Waterworld Waikkal

Posted on
In contrast to the busy beaches further south, Waikkal is ideal for the traveller looking for a quiet getaway

Think of Waikkal and you think of sand, windblown coconut trees and rushing waves. The name isn't evocative like Unawatuna or Kadugannawa. Written in English, it doesn't even look Sri Lankan. But the place, like the name, has more to it than is apparent at first glance, and certainly warrants a closer look.

Words and Photographs David Blacker

Silver on bronze. Prince Vijaya's Tambapanni lives on

Located just a whisker over 45 km north of Colombo, and less than half an hour's drive from the country's main airport at Katunayake, Waikkal is surprisingly little known. Almost completely overshadowed by neighbouring Negombo, it's very easy to miss if you are driving north towards Kalpitiya or the Wilpattu National Park.

Turn off the main road, and you aren't rewarded by anything remarkable at first: just a narrow lane running through coastal marshland and crossing the occasional waterway. It all changes when you get to the beach.

In spite of being just an hour away from Colombo, this series of sweeping bays is almost totally deserted. If you're looking for souvenir sellers, teeming beachside cafés and a weekend party a la Hikkaduwa, this is not the place for you. Take a morning walk along the water and it might be as long as half an hour before you meet anyone other than the local fisherfolk.

Accommodation in Waikkal is a similar story, with just a handful of large resorts and a few cheerful cabanas the only places to choose from if you want to stay right on the beach.

Like many of the beaches on Sri Lanka's west coast, Waikkal widens and narrows with the seasons, and the best time to visit is between November and February when the beach is at its broadest and the sea relatively calm. The sand is like

powdered bronze, and rough underfoot, recalling the name that Prince Vijaya gave his landing place – Tambapanni, or ‘bronze-coloured’ – when he arrived on the island in 543 BC.

Long combers sweep in from a hundred metres out, but unfortunately don’t have the height to challenge any but the most inexperienced of surfers. Stone breakwaters positioned every 500 metres or so protect the beach, and the calm waters in the lee of these barriers provide ideal spots for swimming and paddling. These are also the best places to try your hand at angling – the local fishermen will tolerate your competition with condescending good humour.

Waikkal is a great for the blue water fan, but it’s hard to miss the fact that the sea isn’t the only water body around. The country inland from the beach is crisscrossed by interconnecting waterways, both natural and manmade.In fact, Waikkal’s unusual-sounding name is taken from the Tamil word for a small canal or agricultural water channel. It’s unclear just when the town was founded, but it’s likely that it dates back to at least the 8th century, when these canals were first documented.

For anyone interested in exploring these waterways, taking a boat is the most practical way to do it since many of the canals are not accessible by land. Many of the fishing families in the area own small crafts capable of navigating these waterways and, for a fee, will be happy to take you on a guided tour. Early morning or late afternoon is the time to set out, giving you the best chance of spotting local wildlife.

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While a few mugger crocodiles have been sighted in the area recently, you’re far more likely to see a *kabaragoya*, or Asian water monitor. It can grow to three metres and weigh in at over 50 kg, making it the second heaviest lizard in the world, after the Komodo dragon. They are easier to see when they are swimming on the surface, but keep a close eye on trees with large overhanging branches and you might spot a well camouflaged specimen sunning itself over the water.

There’s plenty of birdlife as well, both resident and migratory, with several types of

kingfisher, many wading birds such as herons, storks and bitterns, and tiny hunters like the Indian bee-eater.

A shattered fishing boat close to the mouth of the Gin Oya reveals how easily the idyllic calm can turn dangerous

It’s often hard to tell which portions of this water network are manmade since a lot of it is in obvious disrepair. The whole system is referred to as the Gin Oya, in fact, taking its name from *ginpol*, the local word for the nipa palms that crowd the banks of the canals, fighting for space with the mangroves. The nipa is a rather odd palm, resembling a disembodied coconut tree floating on the murky water because its trunk is completely submerged.Occasional bursts of bright orange can be seen among the shadowy green of these palms when their strange, lumpy flowers are in bloom.

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Also worth a visit is the rusting old anicut, built in the early 1970s, which looks like a lock commonly seen in Europe or North America, except that instead of raising or lowering the water level, its purpose is to control the flow of seawater entering these freshwater canals. Long since fallen into disrepair, the anicut’s gates are immobile, but you can take a small boat through a half-raised section by ducking low as you slide through.

Heading back from Waikkal, check out the knife stalls that dot the main road closer to Kochchikade. The area is well known for the manufacture of these implements, all of which are made from the recycled steel of truck leaf springs. Many of the stalls have small smithies at the back where you can watch the discarded leaf springs being converted into black-bladed knives.

Oh, and remember those big water monitors? Legend has it that the warriors of ancient Waikkal once coated the blades of their weapons with the toxic fat of *kabaragoyas* before going into battle. Just another surprising fact about this fascinating place.

