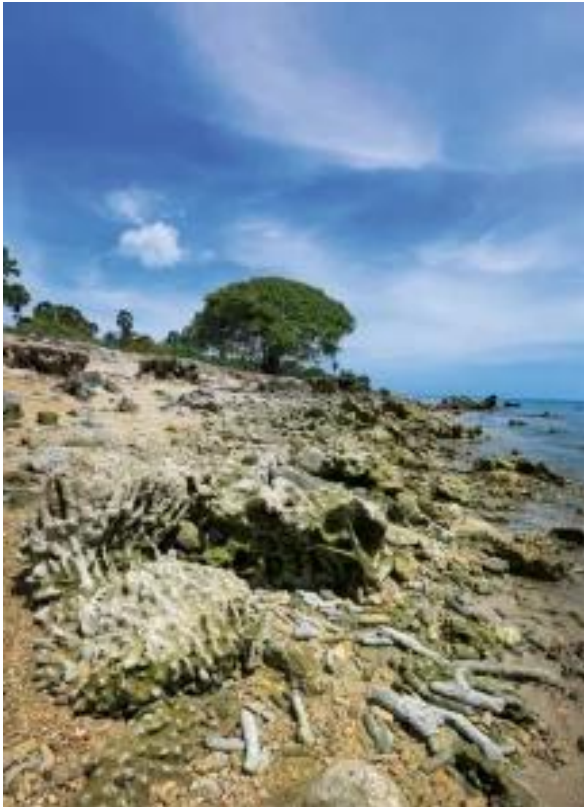


Delving Deep into Delft

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The craggy beaches of Delft, washed with bones of coral

Wild horses, baobabs, growing rocks: discover the wild marvels of the most intriguing island in the North.

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The brightly coloured ferry called 'Neduntharakai' spawned white foam as she cut her way through the green Indian Ocean. We were on our way to Delft. We had rubbed off sleep to come to the Karikadduwan jetty in time for the morning trip.

Delft is an unusual place, with not only a distinctive Dutch name but also a Dutch character thanks to colonial rulers who left behind ruins and relics. The Dutch heritage also remains within the population in the form of blue eyes, a startling physical feature that surfaces in the gene pool up to this day.

Landing, we discovered Delft to be sunny. In its very brightness and aridity is a cheerfulness that bakes off any dark, damp or depressing thoughts. Apart from Palmyra, the other motif in the island are walls. Delft is crisscrossed with coral rock walls. In an island with plenty of coral the islanders have turned to the bounty of the ocean and coral rock walls mark every man's boundary.

Our first stop was at a kovil with a rock outside swathed with a shimmering gold-green shawl and other Hindu paraphernalia of the wayside sacred. Called the "Growing Rock", this is said to be slowly growing into a resemblance of a cobra. And indeed the rock seemed to have bubbled and curled into a sinister shape – just one of the enigmas this island harbours. Yet another mystery that has to be mentioned is the Giant's Foot, a colossal, chilling footprint on a rock.

The old Dutch fort in Delft today has ground down to a grey mass of foundation and walls amidst the dry greenery. Only their great girth can conjure images of erstwhile power and glory. Ironically the star of the fort now is its dove cote. Once but a very small cog in the wheel of this bustling complex, it has now moved to the centre of the limelight. To our eyes today this feature seems to have been influenced by Japanese design.

Driving around, you are mostly passing beachscapes which resemble a no man's land. The sea was very hostile, the waves slapping on a devilish formation of coral near the beach. Not far away from the beach were an efflorescence of the coppery-orange aloe vera, their leaves unfurling like giant starfish opening up for the sun. The beach was scraggy and littered with bones of the ubiquitous coral.

On craggy rocks jutting up from the shallower sea, colonies of the beautiful Common Tern were seen preening themselves and quivering with delight in the sunlight.

Our last stop was the lonely Queen's Tower. Though primitive, it is probably the neatest and most charming little lighthouse in the country.

The wild horses of Delft dawned on us like sprites; proud, aristocratic spirits no one can approach, let alone catch or tame. A blonde beauty who tossed her mane with such vivacious charm trotted away from us. She was the first sign of the big colony, who were on a dry grassland dotted with bleached coral, moving and grazing as one. As we came closer, the horses whinnied and began to canter away, their manes rippling in the wind.



Wild horses: the spirit of freedom in Delft

On the grass we found bleached relics of dead horses; skulls with long molars lying still in the softly blowing wind. As we drove away, the handsome, wild beasts faded into a mirage and soon diminished to nothing.

The most outlandish and exotic sight in Delft is the Baobab tree, one of a couple of specimens of the weird African tree to thrive in Sri Lanka. This statuesque giant with its bottle trunk spread a thousand little fingers high up to the blue sky, searching. Introduced by the Arabs probably for nostalgic reasons, this native of the dry African bushland seemed comfortable here, even though it had such unlikely neighbours in the thin Palmyra and the other Northern dry zone greenery.

Our last stop was the lonely Queen's Tower. Though primitive, it is probably the neatest and most charming little lighthouse in the country. The fire lit at the bottom used to tunnel up so the dancing flames escaped in curls, warning ships in stormy nights.

The ferry was to sail back to mainland Jaffna at three, the sleepy hour of the day. As the craft slowly trailed away I looked back, and was captivated by the charm of the slowly disappearing Delft's solitary existence; a unique island in the sun with its own character.

