Tales From Maha Oya

Posted on

The Rambaken Oya Reservoir amidst the mountainous backdrop

Maha Oya lies 40km inland from Chenkaladi along the Batticaloa-Padiyathalawa Road – a diminutive town and rural precinct in the Ampara District, where quiet livelihoods unfold. It remains a symbolic town that has witnessed the changing tides, during a time when access to the vicinity was once restricted. Since recent times the communities have returned to Maha Oya to find an old way of life, setting up shop or cultivating lands. The central town of Maha Oya pulses steadily with activity, hosting an eclectic scramble of outlets for commuters. Travelling to the outskirts of the township, however, are places of interest for a bit of history, beauty, intrigue and even adventure.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

A phenomenon

Maha Oya Hot Springs are located about two kilometres off Maha Oya and is believed to have some of the highest temperatures amongst other hot wells across the Island. The region encompassing Maha Oya and Padiyathalawa also hosts the highest number of hot wells. We arrived at the enclosure of the Maha Oya hot spring where we counted seven wells of different temperatures with 55°C being the highest. However, out of the seven only two wells can be used for bathing.

The adventure

A few kilometres away in Unuwatura Bubula is an ancient temple and monastery of renown in Maha Oya. Armed with little information about the Weheragala Aranya Senasanaya, prior to arriving at the premises, we decided to venture on and discover what lay ahead. Along the way a local, helpfully provided us with a rough guide to reach an ancient Stupa, but remained behind as we commenced our journey. We came upon a path that fell across several cave dwellings built for meditation. Resident monks find refuge in these quiet shelters and we made our way cautiously along what appeared to be a winding and untrodden path. The path wound across rocks and boulders and often remained hidden beneath a blanket of leaves. The farther we climbed the more uncharted the territory. Soon we were cutting through thick undergrowth, at times crouched on all fours! Getting entangled in wines or tugged or tethered by thorns became a recurring challenge. Quite certain of having lost our way, we were eager to find familiar sights. However, hearing sounds of Avurudu celebrations in the distance gave us reassurance that we hadn’t strayed too far. Our route fell across a gradual and arduous ascent and at long last we found ourselves atop a rock shrouded thickly in forest cover. From here we set our sights on a nearby village. Stifled by exhaustion and thirst, we eagerly descended upon a clearing that led to the welcome sight of a villager’s house. Here we were welcomed warmly, and offered refreshment and much needed rest before heading our way once more.

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The beauty and a past

Passing Unuwatura Bubula we proceeded towards a well known reservoir, the Rambaken Oya, believed to have been originally built during the time of King Saddatissa. Emerging on to the bund, we were at once struck by the scenic beauty that unfolded across the length and breadth of the expanse. Silhouetted along the horizon, loomed the Nuwaragala mountain that further added to the picture postcard vista. The reservoir has been built to irrigate water from Maha Oya, one of the main rivers of the Island. A short distance away from the reservoir we discovered the site where remnants of the ancient dam and sluice gates from the times of King Sadatissa are placed. These are intriguing structures hewn entirely from granite and the engineering mastery of the bygone era is evident and one can still observe the interlocking joint of the sluice gates. Returning from a glimpse into the past, we happened upon a villager of striking and unusual demeanour and appearance. A local of the area, who had joined us on our journey was quick to identify him as one from the indigenous community. The tribesman stood nonplussed by our curiosity carrying a fresh catch of catfish caught using only his hands, as is the practice amongst this community. With this encounter, our next obvious stop was to be the village of this indigenous people.

We were at once struck by the scenic beauty that unfolded across the length and breadth of the expanse

The Indigenous

We found a few members of the Pollebedda Maha Oya indigenous people, gathered at a clearing amidst their humble housings. Amongst those present were Adiwasi Heengama, the Deputy Chief of the tribe and Appuhami Aetto, the Chairman of the Indigenous Community Centre. Their Chief, ‘Gobalathuma’ was not present at the time of our visit. The Pollebedde indigenous clan, we discovered, are descendants of Danigala Mahabandarala – a different ancestry to that of the renowned Damabana clan in Mahiyanganaya. The ‘veddas’ of Maha Oya comprise of 227 members and eke out a living from cultivating crops such as cowpea, and corn, and venturing into the forest to gather bees honey or hunt for game. The forest serves as an important part of their simple lives providing a rich source of medicinal plants used for various ailments. For their spiritual wellbeing members worship the Buddha, and also deities such as Kalu Bandara and Kiri Amma, we learnt.

The forest serves as an important part of their simple lives

As we gathered our bearings at the end of our journey, our tales of adventure, history, beauty and people enriched our impressions and unravelled the identity of a little known precinct.

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