The Crunchy Little Fish Of Wellawatte

Posted on
The train track running along the seaside in Wellawatte

I love to fish and have dropped a hook and line in many of the rivers, lakes, tanks (ancient manmade reservoirs), salt water lagoons and bays all over this lovely tropical island.

Words and Photographs Kurt Rolfes

I've caught good sized barracuda in the Indian Ocean 10 km off shore from Colombo and landed Barramundi trolling in the Ja Ela Ganga (river) that feeds into the Negombo Lagoon just south of the Bandaranaike International Airport. In the Madu Ganga, down south just before Hikkaduwa, I have landed my fair share of Mangrove Jack (Red Snapper family).

I must admit, however, that I have yet to cast a fly into the cold and fast flowing trout streams that run through Hatton and Nuwara Eliya in the central highlands, but that is a definite plan for next year.

And, like any true fisherman, I love to talk fishing with anyone, anywhere, any place! And it's a fact that the longer you talk, the bigger the fish get.

I have driven past Wellawatte hundreds of times. It's a suburb of Colombo about half way down Galle Road heading south towards Mount Lavinia. The old Dutch Wellawatte Canal empties into the Indian Ocean there, after winding its way 15 to 20 km through Colombo suburbs beginning near Rajagiriya.

Almost every time I've driven past the railroad bridge, which spans the canal, I've seen Sri Lankans fishing. They are usually on the rock breakwater that marks the canal's entry into the sea, on the railroad bridge or along the banks of the canal itself.

Last month as I drove over the canal, my curiosity got the better of me. Parking on the shoulder of Marine Drive, which runs parallel to the main railroad track, I walked

over the tracks to the breakwater. Sure enough, even at two in the afternoon, there were three or four devoted fishermen with their lines in the water.

There was not a fishing reel in sight, however. Some of these men had ancient, long fishing poles with about two metres of line tied to the very end of the pole. At the end of the line was a small, shiny silver hook. The first thing I noticed was that they were not using bait.

Their technique of fishing consisted of balancing on the breakwater rocks to get as close to the breaking waves as possible. They would then cast the bare hook into the water as far as the rod would allow and jiggle the hook from side to side. Obviously the bright reflection from the bare hook alone would entice small fish to take a bite.

A couple of the fishermen had transparent fishing line wrapped around an empty water bottle with a much bigger hook tied to the end. They would unwind three or four metres of line from the bottle and throw the line out as far as possible and quickly retrieve it. Still no bait on the hook!

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In the next couple of hours I saw about a dozen small silver Salaya (related to sardines) end up in a big box that one of the fishermen had balanced on the rocks. The guys with the bigger hooks and line wrapped around the empty bottles didn’t get a bite.

Around four in the afternoon three or four young boys showed up with bamboo poles, which they had obviously just cut from a bamboo grove in the neighbourhood. Using the same technique they caught about half a dozen in the hour they were there.

About five pm I got to talking with three middle-aged Sri Lankans who showed up with proper fishing rods, but still no reels. Sandun spoke very good English and explained that they lived in the neighbourhood and he and his friends would come to fish during holidays and perhaps once or twice a week after work. They also treated their fishing as kind of a picnic, bringing not just their fishing gear but

snacks and beer. This, he explained, made their fishing far more enjoyable.

Usually they would catch a dozen or so small Salaya and occasionally some of the larger fish that wandered close to shore. On rare days when the tide was particularly high and the sea water would back up in the canal, Sandun told me that they had even caught the occasional barramundi or snapper.

He also mentioned that sometimes, when the bigger fish were running up the canal, they would use earthworms or small shrimp as bait. He also told me, with a smile, that they even used the occasional reel on their rods when fishing from the railroad bridge.

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The Salaya and other small fish they catch, such as Handella and Sprats, make a tasty snack or short eat when prepared Sri Lankan style.

First you clean the fish then roll them in a mixture of red chilli powder and salt until they are evenly coated. Set aside for about an hour. In a small pot bring a couple of inches of cooking oil to the point just before it starts smoking. Then, in batches of three or four, cook the fish to your preference. If you cook until the fish are crunchy, you can eat them, bones and all. Otherwise you will have to be careful and eat around the many small bones.

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