

Beyond Bentara



The old Bentota Bridge that served for many years as a mode of conveyance

The waters of the Bentara River seemed to stand still and the babble of the river, if there were any, would have been drowned in the din of the traffic that clogged the A2 highway. Standing above the river, on a Bridge that connected the towns of Aluthgama and Bentota, I attempted to recall the various legends and sayings associated with the area. Focusing my gaze on the road that wound through the Bentota town, disappearing in to the distance, I inched forward eager to discover what lay beyond the Bentara River.

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

Our journey to explore the borders beyond the Bentara River, began on the Bentota Bridge. Taking a moment to observe the river that calmly shimmered in the dimming sun rays, we were brought out of our quietude by a sudden onslaught of speeding boats and jet skis scattering the river waters and leaving a trail of white foam in their wake.

It is told in ancient lore that a demon by the name of Bem had guarded the river banks of Bentara and when crossing the river in the bygone days, people would seek the blessings of guardian deities for a safe journey. It is said that the town name and the river name was derived from this folk legend combining the words Bem and thota (river bank) to be later pronounced as Bentota or Bentara. Nowadays the river and the town is renowned for the breadth of water related activities such as water skiing, snorkelling, sailing, wind surfing and diving to name a few. Further, one can find countless hotels snuggled along the Bentota beach strip teeming with tourists, local and foreign alike, especially during the months between November and April.

Across the road, an iron bridge, rusty with old age and running alongside the railway line, caught our eyes and we quickly approached to see it. Having stood for more than 100 years as denoted by an iron plank that read 'Government Factory, 1902, E C Davies, Engineer', the bridge had been the main mode of conveyance, besides the train and the ferry, since the beginning of the 19th Century, until the newly built bridge that is now part of the A2 highway replaced the aging structure.

Back on the road, we snaked through the Colombo-Galle highway whisking pass Induruwa, Kosgoda, Ahungalla and reaching Balapitiya where we took a moment's respite to enjoy the crowds that ferried back and forth in the Madhu Ganga. A popular spot for river safaris, the river on this particular day was serene with only a few boats running the length. The Madhu Ganga offers an eco system that is pervaded with a mangrove forest and small islets. With such variety on offer the river presents ample adventure for travellers without having to wander far and wide.

Adorning every inch available in these shops were masks

On and on we went, to realise that we have reached Ambalangoda where we were surrounded by countless shops, big and small, carrying masks. Artists sat in front, chipping away at blocks of wood or painting an already shaped mask in vibrant hues. Adorning the walls and every inch available in these shops were masks and puppets that represented various folklores of Sri Lanka. Decked thus these quirky creations depicted the renown that Ambalangoda has for masks and puppetry. Stopping at one shop, owned by R M L Raveendra, we watched eagerly as his wife Devika set about designing and colouring a template for a new mask. The shop

was strewn with countless masks... devil masks, small and large elephants, puppets and more. One carving depicting the Maha Kola Sanniya, a ritual that has been present in Sri Lanka for many hundreds of years as a cure for various ailments, drew our eyes and we were informed that the whole carving has been done with one block of wood. Looking at the intricate patterns and the detailed sculpting, we were enthralled to imagine the patience required to sit and chisel away at a misshapen block of wood till such a fascinating form emerged.

Passing many more towns and lonely beach strips where the waves slowly crashed on to the sandy shores we arrived at Hikkaduwa, a paradise for vacationers. Little knick-knack shops that carried various items from clothes to drums to souvenirs littered the narrow road that ran through the town. Tourists wove in and out of these shops and traversed the roads, plunging all too soon to the beach unable to stay away too long from the call of the titillating ocean waves. Multitudes walked the sandy shores or splashed in the waters while still many others lounged around soaking the warmth of the sun rays and indulging in the beautiful ocean that surged before them.

Our final destination was the city of Galle where we pulled up to linger at a small fish market, by the sea shore, packed with people. Apparently as the seas were rough on that particular day, only a handful of boats dared to venture out to the deep seas, making the yield less than most days. People enthusiastically bargained trying to get the best possible deal for the fresh catches piled on the small wooden tables.

Wherever we went winsome smiles greeted us in welcome and a helping hand was always near to guide us in the correct path to reach our next destination. The saying, "do not even bring a newly born kitten, who has not yet opened its eyes, beyond the Bentara River" seemed far away as the kindness and the genuine nature of the people of the southern coast carried us on a journey that encompassed 55 km of beauty and culture of Sri Lanka.

