

Colombo - Matara Expressway: An Agricultural Inheritance



Tour the Island's crop on the Southern Expressway!

Sri Lanka's dark coppery soil is its ultimate treasure. A soil so fertile that anything can take strong root here, is a common adage. As you voyage along the E01 with the impatience of arriving at the Southern beaches, let your eyes wander to the fringes of the tarmac and behold the Island's agricultural inheritance.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Geeth Viduranga

The mist of dawn hovered over the Southern Expressway, dissolving with the warmth of the morning. The windows were a blur of emerald, as we sped through the sleek tarmac. With sleepy eyes we focused to make out the view before us.

Thick groves of rubber trees leaning towards the road from various elevations was the first cultivation that we identified. White pigmented trunks make it easy to spot these lithe greens, bowing off the travellers on their way. It's past the Dodangoda Exit that we enjoyed spectacular views of these sloping beauties growing in strict rows. And throughout the highway these plantations of rubber can be seen, boasting its contribution in putting Sri Lanka amongst the world's top ten producers of natural rubber.

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Coconut trees beckoned our attention with fringed leaves cha-chaing with the wind. Nothing paints a prettier picture of the paradise Island than coconut palms glinting in the sun. The tall palms along the beach are the embodiment of enjoyment and tropical heaven. Yet, the copses of coconut that we glimpsed en route to Matara represent the economical importance of this unassuming palm. From its fruit to its root, this tree serves as cooking ingredients, medicine, roof material and lumber for furniture. The estates of the coconut triangle that leans on the E01 span out in acres catering to a never ceasing demand.

As we rushed through Mathugama, a far more exotic palm waved us to slowdown. *Elaeis guineensis* or the African oil palm stood short and stout, burgeoning rosy smiles in its midst. These red fruits are pulped and refined into oil used for cuisine and body care products. The oil palms' roots are new to the Island's earth, yet are holding strong, diversifying the benefits of the agriculture industry that sustained Sri Lanka since the times of yore.



Green silhouettes sway in the glow of morning

Clearings of light green stand out from the thick groves as the vehicle plied on. In symmetrical squares the lush cultivation spanned like a sea of lime interrupted by isles of banana or coconut. There's a sense of calm that sets in as the rice fields drifted into view, paddy sauntering in the the breeze. There's a soothing feel in watching the buffaloes taking a break from their chores by lounging in their mud baths or a farmer out yonder tending to his crop.

As we crossed over the Bentara Ganga, our view was jarred by fortified concrete. Mangroves filled our flanks, bushy and wild with vines creating ripples in the

water. The Highway boards indicated we were in the vicinity of Batuwanhena – Elpitiya. There was a shriek to look left and as our heads turned we were greeted by a scene of glossy flat leaves that draped a thin polished green bark. It was Cinnamon! Crowding plots of land in rows, this spice was ancient Sri Lanka's most coveted gem. An aroma that lured foreign nations from across Oceans to these shores. Cinnamon plants are short and easily mistaken for young rubber plantations, however the colour of the trunk is a helpful hint.

Rubber, coconut, cinnamon, paddy, cashew, tea, puwak and even the homely banana shrub. The Southern Expressway is not just a quick ride to the glimmering southern coast...

Along our quest to spot Sri Lanka's various agro crops, we were caught by surprise by a red hue that glowed through the green. It was the dwarf cashew tree showing off its flat leaves shaded in red. As the orchard sped past (too fast to click a photo!), I felt a pang of hunger and a tingle in my tongue for something spicy. Cooked or roasted, this creamy nut is much-craved for.

On the home stretch to Matara, the Island's famous symbol stole our attention. Tea bushes concealed low-lying hills and surrounded pint-sized houses. Here tea does not take over the slopes to create a carpet of green. This truly Southern scene shows pruned tea bushes co-existing with the tangled wild of the terrain. As we breathed in this view, an unusual palm swayed into the window. Towering over the tea fields was a row of *puwak* (areca palm) the lanky cousin of the coconut tree. This is the mother plant of the betal nut, the kernel chewed with betal leaf, a traditional past time that colours the mouths of its consumer crimson.

Rubber, coconut, cinnamon, paddy, cashew, tea, puwak and even the homely banana. The Southern Expressway is not just a quick ride to the glimmering southern coast, it's a tour of the paradise Island's bountiful crop.

