The Experience: BT Style

Posted on



Enroute to Arugam Bay – 11 vehicles make a stop to enjoy picturesque scenery

We begin at 6am!

It was Saturday morning, few were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Vehicles at the ready, bag and baggage and the 48 strong BT Options crew piled into their designated wheels, 11 to be precise. Smiles beamed all around and eager anticipation and chatter filled the air. We were off to the East Coast for what was sure to be an action packed four day tour.

Day 1 : Burning The Miles

A total of eleven vehicles tailing each other in succession made quite a surreal spectacle along the main roads. This was evident by the quizzical glances of

commuters we passed by. As can be expected the ever captivating landscapes of the island made for ideal photo ops as we cruised along. Each vehicle held its place in the chain of commute and waving hands jubilantly hailed each other like long lost friends.

Our first stop was for breakfast at Fresh Way in Puwakpitiya. The buffet style spread of typical Sri Lankan breakfast more than appeased our rumbling tummies as we enthusiastically tucked into stringhoppers or rice and curry breakfast. It was all you can eat at 250 rupees per person. Topped off with a cuppa well sweetened tea and slices of chocolate rolls, we were fit to bursting.

Fed and watered we were back on the road. Close upon mid-day we came to a halt in our journey once more. This time at Udawalawe, where the elephants of the national park are famously known to approach the border fence by the road. At the time of our passing through, around 15-20 elephants had lined up along the way as anticipated, drawing eager commuters. We too stopped and were instantly approached by corn vendors to offer feed for the hopeful elephants. We spent several minutes watching and posing for photographs with these majestic and in this instance obliging animals. The corn cobs that we cautiously offered through the fence seemed to just vanish in a single swallow – there didn't seem to be enough to go around.

The afternoon sun beat down harshly and we retreated reluctantly back to our vehicles. Minutes gelled into hours as we sped along when mid-way of Monaragala, something out of the ordinary came within our sights compelling a closer look. It was at Kodayana where a large outdoor installation of the Pelwatte Sugar Industries was hauling hefty stacks of sugar cane. A purchasing point, the stacks were being weighed for transportation as we watched on.

A sudden glimpse of movement brought all the vehicles to a grinding halt

The journey was only beginning and we had much to look forward to and time was of the essence. By mid afternoon we were closing our destination – Arugam Bay. Passing through Lahugala the surroundings took on a distinct air of the pristine. Thick jungle oozed on either side of our road and a sudden glimpse of movement brought all the vehicles to a grinding halt. For the next few minutes we spent playing 'spot the elephant' craning our necks, eyes peeling the green thicket. Catching a glimpse was tricky; our lone elephant was not much for public appearances. Edging forward only led the pachyderm farther into the jungle.

Let The Fun And Games Begin…

It was late afternoon when we reached Arugam Bay with its laidback charm cast from life by the beach. The New Tristar Beach Hotel at Arugam Bay was where we were to spend two nights. The hotel had made preparations to accommodate us where the usual places of stay in Arugam Bay were unaccustomed to large groups such as ours. Greeted with a papaw drink we hung back to take in our bearings and shake off the long drive. The beach front resort offered cooling shade under coconut trees but we had arrived at a time when the sun was blazing and we were quick to take refuge in our rooms to freshen up for a hearty buffet lunch. The sea at this location proved too rough for a dip at the time and oblivious of any plans that lay before us, we soon discovered that a visit to the Panama beach was on the cards. Excitedly, each of us scurried off to gather suitable belongings.

Panama, farther south of Arugam Bay was more than just a beach. Arid sandy landscape devoured us from all directions. The gusty wind and dunes laced with thin ground creepers painted an almost eerie image. Trudging through the endless expanse towards the sea we felt like a solitary herd out in a desert of a foreign land. Here too the waves crashed boisterously and we cautiously edged into the water limiting to an area of safety. We held each other as the waves mercilessly pounded and bullied us off our feet. Rendered even more hopeless with the fits of laughter that we succumbed to for the next hour or so we were but children indulging in silliness and running into waves. Some discovered the technique of attacking waves sidelong, others simply preferred the fallout! Sporting fun continued on to the beach with a game of beach football and as dusk veiled we returned to our vehicles to negotiate methods of drying and changing in the desert-like wilderness. It was a bedraggled, drippy bunch that spilled into the Resort late evening. Exhausted and hungry, dinner was announced at Arugam Bay Surf Resort. The night was still young.

