Kottawa: The Unknown Rainforest

Posted on
The giant boo-hora tree emerges seeking sunlight

A 17km drive from Galle, down the Udugama Road, and you arrive at the Kottawa Rainforest Reserve and Arboretum. Though small as reserves go, it is a pristine and unknown rainforest you can explore amidst complete tranquillity.

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We felt that Kottawa would be a unique experience. On a tree by a small outlet selling boiled corn amidst dense green rainforest on both sides of the road, we were lucky to see a green pit viper, which blended so naturally with the background that you would have brushed against it and still not discerned the young serpent with scales in subtle shades of yellow and green. It was in a deep sleep and writhing in contentment, completely indifferent towards us with its head nestled on graceful coils. We were told that it had been lazing there for several weeks, which they habitually do after a good meal.

The reserve is part of the Kottawa Kombala Conservation Forest covering 1,800 hectares. But the reserve itself is small at 37 acres. We walked in through the entrance, ready for the leeches which our guide warned us would be plentiful. Sunlight hardly penetrates this lowland rainforest canopy. Ferns thrive, young tendrils unfurling among big leaves fanning out in profusion. Moss and lichen adorn trees. It was not the flowering season for orchids. We could only imagine the rare beauty of exotic blooms amidst dark green.

Survival of the fittest is the name of the game here. There is tough competition among trees to rise in the canopy to acquire sunlight. Those who are successful look magnificent, like the boo-hora tree we saw near the beginning of the trail. Though not thick, it was so towering that you won’t see the crown even if you hug the trunk to look up. Boo-hora wood was used by the British as sleepers for the first railways of Ceylon.

The reserve is home to 170 species of trees. Around 100 are endemic. We saw a

small kangaroo lizard perched on a moss-covered stone. The endemic agamid lizard is said to usually spurt away at the slightest disturbance, but this one posed for us with careless confidence. The forest is home to many agamids and snakes, mammals such as the Purple-faced leaf monkey, the Toque macaque and giant squirrels. Among the butterflies are the beautiful Tree Nymph, Blue Oakleaf and the Ceylon birdwing which is the largest butterfly in Sri Lanka. But unused to human presence, these animals did not venture out. Birds remained silent. Yet the forest is home to many winged species, nearly twelve of them endemic. The lianas twisted and coiled like abstract art amidst the trees. We halted to admire a Giant tree snail, hidden snugly within its shell encrusting a tree trunk, with the shell a perfect swirl mottled in a beautiful shade of sea green.

On decaying trunks pretty reddish-brown mushrooms sprouted. We found a grove of Nepenthes (baandura) with so many pitchers blossoming. One of these was turned to see if any winged insects, the preferred prey of the plant, could be found within. But only watery syrup oozed out.


The green pit viper writhing in sleepy contentment

Living on wet soil, leeches like the camouflage of dead brown leaves. They moved about their tiny blind heads sensing our feet treading the path, eager to curl up our feet hungrily. Their eagerness is understandable when you see that human visitors are a rare occurrence.

Of course this makes the reserve secluded – a place of peace and quiet as well as a rare pristine patch of low country rainforest. But as soon as we approached a

stream among shadowy banks, it seemed sad that this beautiful place remains unknown. A lizard with a brilliant jewel-blue pattern on its head scuttled away as we crossed the tranquil waters that cooled our soles.

The trail can be enjoyed in three-and-a-half hours, though you would want to linger longer. The path is a circle-track; you end up at the exact point where you began though from a totally different route. By the end of the path was lying a wal-duriyan fruit. One of us picked it up, taking the thick covering for bushy hair. The spiky thorns give a nasty sting even though this particular specimen was young. Then it was time to bid goodbye to the Kottawa-Kombala forest and the little reserve at its heart. It is undoubtedly the best-kept of Galle’s secrets, but one that should be explored with care and tenderness for the pristine environment and the fragile ecosystem.

