

To your Destination Pronto!



Small blue boats complete with shades bob gently on the canal waters. As the evening encroaches upon the day, the crowd gathered at the jetty gradually thin as they climb aboard assisted by the smartly clad navy personnel. Each find their seating and put on life jackets before settling in. Idle chatter ensues as the passengers ease into their positions while the motor revs up and one by one the boats are steered down the placid waters of the canal. This is the new passenger service at the Kirulapone canal launched and run by the Navy, free of charge since mid March.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara | *Photography by Menaka Aravinda*

The Kirulapone Canal, which was once covered with a dense growth of Water Hyacinth, is now cleared to pave way for this new service. At present, students and staff of the Open University in Nawala greatly benefit with the jetty installed just by the University. The three kilometre route has been established from Nawala to Wellawatte and back, with convenient stops along the way. This leisurely commute takes a mere 10-15 minutes as opposed to a 45 minute ride in a bus amidst traffic.

Under the guidance and directive of the Navy Chief Vice Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe the canal boat service was established according to a concept put forward by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Secretary Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa. With the network of canals flowing throughout Colombo, the gradual renovation and maintenance would provide alternate routes for passengers. The commute functioning at present dawns the successful beginnings of much greater plans in progress. A boat ride through Colombo is a novelty as the passenger filled boats gently take you past the familiar main streets, towns and beneath bridges with complete ease. A Navy boatman expertly manoeuvres at the rear end of the boat and another stands smartly at the bow. As we bobbed along comfortably, avoiding a few stubborn remnants of Hyacinth here and there, the breeze blew in our faces, with fleeting visions of slow paced traffic and life on land in the city surroundings.

At present the boat service is operational in the mornings from 7:30 am till 9:00 am from Wellawatte to Nawala and from 4 pm to 6 pm in the evenings for return travel.

At first the canal required extensive clearing and cleaning which was undertaken by the Navy, followed by its upkeep. This had been carried out with the involvement of the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), the Sri Lankan Land Reclamation and Development Corporation and the Municipal Council. The CEA also provided awareness programmes to the communities living in close proximity to the canal to ensure cleanliness and proper maintenance. As we cruise along we see nets placed on the sides to prevent any debris falling into the water, which might cause a hindrance to the smooth passage of the boats. Piers had also been fixed at several points for passenger boarding and disembarking.

Once the canal route had been established the Navy provided boats that can carry up to eight passengers each.

These boats have been refurbished and modified to suit passenger needs and safety along with seats, life jackets and a shade. There are trained Navy personnel bustling about not only to operate the boats and readying boats for passengers but also include Navy technicians, engineers, divers and the medically trained, who are close at bay. They accompany the passenger boats in a life saver craft. At present the boat service is operational in the mornings from 7:30 am till 9:00 am from Wellawatte to Nawala and from 4 pm to 6 pm in the evenings for return travel.

The Kirulapone canal at present has been cleared all the way up till Diyawanna Oya and in fact can be used even at present. In future many of the canals around Colombo will be used for the passenger service and these include the Dehiwela, Kollonawa, Heen Ela and Dematagoda canals with the Dematagoda canal providing a boat service route connecting all the way to Beira Lake! Already the second chapter of the project, the Dehiwela canal is under way with 65% of the cleaning in progress. This wide network once open for public use would provide an alternate and significant mode of transport and it is hoped, will greatly ease the traffic congestion experienced today. Furthermore, the Navy would provide the required number of boats to accommodate the increasing passenger volume including the introduction of 30 seater boats as well. The required manpower, skill and expertise at hand the Navy is well equipped to build these boats by their

Inshore Petrol Craft Construction Project in Welisara.

In future the reality may be where passengers are racing each other to catch the earliest boat at the jetty to rush to work!

