupled with everything everyone else does, it will hopefully allow some little breakthroughs.'

\* If you are interested in volunteering, Bob and Lynn were pointed in the direction of [www.globalcrossroad.com/tsunami.php](http://www.globalcrossroad.com/tsunami.php) by their fellow travellers in Sri Lanka.

\* If you are interested in visiting Sri Lanka, the couple recommend the eco-lodge at Ranweli.

Details can be found at [www.ecoclub.com/ranweli](http://www.ecoclub.com/ranweli)

The lodge has re-opened since the tsunami.

\* Lynn and Bob raised £10,000 for Cancer Research. They are still collecting donations which will now go to 26-year-old James, whom they met on the trek. He has dedicated his life to looking after his grandmother, who has breast cancer, and is aiming to raise £20,000 for research. For more information, contact the couple on 246647.

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