In the Company of Giants

Posted on



The Hurulu Eco Park is the perfect cure for the jumbo junkie who can’t get enough of elephants.

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Habarana is elephant country. The traveller, driving down the main road that clefts the jungle, gets many opportunities to view the pachyderms in action. We see them munching on tender greenery, or crossing the road. But often, that does not satisfy. Our preoccupation with elephants means that we crave more and more intimate insight into the lives of these animals.

It was this curiosity that led us to the Hurulu Eco Park near Habarana. This park was vested with the status of a wildlife reserve only in 2008. Due to its high pachyderm population, the place rapidly gained popularity among wildlife enthusiasts and the elephant-loving average Sri Lankan.

Carved out of the Hurulu forest reserve, the Eco Park covers 10,000 hectares of land. We hopped onto an open 4×4 and were driven through the gate in clouds of billowing dust. The landscape that met us was dominated by Illuk grass. It was in the midst of a maze of Illuk that we had a close-up with a dozen big specimens of

the many hundreds of elephants who people the Hurulu Park.

The driver took us as close as possible to the herd. I for one certainly felt trepidation, but the tracker accompanying us knew each elephant in the park, and assured us that none of the animals before us were known to charge. Though the elephants seemed gentle, they were gravely concerned for the safety of a tiny baby, cuteness embodied as he wobbled around like a pudding. Something very much like a smile in his face, he was thoroughly enjoying the fact that grown up uncles and aunties surrounded him worriedly wherever he ran to. Mothering was serious business for the whole herd, apparently, and they left us behind to go deeper into the forest, not caring much for our ogling.



So cute and protective

Soon we entered a vast, undulating landscape: rocky plateaux, or flat land spreading far to the horizon till they joined distant mountains. The tracker, little and wizened though not that old, was friendly with a sense of humour as dry as his face. With remarks sometimes acid and sometimes funny, he made us laugh. He was a son of this soil, with plenty of tales and information to regale us with as the wind of the open land whistled through our hair. He was a true wildlife veteran.

The elephants share this territory with other animals, but these are elusive and rarely viewed. It would be a cause to celebrate if you spotted a leopard, or that

tabby-like but rare and wild Rusty-Spotted Cat. More common is the jungle fowl that darts across the dirt track and the slow but gentle Star Tortoise that ambles away from your car as fast as it can.

In the very heart of the park is an intriguing remnant of a far-away age: an early Iron Age burial site, with characteristic square stone slabs balanced in a haphazard way.Why did primitive man completely incarcerate their dead like that? Did they believe the spirits will escape to return and plague the living? We left those secrets lidded by stone slabs unsolved.

A viewing platform has been built on a rock plateau, affording a panorama of a vast sweep of land, as far as the Ritigala, the Mahason devil’s mountain. The hut was spacious and made of wood, and thatched. We did not need binoculars to spy a herd of elephants far away. It was wonderful to see them moving like specks across the flanks of a mountain, breaking branches and feasting. Plastered to the dark underside of the viewing hut we found some swallows’ nests.

On our way, we saw many peacocks strutting about. Not something to enthuse about, of course: in little more than 10 years this showy bird has come to dominate our landscapes, sweeping its tail over paddy fields and rural gardens, so that what was once a wonder has become as commonas a domestic fowl today in many areas.

Even after we emerged onto the main road from the dirt track the jungle didn’t peter out. The wilderness of Habarana seemed unbounded, spreading out of the perimeters of the Minneriya, Kaudulla and now the Hurulu parks. I was happy to learn that such wild parts, untouched by man, still survived; happier still by the communion I had with some wild animals, however fleeting, however brief. The encounters took me back ages; they touched something deep. It must be the memories of my ancestors, or myself, having shared the same land with them before we left to build our own worlds.

