A Boat Ride In Dodanduwa

Posted on



A thick canopy of mangroves creating a leafy doorway into the wide expanse of the Lagoon

It was refreshing and mildly surprising to find the idyllic and pristine natural beauty of the Dodanduwa Lagoon only a twenty-minute drive from the seaside hotels and pulsating nightlife of the lively tourist hub of Hikkaduwa. Home to a rich diversity of plants, insects, reptiles, birds and animals, as well as tranquil islets where Buddhist monks have retreated into meditative isolation, the Lagoon is best explored in boats.

Words Haseena Razak Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

The sky was overcast after a heavy shower of rain when we arrived in the village of Dodanduwa. Local villagers use their fishing boats to show tourists the peaceful charm and environmental wonder that is Dodanduwa Lagoon, also known as Rathgama Lagoon. Clambering into a narrow boat, we took our seats on the wooden

boards and pushed off the bank and into the waters.

Two minutes into the boat ride, we could already feel the impression of the surroundings on our senses. Breaking the gently rippling grey-green waters, two islets rose into mounds of green, fluffy forest cover. Several Little Cormorants perched on rods and rocks emerging from the water. Some had their wings spread wide. Others left fleeting trails in the water as they prepared to take flight. Lining the edges of the Lagoon were lush growths of several species of mangroves in various shades of green. Above, patches of blue sky peeked through a canopy of ashen clouds. The wind was still crisp with the fresh smell of rain.

All this sensory information however, only enhanced what truly defined the spirit of the place: the sounds. At first it seemed that the only sounds that could be heard were the splash of oars in the water and the slapping of small waves against the boat. As we relaxed, lulled by these sounds and the light rocking movements of the boat, we became aware of the various birdcalls ranging from gentle coos to high-pitched screeches. A low mechanical hum in the distance, we were told, was a coir mill on the opposite bank. Underlying all of these sounds, natural and man-made, was that profound silence found only in nature.

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It was no wonder then, that several Buddhist monks had chosen the tranquil islets in the Lagoon – Polgasduwa and Parappuduwa – as spiritual sanctuaries. As we floated past the islands, a blue streak across the sky attracted our attention. Following it, we found it was a Stork-billed Kingfisher searching for the perfect perch to dive for fish. A Greater Coucal on a coconut tree regarded us with piercing red eyes as we glided by.

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Many times during our journey we were delighted to catch glimpses of the Water Monitor. Gracefully slicing through the water, these reptiles have clawed feet, powerful tails and dark speckled faces that seem almost to smile slyly. We saw

several of these creatures in the water, creeping through mangroves on the banks and lying inert on little island rocks. As we neared a prawn trap set up in the Lagoon, we noticed a particularly large Monitor hurriedly scrambling out of the trap – no doubt, after tucking into a small feast of prawns – his sly smile now suiting him perfectly.

In addition to being out on the large, open expanse of water, the boat ride took us into little rivulets thick with mangroves and other water plants. We could reach out and touch the long brown finger-like roots that the mangroves dipped into the water. At times, we had to move out of the way as branches closed in low over the boat. Little Egrets and Cattle Egrets seemed to stand like sentinels around the Lagoon. On a rock, Red-wattled Lapwings stood alert and ready to shout out alarm calls at the slightest sign of danger. In the skies, parakeets flew in formation as kites and eagles circled.

As we floated back to the mooring, we saw a fisherman in the distance beating the water with an oar to drive fish into his net. The resultant hazy spray of water that veiled his boat was a scene that complemented the surrounding natural beauty. It struck me then, that the reason the Dodanduwa Lagoon has remained a marvel to this day is that the villagers have lived in harmony with their natural surroundings. It is fortunate then, that it is these very villagers who act as guides to visitors, thereby further extending their guardianship over the Lagoon.

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