



Following the prince of the jungle

Yes, it was another long weekend and we were back in the safari jeep heading towards Kumana. This was definitely a safari to remember!

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Thanuja Thilakarathne, Dilshi Aberaja and Hansani Bandara

We had not yet reached Kumana but we had already passed lush green paddy fields with a group of tourists riding scooters along the *niyara* (narrow paths). Flocks of Painted Storks made a picturesque site and the elephants that are generally near the lake were having an afternoon snack. A sudden opening in the dense greenery revealed the ocean beyond.

Crocodiles, buffaloes, eagles, wild boar and deer caught our attention as we drove along the sandy roads of Kumana. Suddenly we saw a couple of vehicles stationary and the occupants attentively watching the forest. They gestured to us and said that a lone leopard with its prey (a monkey) had been seen and was close by. They had seen it walking into the jungle. We waited for a few moments but there was no sign of the leopard. Resigning ourselves to the thought that we were not going to see the prince of the jungle on that day, we proceeded with our journey into the wilds of Kumana.

Suddenly we saw a couple of vehicles stationary and the occupants attentively watching the forest. They gestured to us and said that a lone leopard with its prey (a monkey) had been seen and was close by

More crocs, deer and peacocks and as closing time was drawing near, our tracker wanted us to start our return to the main gate. As dusk settled in, we proceeded on our bumpy ride while appreciating the beauty of the wilderness. As we neared the spot where the leopard was seen before, we were met by Priyantha Talwatte and his family, who had just seen the leopard again. He asked us to come forward so that we could get a better view, pointing to where the leopard was securely keeping its decapitated monkey. In a gesture that is rarely seen today in national parks, Priyantha Talwatte asked us to wait and he turned his vehicle around and headed towards the entrance. He gave us the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the great animal without any disturbance so that we could take photographs of this chance encounter.

The leopard was aware of our presence but was not perturbed. He was well camouflaged

inside the shrub jungle but his golden spotted coat gave him away. He was intently turning his head 'this way and that' always looking at the road. He stretched and licked himself, for a moment making us wonder whether he was going to lie down and take a nap. But, then he looked straight at us picked up his precious cargo and got up. He started walking in parallel to the road but we were not sure from where he would come out.

Suddenly, he appeared just in front... The leopard seemed like a young one and he gracefully made his way along the sandy path, one step after the other. Realising that we were following him, he turned around, gave us one straight look—it was at this moment that we realised that the monkey he was holding did not have a head!—then crossed the road and dashed into the jungle. Though we tried to find this princely creature again he had ventured deeper into the shrub.

It was definitely a great experience and if not for the kindness of Priyantha Talwatte, we may not have seen this leopard.

