Singaimalai: A Fascinating Exploration

Posted on
The Poolbank or Singaimalai tunnel gives the railway passenger an exceptionally long thrill

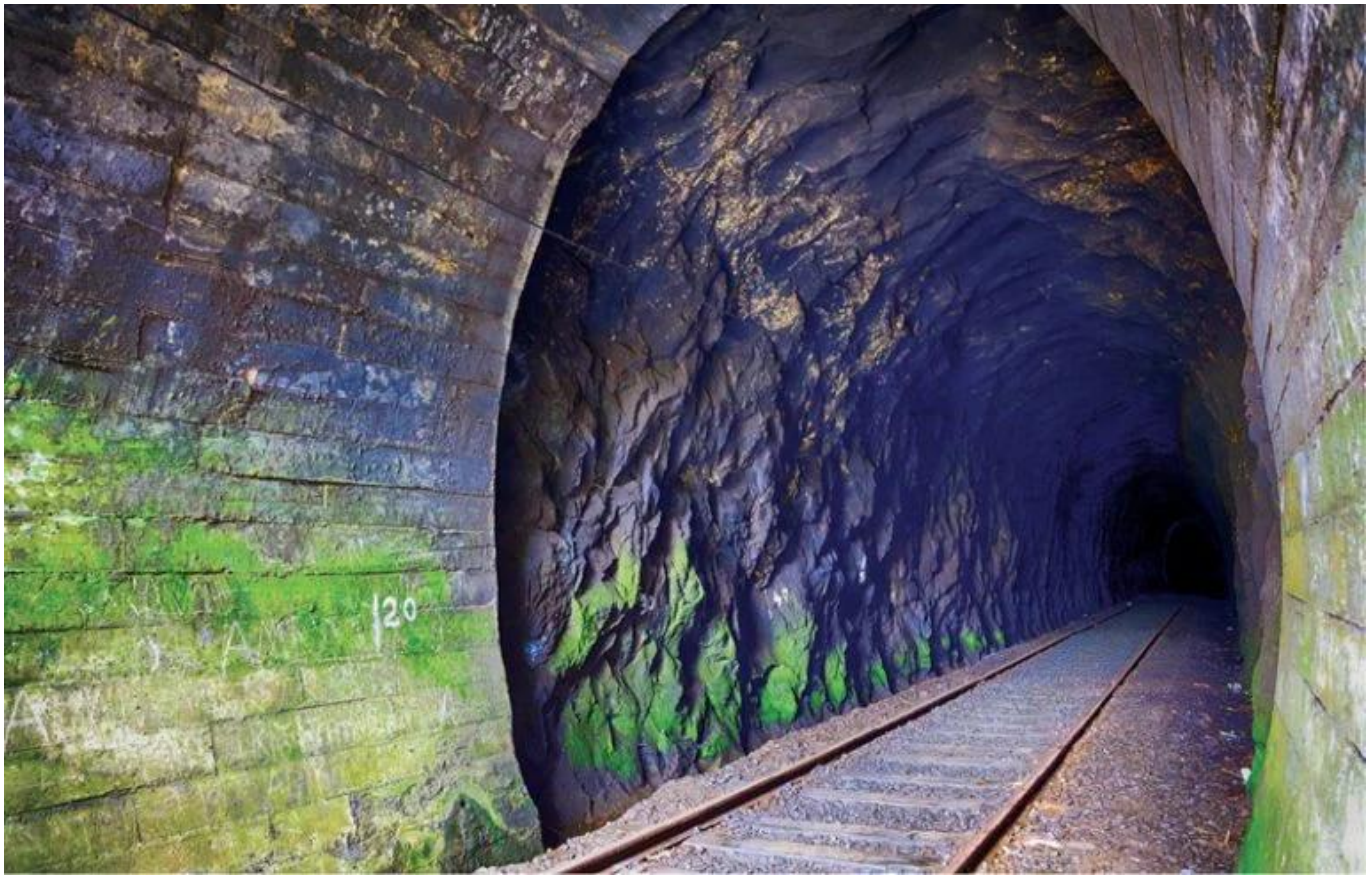
On the trail of the Singaimalai tunnel, the longest railway tunnel in the country nestled amidst a fascinating mountainscape.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa
Photographs Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham and Geeth Viduranga

Barely visible, a train crawls through dreamy mist-wrapped mountains, a tiny wisp of smoke vanishing into the cold air above it. From the train, hundreds of heads gaze out of the windows. Completely mesmerized, they observe the panorama around them. But when a tunnel swallows the hooting train and pitch darkness fills the compartments, no one grumbles. A railway tunnel is a thrilling, chilling experience one always wishes would last just a bit longer.

On her daily route from Colombo to Badulla, the Udarata Menike braves 46 tunnels drilled into the mountain rock by the pioneering British. The longest is in the hill station of Hatton. The English called it Poolbank Tunnel as the Poolbank Tea Estate spreads above it. Called Singaimalai today owing to the legends of a nearby mountain shaped like a lion, it is 562m long. In colloquial use the name has rolled into ‘Singimalai’. Lying between Hatton and Kotagala stations, the tunnel was designed by the great English civil engineer, Sir Guilford Lindsey Molesworth. At the time it was built, in the mid-19th century, the tunnel was an engineering feat, drilled from both ends and meeting in the middle.

It was cold and the mist hung thickly in the air when we walked towards the tunnel. We strode between the close, high walls of rough-hewn rock blasted by the English engineers. As we drew closer to the mouth of the tunnel, a train was heard coming towards us from within and we waited till it chugged past with a rumble before we entered. With the train schedule in hand we knew well in advance to vacate the tunnel and tracks before the next train.



The tunnel, hewn out of the rock, was an engineering feat at the time.

As we walked deeper, the pitch darkness swallowed us completely. The echo of our voices was quite impressive. A mysterious sound of rustling together with a constant choir of thin screeches and whistles were heard above our heads. When we searched with our lights it was revealed that the roof of the tunnel was speckled with nests of the edible-nest swiftlet. Most were occupied with little pink hatchlings, snug in these remarkable nurseries fashioned entirely out of the bird’s own saliva. The mother birds were flitting around, hunting for insects to feed their hungry young.

Because the tunnel curves in the middle as well due to its length, one end of the tunnel could not be seen from the other. The walk was long and we occasionally came across a wavering flash of a torch belonging to groups who, just like us, were exploring the tunnel with their subdued voices echoing loudly.



A shrine dedicated to goddess Pattini near the tunnel

Finally, we left the cold, pitch-dark but strangely comfortable depths of the tunnel and emerged into the pale daylight. We were greeted by the stately old stone mouth of the tunnel touched with patches of beautiful rusty red. Above, on all sides, mountains rose gently, thickly covered in a glowing green, fresh after the rains. As the heights soared the trees too grew taller, and the faraway tops of the mountains were lost in the mist.

At the foot of the hill was a modest kovil dedicated to goddess Pattini. Set against the hills and the tea estates, the colourful shrine of simple architecture created a quaint and beautiful typical upcountry setting. As we left the tunnel and tracks, I looked back to see a train passing by. I wished that I was on that train, winding through a dreamscape and relishing the thrill of midnight-black tunnels as hoots echoed in keeping with an exciting railway tradition.



