

Tracks In The Mist



The station halt's name indicating its height above sea level

The fog held impenetrably heavy as we closed in. Heading uphill to Pattipola in the Central Highlands, we were in search of the highest summit railway station in the country...recalling my father's memories of this place, I found that the railroads did indeed disappear into the wavering shadows.

Words Sonali Kadurugamuwa Photographs Prabhath Chaturanga

A man at the Pattipola town pointed at the bare naked mist before me and said, "It's over there." I kept telling myself, that I had to stay sane and read in between the lines of some abstract structure to see what the people of Pattipola thought they were seeing. It was about the time when I had only just begun to re-repeat my question in an awkwardly inconvenienced state, that I also heard the apparent 'toot' of a train whistle.

It seemed as if all the commotion of the train shuffling around scared away a few layers of the thick haze, and I could just about conjure up enough visual sense to

outline what appeared to be the Pattipola railway station. My hair had turned frizzy with mist and although it wasn't as cold as I had expected, my nostrils were quivering with the snuffles, inhaling the vapour like air. Ruffling up my muffler, I invited in a large breath of the dewy draft into my city lungs and proceeded into the gloom.

As before, the white cloudy smog was at times merciful as it cleared for a few seconds, for me to find my footing up on to the station's platform. It was true what stories say about tracks passing into foggy oblivion, they also appeared out of nowhere, without a beginning nor an end, much like the trains, which I have to admit, in its entirety, was as nerve-wracking as it was admirably mysterious.

The first railroads introduced into the country ran as far as Kandy... followed through to Pattipola, making its hilly plains the highest point for the train route

Inside the Station Master's cosy office, I sank comfortably into its warm wooden snugness with hopes of retrieving some information about the station's humble beginnings. The early 1890's of Pattipola were awakened by the bustle of railroad construction and the ramblings of steam engines. The station building itself, according to the stationmaster, is over 100 years old. The first railroads introduced into the country ran as far as Kandy... followed through to Pattipola, making its hilly plains the highest point for the train route and then extended through Bandarawela, in the late 1890's. A bulky item from the past still lent its functions to the Pattipola stationmaster's office and although it, to me, seemed more of a museum exhibit, the bright, boxy-red train tablet apparatus chimed amusingly as it alerted the station of the whereabouts of travelling trains.

The walk from the station to the summit was just over a kilometre, and as I turned to express a thanking wave in the direction of the Station personnel, they were already submerged into a fade of rough figures. The forests of the Horton Plains surrounded the train route and the thickets of vegetation concealed by the miasma of hovering dew did present mere glimpses into the wild unknown. The bush however, hedged in tightly together alongside the tracks and was as oblivious to my desire for a scenic view, as the mist.

As I approached the signboard indicating that I stood at the highest point, a summit level of 1898.1 metres (6226ft) above sea level, of the track route, a looming train whistle, followed by an actual train, whizzed by. Smiles and a wave

of hands were exchanged between the passengers and I; as are the interactions amid moving-train and train-spotting gestures in Sri Lanka. I watched as it melted away brushing me with a spray of dew, along with its faces into the engulfing mist towards the station...

[nggallery id=12]