Yana Maga: Sri Lanka, A Gift For All

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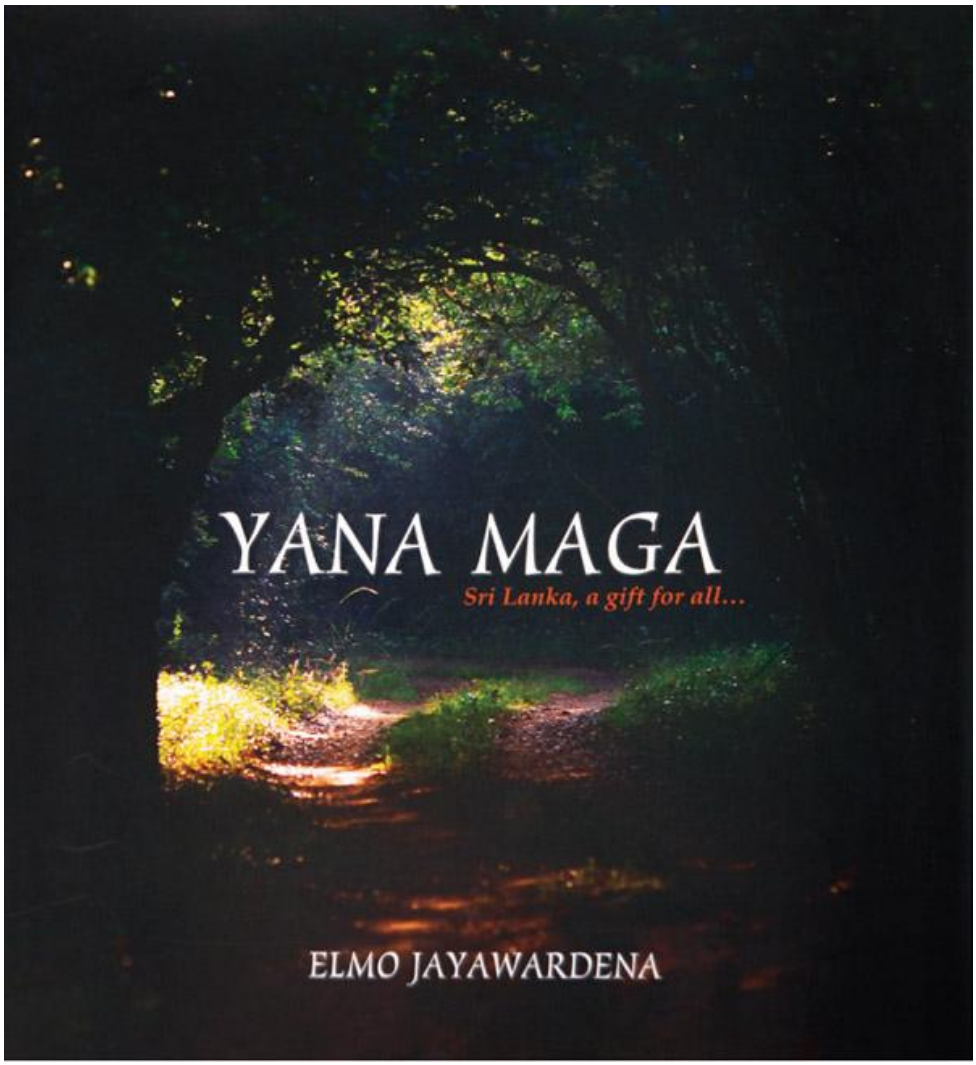

“Whatever are our aspirations, they are based on our journey and it is the journey – the *yana maga* – that matters, not the destination,” says Captain Elmo Jayawardena. And it is this sentiment that holds as premise for his new coffee table book.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Indika De Silva

Capt Elmo is no newcomer to the literary world with three notable novels to his name that include ‘Sam’s Story’, which was awarded the Gratiaen Prize in 2001. For his second, ‘The Last Kingdom of Sinhalay’, he received the State Literary Award and the third ‘Rainbows in Braille’ was shortlisted for the Singapore Literary Prize. Launched in January of 2012, is the latest addition titled, ‘Yana Maga, Sri Lanka a gift for all..’, a coffee table book that aspires to be more than a mere keepsake. Most importantly, the author’s share of the proceeds from the book goes towards a charity organisation, CandleAid Lanka founded in 1996 by Capt Elmo. Among his many passions that include piloting, which spans his career, he is most emphatic about his humanitarian work. The efforts towards alleviating poverty is one which he regards as his greatest contribution to life.

Yana Maga, however, stands by itself and at a glance urges you to delve further. Within its total of 165 pages is encompassed all that is essentially Sri Lankan. As the author himself rightly describes, it is “a walking yellow pages and many other manifestations” of his island home.

Sectioned into three categories, ‘From the known beginning’, ‘Some Places’ and ‘Some Concepts’, the author’s narration takes the voice at times of a historian, another time an anthropologist, and sometimes a naturalist as he writes fluidly on the diverse aspects of the Island. Although a coffee table book, it breaks with convention as its pages, although of vivid imagery, overflow with the author’s words as he describes, unravels and opines. “Through the book ‘The Last Kingdom of Sinhalay’, my intention was for readers to gain a deeper sense of our history, but it’s an 850 page book and people don’t have time to read,” he explained of producing, as a result, “a different kind of coffee table book.” However, it is his numerous travels, written works, and the decade of research behind the Sinhalay novel that afford a mine of information to fill the pages of ‘Yana Maga’.

As it was intended the book can thus be read in small doses, each segment independent of the other. However, a prevalent undertone is the author’s fervour as he describes everything from the “winsome smile of the Sri Lankan”, to “haunts of the wild” such as Yala and Wilpattu, to the evolution of the Colombo city, to a love poem of Gajaman Nona, a socialite during the 18th Century.

The book’s flowing prose chronicles beyond common knowledge as it delves further for the benefit of those who have merely skimmed the surface of a history, a legend or a slice of culture. For instance few would know the nuances of Baila, an inherent part of Sri Lankan life that Capt Elmo fervently declares as “ours, lock, stock and the

beat.”

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The author has also ventured outside the realm of the familiar to unearth little known details and stories that inspire a new appreciation for our homeland. One among these is the Flight of the Double Sunrise, a significant phenomenon in Sri Lanka’s civil aviation history. Conversely, the author acknowledges the everyday sights derived from our environment and that which we easily take for granted. The canvas artists alongside Vihara Maha Devi Park is one such instance whose vibrant displays momentarily add colour to our lives. Readers can also appreciate the conscientious selection of photographs, illustrations, and the strikingly appealing presentation that has an informality of a personal journal. Designed by Prageeth Wimalarathne the vivid layouts of the pages not only elucidate the author’s narrative, but springs it to life such that perusing itself becomes an engaging journey.

The book aptly reaches its end with the poignantly titled “Thirty years is a long time” accompanied with a stirring image that by itself speaks volumes. These are among many other images that have been taken solely for the making of this book. At its conclusion the author is most vocal and contemplative however, ends in a hopeful voice. “The land is undoubtedly a gift from the gods and blessed by them to survive.” It leaves one with a stirring of one’s island home that the author introduces at the start of the book.“This is a country that pulses, makes one’s heart beat a little faster amidst the mix of chaos and charm and a kind of warmth that is difficult to define.”

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