The Wild Wild East

Posted on

A memorable sighting of elephants during a slight drizzle in Lahugala

The jungle heartbeat of the south eastern part of the island beats wild and unrestrained. It is a lively landscape, still with glistening waters and animated with vibrant birds singing exotic melodies. To witness the calm majesty of elephants and the beauties of the sky, it’s time to visit the untouched forests of Lahugala and Kumana.

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A flock of blue-tailed bee-eaters, a rare sight

The evening light radiated with an amber glow across the terrain. We were en route to Pottuvil and as the road (A4) wound through Lahugala Kithulana National Park our eyes eagerly peered through the windows. The route is notorious for sightings of elephants, especially if you are travelling during twilight.

It was a lone bull elephant that drew us to a halt, and we gazed across the grassland hoping to spot a herd. Indeed, moments later on the opposite side of the highway, a herd emerged slowly, feasting on the greens. The calves snuggled beside their mothers, imitating the trunk movements of the adults, learning the

elephant’s craft. Juveniles engaged in mischief and trickery, and were nudged to behave by the grown ups. The slight drizzle that had broken out was ignored by the majestic beings and the onlookers on the road. Suddenly, the drizzle transformed to rain, and the elephants moved with graceful elegance in search of cover. They huddled around a large tree, safe from the rain. It was a memorable image that imprinted in our minds.

Inspired by this sighting we took advantage of the final hours of daylight and decided to embark on a safari in the National Park. The water bodies of the park were the centres of attention, where birds of many a feather congregated. Amidst the usual birds, we spied a common emerald pigeon with its striking feathers. As we neared a villu resplendent with pink and white lotus blooms a pack of whistling ducks took flight. On a nearby tree a kingfisher surveyed the landscape. Throughout our safari we observed elephants in pairs, alone or in herds sauntering through the great forestry of the Lahugala – Kitulana National Park. Enlivened, we exited just before nightfall.

Our sojourn into Lahugala was a mere taster to the wonders in store in the East Coast. The next day we headed to the Kumana National Park. The province was still in deep slumber as we headed towards the park entrance in Okanda. Shuddering from the cold of pre-dawn, we could just make out shapes of villages, vast paddy fields and the thick and tangly shrubs of the Panama – Kudumbigala Sanctuary. Almost as if in crescendo, the first rays of the sun emerged as we reached the entrance, above which the Okanda Kovil stood as a quaint beacon. Scenes of wild boar and spotted deer greeted us the sleepy yet eager amateur “safariers”.

On alert! A herd of spotted deer in Kumana

A set of leopard footprints that we spotted just beyond the park office, shot a course of adrenaline through our veins. The prints were fresh and well-formed in the soil, yet we soon lost the trail to the grasslands. Though the great prince of the jungle eluded us, its ghostly presence was a thrill. Within Kumana, many other surprises awaited. In pools of mud within the forestry wild buffalo enjoyed a lonely soak, watchful with a lazy gaze but keen eyes. As we traversed through there were exciting park sightings of mongoose, wild hares, Ceylon jungle fowl and lone bull elephants. On the banks of serene pools of water, the crocodiles sunbathed, unperturbed by our presence, as we marvelled at their scales, size and snappy yawns. The peacocks enthralled with their exotic feathers and elegant dances. Crested hawk eagles, paradise flycatchers as well as species of storks and herons seized our attention. We caught a glimpse of a white-throated kingfisher near a bridge. Bee-eaters felicitated us throughout, acting like our entourage. Indeed, amidst the flutter of green bee-eaters we managed to spot a pair of chestnut-headed bee-eaters. From the popular Kumana Villu lookout we witnessed water birds revelling. The villu cloaked in water lilies was enchanting with neatly stacked mangroves. At Kuda Kabilitta we witnessed the incredible sight of a swarm of spot

swordtail butterflies mud-puddling. Near noon, the sun stole the show and animals took cover from its harsh rays in the cooling forestry. We headed out of the park for our lunch, yet not before spying a pied kingfisher gulping down its hard-earned catch.

We returned to Kumana at 3pm, ready to experience the evening revelries the park had in store. Indeed, the park provided an unforgettable adventure. Our first sunset thrill came after the sighting of the rare black-necked stork. It is the crowning jewel of Kumana and the bird’s decision to make this forest their home has resulted in the park being bestowed with the status as a Ramsar Site of International Importance.

‘Show me your moves’, a peacock near a Kumana water body

As the sky dimmed and dusk played with pastel shades a cool breeze sifted through the national park. Whilst enjoying this calm shift in nature’s mood, we were suddenly surrounded by blue-tailed bee-eaters, their high-pitched chirps tingling our eardrums. The birds perched on short trees, broken branches or hunted for bugs on dung. Though migrants there are resident populations in Kumana and Panama. The birds treated us to an absolutely stunning phenomena, only second to our most majestic sighting in the Kumana park, elephants.

With rainclouds puffing throughout the sky and a slight drizzle we had almost given up hope of seeing elephants that evening. Yet, surprisingly, as we looked beyond the shrubbery a herd with gentle giants of all sizes came into sight. The adults protectively flanked the young, an infant calf was almost completely shielded from view. In complete synchronization they dragged their heavy feet on the ground, unsettling the dust that rose into the air and clung on to their skin. Some threw trunkfuls of dust on their body. It was a spectacle that leaves a lasting impression.

Elephants on the rumble, a close knit herd in Kumana

Enchanting wilderness sights are the promise of the south east, especially at this time of the year. Elephants are seen all-year round, at times strolling along the Eastern roads. In fact, if ever you want to travel by tuk tuk along the rough paths to the wonderful surf points, be prepared to pay an “elephant tax”. It is an incentive for tuk tuks to brave the territory ruled by these mostly gentle giants. There’s always something exciting and unconventional out here. In December, the water bodies will carry the migrant birds that land in the north to this untouched terrain. Whether to witness the princely beasts of the jungles of Sri Lanka or to marvel at the delicate colours of birds, it’s time to head to the wild, wild east.