

Wonderful Waterfalls

Posted on

Anura Thanthilage

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Waterfalls. Those rushing, falling, tumbling, roaring cascades of water which cannot fail to fascinate even the most jaded of people. The central mountain massif of Sri Lanka and the many rivers that flow from there to the plains below have combined to give Sri Lanka a rare wealth of waterfalls. In fact for its size, the island has more recorded waterfalls than any other country. The Ferguson's Ceylon Directory, the main ready reference on Sri Lanka; lists 16 principal waterfalls.

The sound of waterfalls could be heard in the heavy montane forests of Sri Lanka. They could be seen in the midst of tea-covered mountains. They float down like streaks of glistening cloud from mountains whose peaks are lost in thick clouds. They bring awe to the traveller on busy trunk routes in the hill country. They are worshipped as the abodes of deities, and many are closely linked with the legends of the land and its people.

My close association with this aspect of Sri Lanka's natural beauty came through my work in the production of a TV programme on waterfalls. I discovered how different each of these falls is from the other. I will mention here a few of the many "falls" I visited, those which impressed me most, for one reason or another.

One would be surprised to know how close one could be to a beautiful waterfall while still in the city of Colombo. By travelling just 15 km on the Colombo-Ratnapura Road one reaches the Higashena junction, and then branches off to the Agalawatte Road, in the rubber-growing district. From here it is a few minutes to "Bopath Ella", a waterfall not known for its height, but for the sheer beauty of formation. It derives its name from the graceful way the water falls in what could easily be discerned as the shape of a "Bodhi" or "Bo" leaf, the leaf of the tree venerated by Buddhists.

The "fall" which is formed by the waters of the Kuru Ganga, on its way to joining with the larger Kalu Ganga, is a favourite picnic spot for Sri Lankans, especially due to its proximity to the city. Much more distant from Colombo is the Ella Wellawaya Road, where near the village of Uduhawara is a grand spectacle of cascading water. It is the "Ravana Ella", the Ravana Falls. Although the main drop is 29.96 ft (8.22 m), it is a wide fall and the water rushes over several steps adding to its beauty. The fall is visible from the main road, and the place is a frequent stop for travellers, many of whom will go right up to the rushing water to be photographed, others and to enjoy a river bath in the lower reaches of the river where the current and cataracts are few. Ravana Ella is closely linked in legend with the great epic of the East, the Ramayana. It gets its name from Ravana, the powerful, demon king who once ruled Sri Lanka. The cave hidden behind the fall is still believed by many to be one of the places where he hid the beautiful Indian princess, Sita, after her abduction from India. Villagers will tell you that the cave is also part of a tunnel system used by the Sinhalese kings of old for strategic purposes.

Moving still higher in the mountain country, one reaches Nuwara Eliya, in the heart of the teagrowing area. It is near the eastern boundary of Nuwara Eliya that one meets the waters of Lovers' Leap meets the waters of Lovers' Leap, another waterfall not important for its height (less than 10 m or 30 ft), but situated at a place which gives a truly fascinating view on a bright morning, with the rays of the sun being refracted, rainbow-like in the veil of water, falling from the northern reaches of Pidurutalagala, Sri Lanka's highest mountain.

As its name would imply, Lovers' Leap has a sad tale woven around it. The folklore about it says that in the ancient days a prince who lost his way met a beautiful maiden who showed him the way out of the dense mountain forest. Prince and maiden fell in love, earning the wrath of the king who banished his son from his kingdom, which led the sad prince and his beloved to leap to their death, from where the cascade begins. The wail of the wind rushing through the mountains, heard so often in these parts, is said by villagers to be the echo of the wail of this tragic couple as they made the leap to death.

Even if they have never set eyes on its beauty, many a Sri Lankan would know the Diyaluma Falls by its name. Among the more famous of the waterfalls in the island, it has been immortalized by poets and lyricists in the Sinhala language. This 559 ft (170.68 m) high waterfall lies 13 km from Wellawaya town and 6 km from Koslanda in the hills. Diyaluma literally means skein of water". This lovely skein of water, falling gracefully down like a soft veil, is seen from the Balangoda-Wellawaya

highway.

The unusual lim cascade of Diyaluma has given rise to yet another folk story, also one of love and tragedy. Villagers in this area will tell you that in the past a tribal leader from the low country, who was banished by the king, had come this way with his wife when fleeing to the hill country. He had scaled the rock over which the water now cascades and had attempted to pull his wife up, with the aid of a vine which he lowered to her. As he was hauling her up, the vine was entangled in a rock crevice, and she was strangled to death. The deity of the rock who had seen the tragedy caused a waterfall there, similar in appearance to the falling, dangling vine, in memory of the tragedy.

Bambarakanda Falls is the tallest waterfall in Sri Lanka. It is located in a picturesque piece of mountain country surrounded by the Bambaragala and Welihena mountain ranges. A full 789 ft (240.79 m) high, with three drops (the height of the first no one has yet measured), this gorgeous waterfall is not as easily accessible as many others. The route I would suggest is to reach the town of Kalupahana from either Balangoda or Wellawaya. It is 22 km from the former and 32 from the latter. From Kalupahana, you proceed 3 km along a narrow road through Weerakoongama. A four-wheel drive vehicle is recommended. Here the Bambaragala Falls awaits you in all its undisturbed majesty, a true reward for effort, rushing down from its great height and through the mountain fastness.



Hunas Falls in Kandy.

Visitors to the tea country are most familiar with two waterfalls – Devon and St. Clair. The favourite viewing place for Devon Falls, which descends 280 ft (85.64 m) through dark-green tea country and wooded forest above, is from the 20th milepost on the Talawakelle-Nawalapitiya Road. A better view of this fall, caused by the downward rush of the waters of the Kotmale Oya, is had by travelling in the up-country train. A truly spectacular view it is, as the train loops around the mountain. Having your camera ready could be rewarding.

Not far from Devon is St. Clair Falls, also caused by the waters of the Kotmale Oya.

The waterfall with two drops is 429 ft (131.36 m) high and has two great cascades at the top, joining into one huge torrent midway and falling down over the rocks of the hill country. It is clearly visible, although at a distance, from the road close to Talawakelle town. Those who wish to have a closer view should go down for about half a kilometre through the tea bushes where you will soon reach its roaring foot.

Although not the tallest, yet the best known, of waterfalls in Sri Lanka is Dunhinda. The 189 ft (57.91 m) tall torrent of cascading water gets its name from the smoke-like mist it raises as it falls into a huge rock pool below.

Dunhinda Falls is part of the Mahawelf River system, carrying down the waters of the Badulu Oya, which today flows around Badulla. According to the folk history of Badulla, there was a time when the whole area, which is now the Badulla Valley, was inundated due to the river being blocked by a wild creeper which had grown where the Dunhinda begins its drop. The king of that time gave a commission to a subject to have the creeper removed and save the valley. The task took three months, and saw the birth of the waterfall and the safety of the valley.



Diyaluma Falls in the central hills

Dunhinda is the pride of Badulla. To see it one must travel 5 km on the Badulla-Mahiyangana Road, which will bring you to the road leading to the falls, clearly marked. Proceed 2 km more and you will see the "little Dunhinda", itself an entrancing sight. But go half a kilometre further and you discover the main falls, as its great mist wraps you up, and the roar of the water as it splashes in the pool below fills your ears. For those not so adventurous, the falls could be seen from a special viewing platform near the main road. But waterfalls are delights of nature to be experienced and felt, not just seen. At least that is what I feel, having been near so many of them in this island. (Adapted from Sinhalese.)



Dunhinda falls