

On The Yal Devi To Kilinochchi



The length of the Yal Devi as it glides towards its destination

It was 10.33am to be precise, with the tooting of the horn the train jerked and pulled out of the Anuradhapura station, gradually gathering momentum. I could not believe I was on the Yal Devi, heading towards Kilinochchi...

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Maybe it was because we were really excited that we arrived at the Anuradhapura station more than one hour before the train was scheduled to leave. We had to purchase the tickets once the train was announced. As such as soon as the arrival of the Yal Devi was called, with great pride we said, “Kilinochchiyata tickets dekai” (two tickets to Kilinochchi). With tickets in hand we went to Platform Two, to await the arrival of the Yal Devi. Before long, the mammoth diesel engine pulled into the station. I had goose bumps as I got into the carriage, coincidentally with the words Yal Devi printed on its side.

In Sri Lanka trains are given female names in line with the region that they are travelling to. Yal Devi literally means Northern Lady...

I settled comfortably into my seat, the fans were switched on and soon we were on our way—yipee! The train gathered speed, at Mihintale Junction we got on to the left track and continued on our journey. We passed acres and acres of paddy fields where the harvest seemed to have been collected and the stubble was dry. Overall it was a hot, but pleasant morning. White cotton clouds with light blue skies hopefully signified rain in the near future. The train did not stop at the Saliyapura Station but went farther on. The landscape was a continuous mix of paddy land and green uninhabited areas. Our first stop was Parasangahawewa. Hop out, hop in and we were back on our way. We were moving at a relaxing rhythm passing more green paddy fields, over the occasional bridge, small villages... on and on we went. We passed Medagaha Station—not a stop on our journey. At each station I would peer out of the window and noticing my enthusiasm one of the friendly passengers told me that I could walk about and look out from the door for a better view. I did not have to be told twice! I quickly walked to the door, grabbed the side bars and slowly peered out to drink in the beautiful landscape. The wind, as the train sped ahead, was cooling on this hot morning. The blue train almost glided on the tracks and trailed behind like a tail with no end.

The farther we went it seemed as if the land was being prepared for chena cultivation as there were sections that had been burnt. Corn fields amidst other vegetation indicated that the land was fertile. Medawachchiya was our next stop. A somewhat larger station, we crossed the main road where vehicles stopped to let the Yal Devi pass by. The landscape was gradually changing, it was somewhat drier. Many tanks and water holes had dried up, but there was a gentle breeze to which the tall grass swayed. It also seemed as if the land was being prepared for the next planting season. Soon, coconut trees were replaced by palmyrah trees... By this time I was a bit more bolder and decided to explore the other compartments. Swaying 'this way and that' I walked along each compartment to jump from one to the other where the two compartments were joined making sure not to lose my balance. The other passengers were amused, little did they know that this was my first visit on a train in Sri Lanka.

We whizzed passed Poonewa and Erataperiyakulam stations to arrive at Vavuniya Station, which was the largest so far. There were multiple railway tracks and it was apparent that we were in the town itself. A brightly coloured kovil contrasted beautifully with the surroundings. At Vavuniya we stayed for about five minutes before the guard blew the whistle, waved the green flag and we were off again.

By the time we reached Thandikulam Station, the railway line was almost parallel to the A9 and we were travelling in tandem with the vehicles, though easily edging forward. Over a new bridge we went, passing the old. At one point the railway track seemed to be an extension of the A9, I could feel we were getting closer.

The newly opened railway track from Omanthai to Kilinochchi has allowed people to travel to the North after 23 years

From afar, I could see the gleaming new orange building of the Omanthai Station. Slowly we edged forward and ground to a halt. Omanthai Station is the first of the newly built five stations on the Northern Railway Line that was opened recently by President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The railway track from Omanthai to Kilinochchi is only 63 km. We were now on the new railway track and the engine driver seemed to feel the difference as the train reached its maximum speed. At one point we diverged from the A9 and drove inland. Puliyanikulam was our next stop. Whenever we neared a populated area, the horn of the train would be blown loud and clear, warning those to move away from the tracks. Soon we were in a jungle area. Due to the heat and with no rains in sight, some of the trees had lost all their leaves. However, a little while later, the greenery of the trees were more apparent and the railway track loomed straight ahead to give a clear path for the train.

We passed a herd of cattle grazing in the nearby fields and as the train approached, the little ones scurried away. There were little houses with their inhabitants working persistently in their home gardens preparing the land for cultivation. Mankulam was the next stop, and the station master in his white crisp uniform was ready to greet the train. We edged along speeding up through scrub jungle to reach Murukandi Station, gleaming orange in the afternoon sun. The surrounding land was an earthy orange as well and seemed to be cleared for construction.

