

It's Bubbling At Nelum Wewa



Fishing boats stationed at the embankment of the tank, Dimbulagala Rock looms in the distance

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Sevanapitiya in Polonnaruwa, a discreet town that falls along the A11 route, held a simplistic charm favoured by its restful surroundings. We had our eye open for Nelum Wewa for locals had aroused our curiosity about hot water springs situated in the region. Soon enough a signboard directed us away from the main road and its welcome shade. Our first encounter was a false alarm as the calm waters of Gal Wewa tank first emerged. Travelling along its bund we continued on to reach a second farther up. At its banks fishermen were wrapping up for the day, their boats stationed against a flourish of water hyacinth at its bank.

This was Nelum Wewa or Bora Wewa as its signpost indicated. Judging by its name one would expect to see lotuses in bloom or as Bora Wewa – a muddy pond of water, but neither displayed itself and instead here was a glistening lake that stretched into a horizon of captivating landscape that included the Dimbulagala rock to heighten the beauty of the surroundings. The fishermen pointed us to the hot water wells and they were in fact away from the embankment set along a sandbar amidst the water. which could only be reached by boat.

The boat crept silkily towards the sandbar. Settling ourselves in the narrow confines of a simple three-seater fishing boat with the boatman at the bow, we sat restraining our movements while eagerly trying to drink in the surroundings from an enviable panoramic perspective. The boatman had been a resident of the village for more than two decades and had borne witness to much of the changes over time. During the time his father frequented Nelum Wewa, which was then a marshland, there indeed were lotuses in plentiful, and the existence of hot water wells was knowledge only to the villagers. Curiously, the bubbling springs were discovered beneath the body of water and the sandbar was gradually constructed to make for easy access and isolate the steaming water from the large expanse. While puzzling over this information we had approached our destination.

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Two wells sat adjacently to one another, steam unfurling from their surface. We gingerly tested the water within and decided it best to enjoy the warmth from a safe distance. An outflow of hot water trickled back into the lake from the well closest to the tank and offered a spot to soothe our feet with warm water. Thick colonies of water hyacinth grew here as well, stubbornly unaffected by the bubbling water that trickled to its surroundings. Along the sandbar, there were two other wells located farther away from the first two and to the touch, each seemed to be roughly at the same temperature. According to the boatman there had been seven such wells initially, three of which had to be covered. The reason being that these hot water springs in fact connect to others in the island such as the hot water springs of Kanniya, Trincomalee and Maha Oya forming a network of springs through the earth's crust and thus to maintain a healthy source of water at other regions the three additional wells were closed off at Nelum Wewa. Intrigued by this natural phenomenon we made our way towards a noticeboard, which illustrated the inner workings and other interesting details on the springs.

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Most importantly it revealed that the hot water springs at Nelum Wewa were the hottest in the Island at a temperature of 62°C! Villagers often frequent the wells with pails in tow to draw cool water from the tank and enjoy a refreshing bath at the springs. I was indeed pleasing to see that little had been done to disturb the surroundings and the wells were maintained as unobtrusive simple structures. One could not tire of the scenic beauty that Nelum Wewa offered. Aside from human trespassers, many varieties of birds such as the Pied Kingfisher arrive here in flocks. What's more, while reluctantly heading back in our sturdy little boat, the boatman kindly informed us of friendlier inhabitants here - crocodiles. And had just missed sight of one who had been basking in the sun earlier in the day. However, the boatman assured, the crocs have long been here and never been a cause for alarm among the villagers.

Safely back on land, only fishing boats remained as their owners would have gradually returned home or to the markets with their bounty. We bade adieu to our obliging tour-guide and stayed a while longer to enjoy the full effect of the

panoramic view that lay before us. With all its little surprises and the natural beauty that Nelum Wewa had to offer, we didn't want to miss a thing.

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