Each vehicle held its place in the chain of commute and waving hands jubilantly hailed each other like long lost friends

Shuffling along together down the dimly lit roads to our dinner venue was the perfect way to indulge in the ease and abandon that defined Arugam Bay. Already the troupe was in the throes of song and dance with the rhythmic drum beats announcing an approaching hungry bunch. While our meals were being prepared (and we never knew what they were to be till they appeared on our plates), we walked directly to the beach of Arugam Bay Surf Resort and continued an upbeat

soiree. Song after song accompanied by drum beats on a djembe and strums of the guitar the ‘calypso band’ launched itself on the beach – it was a celebration of collective spirit.

Having worked up an appetite the warm food arrived in the form of chimichanga – ten inch tortillas wrapped around, beans cheese and a choice of chicken, fish and vegetable fillings. We always have the chimichanga during our visits to Arugam Bay, it is our favourite and we never miss to have it! They proved to be mouthfuls of satisfying flavour, and fresh fruit salad with ice cream sealed the deal for the night. Well sated, cups of tea and coffee helped wind down for the day. A startling announcement that 5:30 am was to be our waking hours for the following day left us grimly contemplating on some shut eye asap, when the joke was revealed. With huge sighs of relief we headed back the way we came, in song and dance of course.

Day2 : Rice Bags And Burgers

Sleeping in was not an option. A raucous game of beach cricket, hot cups of tea and simply the enticement of being by the beach eventually summoned all one by one. A hearty buffet breakfast downed with thick papaya juice made for a promising start to the day.

It was a particularly warm and sunny day and some of us were content to settle on the grass lawns and cool shade of coconut trees at the resort. Others braved a walk along the beach to a bathing area farther down the coast, in the blistering heat. The sea at this popular spot turned out was far more bather-friendly with lapping waves to lull away the heat. They returned however with clear signs of fun and frolick and several shades darker. It was soon lunch time and we drove down to Stardust Beach Hotel for lunch a short drive away.

Situated in a cosy niche, Stardust held the air of a genial and airy ambience. Lounge chairs and a hammock lay invitingly and on one end of the interior hung a curious collection of bags. While Stardust is managed by Shelly (Merete Scheller), the bags are a new venture by Suzanne Berg who introduced the novel design of bags derived from rice bags often seen in grocery stores and markets. The rice bags have been altered into a range of attractive and trendy carry bags and messenger bags. It is a venture she began in April this year employing family members of the staff at Stardust. These bags collected from rotti shops or bought second hand have been designed by Suzanne right down to the finer details such as the rivets, zips and lining. She hopes to open a separate shop to display a broader range of her

products in the near future.

To appease our hunger pangs though were scrumptious and freshly prepared chicken and vegetable burgers to sink our teeth into, and fresh mixed fruit juice to wash down the hefty burgers.

Into The Wild

Returning from lunch the day's agenda included a safari to the Kumana National Park that lies contiguous to the Yala National Park. Five safari jeeps hired from Arugam Bay, were stationed at the ready and with roughly eight or ten passengers in each we set off on our way at four in the afternoon. Declared a RAMSAR wetland, Kumana is an important bird sanctuary spanning 1,190 ha. As the five jeeps bumped along through the park's gates a watering hole just beside the track caught our attention. The waters were infested with crocodiles. Some basking in the sun, others stealthily sliding in and out of view, we counted about eight within our sights. Cameras emerged and the clicking began.

As the jeeps trundled along it was evident that five jeeps would greatly reduce our chances of sighting wildlife. The guides proceeded to direct two jeeps and three jeeps in two separate tracks. Kumana proved to be tough terrain with vines and branches grazing the sides of our jeep and a few of us received merciless whipping on several occasions. Traversing through Kumana in the ensuing hours we enjoyed several sightings of animals including a magnificent lone Sambar foraging amidst a thickly grown forest patch, stags and herds of spotted dear, an owl perched surreptitiously on a high branch, and a mammoth sized wild buffalo who looked decidedly displeased and stood threateningly in our path before lumbering out of sight. The highlight of the day was the sightings of few lone elephants foraging in the grasslands.

