Going Wild

Posted on



A pair of leopards spotted at Handun Oruwa as evening approaches

A deep and rumbling roar tore into the night air. A touch of exhilaration shivered through me as I lay in the safety and comfort of my tent. Two of my colleagues occupied a tent adjacent. Having sighted the majestic animals earlier that day, hearing them in the dead of the night, was something else. No doubt, we were well and truly amidst the wilderness, forming a silent bond with its magnetic spirit. Somewhere, in the dark of the night the elusive ones were prowling…

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At the Yala Park Office an open hood safari jeep awaited our arrival. It was a sultry mid afternoon and we were to venture to the Amaya Wild Trails campsite ten kilometres into the Yala National Park. In the sweltering heat there was little

expectation of seeing any notable sightings of animals but mid-way our journey, a swarm of jeeps had gathered by a watering hole. A leopard lay in wait in the nearby underbrush making cautious attempts to cross the road for a drink of water. Though holding positions in watchful silence for the leopard to venture out would have made the most of this opportune moment, with all the jeeps vying for a coveted viewing position, it was little wonder that the leopard would emerge at all. But thirst won over. A usually timid female, revealed our guide, lightly stepped onto the path and was instantly stalled in its tracks by an affronted wild buffalo who was guarding its young. The buffalo's loud call and threatening charge soon alerted the rest of the herd that stood almost militant till the leopard retreated out of sight. Long after we had lost interest, the buffalo remained staunchly staring down the thicket. A drama of the wilderness so early in the day was indeed a promising start!

She moved about with angular grace marking her scent on nearby plants

Our encounter was dampened however with the multitude of jeeps that had arrived ahead of us. Yala favoured us with its fortune once more, however, as our tracker took a chance drive down to Rakina Wala, one of many watering holes around. At a glance it only seemed a deserted and drying pool of water as camouflaged on the dry banks lay a lone leopard resting lethargically. The slow growl of the jeep may have raised it from its stupor and it rose and strolled away from the waters edge. Identified as a female, she settled down once more while we observed her every move. She moved about with angular grace marking her scent on nearby plants before taking to the path and out of our sights. The sole spectators this time we had an unimpeded view of the leopard. Elated with our luck we headed directly to our campsite with some curiosity as to what awaited us there. Along the way a herd of elephants crossing the road caught us unawares. The leader of the herd staggered back in startled surprise and anger, which soon subsided upon realising that we meant no harm. The herd eventually crossed over hurriedly and our day topped off with such a close encounter turned out to be an eventful one.

While our journey fell through shrub jungle and arid grasslands, the approach to the Amaya Wild Trails campsite situated in Yala Block I was doused in the generous cooling shade of thick forest trees. The path led to a clearing where our tents had been set up just by the Menik River flowing below. Our setup comprised of our spacious tents and a kitchen, complete with a chef and service staff of Amaya. The tents made locally, have been designed to emulate the African Serengeti and Masai Mara tents. Both tents pitched facing the river had a porch deck with chairs for lounging around in a singular blend of nature and tranquillity. The tents of ten feet

width and 15 feet in length enclose an inviting double bed and a number of amenities driven for comfort. These tents can accommodate up to six people as well. While the tent elevated on the deck is sealed completely save the zipped entrance, netting along the sides and the doorway ensure ventilation and stave off the many insects. Each tent is provided a battery charged lamp and at the rear of the tent is an enclosed area with ample sanitary facilities inclusive of a shower with running water supplied by overhead tanks for each tent. Hammocks amidst a shaded grove in the farther end of the site afforded a blissful snooze in the stirring wilderness while the river bubbled below.

A lucky whim had us returning to the spot once more to find that the leopard had taken to the ground on a stroll

Upon our arrival, lunch was arranged at a table on the shallow river-bed. In the shade of a Kumbuk tree we sat with our feet in the water, scrunching the soft sandy bed and a hot meal laid before us. While there is no set menu the three meals for the day can be custom-made upon request be it Indian, Chinese, Western, Sri Lankan or Arab cuisine. Many of the amenities and comforts including the specialised cuisine and guided safaris are in place to complete a five star safari camping experience and service. As the afternoon sun subsided, the embankment transformed to an enchanting observation point of the bird life of Yala as often a fish eagle or kingfisher would settle on a nearby branch to dive into the shallow waters for a bite.

The night spent inside the tent proved to be a novelty. The kerosene lamps lit outside cast an amber glow and the wilderness lay visible all around through the tent's 'windows'. While sheer fascination kept my eyes open, the sounds of the wild left me wide awake! A call of a sambur, the roar of a leopard or sudden rustles of movement in the thicket was just too much excitement during hours of slumber. The lull of the jungle eventually cast it spell and blissful sleep won over. It was late night when a flurry of excitement had us awake once more. Wiping sleep from our eyes and staring out into the pitch darkness we soon learned that two leopards had arrived on the banks of the river to mate. Unwilling to disturb the nocturnal rendezvous of the animals we remained within the safe confines of our tents. We had few more hours before dawn.

The approach to the Amaya Wild Trails campsite situated in Yala Block I was doused in the generous cooling shade of thick forest trees

One awakens with the wilderness – or so I learned. It was near impossible to sleep in as a medley of bird calls ascended with the first light; what better way to awaken in the morning! For the inhabitants of the wild the day had begun. We however began sluggishly, with hot cups of tea and breakfast served. The day's activities were divided among bird watching while soaking in the river, dozing off in the hammock lulled by the gentle breeze and a safari through the park. The 36,000 acre Yala Block I had much to offer on our second day we would soon discover.

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It was the dry season at Yala that would last through to September and life seemed to gravitate towards the watering holes. Painted Stork, the Indian Darter, and the Island's largest bird, the Lesser Adjutant were among the bird life that the guide identified for us. At the Kumar Wewa were several mugger crocodiles basking in the sun or slinking below the water surface. As we journeyed along the path, at Diganawela and Rakina Wala junction, we approached several jeeps that had gathered to view a rare spectacle about to unfold. A leopard had just made a kill and was about to cross our path. And it happened in a matter of a few seconds. With a wildboar cub dangling in its jaws it pranced across with acrobatic agility and left us gaping into the thicket where it had vanished. Our photographer resorted to an ungainly balancing act to capture it all as the jeep approached a halt. This was not to be our only treat for the day as farther along Chaitya Road a keen eye of a jeep ahead had spotted a leopard resting atop a rock high above. We waited and watched for many minutes and drove off wondering if it would remain at its place of refuge for long. A lucky whim had us returning to the spot once more to find that the leopard had taken to the ground on a stroll affording a more generous view of its feline grace.

The best sighting arrived later that day just as the sun had begun to recede. We made a turn towards Handun Oruwa, another watering hole. A lone elephant by the water, a mugger crocodile basking and two leopards approaching the water had us all in a profound excitement. Our jeep approached stealthily as possible as the two leopards were preparing to settle down for a drink. The female seemed anxious, and easily startled by the jeep's low rumbles. The parched male had little mind other than lapping the cool water without so much as a pause for breath. Losing light we were compelled to finally abandon our watchpost. It had indeed been a fulfilling day of safari to complete our last day of camping in Yala.

After all the excitement of the day, and a hot dinner served in the lamplight under the trees, sleep stole over the campsite. A civet cat crept around stealthily, as though not to disturb the quiet yet deceptive stillness as the nearby forest rustled quietly. The night prowlers were up and about while we slept soundly in the comfort of our tents.

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