

From Fear of Water to 44km on the Mahaweli River

Posted on

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Elephants along Wasgamuwa National Park.

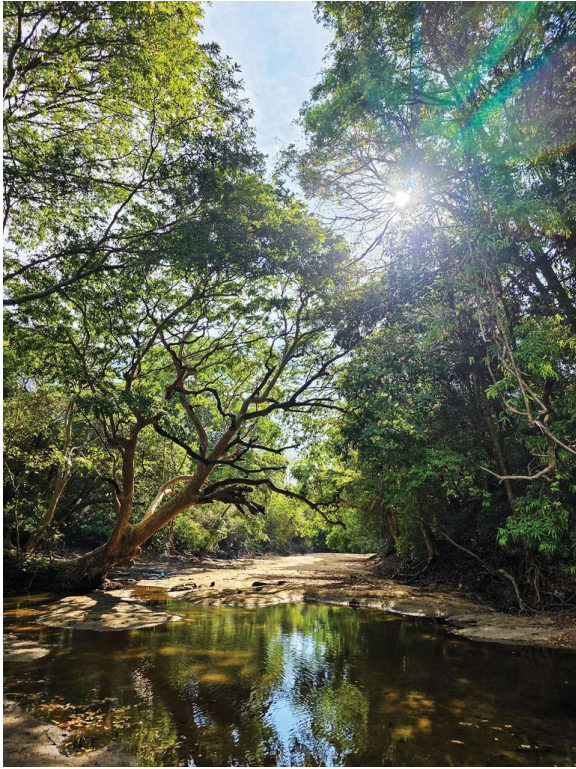
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Kayaking was something I had a fondness for a long time, but I was a little afraid, as I had a slight phobia of falling into the water. On the other hand, I cannot swim, and I had a feeling that I would die if I fell because I couldn't swim. However, as a traveler who loves exploring, I have tried many water sports that I really enjoyed. One day, I experienced the safety of a life jacket while snorkeling at Blue Beach Island in Dickwella. Being so comfortable, I ended up floating backward more during the session rather than snorkeling.

The first time I got a paddle in my hand was in March 2026 while I was traveling in Vietnam. That day, I got a strong desire to do more kayaking as it was so chill. Having that desire in my mind, after coming back to Sri Lanka, I went kayaking at Diyatha Lake. After that, I got a chance to kayak and learned some techniques during an office OBT session.



Mahaweli welcomed us!



Beauty on the way.



What is more pinkish? Kayak or Sky?

The cumulative experience developed my desire even more and finally ended up with a three-day kayaking and camping tour on the Mahaweli River.

Recently, I had traveled a lot with the same group for years. This was a game-changer as I joined the tour with a bunch of strangers. I had met Sadeesha, one of the organizers, once, and knew the other one, Sam, only via WhatsApp. Hence, the

journey was extremely exciting from the very first day I enrolled.

Out of lots of chaos, the day arrived. It was September 18th, and I was supposed to go to Borella by 3.30am. I used a taxi app and reached the location to join the team. Despite everyone who was supposed to be there being present on time, one guy upheld the tradition by being late, lol.

Just imagine you are on a kayak, the kayak is in the middle of an unpolluted water stream, the river is surrounded by green forest, and on top there's a blue sky over your head. It's not a dream. That's what I experienced.

And we started the journey around 4am, heading to Wasgamuwa. Suddenly, Sadeesha got a call. One guy had left the bus to roam around while we were waiting, and we had left him there. We stopped and waited for him as it was only a few meters away. And the journey started properly with lots of laughter.

On the way, at around 6.30am, we made a comfort stop for coffee at Galewela. At that time, I noticed a few more had joined us on the way while I was asleep. The scenery from Galewela to Wasgamuwa was breathtaking. There were lakes with flowers, mountains, and paddy fields, and the road itself offered a scenic view.

We reached Wasgamuwa around 8.30am, where the bus journey ended. We unloaded our bags from there. I didn't have a dry bag for myself, so I had to rent one. So, I was busy repacking the items that I needed to carry for the next two days. Then we had a delicious breakfast that was ready for us, and we did all the prep work before jumping into the jeeps.

