A TRIP TO THE NORTH

Posted on



We were greeted by the dense greenery of Mannar (Photo: Anders Tunek).

A Swedish traveler´s experiences and observations of his tour of the northern and north-western parts of the country.

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The areas we visited on this trip; Mannar Island and Jaffna with surrounding regions, as well as Wilpattu National Park are not areas that are most frequented by tourists.

Mannar Island and Mannar region

We traveled north from Colombo along the west coast in a ten-seat Nissan, new and nice, and we had a competent and knowledgeable driver. When we came back to Colombo after ten days, we had travelled 1450km.

Our first stage, which was also the longest day, took us from Colombo up to Mannar Island. The distance is 340km, and according to Google Maps, it should take almost seven hours. In practice, it takes much longer, in our case almost 11 hours. Only the first 25km out of Colombo

one travels on a highway circumvent- ing villages and towns. The roads are good except for the last ten kilometres before arriving at the hotel, but most of the areas along the road are densely populated, and it is like driving on the main street straight through the centre of a chain of small and slight- ly larger cities bustling with public life. In addition, you should take breakfast and lunch breaks, as well as a few breaks for tea. You also must try the delicious fruits that are sold at stands along the way.

In the last 80km approaching Mannar, the areas become more sparsely populated and the journey goes faster. The roads are quite narrow and some stretches are very curvy, but well carpeted, smooth, and fine. The closer you get to Mannar, the more barren and deso- late the landscape becomes. Tamils and Muslims live in the region, while there are few Sinhalese. Most Tamils in the region are Catholics, less than half Hindus. Usually, among the Tamil population in Sri Lanka, it is the reverse, namely that most are Hindus. Tamil is the dominant lan- guage in the area.

You do not travel to the Mannar region and Mannar Island to see great and spectacular sights. Instead, the area from January through March is a paradise for ornithologists. Most of the birds seen are migrating from India or other parts of Asia. Therefore, exactly when the best time is for an ornithologist to come to Mannar can vary depending on how the rainfall in India and Sri Lanka is distributed over time.

About 500 donkeys roam freely on Mannar Island. The history of why the donkeys are so common on Mannar Island is interesting. In short, the animals were brought by Arab traders hundreds of years ago, and were gradually abandoned.

There are several interesting sites from a cultural, historical, and eth- nological

point of view in the Mannar/ Mannar Island area. First, it should be mentioned that the Gulf of Mannar during the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s

periodically was the site of the world's most profitable pearl fishery. Georges Bizet had the Mannar region in mind when he wrote the opera The Pearl Fishers. The centre for pearl fishing was Arippu, located on the mainland coast 20km south of Mannar. A dis- tinctive landmark today is the ruin of 'The Doric Bungalow', which was built between 1801 – 1804 for the British governor. The place is excep- tionally beautiful, and the sunset fantastic.

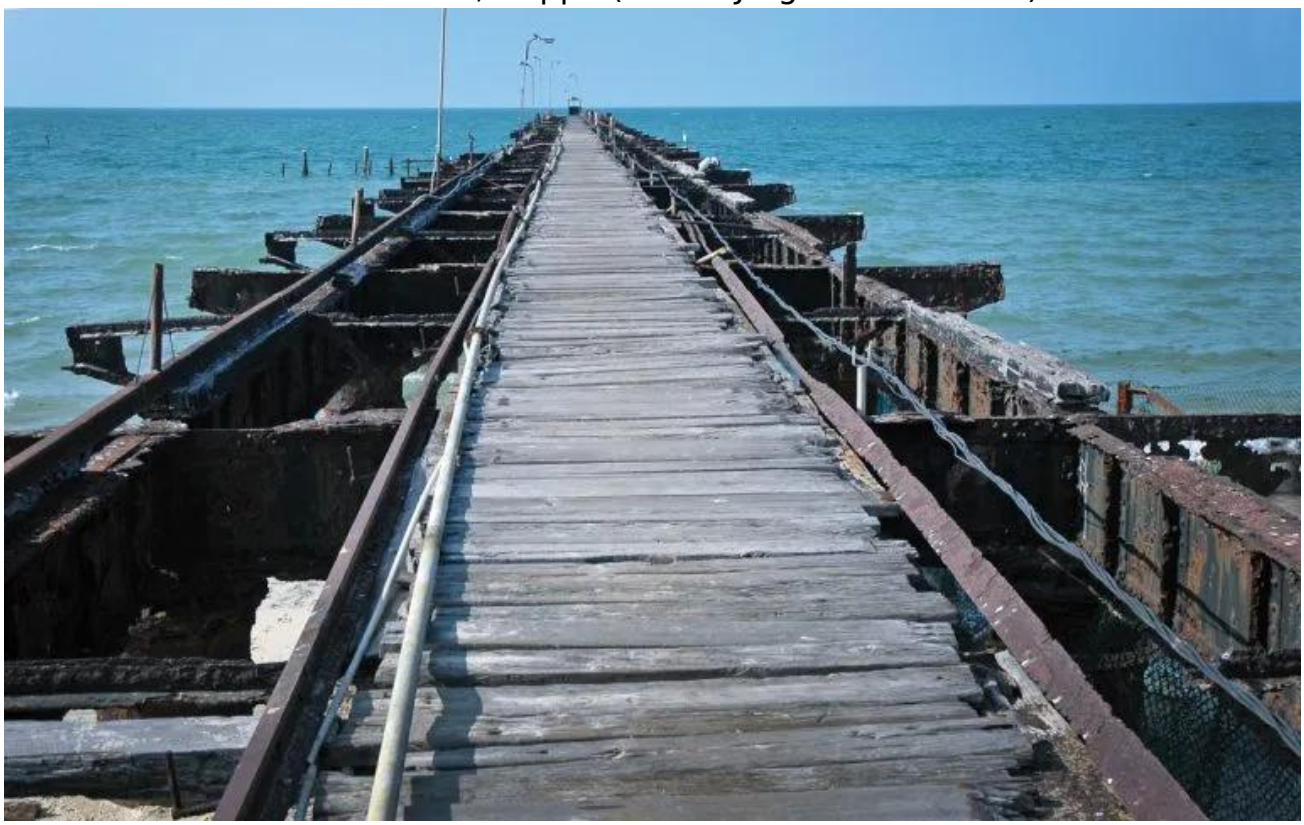
In the small town of Talaimannar in westernmost Mannar Island is the pier, until 1983 the ferries to India departed from this site. India is only 38km away.



