Everywhere And Every Turn: It’s Fresh Fruits & Veggies

Posted on



Mangoes, pineapples, watermelons and pumpkins tantalisingly arranged at a kiosk

Buying bag-loads of fresh fruits and vegetables on the long drive back home after a holiday, is something most Sri Lankans look forward to, perhaps as much as the holiday itself. Several of the country’s highways – linking main cities or in the vicinity of tourist hot-spots – are lined with little shops selling seasonal fruits and vegetables specific to each region. The Dambulla-Habarana road – where I found shops full of fragrant mangoes stacked alongside large watermelons, spiny pineapples and freshly picked cabbages, beans and brinjals – is no exception.

Words Haseena Razak Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

Enticing passers-by to stop and buy their delicious fruit and crisp vegetables are rustic little coconut frond covered shops. The bright reds, yellows and greens of the mangoes, avocados, passion fruit, ripening papayas and shiny tomatoes seemed to work like traffic lights, stopping vehicles full of holiday-makers and pilgrims returning home from Sri Lanka’s historical cities. The main attraction at the

roadside stopovers however, is the mango.

Mangoes can also be eaten raw with a sprinkling of chilli powder to complement the sour taste of the unripe fruit.

Stepping into one of the shops,I immediately recognised the sweet, fruity aroma of ripe mangoes. The vendor expertly sliced slivers of mangoes for buyers to sample. As the well-loved flavour filled my mouth, I watched two little girls tasting their own slices of ripe,red mango. Clearly enjoying themselves, they sucked the flesh off their mango skins and giggled as tiny rivulets of deep orange mango juice dribbled down to their elbows. Soon their cheeks and chins were stained the same colour as their arms.

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Most of the mangoes sold at these shops are grown in the vicinity. There are different types such as the smaller Vilard and Mee Amba, and the larger Rata Amba and Petti Amba. The hefty Karthakolamban mangoes are brought all the way from Jaffna.

At a cluster of shops standing side by side, trucks loaded with big, green watermelons drove up to unload their juicy cargo. Making great sport of the activity, local boys working at the shops lined up by the back of the trucks and began tossing the beach ball shaped fruits to their co-workers. One by one, all the watermelons passed through the hands of the boys and came to rest on shelves inside the shops. Watermelons are brought from areas like Mahawa and Wanathavilluwa.

Although not as popular as the mangoes, some travellers can’t seem to resist stopping along the way to sink their teeth into the refreshing, pink flesh of a slice of watermelon. Adults and children alike, stood by the shops, faces buried in pieces of melon as the abundant juice dripped off their chins, looking up only to spit out the smooth black pips. Sated, they then bought bags full of watermelons, mangoes and several other fruits and vegetables, loaded up their vehicles and continued on their way. During a lull in the arrival of buyers, a spontaneous, friendly food fight, fuelled chiefly by pieces of watermelon, broke out among some of the shopkeepers and their helpers. Having dodged a piece of flying fruit, I managed to find a quiet corner to watch the mini battle, as people tried to simultaneously pelt others and avoid

being hit themselves. The excitement lasted only ten minutes however, as it was time to tidy up and prepare the area for the arrival of the evening spate of travellers.

Shopkeepers sprinkled water on the earth outside their stalls to prevent dust rising and settling on their precious produce. Their helpers began carefully rearranging the piles of fruits and vegetables. While certain fruits are brought from distant places (pineapples from Kuliyapitiya and passion fruit from Matale), most fruits, like avocados, and all the vegetables are grown by farmers in the locality.

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There are many reasons why this particularly Sri Lankan post-holiday ritual has become popular. Chief among them is that the fruit and vegetables sold at these wayside shops are usually fresher than those found in large markets, as most of the produce is grown in the locality. The items are also sold at lower prices than they are in larger cities. Additionally, travellers like taking back gifts for relatives and neighbours at home. The gifts, especially when they are fresh treats specific to a far off region of the country, are accepted with much pleasure.

Perhaps it is the desire to break journey and rejuvenate before continuing along the road home that renders the wayside shops most appealing. The almost festive atmosphere that envelops the little kiosks is the perfect pick-me-up for travel weariness and even post-holiday depression. Driving along with a trunk full of sweet smelling fruits and the anticipation of digging into the tasty treats at home is possibly the most delicious ending to the perfect holiday.

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