A Tuk Tuk Adventure

Posted on
Tukie on the top of Single Tree Hill with Lake Gregory and part of Nuwara Eliya in the background

How does one define ‘adventure’? According to my Random House Dictionary of the English Language “Adventure is an undertaking involving risk, unforeseeable danger or unexpected excitement”. A secondary definition is “participating in exciting undertakings or enterprises” as in “the spirit of adventure…”

Words and Photographs Kurt Rolfes

The rekindling of my spirit of adventure was probably the reason I bought a new three wheeler or ‘tuk tuk’ as they are commonly known in this part of the world almost five years ago. Since that time I have put nearly 20,000km on the mean little machine my daughter Jacquie has affectingly christened as ‘Tukie’.

The common name of tuk tuk came from the sound the original two stroke engines made while idling. I can still pull up behind a 25 year old three wheeler in Colombo and hear the familiar “tuk tuk, tuk tuk, tuk tuk” of an engine that requires that you mix a small amount of oil with the petrol when you fill the tank.

Most of the three wheelers are assembled in Sri Lanka using parts manufactured in India. For the past six years the tuk tuks have been supplied with four stroke engines of between 175 and 205 cc that run on unleaded petrol or as we Yanks say gas, as in gasoline!

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I have driven Tukie for as many as seven or eight hours straight on trips from Colombo north to the ancient city of Anuradhapura near the islands largest game reserve of Wilpattu, south to the popular game park of Yala, bordering the Indian Ocean and east to Trincomalee on the Bay of Bengal. But the one adventure that has eluded Tukie and I over the years due to weather or other projects was the

Nuwara Eliya District including Horton Plains and World's End. I know the highlands fairly well as I have travelled there by both train and car.

This is definitely four wheel drive or tuk tuk country! Once you leave the main road you're in for all the bad terrain that neglect and nature can throw at you. Tukie and I have been isolated by flash floods, rock slides, eyed with distrust by wild elephants and other jungle beasts while creeping down back roads in first gear that only a fit tuk tuk or four wheel drive could navigate.

However, most of the main roads in Sri Lanka are in excellent condition and the legal speed limit for three wheelers is 40 kph, that's breaking the sound barrier at a fearsome 28 mph!! I judge my legal road speed by what the other tuk tuk drivers are doing. If all the tuk tuks are sticking to the legal limit, I know there is a policeman hidden in the bushes up ahead with a radar gun in hand. If I'm being passed at the insanely high speeds of 50 to 55 kmh, I know the coast is clear!

I planned the trip so that I would have two or three days at Kithulgala, Nuwara Eliya and Kandy. After changing Tukie's oil, adjusting his clutch and break cables and giving him a full bath we were ready for the road!

There's not really much that can go wrong with a tuk tuk. Adjusting or changing the clutch cable is probably the only maintenance concern while under way. Most of the tuk tuk drivers I have met over the years also belong to an unofficial mutual aid society. If you pull over to the side of the road with a flat tyre or mechanical problem, within minutes you'll be surrounded by other drivers helping you solve your particular tuk tuk malady. Most of them do their own repairs to save money so there's not much they don't know about these magic little machines! But I always carry spare clutch and brake cables as these are not generally available in remote areas.

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I took off from my daughters' residence in Rajagiriya on a Wednesday at six in the morning to beat the Colombo traffic. In about three hours I was checking into my friend's camp on the Kelani River where you can raft the rapids or join in a number

of other adventure sports.

The following day I decided to explore the site on which the Government is building another hydro dam on the Kelani. About ten kilometres north of the camp on the main road, you travel right down a narrow potholed road for about two kilometres, which Tukie and I did in first and second gear both down and back.Once back on the main road I discovered a charming little motel whose rooms are wrapped around tall stout pine trees about 12 metres off the ground.

Early on Friday I was off to Hatton and Nuwara Eliya. From Hatton, it's all uphill. Hatton, at around 600 metres above sea level is the gateway to Adam's Peak *(Sri Pada)*. Nuwara Eliya is over 2,000 metres and it took me five hours to get up the steep inclines and around the hundreds of curves, almost all in first and second gear.

But this stretch of highway 7 is one of the most beautiful and spectacular in all of Sri Lanka! The kilometre after kilometre of tea plantations are intersected by some of the world's wildest waterfalls and towering pine forests.

Nuwara Eliya is one of the original tea capitals of the world! Lipton started his empire of tea just down the road and it's still flourishing today. Most of the flowers and vegetables found in Colombo's markets are grown on the slopes of this temperate tea town.

But the real reason for ultimately tuking over 500km was to visit Horton Plains and do the almost 10km trek to World's End and Baker's Falls. Leaving Nuwara Eliya at 4am on Monday I was on the trail by 6am and five hours later was back at Horton Plain's headquarters and ready to start the downhill drive to Kandy.

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And I do mean DOWNHILL!! From over 2,000 metres in the clouds you level off at around 400 metres. This time Tukie and I were in second and third hitting the many curves at less than 20 kmh. It took us about three hours and after my 10km trek to World's End that morning, I was ready for bed.

The bustling city of Kandy is the second largest city in Sri Lanka and its main claim to fame is the 'Temple of the Tooth'. It's the country's most important Buddhist

Temple and is home to one of Buddhism’s most sacred objects, the ‘Tooth Relic’.

Other places to see while in Kandy are the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, the Tea Museum, The Royal Palace and the relatively new Kandy City Centre shopping centre.

It was time to end our adventure. But we still had one more stop. I had been to the Elephant Orphanage at Pinnawala but there was now a new kid on the block! I had read that Sri Lanka’s first ‘open Zoo’ had been built in Pinnawala and I had to drop by and have a look. After having perused both the Orphanage and the Zoo, Tukie and I headed for home.

It had been over 500km on every kind of road you could imagine! I will treat Tukie to another good wash and I will treat myself to a couple of ice cold beers!

