A Mountain Locked Terrain: Mandaram Nuwara

Posted on
Mandaram Nuwara as seen from Piduruthalagala

Perhaps the ideal location to experience the tranquillity of nature to the fullest is to be found in the exquisite topographical formations, much of the year drenched by clouds that hover and hug the eastern slope and ridges, of the tallest massif: Piduruthalagala (8,294 feet above sea level). With enchanting backdrops like nowhere else in the island, this is the basin of Mandaram Nuwara. Legend says that it was known as 'Manu-puraya' since the ancient times, long before British colonial rule.

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Situated in the Nuwara Eliya district, the basin can be reached via Kandy on the road leading to Walapane, passing Rikillagaskada, turning right just before the town of Padiyapelalla, or from Nuwara Eliya. The road in the hilly terrain turns and twirls its way manoeuvring through to a destination beguiling your eyes every inch of the way.

Bordering the Piduruthalagala Forest Reserve, at the base of the massif is this small village, enclosed from the west by Piduruthalagala and from the east by the Balagolla mountain ranges. Due to its topographical assemblage, at a high altitude the village receives rain much of the year round as its name in the native Sinhala language implies. It is a village that has never seen the very first rays of the sun nor the last rays because of its mountain locked location.

With grasslands wreathed with wild flowers of different hues (some of which are rare varieties of seasonal ground orchids), cascading waterfalls and extensive paddy fields, the scenery is simply breathtaking. It's just a click away to capture the magical beauty of many a colourful avian wildlife, and by dawn the air is filled with the high pitched tunes of Hill Mynahs. Looking down at the village I was at eye level with soaring raptors mid-air as they rose up with the thermal currents. A Black Eagle caught my attention as it was shaking a nest in a frenzy, in search of a meal.

On the way to Mandaram Nuwara I encountered a fairly small waterfall which is in fact the second drop of the much larger Athinni Vatuna Ella, situated within the village. The Kolapathana Ella is about 2 km from the village.

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The villagers produce treacle and jaggery, extracted from the sap obtained from the flower of the ‘Kitul Palm’. It was on a dead Kitul Palm trunk that the endemic Grey Hornbill, had built its nest in a hole. While observing its behaviour from a distance it was evident to me that the hornbills were feeding chicks in the nest.

The endemic vibrantly plumed small sized Yellow Fronted Barbet and the Wood Pigeon have also been observed here. I was lucky to capture an image of the very shy, colourful Three Toed Kingfisher, the smallest of the kingfishers and the prettiest of them all. As its name implies the bird possesses just three toes unlike an ordinary bird which has four. A rare woodpecker with a restricted distribution, known as the Streak Throated Woodpecker, was also sighted here.

The surrounding jungle is teeming with wildlife, from the elusive Leopard, the scurrying Barking Deer to the swinging Langurs and Macaques. The squirrel found here is different for it is much darker all over, is endemic and rare and known as the Dusky Squirrel. It has acquired a darker tint to survive in the misty conditions of hilly terrains. At night the cold air is filled with the loud croaks of amphibians and the never ending rattling of crickets, while the armoured Pangolins, and Porcupines, and Hares roam the forest floors. The giant Grey Flying Squirrel too glides from tree to tree in the night.

Among those that inhabit the forest floor is one of the very rare endemic varieties of snail genera known as the ‘Rawana Snail.’ This has a very restricted distribution and can be easily identified because its shell, unlike other snails, has a thin fleshy margin. The Rhino Horned Lizard an endemic, highly camouflaged lizard that is restricted to the central highlands, can also be found here, especially on tree trunks. At high altitudes semi-burrowing non-venomous snakes such as the Common Rough Sided Snake can frequently be found at the forest edge.

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According to legend, King Ravana asked his servants to prepare a special milk rice for Princess Seetha. He tasted the milk rice and found that it did not have adequate salt in it and so threw it away. The villagers believe that this discarded milk rice is still found beneath the soil. It is known as ‘Rawana guli’ and is the size of an olive and has a medicinal power to heal stomach aches.

People here have simple life styles, centred around the village’s Buddhist temple; their main livelihood being paddy cultivation. Tea plantations as in many hilly terrains in the up country can be seen here as well. Apart from paddy, other crops of vegetables and fruits are also cultivated.

The inhabitants of the Mandaram Nuwara are friendly and hospitable. Their warm and friendly gestures make the journey additionally worthwhile. To find an honest companion to assist in trekking in the wilderness will not be a difficult task. People here have a charming sense of integrity, acquired from the untainted surroundings they have been blessed with.