Painted stork ((Mykteria Leucocephala) (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).



Remnants of the Doric House, Arippu (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).



Thalaimannar. The pier from which ferries for India departed up until 1983 (Photo:

Anders Tunek).



Fishing village Pesalai on Mannar Island (Photo: Anders Tunek).

In the middle of the northern coast of Mannar Island lies the fishing village of Pesalai. There are hundreds of small boats here, pulled up in the sand or anchored out in the shallow waters.

You will be amazed at the inten- sity of the business. If you are lucky to arrive at the right time, just when a good catch has been landed, you can see amazing scenes of small egrets and gulls stealing fish and small crabs, as well as several types of big raptors in turn steal food from the beaks of the gulls and egrets in flight.

In the town of Mannar, there is a fort that was founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century. The fort has a tragic tale of a young princess, Dona Catherina or Kusumasana Devi, who lived here during her child- hood during the Portuguese era,

in the late 16th century. The princess was taken to the Portuguese colony Goa in India, and was given a Christian education, then brought back to Sri Lanka. The Portuguese strategy was to make Dona Catherina queen of Kandy. The strategy was successful, but the life of Dona Caterina was tragic. She died in 1612 at the age of 35. Following the Portuguese era, the fort was expanded by the Dutch to be taken over by the English.

Not far from Mannar Fort is a famous Baobab tree (Baobab Tree Pallimunai), whose trunk is said to have the longest perimeter of all trees throughout Sri Lanka. It is estimated to be 700 years old and is said to have been planted by Arab traders.

Jaffna and Jaffna Peninsula

We continued our journey to Jaffna in the northern peninsula of Sri Lanka. The distance is only 129km, the roads are good, and this part of the country is sparsely populated. The landscape is very flat, and a Swede cannot help but think about how similar it is to the landscape on the Swedish island Öland (Ölands Allvar). Not until one approaches Jaffna town do the areas become more populated.



The 700-year-old Baobab tree in Mannar town (Photo: Anders Tunek).



Fort of Mannar (Photo: Anders Tunek).

Jaffna town has about 90,000 in- habitants, the region (Jaffna penin- sula) around 600,000 (census 2012). Almost exclusively Tamils live here (99 percent), of whom 83 percent are Hindus, while 16 percent are Christians. Before the Civil War, which began in 1983 and ended in 2009, there was a slightly larger number of Sinhalese/Buddhists and Muslims than now. Before the war, Jaffna was a prosperous town, one of the richest in Sri Lanka, and today it is in the process of rebuilding.

The food in the Jaffna region de- serves a special chapter. Absolutely delicious. A true Jaffna curry is dark red and very spicy if you have not asked for moderation in spice. Among other things, the seafood soup called Kool is famous and indigenous to Jaffna. Kool must usually be ordered one day in advance. In Keerimalai, suburb of Kankesanturai, on the north coast, is

one of Hinduism’s oldest shrines, the Naguleswaram temple, dedicated to Lord Siva.

