

Rain Catchers



Two boys share an umbrella to avoid the sudden downpour

There are two reasons why someone in Colombo might carry an umbrella, regardless of the weather. The most apparent reason would be because of the overbearing sun, which can hover above like a doting parent. The other is the capricious rains, which can pour in torrents at the drop of a hat, and usurp an otherwise clear, sunny day.

Words Benjamin Fowler Photographs Damith Wickramasinghe and Indika De Silva

The amount of cloud cover isn't the best indicator of whether or not rain is coming - black, stormy clouds brewing in the distance might be shooed away by the wind to another horizon. On the other hand, a light drizzle might begin to fall under clear blue skies, with the rain preceding the clouds. A more reliable indication that rain might be on its way is when the wind picks up and the salty smell of the Indian Ocean is blown far inland.

From June through October, Colombo gets drenched by the Southwest monsoon, which comes as if a response to the year's most humid months. If you were to stroll through the city during a downpour, you would see shopkeepers standing in their doorways, taking in the cool, refreshing breezes. Some sweep the growing puddles back into the street. There's also the atmosphere created, even by a light rain, where cars driving by make a low, ambient hiss from the wet roads, and

raindrops make percussive beats on tin roofs that change with the ebbing and flowing of the storm's intensity.

Motorcyclists, wary of the sleek, slippery roads, opt out of travelling, and are seen clustered under awnings or petrol stations, patiently waiting for the weather to subside. Trishaws unfurl their black, leathery curtains to protect their passengers. Police don heavy raincoats.

With a light rain, even without umbrellas most people will continue walking along at an undeterred pace. Given the usual heat of the day, a sprinkling can be quite refreshing. Pant legs get rolled up, sarongs hoisted, and some elect to take off their shoes. Especially during the monsoon seasons, this sort of rain is frequent and presents no reason to dart under the nearest awning.

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Though as the rain picks up these inclinations change. With a medium downfall, most people either walk faster or slower – either trying to get to the destination quicker or trudge forward stoically, concentrating hard on umbrella positioning in order to maximise dryness. Couples sharing an umbrella get closer together.

Though with a heavy drenching, all bets are off. Even oft-travelled thoroughfares can quickly become devoid of pedestrians. Those remaining are left sprinting for shelter. Cars slow down to navigate the growing puddles in the street, and leave wakes from their paths that crash against the sidewalk curbs. Though no matter how hard the downpour, there will always be some who simply pay the rain no attention, ambling along in no particular hurry, soaked to the bone.

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Without being able to count on a reliable warning for incoming rain, you're often forced to get creative with your choice of protection. Shoppers raise their purchases in plastic bags over their heads. A stray piece of cardboard or a newspaper will have to do for some. Others fashion empty plastic bags into makeshift caps. Cart-pushing labourers cover their cargo with a tarp, and once

they deliver the goods, wrap themselves in it like a cloak.

A fruit and vegetable peddler, however, might leave his produce uncovered, letting the rain wash over the goods whose rainbow-array of colours stands out dynamically against an otherwise dark and drab scene. Though that's not to suggest that rainfall doesn't produce new colours of its own. Red dirt from construction sites spills out on to the street and creates maroon streaks down the side. Vehicle brake lights and neon signs are reflected in the puddles on the street.

Umbrella or not, I've noticed there's always someone on the beach, even in heavier rains when the seas are choppy and ships not far off coast are just vague shapes in a dark-grey fog that envelopes both sky and sea, when the skyline is just a silhouette in the distance. Maybe they were too far from buildings or shelter when the storm rolled in, or maybe they just like the rain.

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