A track ended at a cool and shady clearing where we made our pit stop near the embankment of the Kumbukkan Oya streaming calmly by. At the centre was the 'Punchi Kebiliththa' or Paththini Amman Devale, where pilgrims pay homage enroute to Kebiliththa on the opposite embankment. While we sank into a reverie in the soothing atmosphere dusk was gathering and it was time to head back.

Bonfire, BBQ And Dancing In The Moonlight

We traipsed down the dimly lit by-lane not knowing what to expect. We were

headed for dinner and soon we arrived upon a beach. A bonfire cast a warm glow and bathed in its light we glimpsed a BBQ and tables set along the beach underneath the night sky. This was indeed a rare treat arranged by the Tsunami Hotel. Managed by Lee and Nalim the hotel was opened and named Tsunami Hotel in 1998 (before the actual Tsunami hit in 2004). Lee fell in love with Arugam Bay while on a motorbike trip around the world. At a time when a commute to Arugam Bay was far from convenient. A chance meeting with Nalim at a surf point led to the beginning of the Hotel that today has ten room accommodation right on the beach.

Lee and Nalim had been immersed in preparations since morning to make our evening special. Lee in particular had been in much trepidation to ensure that the evening would unfold smoothly. He had little need to worry. Immersed in a balmy enchantment of the evening we cued up at the BBQ. Ambience aside the palatable spread in itself was enviable. Fried rice, barbecued barracuda and potatoes, marinated chicken and salad comprised our meal.

After a hearty meal, it was time to kick up some sand once again. The long day at safari didn’t deter the song, dance and theatrics that unfolded late into the night. The evening entertainment was punctuated with bits performed in succession…momentarily the beach became a small open air theatre with the audience, the singers, dancers and actors of BT Options. Lee was appreciative of the group’s lighthearted exuberance. It must be noted that consuming alchohol is not BT Option style. We were high on our own spirits!

Day3 : Passekudah

A breakfast spread of pol rotti, chapati, omelette, sambol, milk rice, dahl curry and fish curry at Tristar made for a fulfilling start to the day. A smooth and uneventful journey, we reached Batticaloa town by mid-day. We had one short stop to make here – the roadside cashew vendor. Packets of freshly roasted cashew were distributed across the lineup of vehicles and soon we were on our way to Passekuda heartily munching some of the best tasting cashew nuts you could find.

Travel weary from the long drive and sultry heat, we arrived at our place of respite for the remainder of our stay – Maalu Maalu in Passekudah. We were graciously received with wet towels and deliciously refreshing melon sorbets. And the Resorts and its cabanas spread towards the beach front affording a breathtaking view of the pristine powdery beach and the calmly lapping waters of the sea. At this time more members of our staff arrived at Maalu Maalu from Colombo (now we were 68 with

16 vehicles in total!) to enjoy the last stretch of the tour and amidst greetings and friendly banter we sought refuge in our rooms accommodated at the two storey chalets to freshen up for lunch.

We took a short drive down to Amethyst Resort where awaited a lavish buffet spread. Breads, salads, fried rice, rice and curry and an array of desserts. As we eased into our meals a wind storm brewed in the distance. Before long it arrived upon us strewing sand and wreaking havoc as it swept buffeting tables and chairs. It was a brief occurrence however and we watched and waited as it died down into the distance.

We Love The Sea And Banana Boat Rides!

What was supremely enjoyable about Passsekudah was that we could wade far into the water. The calm sea allowed hours of soaking, aimless floating about and rambunctious activity surrounded by a secluded beach expanse. Inventive water sports, random splash games and squirts and squeals ensued. Minutes turned to hours and none had mind to abandon the comfort of the lapping waves. All that soaking it was surprising we didn’t all just turn to pulp.

Much to the joy of many, a banana boat from Lanka Sportreizen came our way and rides were soon arranged for five at a time. Donned in life jackets, much enthusiasm was focused on watching each group topple off the careening boat. And the big splash never failed to take place amidst loud cheers. One by one, we finally waded out of the water as a cloudy evening sky unveiled a splash of colour.

