Flaming Flamingoes

Posted on



A pink army wading the blue: your first sight of flamingoes in Vallai is a delightful shock

We encounter a massive flock of pink ballerinas in Vallai who have travelled across oceans to avoid the winter back home.

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A vast lagoon in Vallai is the crossing point from Jaffna to Point Pedro. This was a lovely hue of blue in the immaculate early morning; shimmering like a topaz. Among the distant grey green fringes sentinel-like Palmyra rose towards the sky. The road stretched on like a ribbon between this blue and green lagoonscape.

All the time, we were keeping out a wary eye for a pink troop, so when something like candy floss seemed to have materialized on the far away saline waters, we cheered. Flamingoes! We came to halt by the small kovil painted with the bright colours of the Hindu faith. A great cutout of Hanuman, the monkey god towered against the lagoon, as if he had just now landed from India in his most magnified form, coronet touching the sky.

Here we got down and made our way cautiously towards the fringe of the waters. We tiptoed on mud from one bush to the other, bowed to the point of comicality. Since our group approached with great discretion the birds did not take fright. They stood like a whitish pink reef, edged by a colony of tiny brown teal that swam or flew based on mood. Flamingoes, at times with one leg daintily folded up and an elegant posture must be the best posers among birds. It was magical to see them standing in this dignified fashion as above, the sky would be dotted with ducks, like a thousand embers thrown up by a blazing fire.



When one flamingo begins to fly, the rest are sure to follow

We knew we were fortunate to experience the flamingoes up close, even though estuarine lagoons such as these, unhampered by vegetation, are among their favourite hangouts together with large alkaline or saline lakes. These flamingoes have an air of indignation, but in actuality they are ultra-sensitive to what is going on around them. It is sensational to see the flaming birds move in slow synchronization. The slightest threat and they scatter then rise like a pink cloud, to settle on another spot.

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One would quite scarcely tire of observing these gracefully flushed ballerinas. However, they can also be funny. The distant silhouette of a flamingo in upwards slow flight has something comic; an unlikely mix of awkwardness as well as elegance. I watched one long-necked silhouette on the blue sky rather like a gigantic dragonfly. But when they actually ‘wing’ it, it is a magical sight, a slow flight of ballerinas with their wings folding up and down. The birds also seem to

enjoy drawing patterns in the heavens. At one point they flew in a line, like a connected chain of stick insects. Then they would scatter in a joyous melee, handfuls of pink pearls thrown up by some giant. It is only once they have spread their wings that you can see inky black edges, contrasting with the other mellower shades.

The flamingoes here possess a subtle pearly sheen, touched with pink. Solid pink is visible only on the beak, their painfully delicate straw-like legs and the wing tips. Plant plankton and zooplankton in these waters provide the birds this colour, and greater the plankton the stronger their pink hue.

It is difficult to get bored of these elegant, gentle, beautifully coloured, charismatic yet comical, entertaining birds. We would have stayed on much longer had they not grown weary of our presence and flown off!.