There was a total of 16 members who joined the tour apart from Sam, Sadeesha, and their team. We all hopped into three safari jeeps and reached Wasgamuwa National Park. After purchasing the entry tickets, we headed to the Mahaweli River, where we were supposed to get into the kayaks.

Amenthi, her husband Chulanga, their friends Jehan and Oshan, and I were in one jeep. The trip was full of stories, including their travels, nostalgic millennial stories, and more. On the way, we were lucky enough to see some elephants, a Serpent Eagle, a group of Asian Openbills, and so many other birds.

By around 11am, we reached the location and selected a kayak for ourselves, followed by a detailed safety and instruction briefing by Sam. Before that, we handed over our dry bags to the team, who would take them to the 1st camping site by truck, since road access was available up to that point.

Finally, the time arrived to get into the water with our kayaks. It was kind of a task on the first day to get into the kayak. And I need to mention that the team was very supportive and helped each other very happily.

After some trial paddling, we set off on the journey around 11.30am. Mahaweli welcomed us all very warmly.

The first few hours were busy as we were all getting familiar with the kayak and the water flow, remembering instructions, noticing rocks, and taking pictures/videos. Other than Sam and his team, only “Complimentary Sam” had done this tour previously, so all the other 15 members were curious about what was next.

Once we got used to the kayak, it was all about conscious paddling, because noticing rocks before we hit them would not only keep us from falling out of the kayak but also keep Sam from having a heart attack!

We hit a small rapid, which I really enjoyed. Then we pulled over at the riverbank for lunch. Must say, all the meals were thoughtfully prepared to provide the proper nutrients that helped maintain our body strength.

We had a little break while having lunch, and some monkeys from Wasgamuwa Park also visited to greet us, almost hitting our heads with some branches.

After lunch, we started kayaking again, and it was all about enjoying the view rather than the basics. Just imagine you are on a kayak, the kayak is in the middle of an unpolluted water stream, the river is surrounded by green forest, and on top there's a blue sky over your head.

It's not a dream. That's what I experienced. Sometimes, we witnessed lots of birds.

After paddling for a few hours, we took a tour of the jungle, hoping to see some birds, but we only heard different species. Starting the last stretch, we continued paddling to our campsite for day one after approximately 12 kilometers of kayaking.

The rest of the day was all about relaxing. Had a nice bath in the Mahaweli River

itself, in the flowing water. The truck that carried our stuff had arrived at the campsite by the time we got there. Not only were our tents ready, but the evening tea was also ready.

I changed into a casual outfit and had a coffee while enjoying the river view. Suddenly, I noticed the sky was turning into magical colors, which made me run to the riverbank. After everyone got changed into their comfortable outfits, we gathered around, introduced ourselves individually, and ended up with a live music session backed by Sam's one-piece band. Bonfire, music, flavorful dinner, moonlight, and the jungle were all there.

I couldn't imagine anything else that I could ask for. After dinner, it was a wrap for the day, with tired hands and legs but a curious mind about what the next day would bring.

The sound of the birds woke me up before the alarm. The tent was comfortable, and I slept well. The jungle supported us with all the facilities that we needed.

Golden sunrays were kissing the world while creating Pinterest-worthy scenery. We slowly started the day as we had enough time to get ready.

On the second day, we had to carry our belongings in our kayaks as there wasn't any road access to the second campsite other than through the river. I strictly followed the "lighter is better" theory, which I always apply in my life. I managed to pack the essentials into a 15L dry bag and handed over the balance of the stuff to the truck, which we would meet in Mananpitiya.

One of my favorite meals—white rice, coconut sambol, and oil-fried dried fish—was prepared for breakfast, giving me an extra boost and making the morning even more interesting.

In the morning, we found that a harmless snake and a scorpion were in two of our tents, but none of us were injured. Around 9.30am, we hit the river, starting day two of the journey. The river was not deep, and there were several rocks. So, we had to get into the water and drag the kayak for a small distance.

Compared to the previous day, only the nature of the river and the level of friendship had changed. When it came to the water, we hit more rapids, which boosted our adrenaline, whereas the team was also becoming more comfortable

with each other. By this time, we were all in sync with the water's rhythm, and we managed to get through the rapids without falling out of our kayaks.

