Off The Beaten Track In Kumana

Posted on



Remnants of the past, the coconut trees of Kumana village

It was not really the ‘season’ to visit Kumana, but I for one do not believe in seasons, as the best time to actually experience a place is when it is not overcrowded with people. But, this particular visit was not really to see the animals, it was to venture along untrodden tracks to discover the hidden wonders of Kumana, where any animal we did see was considered a stroke of luck.

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Bambaragasthalawa

We entered the Kumana National Park as usual, passed the *Yoda Lipa* – a giant stove (three large boulders positioned naturally in the shape of a stove) and drove farther into the jungle. From the well-worn road we suddenly turned to a side path, which was overgrown with errant branches scraping as we bumped and bounced

along. The journey itself was an adventure, with recent rains the roads had washed away and there were large dips and dives, where roots of trees had become exposed and mini rivulets had formed. The jeep skid and slid as we ventured into dense jungle.

We had not seen much animals, maybe because it was early in the morning and there was still dew on the grass and the air was crisp. Maybe they were all having a day in! We had travelled for a couple of hours when our jeep stopped and our driver and tracker got down. We had apparently arrived at Bambaragasthalawa.

We kept all our food provisions in the front seat of the jeep and closed the doors as we were warned that food left out would be a party for the monkeys. There was a foot path leading up a slope,with a massive rock boulder looming over us. I was curious to find out what was at the top. Overgrown with green shrubs and with rocks as foot holds, we made our way. The path was lined with a plant that had purple blossoms, this was supposedly called the Neluwa plant.

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Soon we could see an outline of a cave, we climbed over boulders and stepped into its cooling interior. The floor was smooth, this was apparently due to bears and elephants seeking refuge under the caves protective shade. The face of the rock massif had grooves etched around it to prevent rain water from flowing into the cave. A few steps farther and we could see remnants of an ancient brick wall. This kindled our curiosity further, some say curiosity killed the cat, well hope not!

Passing the brick wall we entered into a larger cave and there, a resplendent reclining Buddha statue lay. The entire statue had been made of brick and the finish and detail of the *siura* or robe was amazing. No one seemed to know much about the origins of this Buddha statue. We could assume that this had been a temple complex during ancient times. Nothing else remained except for the Buddha statue, though there was another cave on the other side of the rock.

It is said that Bambaragasthalawa had been occupied by a pygmy population in Sri Lanka called the Nigantayas. However, today the entire area has been engulfed by jungle. As we returned to the vehicle the sounds of the wild alerted our senses. Apparently the cave complex is a favourite of bears and it is no wonder that we heard one of them call out as we made our descent.

Stroke of Luck

Kumana is well known for its wildlife and more so for migratory birds and as we returned to the road it seemed as if the jungle had finally awoken.

Herds of wild buffalo glistened in the morning sunlight and we had annoyed one particular bull who was ready to rush at us if deemed necessary. Deer seemed to be everywhere, some lazing in the shade and others grazing, it really was a relaxing morning for everyone.

Our attention was soon drawn to a Changeable Hawk Eagle who was perched on the root of a tree at the side of the road. We observed it from a distance for quite a long time as it pecked on its meal and finally flew to a branch at a higher level.

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Painted Storks, Egrets, Godwits, Ibis and many more were in their numbers creating a picturesque setting. We were fortunate to see a Black Necked Stork and we were told by our tracker that there are only seven in the entire country. As we drove along we came to a large lake where two elephants were having their morning feed. They were not at all bothered by us as they expertly took hold of clumps of grass with their trunks and swished them into their mouths. It was almost rhythmic as they moved in tandem. Suddenly there was a splash as a crocodile who was basking in the sun receded quickly into the water on our approach. We were quite surprised to see five more heads bobbing in the water!

We rarely see the Sri Lankan Jackal and to our luck, a pair of jackals were enjoying the morning sun. We had disturbed their pleasant morning and as we watched they quickly got up and ran towards the jungle. It was soon apparent that one of the jackals had a limp and it was a nice experience to see the other waiting for him to catch up. Further along another elephant caught our attention, deep in water, it too was enjoying its morning meal. Though the Kumana leopard had evaded us, we were happy that we had been able to see this many animals during our journey.

Village in the Jungle

We continued along roads that had not been used by many. Lunch time was soon

upon us and we were famished. We nibbled on our biscuits while we bounced to our next location. Coconut trees appeared in our view and a couple of buildings stood out. We had arrived at the Kumana Village.

Nothing much remained of the village except for the coconut trees and the two school buildings, which was now part of a camp. The village, had been in existence even before the Panama Village and was relocated during the 1990s.

T Weerasinghe who now lives in Panama once lived in the Kumana Village after marriage, narrated the life in the village with nostalgia. His father had been an Ayurveda physician who visited the village regularly and Weerasinghe would accompany his father. There had been 60 families living there. It is said that those who fled after the Uva-Wellassa uprising against the British found their new homes in the East, where some families stayed in the Kumana Village while others located to Panama. The Kottagaha Walauwwa, which is popularly known in the locality had been at the Kumana Village.

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With the Kumana Wewa providing water, the main livelihoods of the village had been agriculture where they engaged in paddy and chena cultivation as well as coconut and fruits, especially wood apple (*divul*). Fishing and the collection of bees honey had also been means of income. Salt had been sourced from the lagoon where there were natural salterns. The houses in the village had been made of daub and wattle and thus none of these remain today. People travelled by bicycle, bullock cart or simply walked and it had taken about three hours to a day depending on the mode of transport one selected.

The village had been self sufficient, although there was only one shop and if necessary the villagers went to town to get their requirements. The doctor visited the village only twice a month and for any ailments the villagers would visit the Kebiliththa Devale on the banks of the river where they would bathe in the river, hang a small branch on the tree and pray to the *Deviyo*. By the time they returned home the patient would be already cured.

One would wonder how a village isolated within the jungle would survive, but apparently the wild animals did not trouble the villagers and neither did they. It was an existence of mutual respect… What remains of the village is only the coconut

trees that gives an inclination to the human habitation that was once there.

Kumana truly belongs to the wild now. And, makes one wonder what else is there to see, off the beaten track.

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