



## Canopy havens

**In its heart there lie many escapes, pathways of quiet and groves of shade. These short walks or drives within patches of nature relieve the mind from a city of the mundane. Business deals, as always, turn to friendly chats among colleagues under these air lit passages, schoolchildren frequent under canopying fluffs of green while they leave behind the bustle of school and bus rides...**

### ***Words Sonali Kadurugamuwa Photographs Prabhath Chathuranga***

These are the spaces where the commercial city disappears into peaceful little coves of comfort, accompanied by the generous foliage of giant trees. It's a sense of placidity even where traffic may congregate. Shady spots that plot busy streets are gentle reminders of how even the smallest hints of green are like therapeutic tunnels of mind-easing respite.

Down Thurstan Road, the trees that bear heat and sun shielding canopies override the sounds of the everyday battles of traffic whizzing by. Wise, these 100 plus year-old trees drive their heavy roots into the pavements as if to hold the areas captive to encourage and attract pedestrian awareness of their being. The University of Colombo borders either side of the footpaths and students take casual rambles up and down, "It doesn't feel like we're walking on the way to the exam hall," says one tense student, "The greenery helps us to relax and reflect on what we've learnt during the course of the day," includes another. Fifth Lane, off Thurstan hosts a most unusual collection of plants to be growing within city limits. The watekeiya typically found growing abundantly in the man-grove swamps, towers flourishingly down the Lane beside a coffee stop. Mara, frangipani and elongated buttresses of large banyan trees adorn Gregory's Road. Much like Thurstan, Gregory's is a public route, used by motorists, schoolchildren and others alike, however it is considered a residential area, private in appearance and makes for cosy, wandering promenades.

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An elegant route edged by tree after tree of teak and Mara with green foliage and shaded to perfection is Sarana road, off Baudhaloka Mawatha, which runs roughly in a semi-circle. Wijerama Mawatha, which enters into several inroads teeming with neatly cut flora, is yet another cheerful roadway that never ceases to turn heads away from the hot sun. Set in frangipani trees, both lofty and little, together with bountiful mara trees, sweating with

mosses and climbers running up their massive trunks, adding to the richness of shade, Vidya Mawa-tha's winding side street off Wijerama complements the architectural school that sits within its green glory.

Other, less evident little shady havens are nestled within residential yet solitary byroads, which are made use of mostly by the recreational crowd, who'd rather exercise beneath free shade as opposed to working out at a dreary gym.

Mischievous, young school-children play hide and seek amongst thick plants and bushes, after school, and sometimes take long cuts home, through traffic and carefree paths - whatever extends the time spent playing with their friends, even they choose nature nooks such as these to while away their innocent frolic.

We watch as a mother and son leisurely pace through Elibank Street. On seeing them, one would think that the road's personality, heavy with flowers and plumage, reflected in their expressions of love and freeness of spirit as they strode along, chatting hand-in-hand. Another little nook is the boulevard through Nidhas Mawatha, nidhas, meaning free and mawatha mean-ing road. As I walk through this tree-trimmed passage, before me a familiar structure unfolds - the Independence Square. Hence, this lush trail has been laid ahead as a walk to freedom - so to speak of course.

The oldest of trees create the largest of shade and they are truly a pleasure that shouldn't be taken for granted. Their tranquil ways may have kept us sane, as we take a breath beneath their soothing green, in a continuously expanding city. They may have been the reasons why we travel through certain side streets, without thinking too much about it. But this is what they do best... free your mind.

Colombo city is a cluster of concrete, but more importantly, it is balanced with modest repertoires of everyday green miracles that trans-form any hectic atmosphere into serene bits of haven that, reassuringly, we simply can't live without.

