

Highway to Dine



The luminous Southern Expressway



It was a weekday evening. The working day had come to a close. Colombo was abuzz with a multitude of options to appease the reveller. But thanks to the new Southern Expressway, it had become possible to indulge in escapades a little farther away from home than usual. We had just embarked on our first...

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The plan was to head out to Unawatuna, enjoy a delicious meal by the beach and return to Colombo at a decent hour. By the time we reached the Kottawa entry to the expressway, we were buzzing with excitement about the evening that lay ahead of us. The brightly lit entry exuded a sense of brand-new and cutting-edge.

It was the proportions that made the most predominant impression. The towering street lights, the expansive roadway: everything was much larger than what we had come to associate with roadways in Sri Lanka.

As we slowed down at one of the tollbooths that stood sentinel on the highway, we were greeted by a smiling tollbooth attendant, who issued us a ticket: our passport to the highway. It read 7:21pm. Without further ado he lifted the gate.

Dubbed the 'super road' by some, the Southern Expressway, or the E01, felt exactly that: super to the point of being alien. From the time we entered it, throughout our journey, our surroundings felt foreign. The awareness of being on local soil, coupled with the sensory information that seemed to contradict this fact, had a strange - almost surreal - effect on our psyche. For those of us whose first time this was on the highway, the mystery of the landscape shrouded in blackness only heightened the effect. We could make out the dark shapes of hills rising to meet the sky, which was a paler shade of grey. We glimpsed snatches of rocky hills whenever illuminated by headlights or street lamps. Far ahead of us a few brake lights, like fiery red eyes in the dark, queued up neatly. Behind us was darkness, punctuated by the bright headlights of vehicles in the distance.

The highway itself maintained its impressive sense of vastness. The reflectors on either side of the road lit up as we passed, and the painted markings, demarcating the different traffic lanes, glowed a brand-new, luminescent white against the jet black tar. So preoccupied with our novel surroundings were we, that we were only reminded of the speed limit unique to the Southern Expressway when several reflective road signs read to us "100kmph". Leaning over the shoulder of our friend in the driver's seat to peek at the speedometer, it became apparent that we were indeed travelling at the stipulated pace. The ride was so smooth and fluid however, that it hardly felt as though we were moving at such a speed. On and off ramps spiral off the main road at regular intervals, and it's striking how a roadway can be so meticulously, evenly designed but can also flow so flawlessly amongst the hills and over rivers.

As the tollbooth attendant gave us our receipt, we were abuzz with exclamations: "That was incredible!"; "Just one hour!"; "It's unbelievable!"

Perhaps the most astonishing feature of the highway is the swiftness at which destinations that used to take hours to reach can now be approached. The

expansive, well-lit interchange points on the roadway were passed by at a truly incredible rate. By 7.58pm we had already reached Kalutara. In the next ten to twelve minutes we had passed by Aluthgama and Ambalangoda. A few minutes later we were zipping past Hikkaduwa. And at 8.26pm we had reached the Pinnaduwa Interchange, the entryway to Galle. As the tollbooth attendant gave us our receipt, we were abuzz with exclamations: "That was incredible!"; "Just one hour!"; "It's unbelievable!"

Ten minutes later we were in the heart of the celebrated seaside resort of Unawatuna, with a plethora of inviting restaurants laid out before us. Soaking up the bubbly, upbeat vibe of this tourist hotspot, we entered the Thaproban Beach House. Hungry after the excitement of the drive, we placed our order immediately, sipped on fruit juice and explored the beachside restaurant.

When dinner was served we discovered the salads were fresh and crispy, the fried noodles were well seasoned, the battered cuttlefish had a satisfying crunch to it and the crumb fried fish was cooked to perfection. Well prepared accompaniments like the fried basil leaves and the tartar sauce enhanced the flavours. After enjoying this flavourful meal and the seaside breeze we decided to head back to Colombo.

Back at the Pinnaduwa tollbooth, the attendant smiled, almost posing, when he saw our camera. The ticket he gave us read 10.29pm. As we got back on the Southern Highway our friend in the driver's seat commented on the driving experience on the super road. It was an easy drive, he said, which is why it is imperative to be well-rested before the journey and also adhere by the stipulated speed limit and road rules.

Before we knew it, we had already passed by Hikkaduwa. While we discussed the surroundings of the highway during the day - sprawling paddy fields, jungle and rocky hills - Ambalangoda, Aluthgama and Kalutara flew by. We were admiring a few isolated lights twinkling through dark knots of vegetation when an enormous Buddha statue came into view. It was placed high atop one of the hills and lit incandescently. It appeared as a beacon, shining out from the darkness that surrounded it.

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At 11.22pm we passed by the town of Panadura. Four minutes later the Horana exchange point came into view. By 11.30pm we had reached the Kottawa Interchange. Content with our exceptional night out, we mused on how it used to take a good three to four hours to get from Colombo to Galle. Today however, we had travelled from Colombo to Galle and back again, complete with a sumptuous dinner, in just four hours. The Southern Highway has opened up an avenue for many an adventure in the future.

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