



The Nine Arch railway bridge

The Ceylon Railways' 'Queen of the Mist'

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Exploring our beautiful island by train is a traveller's delight. Travelling by train is a lovely experience that beautifully accentuates any trip. The dazzling views of the upcountry Main Line will leave you with awesome memories. Endorsed by many travellers as one of the best railway journeys in Asia, is the trip from Colombo to Badulla on the magnificent Udarata Menike.

This 10-hour journey is filled with spectacular scenes of tea plantations, valleys, vintage railway stations and ravines. The rail journey takes you past the nation's highest train station at Pattippola. The view of Batalegala (Bible Rock) is stunning. For photo enthusiasts, this rail journey is full of mesmerizing views. The thrilling high bends as the train negotiates steep gradients and cliff-hanger stops fulfill that aura of adventure. It is testament to the passion and commitment of the engineers and staff of the Ceylon Government Railway in an era of unrivalled glory.

Every innovative idea stems from a genuine need. The need for railways in Ceylon was mooted by an earnest request for the transportation of coffee. Enterprising European planters had invested in their coffee plantations by 1842. Coffee was a lucrative crop in that era. The planters pressured the Governor to provide a rail line for transporting their coffee to Colombo.

By 1845 the Ceylon Railway Company (CRC) was formed. Laying the foundation stone at the Maradana Railway Yard in August 1858 (close to the present Maradana Station) Governor Sir Henry Ward had proclaimed, "Railways will supersede roads in oriental lands." The new railway project was full of challenges. There were rocks to be blasted, water clogged lands to be filled, tunnels to be bored and platforms built.

Perhaps, the biggest challenge to the aspiring British engineers on the Main Line was building bridges that would tolerate the weight of the steam locomotives. In 1861, the Ceylon Railway Company was terminated and the Ceylon Government Railway (CGR) formed. The first General Manager was W.T. Pearce. Upon calling for tenders the selected contractor was W.F.G. Faviell. Building the Main Line was not easy. These lands had to be surveyed and maps drawn. By 1864, the first phase of the main rail line was ready from Colombo to Ambepussa.

The belching iron locomotive steamed out full speed ahead, spewing out flecks of charcoal. This locomotive carried 1,500 gallons of water which was converted to steam. The people of the placid rural areas were surprised. They sang - Anguru yaka watara bebee, Colomba davana yakada yaka, which would translate as, "the iron demon that eats charcoal and drinks water speeding towards Colombo." Under the dynamic initiative of Sir Lindsey Molesworth, the first Director General of CGR, the tracks were extended, reaching Kandy (1867), Nawalapitiya (1874), Nanuoya

(1885), Bandarawela (1894) and finally, Badulla (1924). The entire mission of laying rail tracks took an amazing 60 years. One of the key men behind this remarkable era of railways was B.D. Rampala, a native of Pannipitiya. Don Rampala was the Chief Mechanical Engineer of Railways and was duly promoted General Manager. In the 1950s under the Colombo Plan initiative, the Canadian Government gave Ceylon her first diesel-powered locomotives. Some of the engines were named Alberta, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Montreal and Vancouver. It was one of these powerful engines painted in silver and blue that hauled the Udarata Menike on her first uphill journey on April 23,



Vintage locomotive at Nawalapitiya



The quaint Demodara Station



Batalegala Rock

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1956. Her passenger coaches were red Astra class carriages built in Romania. Hundreds of men built their lives working on the railways. I managed to speak to some of them about this train. The home base of the Udarata Menike is the Fort Railway Station. The man in charge of overseeing her safe departure on a daily basis is the Station Superintendent. He explained, "We are proud of the history of this train, and her long route which attracts many people. Our team ensures that the train has everything she needs for her uphill journey. We operated five coaches, attached to the engine. Since her inception 60 years ago she always leaves the Fort Station from Platform No 3."



Pattippola Station



The tablet machine

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The Railway Protection Force (RPF) plays a vital element in the safety of main stations and moving trains. The present chief is Superintendent Anura Premaratne.

The task of Railway Security Officers is not to be confused with the train Guard.

The train Head Guard and Under Guard work closely with the Engine Driver. The RPF patrol the train and are responsible for its security. They have done this since 1946. The Udarata Menike has many foreign tourists as well. On this journey they deploy two officers from Colombo to Nawalapitiya, and from Nawalapitiya to Badulla two other officers take over the shift.

From the Colombo Fort Station the train is serviced by nine sub

divisions - Transport (which includes Guard service), Railway Stores, Stations Branch, Motive Power Sub Unit, Mechanical Ways and Works, Signal Telecommunication, Commercial Section, Railway Security (RPF) and Accounts.

The Udarata Menike train covers a staggering 62 railway stations and cruises through 42 tunnels. Of these tunnels the longest is Pool Bank (locals call it the 'Singha Mala' tunnel). It covers 562 metres and is located between Hatton and Kotagalla. The tunnel was bored from both sides.

The jubilant British engineers and Ceylonese crew met in the middle. From Rambukkana the train begins her upward haul.

At this point an extra Pilot

The Udarata Menike train covers a staggering 62 railway stations and cruises through 42 tunnels.

Engine is used to push the iron beast from the rear.

Today, the Udarata Menike is powered by Chinese built Class S12 Diesel engines. The scenic route from Nawalapitiya continues up to Watawala (an area prone to earth slips during heavy rain), Hatton, Great Western, Nanu Oya, Pattippola, Ohiya, Haputale, Diyatalawa and Bandarawela. From here she gracefully begins her descent to beautiful Ella, Demodara and enters Badulla. The Demodara Station and its underpass loop are a marvel of railway engineering.

It is a spectacular memory to every traveller. The Nine Arch Bridge between Ella and Demodara is another engineering feat of that era. It was built under the supervision of the British engineers and Ceylonese engineer D.J. Wimalasurendra. Originally, the bridge was to be completed as an iron structure. With the onset of World War I the iron allocated for the project was reassigned for British war efforts. The building process was delayed. The local contractor P.K. Appunahmy had to finish the task with stone, brick and cement. This bridge is 300 feet in length and has a width of 25 feet.

Another feature on the Main Line is the 'tablet' system. This is an innovative British safety system still in operation. From Kadugannawa the Station Master hands over a 'tablet' (a steel disc attached to a hoop) to the Engine Driver. This is handed down in a relay to corresponding stations and when inserted into a machine, it facilitates the movement of the semaphore signal system. The Station Master knows the tablet will position Udarata Menike in the 'release', 'out home' and 'online' phase of her journey. It is a brilliant system with zero room for error.

Pattippola is the highest point on the Main Line. The small station rests on an altitude of 6,225 feet. When the train stops here, the rear engine moves forward, and they couple it with the engine at the front. Both engines then move forward. Many consignments of fresh cut flowers are sent to Colombo by this train.

The engine drivers on this long route change shifts at Nawalapitiya and Bandarawela. The Udarata Menike has come a long way over the past six decades, retaining her position as the Queen of the Railway who travels the mist-covered mountains. She has created travel memories for thousands, and will continue to dominate our salubrious hills.