

The Enigma of Thambalagamuwa



Craggy rocks along the bay

It's hard to say why Thambalagamuwa Bay is so rarely visited. It's a haven for animal and bird life, is close to the east coast beaches of Uppuveli and Nilaveli, and even has an airport in the vicinity, yet hardly anyone goes. This situation surely can't last for long - it's time to make the journey before people realise what they're missing.

Words and Photographs Shyam Ranasinghe



The rocky protrusion acts as a defence against the wind and is a sanctuary to small crustaceans and other small animals that find refuge in its many crevices

Thambalagamuwa, the shallowest of Trincomalee's three bays, manages to remain unnoticed and virtually unvisited despite its location beside the bustling townships of Kinniya, Thambalagamuwa, and China Bay. Also known as Thambalagam or Thampalakamam, it's fed by branches of the mighty Mahaweli River and covers an area of around 18 km². It's large, but not deep, thanks to the sediment deposited by the river: the bay (though commonly referred to as a bay, it is actually a lagoon) is shallow enough in places that fishermen are able to hop out of their boats and bring in their catches standing in the water.

Despite barely registering on the tourist radar, Thambalagamuwa is the amateur naturalist's dream. It may not look like much, but put in the time and effort, and the bay's treasures will reveal themselves. Fringed by a lush expanse of dense mangrove, it's home to a wide variety of plant and animal life.

Strolling along the narrow, sandy edges of the bay, whose waters had turned a bit murky as a result of the monsoon, I spotted what looked like snails on speed. On closer inspection I discovered that they weren't snails at all, but hermit crabs that had taken up residence in the abandoned homes of various mollusks. Asserting their dominance in the nearly still waters, the crabs scurry over every surface, leaving no stone, tree stump or fallen leaf unconquered.

Rivaling the hermit is the lagoon crab, which thrives in the protected environment of the bay. At the end of a long walk I perched myself on a rocky outcrop overlooking the silent water and fixed my attention on a small community of crabs going about their business on the shoreline. The time flew by as they scuttled in and out of the water, stopping occasionally to look up at this two-legged giant pointing a camera at them. It was only the call to prayer of the mosque at Kinniya that finally broke my reverie.

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Mangroves cluster around the edges of Thambalagamuwa, the green of their leaves bright against the reddish rock of the shore. The oxygen-starved environment demands that the trees grow pencil-like roots, which stand above the level of the water like sky scrapers for the world of the tiny. It all makes an ideal home for species including fiddler crabs, who zap away into their tiny holes in the mud the moment they sense my movement. Finally, after a long time waiting, one came out and stood before me, holding out its bright orange claw as if in protest against my having disturbed its rest.

Away from the fiddler crabs a mudskipper shuffled away down the shore at a pace probably faster than I could run. Similar in appearance to the creatures that first made their way out of the oceans and onto land hundreds of millions of years ago, this air-breathing, amphibious fish gives Thambalagamuwa the feel of a place lost in time.

Gathering my thoughts as I prepared to continue my walk, I was surprised by the sudden splashing of scores of fish leaping out of the calm waters.

The exclusivity of this place is all part of the charm

Thambalagamuwa is also home to the elusive sea snake known as the *valakkadi*. This highly venomous reptile remains hidden in the mud, only venturing out to hunt. Attacks on humans are rare, but I had no intention of trying my luck, and kept my eyes peeled for its scaly skin.

The most thrilling moment of my visit to Thambalagamuwa involved another of the bay's more dangerous residents. Crocodiles spend much of their time hidden

beneath the surface of the water, only their snouts and eyeballs visible. I spotted one surfacing, its gaze fixed ominously on a troop of monkeys sitting by the shoreline. The massive croc ducked under again, hoping to surprise the primates, but it was too late - they were already aware of the presence of the predator, and scampered away from the water, out of reach of the frightening jaws.

Oblivious to this drama, a flock of egrets stalked through the shallows in search of food, while a fisherman cast his net wide in the distance. It seems a shame that so few people have experienced the delights of Thambalagamuwa. On the other hand, the exclusivity of this place is all part of the charm.

