‘Train Bus’ to Madhu

Posted on



‘Train bus’ to Madhu Road stationed at Medawachchiya

Is it a bus or a train? I wondered to myself. Except that it stood on rails and a frontal pilot attachment betrayed its intended function, I could be forgiven for the mistaken identity. This is the new rail bus service that commenced in May this year to convey passengers to Madhu Road from Medawachchiya.

Words Prasadini Nanayakara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

When we arrived at the Medawachchiya railway station, the ‘train bus’ stood as the sole exhibit in quiet airy anticipation. The new service was introduced bearing in mind the influx of passengers who frequent the hallowed precincts of the Madhu

Church, particularly during festival days when the numbers swell. The much revered Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu draws those of faith from all across the Island seeking solace beyond its threshold. The Shrine’s repute is reinforced by the belief held amongst the Catholic community, of miracles and healing powers that it possesses and stands as the most venerated Catholic shrine in the Island. It is the August festival that draws the magnitude of visitors who arrive in the thousands to pay homage.

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May 14th of 2013, marked the inauguration of this new rail shuttle along the newly reconstructed railway track between Medawachchiya and Madhu Road. The rail track is to continue on till Mannar in the future, however, at present it makes its final stop at the Madhu Road. The compact locomotive is in place as a convenience for passengers, journeying approximately 45 km, three times a day from Medawachchiya, with return journeys scheduled as well. On our arrival we were in time for the 11:00am commute and having purchased tickets priced at 45 rupees at the counter, we hauled ourselves into the rear of the two conjoined passenger coaches. The interior impressed the distinct sensation of being inside a regular passenger bus, complete with a gear box, side mirrors and a steering wheel at the helm!

A fairly quiet day, we enjoyed the entire coach to ourselves as the rail bus thundered to life and began its rumbling journey. It was indeed a novelty as we sped past expanse after expanse of greenery and paddy fields and at times lakes. On a clear day such as this, lulled by a balmy breeze, chugging amidst the restful terrain complemented the nature of this journey – fitting, as one would imagine, for quiet and spiritual reflection. While the rail bus could accelerate up to 90kmph, often its path was obstructed by cattle that wandered on to the rail track bringing the shuttle to brief halts. At the first designated stop at Neriyakulam Station, several passengers got on, amongst whom were an elderly couple with bag and baggage in tow. Having travelled all the way from Colombo, Stanislaus and Philomena De Silva were no strangers to these parts and the Madhu Church. Just last year they had made the pilgrimage seven times in total. Making the commute on the Rail Bus however would be their first. As the minutes and the miles sped they both sank into quiet reflection. Stanislaus retreated into quiet prayer with rosemary beads in hand and a silent prayer on his lips.

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One more stop at Cheddikulam and the train bus arrived at its final destination, the Madhu Station. The entire journey lasted a little over one hour which seemed to simply breeze by. Accustomed to making a long journey to Madhu, Phelomena was quick to comment on the ease and convenience the Rail Bus afforded for the last stretch. And as first timers they could appreciate the surroundings as they journeyed, which served to siphon away the fatigue of travel. The Madhu Station which at the time was receiving its final touches, housed state-of-the-art engine and operation rooms, and was in anticipation of receiving commuters in larger numbers during the upcoming festival seasons. Stepping off the good ol’ train bus we followed in the wake of our pilgrim passengers out onto the sunny roadside. Right outside commuters can chose to hail a bus to the Madhu Church, located 12 km away or make their way to the first junction where tuk tuks are stationed to receive passengers. All in all the long journey would soon end and their salvation lay just a few minutes away.

