



The herd of elephants before the entrance to Kumana

A visit to the East is not complete without a trip to Kumana. Enter the solitude of the wilderness where the untamed reign, remember that you are only a guest on a brief visit...

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe | **Photographs** Thanuja Thilakarathne

It was a long weekend and during our holiday at Whisky Point, Urani we decided to visit Kumana because we could not help but heed its call. Late afternoon to evening is the best time to visit Kumana. Though famous as a nesting place for birds this national park is also home to the elephant, leopard, sloth bear, spotted deer and many more. While there are seasons to visit Kumana, generally if you visit during the afternoon any time during the year you are bound to see animals. It all depends on your luck.

We slowly drove along the sandy roads, having first seen a stripe-necked mongoose, we were thrilled to see three elephants, a couple on one side of the bank and the other on the opposite side of a lake, indulging in an afternoon snack of crunchy grass. I had a good feeling that we were going to see many animals today.

Groups of painted storks and fleeting herds of spotted deer captured our attention. Alert and ever ready to take to one's heel in case of danger. There were many stags with impressive sets of antlers. Pied Hornbills usually in two's were a frequent sight on that day. At one point there were many swooping in, dusting themselves in sand and flying on to the closest tree. Apparently they were 'sand bathing'.

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green grass and branches

A lone serpent eagle was on the ground looking intently at something in the grass, it did not move even as the vehicle neared. This was definitely a curious sight. We were privileged to see a peacock dance in its full glory. The peacock had displayed his beautiful blue and green plumage and was doing short steps in circles. But he soon hurried into the thicket to shy away from prying eyes. A white-rumped shama was perched on a branch picture perfect, while a group of visitors in another jeep were clicking away their cameras.

As we continued along the sandy road intently looking around to capture a glimpse of the

wild, our friend in the front of the vehicle whispered in an urgent tone “elephants just beyond the bend”. We slowly urged forward, it was lovely to see a small herd of three females and a little one feeding on the green grass and branches. We watched them for a while, the elders protected the little one, but he slowly came out to cross the road with two of his protectors. While the three of them continued on their feed, the other adult remained on the opposite side of the road. From the other side, another vehicle approached. Upon hearing the sound, the two adults first covered the little one and the third adult quickly crossed the road to complete the protective circle. After a few minutes the little one could not help but put out his inquisitive head. There were too many spectators for them so they decided to venture into the jungle.

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The sun was bidding adieu to the day and we saw more pied hornbills, couples perched high on trees, a lone elephant in the cooling waters of the lake, a wild boar scurrying into the thicket and a group of four green beaters enjoying the evening breeze in the middle of the road. A painted stork spread its wings and soared into the sky, while a lone peacock made an impressive stance atop a rock.

It was getting late so we had to return to the entrance of the Park. As we made our way, the large rock outcrop that rose above the treetops impressed us. We journeyed further, minding our own business and not expecting to see any animals when a rustling from the jungle stopped us in our tracks. An elephant was foraging in the foliage and hearing us stopped in its tracks, turned around and lifted his trunk to ascertain who we were. He sized us up from a distance and continued on with his routine. At one moment he grabbed some sand in his trunk and flung it across his back. As we edged forward he too came forward continuously monitoring us with his trunk focused in our direction. Having had enough of us he crossed the road and headed into the jungle.

We had heeded the call of Kumana and had experienced its wilderness. As we headed back home it was already dark, but we had a gentle giant bidding us adieu under a tree in a paddy field, motionless as the night itself.

And, the next weekend...



The large herd before the entrance to Kumana

Words Vimadi Athauda | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Thanuja Thilakarathne

The day was somewhat overcast as we made our way to the Kumana wildlife sanctuary. It was around four in the afternoon, just a couple of hours away from closing time. We had very little hope that we would make it on time, but we raced along the rugged path to the entrance.

Quite unexpectedly from the jungle emerged a lone elephant. Our vehicle came to a halt. Then another emerged from the trees followed by several more. It was difficult to count. Here we were seated in our jeep just a while ago, quite certain that an encounter with the wild would not be possible at this time of the day when the elephants came to us. Two adorable baby elephants were the cynosure of the spectacle. The herd of adult elephants made a protective ring around the 'juniors'.

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Amidst the light rain the cameras were clicking continually. A beautiful sight as the elephants frolicked in the water and engaged in various antics. Noticeable to us was a lone elephant intently keeping an eye on the road. Everything seemed calm until the cantankerous sound of a tuk tuk disturbed the surrounding. The reckless driver had not only switched on the lights of the vehicle but also was tooting the horn, much to everyone's annoyance. This agitated the lone elephant guarding the herd. As the tuk tuk passed, the elephant came charging towards the road. A tad terrified, we retreated. Suddenly the elephant could not be seen. We then moved forward.

The rest of the herd was still in sight. The noisy tuk tuk returned much to our displeasure, very much loud like before. Suddenly, the lone elephant came out, again ready to attack. By now, the entire herd was on the road; our path was obstructed. We were worried as our vehicle was between the herd and a narrow bridge. We managed to reach safety though it was a suspense filled few moments.

It was nonetheless a beautiful encounter. Elephants are adorable animals to watch and are peaceful as long as they are undisturbed.

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The Calling of Kumana

