Down The Valley, Up the River

Posted on



The inexhaustible beauty of the Knuckles Mountain Range

Driving along, it is near-impossible to peel your eyes from the view of the mountains, which are visible from just about everywhere. Suddenly, you're alerted to the trickle of a waterfall, but too late, you've already passed it. There is a strange way in which the enormity and timelessness of the place is undercut by the tiny and the elusive. This time we stop for it.

Words Benjamin Fowler Photographs Indika De Silva

Making our way through the many peaks and valleys of the Knuckles Forest Reserve, our vehicle slows down to cross a small bridge over a river at the bottom of a valley in the shadow of Mount Maningala. Given the area's abundant tree cover, the river is only visible to us for the few seconds we are crossing the bridge before we are to make the steep climb up the next mountain laid before us. Many of such features in Knuckles are visible this way – hidden pockets of beauty tucked away into a landscape dominated by enormous mountains and never-ending expanses of trees.

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The view of the river is the sort that would only occupy a few seconds of admiration as you travelled to your pre-planned destination, that is, if you weren't already focused on the massive peaks elsewhere. So we disembark at the Telgamu Oya, and what would normally be a fleeting notion of beauty turns out to be a world in no short supply of features and secrets of its own. Though sections of the river would surely be visible from some of the trails that wind their way up the mountainsides, we decide to get up close and personal, hopping along the river's many stones as our path, abandoning plans and trails as the very sort of thinking that causes us to skim over a place like this in the first place. We leave intention with the vehicle and take off our shoes.

From where we approach it, the river is lined with concrete chutes on either side, used to redirect water elsewhere in the valley like highway off-ramps. The concrete looks as old and weathered as the stones themselves, and makes for a convenient

path for us to reach the river. It terminates near a large, flat rock in the middle of the river, a perfect place for us to take in the sights, and scout out a path onwards, upriver.

I dip my feet into the water, hoping to get some respite for my feet sore from hiking, and what I get instead is water so cool my whole body feels invigorated. And the water is so clear it's no trouble at all to spot a rock flat and stable enough to stand on. Looking down to secure my footing, it's easy to see which rocks are slippery with moss and underwater flora, as well as see fish stagnant on the riverbed, basking in the sun. I'm instantly jealous, and it's the first of many times I'm tempted to just dive into the water, clothes and all. In fact, not far upstream is a 'natural pool', and the clear water makes it obvious to see what a comfortable depth there is for full-body immersion.

Hopping along the river's many stones as our path, we abandon plans and trails as the very sort of thinking that causes us to skim over a place like this in the first place

With the abundance of birdsongs, clear mountain air and colourful butterflies and dragonflies darting every which way, there's a dreamlike quality to the river. Up above are clear blue skies, an occasional cloud or two, and Knuckles mountains, ever-looming in the distance above the trees. The river is littered with enormous, ancient rocks, scarred by geological time.

We make our way upstream, hopping along the rocks, or slowly manoeuvring over the submerged ones. We plot courses that make use of both river and land, trying to find the highest boulder we can climb so as to get the best vantage point of where to go next. There are ample stones to choose from and different paths to take.

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Need a reprieve from the sun? A path towards the riverbank provides you with tree cover. Feet sore from sharp rocks? A short stand on a submerged rock can be like an elixir for your feet. Feet too wet to confidently climb that sloped rock? The sun-absorbing black rocks above the water will grant you dry footing in no time.

There's a lot to take in. Alongside the tree-lined river we pass by a few thin

waterfalls. One was almost completely enshrouded by the trees, and would have been easy not to have noticed. I'm reminded of a hike we had taken earlier that day, when, at a much higher elevation, we passed by a fountain that leaked pure water from out of the rock. I had no idea where the fountain flowed – its descent was impossible to track from that height. I knew now it came to places like this. It was a unique feeling being able to plainly see these mountains in the distance as I waded in the water and know that from the perspective of that mountain, straddling the distant horizon, this point of the river where we were standing would be indistinguishable from a vast sea of green.

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Though the river itself runs remarkably straight, rather than continuously ascend, it appears to us as a series of low, flat plateaus, like a series of stair steps, punctuated by boulders and brief waterfalls. This greatly helps build anticipation – you get a different viewpoint, both ahead and behind you, with each higher rock you climb.

Standing high atop a boulder, scoping out the rocks upstream, it's hard not to feel adventurous in a manner that's so gleeful it borders on the child-like. We press on this path with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of beauty, with a momentum of our own wonder and excitement, not at any moment feeling the need to answer the question, why?

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