Nearby is a pool, with fresh water from a hot spring. Another eight kilometers west along the north coast is a Buddhist shrine, Dambakola Patuna. According to legend, this was the place, where Sangamitta Theri, the daughter of India’s ruler Asoka, 304-232 BC, landed with a sapling from the Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha sat when he reached enlightenment. The sapling was taken by Sangamitta Theri to Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka’s former capital. This tree is said to be the oldest living tree in the world. Kankesanturai and its surroundings offer great opportunities for swimming in the sea. Just over 20km east of Kank- esanturai is Point Pedro, Sri Lanka’s northernmost point. Up here, fishing villages and kovils are everywhere, roads narrow, and you will not proceed quickly as you wish.

About 12km east of Point Pedro is Manalkadu, with ruins of the Old Dutch Church, which today is largely covered by sand. The church was built by the Dutch in the 17th century.

If you continue another 65km east along the coast from Manalkadu, which we had planned to do, you come to Chundikkulam nature reserve, a famous bird sanctuary. During the bird migra- tion season, you can see many bird species, including flamingos.



At Dambakola Patuna. A replica of the boat carrying Ven Sangamitta Theri to Sri Lanka from India (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).



Old Dutch Church in Manalkadu (Photo: Anders Tunek).



The entrance into Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil (Photo: Jorgen Wieslande).

We stopped for a brief moment at the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil on the outskirts of Jaffna town. This is the most important temple of Sri Lankan Hinduism. The present temple was founded in 1734, but the sanctuary is very ancient, though not at this precise site. The present temple is known as the fourth temple. The current Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil is a very extensive facility. The temple has great social, religious, and cultural significance to Sri Lankan Hindus.

Generally, one does not leave the precincts of the Nallur temple without cooling off with an ice-cream from the famous Rio Ice Cream parlour within eyesight from the temple entrance.

We also visited Jaffna Fort. As in Mannar, the Portuguese founded the fort, which

was expanded by the Dutch and later taken over by the British.

The fort in Jaffna is much larger than that in Mannar.

The next day we had planned to visit the island of Delft, marked on the map. Delft is named after the Dutch city of the same name. Almost all the islands up here in the Jaffna area have had Dutch names, but usually the original Tamil names are being used today. Delft also has a Tamil name, Neduntheevu, but for some reason the colonial Delft is still used for this particular island. To get to Delft, you need to drive from Jaffna town to the west for about an hour to the island of Punkudutivu, which is the outermost of the islands that are reach- able by car. From Punkudutivu it takes an hour by boat out to Delft. Delft is a flat island of 50km2 with a population of 4,800, exclusively Tamils. The island is in the Palk Strait between Sri Lanka and India. It is said that a trip to Delft is like travelling a hundred years back in time.

Wilpattu National Park

After three nights and two full days in Jaffna, we started our journey back south. Our goal was to reach Wilpattu. We travelled 236km that day. We made a stop at Thanthirimale. Here is, quite remotely, a significant Buddhist temple built in around 300 AD. Legend has it that the ensemble including Ven Sangamitta Theri on her way to Anuradhapura made a stop here. Furthermore, legend states one of the saplings of the Sri Maha Bodhi is at Thanthirimale. At the site are also beautiful murals of much later dates, as well as rock inscriptions.



The temple at Thanthirimale, founded in the fourth century AD (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).



Spotted Dear (Axis Axis) (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).


Peacock (Pavo Cristatus) (Photo: Jorgen Wieslander).

Wilpattu is not the most visited national park in Sri Lanka, although it is the largest.

The following day we were on safari in Wilpattu. In a way, the day was a disappointment. We didn't see the "big ones", and by that, I mean the elephant, leopard, and bear. According to research, there should be 30 – 35 leopards in Wilpattu, but they do not always want to introduce themselves to visitors. On two previous visits, I had seen leopards in Wilpattu. However, we now saw everything else, buffaloes, crocodiles, magnificent deer in abundance, wild boar, turtles, and birds of many species.

Wilpattu is not the most visited national park in Sri Lanka, although it is the largest.

In Wilpattu there is everything that Sri Lanka can offer in the form of wildlife, but because of the large area, and the barren nature of parts of the reserve, the large animals seem to appear rela- tively sparse. There is no guarantee at all that you will see everything during a few hours of safari. Espe- cially after a rainy period, as was the case during our visit, when there is plenty of water everywhere in the terrain, the animals are not forced to the reliable water holes where most of the driveways pass.

The next day we drove the 180km back to Colombo to chill out in the city’s bustle. We had enjoyed an ex- tensive trip of North and North- western Sri Lanka.