During lunch, we had a free-flow session in the rapids, where we parked our kayaks on the riverbank and floated through the rapids with the support of Sam and Shan. There were lots of beautiful fish in the river that visited us to say hi while we were trying to clean our plates.

It was a peaceful journey with a simple lullaby vibe after lunch. After successfully passing another strong rapid, we parked our kayaks and walked to "Kalinga Nuwara", a large river island with archaeological remains, including ancient clay bricks and broken granite building fragments. Apart from the ancient ruins, there were also some "Ditwa" ruins. Then we jumped into the kayaks to start the day's final stretch.

A few of us had seen an elephant while passing the island. Not only the river but also the surrounding landscapes changed dramatically just after passing the island. The river was wider, full of sandbanks, and had just flat water with no rapids at all, while the surroundings appeared a little drier than the area we had passed through over the past 24 hours.

As the river was wider, we were just like small ants flowing in the river. Earlier, we were careful with rocks, but from now on, we have to pay attention to sand as well.

The river was flat with no rapids, which made us have to paddle harder because the water's support was very low. No matter the changes, the scenery was still beautiful, so I spent more time looking around and taking some pictures to take home.

After enjoying a little too much, Wasana reminded me not to idle, as I was in the middle of the team, where the first set was visible to my eyesight, while the others were not even in the visible area.

Then I started paddling a little faster and joined the front team. After around 18-20km of kayaking on the second day, we reached the campsite, our home for the second night.



Ancient Ruins at Kalinda Nuwara.



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Sadeesha, tiny, but strong! Brave girl!



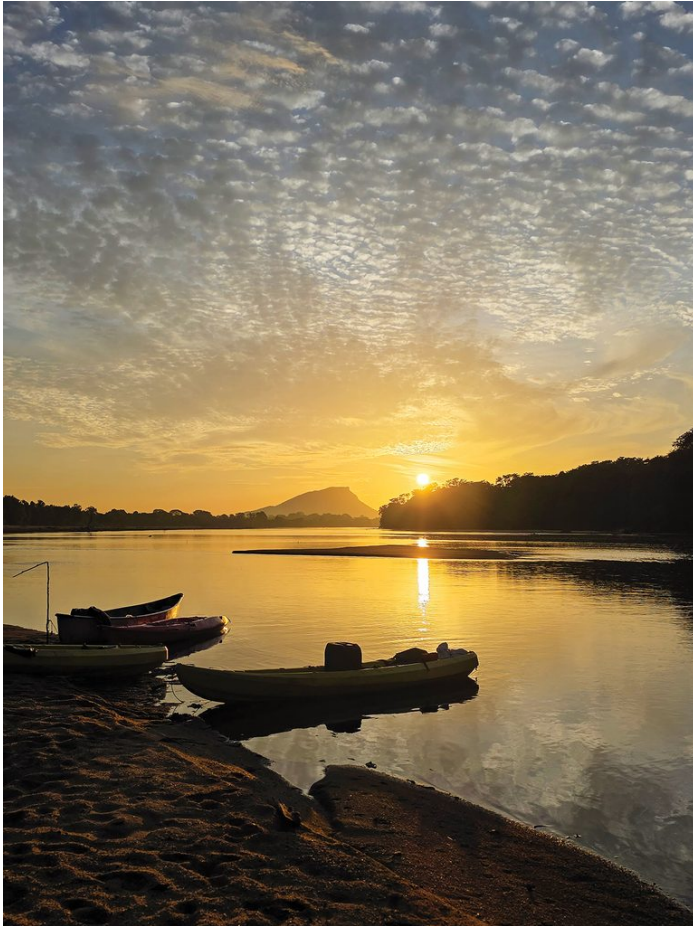
Rapids boost energy while Niroshan and Shan taking care of safety.



One fine evening in Mahaweli.



Bonfire, not just for fun.



And the Kayaks were kissed by golden rays.

Before getting into the river, we all helped the team find dried branches for the bonfire. The river was flowing better, and we all had a relaxing river bath until we were shivering.

