

Railing by Southern Life



It was early in the morning and sleep had not yet left our droopy eyes. We were at the Fort Railway station ready with three tickets to Matara. Amidst the busy hum of trains arriving and departing we descended the stairs to platform five. As we stepped on to the newly paved platform yours truly missed her step and fell flat on her face! What a start to an adventurous day! Curious indeed.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Mahesh Bandara

We were an hour early as I had checked the wrong train times the previous day. Yes my bad! We settled comfortably into the chairs along the platform and passed our time observing the many trains that came and went and also the passengers who were in a rush to get to their destinations. It was around 6.40 in the morning when the train was announced, the shigragami or express train from Fort to Galle and then stopping at all stations to Matara, was to arrive soon.

At 6.50 am, train number 50 pulled into platform five and we ran towards the

train to catch window seats. This was not the Ruhunu Kumari, which we learn had scheduled times in the afternoon. Soon, we were on our way, gliding through built up areas in the heart of Colombo. As we crossed over the Beira Lake, I caught a glimpse of the blue ocean glistening in the morning light. No, not stopping at Kompaniya Veediya, we chugged passed, but I managed to admire the beautiful detail of the colonial design of this somewhat quaint station.

Vendors selling peanuts, boiled chickpeas, short eats, water and even coffee went up and down the train

As we moved on to the coastal belt along the Marine Drive, Colombo was getting ready for the new day. There was morning traffic with children going to school and adults to work. There were yet others getting their dose of daily fitness jogging from one end to the next. Our first stop was Dehiwela, then Mount Lavinia and Ratmalana, which was a big station with many railway lines. People seemed to be entering the city at this point. Some got in and others got down. Listening to the chatter of my fellow passengers was indeed entertaining.

Vendors selling peanuts, boiled chickpeas, short eats, water and even coffee went up and down the train announcing their wares. We were fully prepared with our nibbles and water, as such no amount of cajoling could entice us.

Lunawa was just a blur; stops in Moratuwa and Panadura, and we had left the city limits. Though we were still journeying through somewhat of a built up area, the atmosphere and the landscape had changed. There were more trees and we were able to catch an occasional glimpse of the sea. We passed towns and villages, soon we were in Wadduwa, Kalutara North and as we approached Kalutara South, the pristine white Stupa of the Kalutara Temple rose above us. The train slowed down to stop at the station and with the revered Kalutara Bodhiya coming into view, the passengers sitting across me almost as if reading my mind brought their palms together in worship as I did the same.

From here onwards it was a limitless stretch of sand, ocean and sun

From here onwards it was a limitless stretch of sand, ocean and sun. In Beruwela we passed the famous Maggona Mosque, a sacred site for the Muslims in the country. Bentota, it was hotels and along we went swaying to the rhythm of the

locomotive.

I got up and decided to explore my surroundings. While I had been looking after our belongings, my friends were nicely seated near the doorway of the compartment enjoying the breeze as the train sped on. The doors of the compartments reminded me of those that you find in houses. Smiling to myself, I walked along the aisle bumping into passengers and stepping over luggage. There were groups of tourists, undoubtedly travelling South to enjoy the beaches that Sri Lanka is so famous for.

In Kosgoda, my attention was drawn to the sudden colour of saffron against the somewhat monotonous background of green. My heart warmed when I realised it was a trio of very 'chuti' hamuduruwas (Samanera Buddhist monks). So young yet wise to let go of lay life to seek a greater level of spirituality.

The entire journey had taken us four hours and forty two minutes and we had travelled 156.48 km

Ambalangoda, Kahawa and Hikkaduwa, here many tourists got off while others got in. There was a buzz of chatter as they settled themselves in their seats. We passed the old station of Boossa, which was reminiscent of a country station that you find overseas. Ginthota, and then the train started to slow down. We were approaching Galle... the train ground to a halt, I could feel the joints and bolts straining and relaxing as we became stationary. Galle is a very large station with multiple lines and greater structures. We were there for about 30 minutes during which time we got off the train to stretch our legs.

The guard blew the whistle and we ran to our seats. The train jerked and we were back on our way. While the journey from Colombo to Galle was supposed to be an express service—stopping at only selected stations (though passengers who travel by train frequently disagree as we had apparently stopped at almost all stations)—the stretch to Matara was to be the normal service stopping at all stations.

In Talpe one of the tourists who were travelling in the same compartment inquired whether we were at Mirissa. While reassuring them that we had a long way to go, from this point onwards my attention was solely concentrated on tracking our journey on my iPad so that I could tell them when to get off. A peak

outside the window at Koggala, where it is famously known to have the sea, road, bicycle track, pavement, railway line and airport all in one location. We were parallel with the road and the Air Force plane, which had been placed as a clearly visible monument. We passed Weligama and while telling my fellow passengers there were a few more stops to Mirissa, I learned that this Swedish couple had been in Sri Lanka for two months, enjoying the beach at Hikkaduwa and were heading to Mirissa to see the whales, after which they were to travel to Trincomalee. What a nice holiday! We wished them well as they got down the train at Mirissa and we were on the last stretch of our journey.

A brief stop at Walgama station and the train gathered speed, we were literally whizzing past towns and then...we were in Matara. The entire journey had taken us four hours and forty two minutes and we had travelled 156.48 km.



