

Across The Fence



He blinked, his tiny eyes shining in fervent anticipation. Edging another inch closer to the fence he tried reaching out. With a start I backed away as did the others around me. He lifted a foot and started flapping his ears in tune to a series of nods of his large head. As they eagerly accepted our fruity offerings, we looked on. In the dry afternoon heat, we stood on either side of the fence that separated our worlds - as they watched us and we watched them: the humans and the elephants...

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Menaka Aravinda

We were driving down the Udawalawe-Thanamalwila road. Outside the sky was shimmering against the mid morning sun, as it usually does in this part of the country. Sitting in the moving vehicle, deep in thought, I watched the world pass by, entrapped by the mesmerising beauty and serenity of the surrounding plains. We soon reached a clearing, with the vast open skies hovering above us. Awakened from my reverie I sat up as we drove through a dam with the glistening waters of the Udawalawe Tank on our left and a lush green treetop canopy on the right.

Less than half a kilometre since passing the tank, we could make out a few vehicles parked ahead on the roadside. A group of people had gathered and were seemingly watching something... something very pleasing. We slowed down adjacent to the gathered crowd curious to find out what was in store for us. The small crowd of people were standing along a fence, not just any fence but the electric fence that ran along the border of the Udawalawe National Park, stretching across for acres along the side of the road.

[Tail swinging, ears flapping, he reached his long trunk through the fence as the man handed him a single sugar cane stick](#)

Standing inches away from the fence - on their side - stood two elephants, swaying this way and that, looking straight at the humans that were in turn

watching them. They seemed to have a silent conversation that ignited between them. As I mingled in with the thrilled bystanders who were laughing and talking in excited voices, I understood for the first time what was really going on and watched in awe the spectacle that was unfolding before me.

Two men approached from a tiny fruit stall from across the road with two bundles of what looked like sticks. As they crossed the road and got closer to the fence the excited animals hastily followed from their side of the fence; pushing each other, racing to get to the two men. One of the men untied the string that held one of the bundles together. They were thick brown sticks of sugar cane – a tasty treat for the jumbo friends. As he took one out, the elephant closest to him seemed to have suddenly come alive in a happy dance, shifting from one foot to another; tail swinging, ears flapping, he reached his long trunk through the fence as the man handed him a single sugar cane. Within a second, it was in his mouth, and the trunk reached back out to the man again. The onlookers laughed and cheered in unison. “*Ah hari hari*” (Okay okay) said the man breaking out in laughter, and this time held out the whole bundle through the fence. His jumbo friend took it in an instant and put the entire content into his mouth. We could then hear a loud crunching sound as he bit into the juicy sugar cane, swaying his trunk in absolute contentment.

The remaining bundle of sugar cane was then offered to his impatient companion – who was smaller in size – eagerly waiting for his turn to sink his teeth into the luxurious sugar cane treat; and soon he too was munching away in joy. Another person crossed the road and bought some thambili (king coconuts), and as he tossed them inside the fence one by one, the two elephants grabbed the fruits the size of footballs and swallowed them without a second’s thought.

[The small crowd of people were standing along a fence, not just any fence but the electric fence that ran along the border of the Udawalawe National Park...](#)

As the crowd slowly dispersed – each small troop piling into their respective vehicles, infants, grandmothers even an occasional Buddhist monk – we lingered a moment longer, admiring the couple of gentle giants at such close proximity. They soon approached us standing face to face, eyes on us, in anticipation of more treats. “*Issaraha thawa ali innawa*” (there are more elephants further on) said one of the men giving me a toothy smile, who we soon learnt was the owner of the fruit stall from across the road.

We recommenced our journey, this time - much slower - with watchful eyes and sure enough, just a few metres ahead there was another group watching three elephants across from a few more fruit stalls. The largest of the three was munching on a whole cluster of bananas with its hooked end sticking out like an umbrella stick from the elephant's mouth. With its front foot it was pushing at a green bunch of bananas that someone had thrown inside the fence. The people were tossing more bananas, manioc and bits of fruit for the other two. Where they stood, the dusty earth was scattered with colourful fruity remnants; and the elephants grabbed mounds of earth with their trunks bathing themselves with the dirt as a relief from the harsh heat. The largest, suddenly let out a sneeze spraying itself in a watery liquid. "He has a cold" said a little boy from amongst the onlookers, making us all laugh. As they went on eating they seemed to put on a show for us, pushing each other and twisting their trunks in playful battle for food.

There were close to 20 big-ones along the side of the road that day as we drove on; parties of two or three having gathered at the fence - even loners. They silently watched the bananas, wood apples, mangoes, king-coconuts and sugar canes neatly arranged on display in the tiny fruit stalls, patiently awaiting the humans to stop and offer them treats, when ideally they should be in their natural habitat.

[As they went on eating they seemed to put on a show for us, pushing each other and twisting their trunks in playful battle for food.](#)

As each speeding vehicle slowed down and its colourfully clad occupants eased their tired muscles under the shade of the expansive trees, relaxing their weary minds by watching and feeding the beautiful animals, each party entertained the other; and each party, the wild yet gentle beast and human, immensely enjoyed the company of the other... from across the wired fence.

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