

# As White as Snow

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A rarity almost never found in the wild, the white tiger is world famous for its uniqueness. For the first time in the history of the nation the Dehiwala Zoological Garden is showcasing a pair of these beautiful creatures. Lovingly named Sudaraka and Shwetha the young white tigers are a sight to behold in all their majesty.

***Words Dinali Sugathadasa Photographs Mahesh Prasantha | Menaka Aravinda | Mahesh Bandara***

Welcoming eyes peer inquisitively at the two newcomers to the Dehiwala Zoo. The sheer magnificence of their movements are entrancing, from their gigantic paws elegantly treading across the encampment, a swish of their long tails, even a yawn boasting their sharp white teeth, the blue eyed beauties demand the centre of attention.

Oblivious to the intruding eyes, Shwetha and Sudaraka bask in the morning sun, cooling themselves in the pond for a while, then a bout of playful frolicking on the grass and back to the pond for a cool off. The two young white tigers introduced to the Dehiwala Zoo are bundles of mischief, never sitting in one place for long, pouncing on each other, their naughty little squabbles and games of tag are constantly on display.

Their incredible size and structure leave us stunned as we learn that the male Sudaraka is just over two years old and the female Shwetha even younger. Their strong fore and hind limbs are apparent from a distance and the swiftness of their movements in carrying the immense weight of their bodies is proof of the arrant power within.

Under the directions of Ananda Lokuranamuka, the Director of the Dehiwala Zoological Gardens, the staff of the Education Centre were untiring in their efforts to provide us with knowledge on the two newcomers and their origins. Shwetha and Sudaraka were flown in from China as part of an animal exchange programme in the month of March and needed extra attention during the early period of stay to get them acclimated to the tropical weather conditions. Still unable to bear the heat, their most active time is between the early hours of the mornings and evenings, retiring to their dens under the afternoon sun. Shwetha and Sudaraka are white hybrids of the Bengal tiger breed and being brought up in

a tame environment since they were cubs, we were informed that the young ones were approachable.

Scores of visitors make a special stop by the white tiger abode, to catch a glimpse of these beauties, and the pair put on quite a show with their fun and games in a world of their own. The male Sudaraka is quite the entertainer, seeing us observing them from afar he approaches, looking up from their enclosure below he lies belly-up and opens his jaws wide as if posing for the best shot.

As we gaze down enraptured at the dignity of this creature, it is a heartbreaking thought that the tiger is severely endangered with already three out of the nine tiger subspecies extinct. As Sudaraka and Shwetha withdraw to their dens for the afternoon, we bid adieu to our playful friends. Their showmanship for the day was not in vain, I for one already long to see them again.