Hee Haw! Donkey Tales

Posted on



They were scattered everywhere muzzles deep in the shrubs

They stood scattered in the most densely peopled street sides as well as

in the most scarcely populated grassy patches of Mannar, their muzzles deep in shrubs and shoots of grass browned by an all encompassing dust. They ranged in colour from grey and deep chocolate to a carroty and even a rare black or brown. These fascinating creatures, the donkeys in their great numbers, bejewelled the Island of Mannar, making them an inevitable part of its distinct identity.

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Rise and Shine…

The usual early weekday morning, the town was just waking up to another day. The street shops began one by one to open their dreary doors to the sleepy customers on their way to work, hurrying in and out to buy a loaf or some fresh buns. One eager customer however (four legged of course!) lingered on the front step of a certain small eatery, eager eyes on the opening doors, awaiting his share, not wanting to start his day on an empty stomach. As he waited and waited, the hungry crowd watching him could wait no longer and continued their search of the unique Island of Mannar.

As we roamed the busy by-lanes and the main streets of the Mannar town, we watched more of them mingle with the people, the dogs, the cows and even the occasional goat, small wonder to the regular passers-by. But we watched these quirky animals as they filled us with laughter; their sheer number taking us by surprise. They swayed their stout little bodies as they crossed the streets in fours and fives and munched on the titbits generously offered to them by the street-side vendors.

Where Did They Come From?

The history of the donkeys in Mannar is as equally fascinating as the animals themselves. These ‘beasts of burden’ scientifically identified as Equus africanus Asinus, are known to be the descendants of those introduced to Sri Lanka from Somalia, brought over by Arabian traders many centuries ago in order to carry their merchandise (mainly spices) to the interior of the country. The ancestors of the donkeys that today roam the streets of Mannar Island have apparently served a dual purpose. It is believed that these donkeys had been used as pack animals particularly by the dobhi people (clothes washers); and most interestingly these

animals had also been used for their insect repellent qualities. Some believed that the donkeys' high pitched "hee haw" calls drew away the beetles that destroy coconut plantation and others believed that their dung attracted the beetles away from young coconut shoots. Ever since the first ancestral domestic breeds, donkeys have been actively engaged by people in Sri Lanka especially in the Northwestern coastal belt as domestic animals. Today, they roam the streets wild and free.

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In All Colours…

Soon the sun was dangling in mid sky as blue as it will ever get, the scorching heat had just begun to tease us, and we steered our way out of the city and in search of a picturesque beach in Mannar. Anti-climax to an endless quest: gazing at those furry creatures that seemed to surround us around Mannar in all their colour and variety. Forget finding that beautiful beach let's watch donkeys! And we most certainly did.

They appeared in all colours but the regular grey that we associate with donkeys. "What is going on?" we wondered. "Where are all these colours coming from?"

There were vast grassy patches that dotted Mannar on which they grazed, happy and carefree. A cute little foal nagged behind its mother for more milk, the mother playfully nuzzled it, keeping a close eye on the cows close by. And lo and behold who comes marching into the scene 'the black sheep of the family': a pitch black little foal lazily trotted into our little scene. Amidst our oohs and ahs he happily grazed; it suddenly looking our way and nodding, as if to say "yes I know I know, I get it all the time". This was not the only rare one we spotted in Mannar that day. As we passed a large coconut plantation we spotted another batch and amidst the regular greys was a donkey which looked so similar to a cow that it took us a while to figure this one out from a distance. These animals in the coconut plantaion brought to surface another question nagging in our heads: were they still being used as insect repellents in the modern day?"

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As we watched in admiration, eyes adjusting to the somewhat unfamiliar, they

merrily scuttled about and mingled with each other, hee-hawing in the midst of vast coconut plantations, grass patches and on the streets. Even though a rare sight outside Mannar Island, these donkeys are certainly a species that need not be taken for granted and definitely need protecting.

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