Navigating The 18 Hair-Pin Bends

Posted on



Two bends and a view

The car zigzagged across the hair-pin bends with uncharacteristic ease. An occasional peek out of the window presented slices of blue mist covered vistas, studded with shimmering silver pools of water, snaking beige streets and an abundance of greenery.

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I always found passing the 18 hair-pin bends, down the Kandy-Mahiyanganaya road to be an exhilarating highlight, be it the ascent or descent. Usually, I brace myself for the oncoming nausea, though not without a tinge of excitement. As the road used to be only three to five meters wide in the hilly area with narrow single lane

sections, drivers had to stop their vehicles for oncoming traffic and sometimes even reverse to allow the other vehicles to pass. This time however things were different. From a distance the renovated road stretch from Udatenna to Mahiyanganaya, alias the '18 hair-pin bends' seemed to gleam with the promise of a less bumpier ride than usual. The road has been widened up to 15 meters and carpeted from Udatenna to Mahiyanganaya.

As we navigated the 18th bend, which was our first sharp winding bend on our ascent towards Kandy, I waved at a merry child who grinned at me from a car coming from the opposite direction as our vehicles drew level. This would have been an impossible gesture during the single lane days of the hair-pin bend terrain. The renovated road comprises of the standard two wide lanes, convex mirrors and an upgraded system of road signals, allowing the drivers smooth sailing towards their respective destinations.

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As we approached yet another bend, a young man, balancing a basin full of something on top of his head looked at us with an inquiring glance from behind the safety of the protective fence. Since the lanes were now wide enough to protect us from any unwonted incidents, we had no scruples about pausing our journey to talk to him. The young man proved to be familiar with the 18 hair-pin bends and informed us that if we look down upon the terrain from the tenth bend, we would be able to see two bends at once. He was right of course, and as soon as we paused to look down at the two bends, the same young man walked towards us with a mischievous smile and the basin, which contained grape fruit. He had caught a bus at the bend where we last saw him to sell his wares to the commuters.

Our thirst quenched we moved on. This time I was eager to catch glimpses of the views from this steep climb and lowered my window. On my left I could see the passing mountain tops, which alternated between misty blue and green while miniature cars, buses and trucks moved back and forth flanked by green and golden tops of trees. On the other side of the road were hilly banks covered in grass and bushes. I spied several retaining walls, constructed to prevent earth slips along the banks. Enormous paintings of leopards, elephants and the spotted deer adorned these concrete walls.

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Passing these pleasant sights we finally approached the first hair-pin bend along the road, which was our last such bend for the day. We pulled over at a square of earth protected by a concrete fence which provided an ideal spot to gaze at the valley below. We were not the only beauty lovers at this point, two or three families had parked their vehicles at the same spot and were watching a panoramic picture, munching on grape fruit and sandwiches. We joined them in companionable silence. The descending mist seemed to embrace the miniature buildings, vehicles, hills and the green foliage while the last rays of the sun touched the waters of the Ratkinda and Ulhitiya reservoirs, Mahaweli river and several other lakes, tracing a silver shimmer across the picture below.

The British planters used the Kandy-Mahiyanganaya route to transport their products to Colombo port. However, historical evidence indicates that the route has existed for centuries.
Eight new bridges and 320 box culverts have been reconstructed while 37 culverts were widened
along the road.

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