



A small tiff: 'what are you complaining about?'



How many can say that a mere five minutes into the wilderness, they had an encounter with the prince □of the jungle? Well we did, and not just one, but two of them. And not just a fleeting glimpse but one □whole hour of observation. Thank you very much!

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda

It was in the early hours of the morning that our journey began at the Wilpattu Wildlife Reserve. With a guide and trekker at the helm, the jeep growled along the red dust road. Already an eager anticipation took hold with eyes cast every which way. Just a few minutes had passed and the jeep jerked to an abrupt halt. What followed next was something that none of us ever anticipated. □Our trekker whispered as he pointed in the direction of a watering hole about 20 feet away. In a moment's silence we all caught sight of the spotted velvety coat slithering amidst the overgrown greenery. Scrambling and chaos ensued inside the jeep - precious seconds could be all we had.

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There were two of them, two young male leopards, probably teenagers our guide surmised. Beyond the watering hole they huddled together. It was evidently a restful start to the day. From this point on, time stood still. Judging by a display of playful affection we gathered they were two siblings scouring the wilderness together. The watering hole may have drawn them here, however, they showed little interest so far and instead pawed, nosed and nudged each other. With our prying eyes feasting greedily on this rare sight, we couldn't help but wonder if our presence was felt. At times they appeared to glance our way - brief moments in between stretches, yawns and lounging on branches amongst a range of lazy antics. However, neither strayed too far away from the other.

Gradually accustomed to their spot and probably our presence as well, one of the leopards broke away leaving the other to rest across a branch - a picture of lazy elegance. The other approached a tree and extended its foreleg along the bark of a tree to engage in a session of morning stretches. We could differentiate the two siblings at this point as one had a chain of merging spots collaring its neckline. With changing behaviour, we were privy to their many moods and natures; at times playful gamboling cubs, another time prowling hunters with sleek bodies, keen, piercing gazes and remarkably linear postures and even teenagers in the throes of a tantrum. This last state emerged as the leopards approached the watering hole for a drink of water. However, the mouth of the hole proved too steep.

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Each braved the descent cautiously, gingerly reaching a paw into the water as if to summon the water out. It barely touched the surface. We held our breath, wondering if their attempts would end in a slip and a splash. One retreated many times only to return again and again until finally, it gnashed its teeth in frustration at the water. Sadly, not a drop to drink, the pair resorted to idling aimlessly about the vicinity.

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Just when we thought our fortunes couldn't get any better, the leopards strode gracefully around the watering hole to emerge at the fore. The morning sun cast a golden glow upon their luxurious hides and they camouflaged in the tall wheatish grass. The leopard closest to

us raised its head and yawned widely exposing its intimidating canine teeth and gums.

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We watched, not willing to give up a single second as they lolled about. Suddenly one of them approached the jeep, its demeanour held an air of boredom. But then, he halted directly ahead of us and slowly but surely, fixed his feline gaze directly upon us. He was watching us watching him. If ever there was an occasion to keel over, this was it.

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