Rowing down Bentota

Posted on



Excitement through the mangroves

Discovering the mangrove-fringed river that is the gateway to the South

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Bentota is probably our most abundant, luscious beach resort, thick with tropical greenery and colourful with the virgin white of Frangipani or pretty sprays of orchids. It is the Bentota (or Bentara) river that splashes the place with so much beauty, while providing a peaceful haven for a group of creatures and plants that have evolved to live only in this environment.

We took a boat for a rendezvous with the peaceful river. As we drifted away from the pier, gaps on the green river bank offered occasional peeks into life of the rural South.



The Bentota river colours the place with beauty

A towering grey colour Buddha glanced across the waters, bestowing blessings on vessels that briefly paused before it.

We glided past a pola (village fair), heaps of robust, gleaming, multi hued vegetables were strewn under colourful canopies as buyers poked and pried shrewdly for the best bargain. As we headed to the heart of the river, however, human presence thinned and evaporated. The Mangroves closed in like thick, emerald, earth-bound clouds on every side till they hemmed our entire world.

It’s a mystery why flying foxes (bats) prefer certain trees while avoiding others just as appealing to our eyes. The nocturnal revelers were dozing topsy-turvy in their numbers, some of them elegantly enfolded in their robe-like wings while others dangled lopsidedly. Suddenly the thrum of the boat engine dropped to a purr and the boat bumped its nose against mangroves. Our guide, his finger pressed to his lips for silence, poked his head stealthily into the cage of aerial roots. He seemed to be pointing out something slimy and green hardly discernible. But in the middle of the slimy object was something alive that sucked you in. It was the cunning coppery green eye of a crocodile, watching us silently, evilly, calculatingly. Though only a part of its head was visible, the monster was obviously a behemoth as big as 12 feet.

We had now shaken off civilisation and were speeding along wild greenery. Things were heady. With a hollered ‘hold on!’ the boatman swerved the craft to a side, careering head on into a tunnel or cave made of mangrove. Within the dark shadowy canopy of mangrove into which we entered, I could hark back to childhood fairytales of enchanted woods. We had to duck constantly because aerial roots jutted out threateningly. The canopy above was akin to that of a great rainforest- if not darker.

It was with reticence we emerged out of the dark green glow of the canopy into sunlight. On our way we sailed along a fair number of boats, rocking with groups who could barely control their excitement at the close brush with nature.

It really was cause enough to be hysterical. This magical river that divides the Southern province from the Western has entertained us with a glimpse into her secret heart.