

Hoi Hoi... here comes the fish!!!



Tugging hard on the net full of fish

Hoi hoi...hoi hoi, they chanted in a harmonious sing-song pattern. Their sturdy arms blackened by years of toil beneath the scorching tropical sun, brought to shore thousands of shiny fish that scattered the golden beach at their sand covered feet. The roaring sea-breeze picked up the intermittent murmur of their outlandish melody, carrying it far and wide. The Kuchchaveli beach was a flurry of activity as we watched the fishmongers go about their afternoon routine.

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

From afar all we could see were two long parallel rows of people pulling on what appeared to be ropes. A closer look soon proved us wrong. They were tugging at two ends of the same large net that was still half submerged in the shallow water. The waves that constantly lapped against the shore were an unusual shade of green, stained by the seaweed, that according to the locals appeared only during a certain period to last a few weeks before it disappeared again.

Waist deep in the virescent sea were a few more men holding on to the net, making sure that their day's catch wouldn't escape back into the ocean. The fish had begun now to surface the water and jumped about in an elusive feat. Beside

them a group of young children splashed at the water collecting the small fish in little plastic bags. I watched in awe as their laughter out-rang the swashing of the waves and the yells and calls of the men battling the net.

These fishermen were pulling ashore what is often called the *Maadala*: an expansive net that is laid for fish twice a day; early morning and late afternoon. Giving a hand in this laborious task were women and children, their ankles buried in the soft sand, tugging hard at the net that was already full of a variety of fish.

A closer look soon proved that they were tugging at two ends of the same, but large net that was still half submerged in the shallow water.

Hoi hoi... and before long the net began to gradually surface and was being dragged along the wet sand. We managed to catch a glimpse of their first harvest tangled in the net and tousled by the bright green seaweed. Soon the children and women began crowding around, picking and selecting the catch, brushing away the seaweed with sticks and creating separate piles for different types. Baskets were being brought and the fish were swiftly sorted.

Above their heads soared a hungry horde of crows, shooting down every now and again to indulge in a lavish seafood meal, snatching their prey and taking to the skies again in the wink of an eye. As the children shooed the birds with their hands and sticks shielding the fish from the feathery thieves, we mingled with the crowd eager to take a closer look, eyeing the common types that we often see in the city markets.

Hundreds of *Paraw*, *Balaya*, *Kumbalawo*, *Kannadi Paraw* and *Hurullo* were being sorted into piles. There were other interesting kinds such as the Sword Fish; and the *Sapaththu Maaluwa* or Flatfish, which technically has both eyes on one side and none on the other. A unique yet fiercely poisonous type of fish, which we assumed was a type of Fire Fish, was identified by the fisher folk as 'Mudu Kukula' and we were duly warned as it wriggled in the sand. The fisher folk including the very young, expertly carried bunches of fish in their hands as they engaged merrily in small talk.

While the first stock of fish was being sorted, the second net was being pulled ashore by the men. The locals called it '*Madiya adinawa*'; this net is laid in a particular place known to be frequented by schools of fish; and the expectant net-bearers awaited its abundant harvest.

The wet sand felt soft beneath my feet as I walked about amidst all that hustle and bustle on the beach. The children chased each other while they helped the adults sort the fish. I edged closer pointing to each strange looking fish eager to know and learn their names.

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Several more nets were pulled ashore that afternoon and the existing mounds of fish were replenished. The baskets were now being taken one by one away from the beach to a parked truck. I eagerly tailed the basket bearers, peeping into some of the boxes that were stacked both outside and inside the truck. Their contents ranged from small and large fish to squid, all buried in ice. The truck would safely transport the fish to markets in places such as Trincomalee and Colombo, I was told.

As the sky began to gently lose its luminescent glow, an orangish tinge silently spread across the clouds. The crowd began to gather the nets in coils and gradually dispersed. Each went their own way along the beach, satisfied after another fruitful day of fishing; and we took to the road to resume our exploration of the beautiful coastal Kuchchaveli of eastern Sri Lanka.

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