

On the Trail of Tranquility

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The water broadened out as we came to a stop by the riverside. On the river, watermen were polling a raft on the far side and the tall bamboo groves made stage whispers in the breeze across the water. It was quiet suddenly. Only the water made any noise apart from the occasional bird that flew its undulating flight over the river and into the trees. The water rippled at the bends and the growth of the dry season clung tenaciously against the current. Beyond the next bend, the fields of rice paddy spread vastly to the horizon, where dark sunburned farmers worked the land and a few water buffaloes stumbled to the roadside.

An almost idyllic calmness is common to most of Sri Lanka's lazy and tranquil roads, and in spite of the onrush of development they still retain the unaffected atmosphere of a more leisurely and quiet age.

It was a bright tropical morning and the breeze was cool and fresh. The ferry, a large raft made with planks lashed together, began its journey across the water with its load of villagers, a cart and two bulls. It came alongside and bumped against the pier which was really the road ending at the water's edge. The cart

staggered off the raft and our car was gently rolled on board. Again the muscular men polled it back it to mid-river. The trees on either side were leaning heavily into the water. Slowly drifting at an angle in the hot sunlit river we berthed at the other side, rolled the car back to the road on the other bank and drove on smoothly leaving the Kelani River behind.

My two companions who were armed with cameras had a road map spread out on the back seat, from where a steady stream of advice came in the direction of the driver and me. The back-seat driving continued as we headed upwards on one of the fine roads that span the island, which make all locations on the island just a few hours away at most. For a small island the geographical variety is staggering: from the scorching beaches to the cold hills of Nuwara Eliya and the warmer dry zone towards the north with its ruined cities and .the jungles with its wildlife frequently on the roads inhibiting traffic. We passed through a forest planted by the Forest Department which was a study in greenery, the hallmark of most Sri Lankan scenery. The trees moved speedily by and when we came out of it, the sunlight blazed through the windows.



A lonely road in Athurugiriya near Colombo flanked by rubber trees.

Quickly we passed by a cream with water cascading over rocks, making white water in the knee deep rapids. In the clear water several women draped in wet chintz clinging to their bodies were bathing, washing clothes and gossiping. Bath time Sri Lanka is a leisurely process where the news of the village circulates and furtive overture to the opposite sex are made.

We left behind the bathing women and moved further inland, past Mawanella. The land was lush with its verdant paddy-fields, planted a few weeks before, swaying in the gentle breeze that fanned over the fields. We entered a back road and came to a dead end, a paddy-field, and found a quiet corner at the edge of a rubber estate where a few cattle egrets and pond herons stood with legs poised to move.

'Click' the camera went; the next moment a clap like a rifle shot and a hundred birds exploded into flight. Click! It was amazing how the pond herons and the egrets had been just a moment before so well camouflaged, as the birds circled widely around in white flashes before finally landing on another part of the fields.

"Didn't I tell you! What a before and after shot!" one of my companions said. But John, our experienced driver, was not moved. "You should have seen how once an elephant charged our- vehicle and nearly dragged everybody out of it in the Ruhunu National Park," he said.

Sri Lanka is a photographer's paradise with its roads taking you everywhere. We drove past fences bordering the road and keeping the cattle away from the tender paddy. The fence posts had sprouted roots in the fertile land and had sent out long branches almost at whim. The land was abundant, and so many stories are associated with these routes that are sometimes rugged but always beautiful. Stories abound of elephant charges, of ghosts and even of legendary bandits who once frequented these by-ways which make a journey more exciting.

Late in the afternoon we once again turned into a backwood, this time to visit an old rest house with its quaint blend of Sinhalese and Dutch colonial architecture. Beside it was a new housing estate, built in the contrasting architectural style of people in hq.5te, on part of what was the large coconut estate of the former lord of the manor.

It was a pleasant evening and we were seated on the verandah of the rest house. The fresh lime juice revitalized us, and we decided to spend the night there.

As the sun rapidly set, my friend and I walked down the gravel road leading away from the rest house to a small village temple where a few oil lamps were burning near an image of the Buddha. The flowers offered by some devotee earlier in the evening were still fresh on the altar.

As we returned, the fireflies were flitting about in the dark. Through the window of a nearby house we saw a family with eyes glued to a TV set, a mode of modern communication leading to many changes in the rural life-style. When we get back to the Walauwva Guest House, the old retainer who was both cook and butler was laying the table with turn of-the-century china from England.

The following morning, getting behind the wheel, we tried to retrace a different

kind of route -those used by the ancient Sri Lankans, the 'Rajakariya' system under the Sinhalese kings provided for the maintenance of the road by obliging the people living along the route to care for it. However, we could not locate the roads with certainty. At least a dozen routes are known-like the old Ibn Batuta route and the pilgrims' route from Anuradhapura to Adam's Peak and Sri Lanka's hero-king Dutugemunu's route from Tissamaharama to Anuradhapura. It takes only a little imagination to visualise the traffic of horse-drawn carriages and large carts dragged by elephants. The king had a number of titles pertaining to transport, one of which was Chief of Elephants. The dangers of travelling in ancient times must have been considerable with the roads cutting across forests where elephants and even marauding leopards were common.

We reached the hills through the picturesque A 7 Route which goes through a scenic landscape from Yatiyantota, and the route has not suffered the changes most other roads have. The clouds were on the hilltops early that afternoon waiting to descend to the valleys at the first indication of the onset of evening.

The next day we went to the beaches of Tangalle where we enjoyed ourselves basking in the sun.

I stayed back at the old rest house thinking about driving the rest of the way home, since the driver was staying behind with his relations. His stories had kept us going as he had acquired the folklore that belongs to each of the roads that we had been on. Each route has its own character - the hill routes and the coastal routes, as well as the northern dry zone routes. Getting back to Colombo, with both my companions asleep in the back seat, dawn was breaking in the east, and in the stark blue' sky the moon had begun to set into the sea off Colombo. The land was flat and dusty, and soon in the blazing morning the people were beginning another day with the roads spreading out in all directions, inviting everyone to explore.



The mountain road at Ramboda with fir trees lining the road and a distant view of the green hills.



The winding mountain road to Nuwara Eliya with sharp elbow bends through tea estates in the hill country. (Suresb de Silva)