Kumana: Where the Majestic Roam Wild and Free

Posted on



An elephant crosses at a leisurely pace

As one travels through the scrubland forest of the Kumana National Park, it is not just an encounter with the magnificent mammals and reptiles of Sri Lanka. It is more an adventurous opportunity to feel the heartbeat and circle of life of the Eastern wilds.

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It was past 3pm as we travelled through quiet Okanda, yet the sun beamed ferociously bright while a balmy breeze swept across. Our aim was to visit the

undisturbed habitat of the Eastern Province, the Kumana National Park.

Before our journey of discovery however, a stop at the Ukanthamalai Murugan Kovil was customary. Also called the Okanda Temple, it sits on the border of the national park and is an important stop during the annual Pada Yatra or pilgrimage on foot from Jaffna to Kataragama. The radiant kovil at the foot of the burly Okanda Malai, which is said to be a place that offered Lord Murugan respite, is therefore dedicated to the deity. The shrine on the malai is the Valli Amman Kovil. Our brief visit to this sacred place impressed upon us the vibrancy and the religious fervour in the East of Sri Lanka.

Journeying on farther, we were soon within the rustic, untamed and shrubbery green of Kumana, a wild preserve spanning 35,665 ha. Before the Yala East National Park, Kumana was designated a national park in its own right in 2006 because of its environmental importance. As our eyes prepared to squint and survey out the elusive wildlife of this park, our ears rang with the howls, caws and whispers of this land. After we were within the thick of the forest, having left civilisation far behind, a serpent eagle greeted with a weary eye. Discreetly the jeep steered past a herd of spotted deer. As we neared a majestic stag with beautiful antlers pricked up its ears and stood fast on alert until the herd disappeared into the thicket. A wild boar strutted past us snorting a hello before sniffling along for food to satisfy its hunger.

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Our initial encounter with the gentle giants of this landscape was a few turns later, where a charming lone female elephant slowly crossed the dirt road. Surveying the land, it retreated to the bush at its own pace, unhurried by our presence. Through the leaves, we saw her pause for a moment and suddenly she let lose a trunkful of dust on her head; leaving the elephant to its cleansing ritual, we rushed to the rock formation called Girukula.



The grand Prince of the wild, a Sri Lankan leopard in Girukula

Girukula is the pride rock of Kumana. Here, on most occasions, lurks the Prince of the Island’s wild, the Sri Lankan leopard (Panthera pardus kotiya). Signalling our good fortune, the sky cleared, and the dim evening light focused on a grandiose leopard. Lucky we were to glimpse the royalty of Kumana. Minutes passed unaware to us as we peered at the leopard through rustic foliage, adrenalised by even the slowest of movements of the resting beast. For a brief moment something caught its attention and it perked its head up, and then turned its head away.

Another mesmerising site greeted us at the known watering hole called the Kumana Villu. The mangrove filled body of water was a mesmerising expanse; a paradise for the wild in Kumana. What seemed to like kirala (Sonneratia caseolaris) to our untrained eye symmetrically emerged from the lotus filled waters. This villu among other mangroves, salt marshes, reservoirs, lagoons and estuaries is the reasoning behind the national park being recognised as the Kumana Wetland Cluster Ramsar Site as well as an important wetland. On drooping branches of trees soaked in the villu, flocks of pelicans rested, most with heads drooping down while a few others

had their gaze fixated on the slimy green for a fresh catch. We soon zoomed in on a woolly-necked stalk, preening its feathers and later witnessed the elegant dance of the peacock. Our sagacity in staying for longer at the watering hole was then rewarded by the sight of a lone bull elephant softly quenching its thirst.

Quick rustle in the shrubs, our eyes darted on alert, spotting an enormous crocodile snoozing and cooling off on the moist earth in a shady spot. Indian or Oriental darters, with their snake-like necks coiling out, alerted us towards the downcast sky, which threatened with rain. Satisfied and revitalised after rekindling our connection with nature, we left Kumana pa. Couple of Malabar Pied Hornbills, in intense conversation, watched our departure.

An exploration through the Kumana National Park will surely enchant and excite you with rare glimpses of several animals in their element. A natural jewel, it is a valuable national treasure.

