A journey through the wilderness: Lahugala

Posted on

It was around 4.30 pm when a group of us passed through the gates and entered the Lahugala National Park. The evening light was casting shadows on the ground and the large trees and foliage were shading our path. As the vehicle drove forward I could not help but feel that I was truly entering the wilderness.

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The Lahugala National Park was opened to the public recently, therefore the tranquillity of an untouched environment still prevails. The roads are still rough and newly cut with an occasional branch or two barring the way. Only 2 km of road has been constructed as yet for vehicle use of this 5,131 hectare National Park, however the surprises that greet you at each bend and turn are worth the experience.

We were accompanied by a trekker who had more than 25 years of service in the Wildlife Department and it was soon apparent that the wilderness was his second home and that he had a wealth of knowledge.

The road led to a large rock outcrop where leopards are known to be seen. We climbed up the rock and the view in front of us was breathtaking – we were looking at the Kitulana Tank, where the surface of the water was covered with beautiful pink water lilies. In the distance a lone elephant was relaxing in the evening sun while crunching on succulent greens. I was hoping that we would see a cute leopard cub peeping from one of the openings in the rock, but that was not to be. For me, standing on top of the rock looking at the tranquil environment, I could not but feel at one with nature. For me this was paradise.

After soaking up the evening sun we headed back on to the track, driving through the jungle, it was very quiet except for the sounds of the birds and insects. The National Park truly belonged to the animals that resided there thus they were very good at hiding from the human eye.

To reach Lahugala Tank, which is the largest reservoir within the National Park we had to return to the main road and enter through a gravel path that led to the place where the circuit bungalow used to be. I guess it was the peace and calm that took my breath away. The Lahugala Tank spread far and wide ahead of us. As the sun was going down the sky was a gorgeous union of colours. We sat on the cement boundary and immersed ourselves in the surroundings. A flock of birds flew over us… this land had not been touched by man for a very long time and I must say I wanted Lahugala to remain the same, my little secret.

In the distance we could see four elephants and our trekker assured us that we could get a better look if we returned to the main road that ran along the reservoir. Excitement was in the air as we headed towards the main road and yes indeed the four elephants that we had seen far away were just a few metres from us. As we came closer our experienced trekker asked us to get down from the vehicle and follow him. I was extremely thrilled! We started walking very quietly…and were advised that an elephant would not attack unless it felt threatened, no way were we going to disturb these lovely giants of the land. We wanted to only observe and did not mean any harm. It was apparent that the elephants knew this too because they lifted their heads as we approached but soon returned to what they were doing. Even as we watched the elephants near the reservoir we could hear the sound of someone approaching from the jungle, there was the sound of ‘twak’ as a twig snapped under the weight…but they were cautious steps, as if they too did not want to bother us. Our trekker quite calmly informed us that it was elephants who were waiting to come out of the jungle and that usually the leader of the group will determine whether to proceed or not, after evaluating the environment. Since we did not want to disturb our gracious hosts we retraced our steps back to the vehicle.

By this time the sun had gone down, as night settled in we left the environs of Lahugala. I knew as we left, that Lahugala would always be a part of me. Need I say more?

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

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