

The Tropical Tree of Life

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Aided by the currents and cupped by the swelling tides, the unassuming coconut arrives at its destination, a sandy beach, ordained by the coast of a tropical isle to quench its extensive time spent afloat at sea. The coconut easily, nestles into the loose flowing grains of sand appreciatively, as its opportunity to flourish had finally begun.



In Sri Lanka, coconut trees grow predominantly; on what is known as a 'coconut triangle', however, these trees thrive nearly anywhere in the country and are tolerant of most soil types, especially, soils high in saline. Our journey of exploration into the benevolent life of the coconut tree guided us northwest along the triangle, on the Colombo-Negombo stretch of road that knew no bounds of its elasticity. Nearing Maravila clock tower, coconut trees were bountiful. That morning, we knew that we had reached coconut country. Roadside shops, were selling young coconuts or *kurumba*. We indulged ourselves in its sweet water as a monger cut some open. The coconut plantation we were pursuing was among many others of its kind and discovered it in a restful, yet, stimulating location. Here, our presence was welcomed with the extent of the towering coconut trees and sounds of elongated leaves clapping, like the unity of a gracious ovation, as the wind frilled through their branches.

We walked amongst the undergrowth that seemed tundra compared to the soaring silent lengths of the coconut trees in the estate. They grew farther and farther up, a clustered green of parachutes, bowering, against the vacant blue sky. The young coconuts, like friends for life, hung indefinitely close to the tops of their canopies, where they were roofed and shaded. On the ground, dry, harvested mounds of

coconut were waiting to be husked and transported out to the markets. The raw white meat within the hard hollow nut will be scraped and milked, then added into traditional curries to make gravy. While treading through the estate, we curiously walked towards the roar of a near by decorticator. We watched it strip and separate angel hair fibres from the tough, dried and rugged coconut husks. The husks, in their thousands, were mounted, one on top of each other, bringing to mind the many items created through the processing of husk fibre or coir; ropes, brooms, floor polishing brushes etc. The fibres left over after the extraction can be used as mulch together with fertiliser for plants and even the coconut tree itself.



Shaking off husk fibres from our feet and continuing through the path, we passed several plantation workers spread out around most of the estate. Some were skillfully scooping out *copra* or dried/smoked coconut meat, using a sickle, over large open ovens made with wooden rafters and lengthy branches meshed together in sheets of crochet—all compliments of the coconut tree. The *copra* was being readied for oil extraction. We saw other workers on tops of trees, preparing the coconut flowers for their purpose. The flowers were being bathed in herbal ointment, as carefully as a mother would groom its newborn, to induce the secretion of honey or toddy, which is used in many a sweet preparation, in Sri Lanka. Towards early evening, our continuing route followed the coconut trees and trailed us upon a nursery. Shoots of new coconut plants, greenish yellow, pierced through the cracks of dry, wrinkled coconuts. At this point of germination the dry husk is peeled off and the hard exterior of the nut can be cracked open revealing the delicious, soft pulp or *palapi* within; a favorite among many Sri Lankans. Our mouths full with *palapi* and our hearts pure with the coconut water, we went on to see the, ever-mystifying, silhouette of coconut trees. Picture perfect! With the setting of the crimson sun and the end to a truly insightful day, we admired the sunset from within a small hut thatched in weaved coconut tree leaves.





Did you know? During the time of the Second World War, coconut water was used for blood transfusions because it carried an almost, indistinguishable compatibility to blood plasma. It had saved the lives of many soldiers that were wounded in the Pacific. Coconut water is one of the cleanest and purest forms of liquid next to water itself. In Sri Lanka, the flower of the coconut tree is used in decorating the poruwa during wedding ceremonies as a sign of good luck and prosperity for newlyweds.