Fireworks And Costume Madness

The buffet dinner at Maalu Maalu had us spoilt for choice. The restaurant served a spread of both Sri Lankan and International cuisines accompanied with delicious chilled melon juice. The plates emptied, we all headed to the outdoors once more, where a surprise was waiting for our boss from us. Out at the edge of the beach, a fireworks display erupted all at once. The fireworks had been arranged from Kimbulapitiya for this occasion. The whizzes and squiggles shot up one after the other in myriad sequence. Bursts of light bloomed across the inky black sky and showered down like shooting stars amidst ‘oohs’ and ‘aaahs’. This was just the beginning though, and we headed back to our rooms to prepare for the night’s events. Staff members gathered at the poolside platform. Announcements were made, the music began and dance groups lit the stage with a medley of

choreographed performances including graceful dances in long swirling skirts and a thumping Haka dance.

The stage then opened for the next item – a costume show. Some of the appearances were Serena or Venus Williams (hard to say which), a colourful cupcake, a goofy waiter, a poosari, a school girl and a preschooler, Mr & Mrs Flintstone, a ninja, a wicked witch, a pirate, a politician and his security, angry birds, a white witch, a country singer, a rapper, cat woman, Harry Potter, ballarina, gypsies, Rupanzel, Grease Yakka and much more! The day's merriment moved right on to the beach as the songs and dance continued late into the night…

Day4 : A Hiccup Along The Way

After a feast of a buffet breakfast, we had our bags packed and ready to set off on our return journey. Along the way one of the vehicles began to experience engine trouble. Each time the vehicle stopped all the others performed a procession of parking. Several such stops later the problem could no longer be 'quick-fixed' and the vehicle would go no farther. We were running late for our lunch reservation at Palm Garden Village Hotel in Anuradhapura and with one vehicle being towed we finally reached our destination closing to five in the evening.

Hunger pangs were finally relieved with a delicious buffet 'lunch'. While the vehicle was being repaired we had ample time to lounge around, explore the maze of paths and be captivated by the restful and serene surroundings. We did a tour to an irrigation tank that had been renovated by the Hotel at the border of the property said to be frequented by elephants. We encountered none however, and enjoyed the cool breeze and the quiet rustle of the benevolent trees in the vicinity. With no success in repairing the vehicle we started on our way once more.

All's Well That Ends… With A BANG!

After several hours on the road, we made a stop at a wayside shop in Madampe for tea. At this point some of us changed vehicles to get on route to be dropped at our respective homes. After a scalding cup of tea we set off again. The pilot vehicle, which had been in front up to now did a turn and drove backwards for a spin. During that time one vehicle sped in front.

What we learnt – There can never be too much sea bathing – no matter how sun burnt you may be. More the merrier! It may be late, and the journey may be long,

but always stay safe and alert on the road!

Nothing could dampen our spirits – Whether it was power cuts in Arugam Bay during the entirety of our stay, where the walks along the roads with song and dance in pitch darkness was great fun or the freak wind storm in Passekudah that made the day even better! There is no excuse to have a great time and any hiccups were just part of the experience!

In the end – We laughed with abandon, played hard and enjoyed each others spirit and camaraderie. Our policy on fun has always been minus alcohol. And we all stuck together all the way…

These are what memories are made of. This memorable trip, above all was a motivation of team spririt and in essence an investment.

As we passed Marawila, we found some of our vehicles halting to a stop and phone calls being made. A little way ahead a trishaw lay toppled and shattered on the road. Groups of people had gathered and it soon became evident that one of our brand new vehicles was involved. And it was the very vehicle that had not made the customary stop at Tannivelle Devale in Madampe.

We all stopped immediately at the site of collision. Discussions were taking place and the driver of the trishaw had been whisked off to the hospital. Word of mouth travelled across the anxious group. It was fortunate that help and patient words were at hand to avoid further complication and unnecessary confrontation. Even more so that the trishaw driver was not badly injured. Our very shaken colleague who was at the wheel gradually collected himself. The police arrived to inspect the scene of the accident and after awhile we all drove towards the police station. It was late in the night and as the minutes ticked by, each vehicle was sent on its way one by one, as matters were being sorted. Phew!

What memories, what fun and above all what an experience we had. Each place we stayed or ate, tried to give us discounts or complimentary rooms, but we said no and ensured that the proper amount was paid. The expense, though very large for a company of our size, was considered an investment on our staff. And, that is how our company is; if a Thursday or a Tuesday is a public holiday then a long weekend is given to the staff where the intermittent Friday or Monday are declared company holidays. Staff are taken out for movies where the entire office is closed during that time, then interesting shows are some of the other outings that staff are taken on.

All this is done because it is the people that make BT Options what it is.

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