The sky became a painter, giving us a live painting session that was a masterpiece to enjoy while we were bathing in the river. The river's upside was a colorful painting reflected in the water, while the river's downside was grey, and the Dibulagala Temple shone white.

After freshening up, I had a coffee to refresh while a few were enjoying a beer under the moonlight. The effects of long-distance kayaking hit the body when night fell. My hands and core were freaking hurting, but I decided not to think of it.

The campsite was a huge sandbank near the river, creating a beautiful landscape. Before wrapping up the day with the bonfire, we all gathered around, had chit-chats, listened to each other's stories, and had dinner. All of this was done under the moonlight, with a sky full of stars. Finally, I hit the tent, hoping to wake up to a dramatic morning. I couldn't say I slept well on the second night because my whole body was aching from every angle. But I survived. The sound of an owl reminded me where I was. It spent quite a lot of time close to the campsite.

I woke up around 5.30am, as I have always been a chaser of sunrises and sunsets. Once I stepped out of the tent, I couldn't believe my eyes. I knew the sunrise would be beautiful, but I didn't expect it to be that pretty.

And suddenly, I noticed that, in the rush of having a sleep, I had used the door that faced the west. Otherwise, I could have noticed the color of the sky earlier.

Whatever! The most important thing was waking up to see that beauty. I quickly freshened up and sat closer to the river, facing the mountain, to capture the beauty not only on my mobile but also with my own naked eyes. It was indeed a dramatic sunrise.

As we were on a sandbank, the golden rays made us feel we were on a golden yard. When recalling that moment now, I understand that I could forget all the pain I had by the time daylight appeared.

For day three morning, we were treated to milk rice by the team, which tasted yummy.

I'm so grateful to the whole team, including Sam, Sadeesha, Banda, Shan, Niroshan, and Wasana (the team was afraid of him rather than of hitting a rapid and falling from the kayak), who took care of us throughout these three days. Safety was prioritized everywhere. Not forgetting the delicious meals cooked for us.

By the time they finished packing, we were ready, packing our tiny little stuff into our kayaks.

Even though the golden hour created dramatic scenery on the sandbank, by this time the daylight made us feel dramatic, as the sand was already hot even at 8am.

When we started the journey on the 18th, I only knew Sam and Sadeesha, but by the

20th, I had become friends with 15 different amazing souls around the country.

The four friend groups with exploring couple Amenti and Chulanga, and funny Jehan, who recalled 80s–90s nostalgia, and wildlife fan Oshan; two siblings Hiruni and Tharindu, who were having swords against each other every time and caring too; the three-friend group Rashmi, the over-packing guy who was careful enough to maintain his nails during the trip; DJ Hiranya, the tall and talented guy; Sudaraka, the hidden billionaire, and complimentary Sam and naturalist Abu, who were always high; the lawyer couple Riyaza and Tharindu; and funny couple Isha and Paliwatta, who forgot their stuff, including clothes, in the bus on the first day itself, teaching all of us how light we can be.

Day three was more like still-water kayaking. The river was flat with no rapids, but sand was everywhere. There were times when we had to get out of the kayak and drag it ourselves because the water level was very low.

Sometimes the wind supported us. However, the journey itself was peaceful as usual, with different challenges.

Then we parked on a sandbank and spent a few hours enjoying the water. It was one of those moments where there was nothing much to do except relax, enjoy the river, and let the time pass. We had our delicious farewell lunch at the sandbank itself, which made the moment even more enjoyable.

After lunch, we eventually got back into our kayaks for the final stretch. Mananpitiya was only about eight to ten kilometers away, and somehow, knowing that the journey was coming to an end made me want to slow down and enjoy those last few kilometers a little more.

In total, we kayaked 44km over this three-day journey, an absolute achievement.

At Mananpitiya, we took a final dip in the Mahaweli River, freshened up, changed into fresh clothes, and headed back to Colombo with aching bodies and hearts full of memories.



Sunny, yet beautiful.

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Team work at sunrise; capturing each other.



The team (L-R): Hiruni, Rashmi, Sudaraka, Hiranya, Abu, Tharindu, Dilani, Jehan,

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Tharindu, Oshan, Chulanga, Amenthi, Isha, Sam and Paliwatta.