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About to throw the next net

Nature's wonderlands

JULIET COOMBE

To enjoy the amazingly diverse Island wildlife head to Negombo over the festive period and spend time in the beautiful and very different stretches of water, each with its own unique echo system that can be explored by boat or kayak. You can hire either from one of the jetties in Talhena, a particularly charming section of Negombo's ancient water ways. Here you will find a huge variety of bird life and the notorious spitting fish, a lagoon version of Jaws that prays on unsuspecting insects clinging for dear life to surrounding lagoon foliage, which are instantaneously knocked off their leaves by a spray of deadly water that allows the fish to dine out on a feast of insects. Whether it is exploring the ancient wetlands or sailing across the lagoon, the peaceful serene experience for many is akin to doing yoga only on water.

If you want to know more about all the natural wonders and varied echo systems it is worth hiring a naturalist or a knowledgeable local fisherman from Negombo town, like fisherman turned water safari guide Chaminda whose incredible knowledge of the area rich in wildlife is encyclopaedic. They also give you a fascinating insiders view of village life and what it is like living from the ancient waterways. Also how important it is to respect nature and pay thanks to God for the plentiful supply of food. One trick I learn from a group of fisherman in Negombo harbour is that the easiest way to catch fish is not with a rod, but by creating a kadol catchment area. This ancient way of catching fish makes the fish think there is a mangrove swamp full of tasty things to nibble on and by throwing branches of kadol into a circular pattern and leaving them floating on water in different parts of the lagoon for one month at a time, the fisherman create a fake habitat which they learnt provides lots of fish in one go from their ancestors. Pulling these intertwines branches up you will see not only lagoon fish, but also sweet local prawns and crabs caught in these clever wooden traps.

Madurika and Srimal from Talhena village are full of stories about the village lagoon religious traditions and you will see old men toddy tapping along the edges of this picturesque water way and pulling coconuts down to sell in the market daily. It is also nice to stop and drink a refreshing coconut or two as it is far more effective than a bottle of water and much more sustainable. The boat guys love to talk about the many legends of the area like Saint Barbara, whose iconic image and church in the center point of Talihina, a place named after the Tal tree that provides shade, herbal remedies and a rather lethal alcoholic brew drunk round village beach fires at the dead of night.



Bring those binoculars to see the rich bird



Look closer at nature's smallest details like the lagoon shells

In the swinging sixties when Sri Lanka's best architect Geoffrey Bawa built Sri Lanka's Blue Lagoon this wildlife wonderland for birdlife was seen as the Negombo Riviera and an important water path way through the country, feeding into the Dutch and Hamilton canals that take you directly to Colombo and up to Puttalam in the north. Until the 1950s the waterways were always busy with trade that went across the lagoon from one canal to the other, but this all changed when the roads were developed and other ways of transporting dry fish and cinnamon became faster and more convenient in trucks or on the trains. Today the waterways are reopening for nature tourism, and a more environmentally friendly way to travel than by the clogged up roads. Arguably depending on the time of day the ancient way of travelling is healthier as you are outside and faster as you never see traffic jams on the lagoon.

Muthurajawela Nature Wetlands is perhaps Negombo's richest and most fascinating wildlife hot spots and a great escape from busy Colombo City life. The Catholic Church that belongs to Pamunugama guards the entrance to Hamilton Canal, which was built by the British to stop salt water coming to Muthurajawela land due to the Dutch Canal, destroying much of the earlier paddy cultivation. The meaning of the area is the Kings paddy field, which produced pearl like rice, which was incredibly good for you. On any two-hour or three hour nature boat tour you can expect to see at least twenty five different species of birds out of the 102 recorded in this area. A fascinating historic nature reserve with British colonial style houses dotted along the banks of the canal, where ancient methods of fishing including beating the water to send the fish into a circular frenzy can be also be observed daily. After the paddy field project failed the British used barges to take goods to the capital Colombo and then via the port to Europe. Along the edge of the coconut palm fringed canal you will find many fascinating plants like kirila for making juice and the roots which were once used for corks for both local Ayurveda treatments and stopping the bottles of toddy. On my trip we saw the Blue tailed Bee-eater, which is a green bird with a pretty blue patch. Lesser Whistling Duck, lots of majestic grey herons wading like regal troops across the lagoon, bright Red Wattle Lapwing, Whiskered Terns, Little Cormorants, which are often seen perched on the fishing sticks known as Athukutu or Masathu with huge wings span.

Animals included troops of Toque Macaques a medium size monkey with brown body and distinctive white belly the perfect camouflage to swim across the muddy canals, as when you look up all you see is sky. Seeing this is both amusing and fascinating as they look like Olympic swimmers with the gusto and speed they take to swim from one bank to the other. Indian Brown Mongooses are not so common growing up to 65cms, and the lizard like water monitors that some mistake as crocodiles are always a thrill to see as they scavenger hunt for all types of food acting as natures rubbish removers. This monitor is a terrestrial lizard growing to 180cms, that glides along the side of the banks and living off bird's eggs, old bits of meat, and rotten food. We saw one at around 80cms including its tail and it was probably about 6 months old, swimming past a recently opened coconut, which it dipped its exceptional long



Lagoon birds using the sticks as viewing platforms and also sun spots to dry their wings



Branch by branch they build a monthly trap

tongue into. On one in every ten trips you will also see the shy estuarine crocodiles, which grow up to, 23 feet and they are exciting to spot, as they are extremely territorial and will fight off invaders giving you that amazing National Geographical filming opportunity.

Whatever you see every trip to Muthurajawela wetlands, the lagoon and Negombo canals is a magical experience and something worth doing if you need a break from the frenzy of Christmas shopping and cooking. Just make sure you go with a good pair of binoculars and a camera with an excellent zoom lens and if possible tripod to capture the action.

The early morning and late afternoon periods are the best time for seeing wildlife and then mid morning is a great time for shooting landscapes with the myriad of shadows that criss cross the water ways giving them that mysterious Hitchcock look we see in old black and white photographs of the area.

Guide book writer Juliet Coombe explores Negombo's lively waterways and wetlands, which are all stunning places for those that like to be woken up at dawn by an orchestra of birds and find even the smallest of creatures fascinating to observe



Muthurajawela fisherman beating the water - an ancient way of catching fish



Negombo is rich in ancient traditions. Even the fishing boats have an eye on nature



Who is looking at who?



The great scavenger of the waterways