Heading Home

Posted on



The road runs ahead with promise of adventure, excitement, and hopefully some elephants

The sun played on the Trincomalee-Anuradhapura Road. This 110 km highway runs straight, with almost no undulations, through an ancient land that is dry and arid.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam & Anuradha Perera

The cultivator spends his nights in this hut, watching out for wild animals coming to destroy crops

This dry landscape breeds a sense of freedom in the traveller. There is something brisk, salty, healthy and robust about the sea air, especially at the start of our journey in Trincomalee on the eastern coast. Any Sri Lankan traveller taking this road would also feel sentimental, because it was this part of the country, and not the more fertile interior, that fostered the ancient civilization of Sri Lanka.

Travelling down this road, we witnessed vestiges of a vanishing world: yellowing paddy fields with palmyra trees signaling that these are the heartlands of our Dravidian compatriots; the occasional pond dotted with dainty white lilies; the rippling waters of an ancient tank.

There was a pattern to this road. Though it mostly ran through scrub jungle or fields, little towns sprang up regularly. They were full of colour and humanity, though it was difficult to decide whether they should be called ‘picturesque’ or ‘lurid’. I veer towards ‘picturesque’ because the little town with its multicolored signboards and merchandise and cacophony is fast becoming a quaint thing today.

Though often used, ‘arid’ isn’t really the best word to describe these parts. Unlike the more verdant wet areas of the Island, this region is home to nearly all species of wildlife found in the country, including all of our charismatic mega fauna.

It is equally home to a wealth of tradition, legend and culture. The black signboard of the Archaeology Department, which never fails to exert a strong pull on the traveller’s imagination, points to several byroads leading to archeological sites. Seeing as Trincomalee and Anuradhapura are two of the oldest centres of civilization in the country, it wouldn’t have been surprising had we seen three times as many signboards.

Trincomalee’s history goes so far back that its Shiva temple, the Koneswaram, was in fact mentioned in The *Mahabharata*; it has been a Hindu pilgrimage site since 400 BC. Mythology assigns the place a much older date: King Ravana of The*Ramayana* and his mother are said to have worshipped at Koneswaram around 5,000 years ago.

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For a considerable part of its length, the road runs through wilderness. Our hopes of a glimpse of some wildlife were whetted by yellow road signs with silhouettes of elephants and buffalo. We had to be content, however, with the fleeing behinds of a couple of mongooses, some wood pigeons more brightly coloured and shapelier than their city cousins, and a few raptors gliding hungrily in the skies above.

Most of the evidence of the ancient civilization that flourished here has not yet been unearthed. How many overlooked grassy knolls and submerged ruins, if dug up, would revolutionize history as we know it? The air itself feels pregnant with the untapped historic potential in this vast area.

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Towards the end of the road, we were fanned by the breeze that came skimming over the waters of ancient reservoirs. White or ancient brick spires marked the skyline: we were approaching the sacred city of Anuradhapura.

We stopped by an old *wewa* (reservoir) and splashed ourselves with water. From where we stood, knee-deep in the *wewa*, we could see the immaculate Maha Stupa at the peak of Mihintale. It felt like a glimpse of a loved one after a long estrangement. Inherited memory of Anuradhapura, our ancient capital, was reaching its long hand over the millennia to stir warm feelings in my heart. When a people has had one city as their capital for more than 1,400 years, its call would be felt in the bones of the people. I knew that my journey had come to an end here: I had arrived home.













