



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

THE STORY OF SRI LANKA'S GREAT RIVERS

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FOR CLARE DE LA T

RIVER GODDESS

“Sometimes, if you stand on the
bottom rail of a bridge and lean
over to watch the river slipping
slowly away beneath you, you will
suddenly know everything there is to
be known.”

A. A. MILNE



WINNE THE
POOH &
RIVERS

Sri Lanka's 14 great rivers offer a rarely explored opportunity to unearth its history and its greatest dishes - morish reminders that rivers, being all about life, prove there is no better way to experience it than to eat or drink it

This was something that Winnie-the-Pooh's dear friend Eeyore knew all about, having famously fallen into the river.

"Oh, Eeyore, you are wet!" said Piglet, feeling him. Eeyore shook himself and asked somebody to explain to Piglet what happened when you had been inside a river for quite a long time."

Presented with a honey jar by Winne the Pooh, Eeyore would have known what any Sri Lankan Vedda could have told him: that honey was not just yummy but perfect too for preserving meat.

The Vedda, Sri Lanka's Aboriginal community, still exists. Descended from the country's Stone Age hunter-gatherers, they make up 1% of the population, a community with strong animist beliefs that has, against all the odds, retained some part of its distinctive identity. Honey and meat, wild at that, mostly wild boar, are among their preferred dishes and the history of some of the very earliest Vedda tribes can be traced around the watershed of the Maduru Oya.

ANTIQUE
WONDERLANDS

At 136 kilometres, the Maduru Oya is the country's eighth longest river, collecting its waters in the mountains beyond Mahiyan ganaya, halfway from Kandy to the Indian Ocean at Batticaloa. The streams around its collection points are highly revered, said to have once hosted the Lord Buddha himself, who came to settle a land and water dispute between warring Vedda tribes.

Their fondness for wild boar has endured, and the meat is a popular curry dish in Sri Lanka – dark and spicy, marinated in turmeric, chilli, pepper, ginger, lemongrass and pandam leaves. Known as Ela Mas Curry, it is usually made as a dry curry, so that the gamey flavour of the wild boar dominates.

All along the dry scrubland banks that enclose the Maduru Oya are the ruins of the outermost reaches of the Anuradhapuran Kingdom – including 6th-century irrigation structures, bisokotuwas, built to maximise drainage, that it took the West a hundred years more to invent. The Maduru Oya drains into the sea at Kalkudah, a small town surrounded by beaches that have remained abandoned since the end of the civil war.

The Vedda were just the first of many people to appreciate the pivotal importance of the country's rivers – for if ever a country can be said to have been made by its rivers, it is Sri Lanka. It was by harnessing their fecund power that its first kings fuelled their kingdom with the benefits of plentiful agriculture.

Urbanisation, trade, religion, buildings, and society itself all emerged from a society that could consistently grow its most basic crops. Indeed, so great was the sophistication of the techniques used to trap, store and distribute the waters across the kingdom, that it allowed the kings to build, and go on

building in Anuradhapura, the city that, for almost 1,500 years, would govern the island and whose bewitching influence would dazzle the kings and countries across the Indian Ocean.

Water management became a national obsession. The Vedda began this rare expertise, which was perfected during the Anduraupuran era. Rivers were dammed, massive tanks and reservoirs dug out, and canals and water streams cut in gradients of breathtaking precision using a tank cascade system dating back to the first century BCE.

Even the trees and bushes that grew along the water's edge were carefully selected to deter evaporation and loss. It is therefore unsurprising that almost sixty per cent of the power generated now comes from hydroelectricity.

No river best exemplifies this history than the Malvathu River. At 164 kilometres, the Malvathu is the country's second-largest river, and was what the Tiber was to Rome, the Thames to London or the Nile to Egypt.

Spilling from the streams around Dambulla and Sigiriya, it flowed onto Anuradhapura, connecting the capital with what Ptolemy mapped in the 2nd century CE as Medettu - the port of Mannar, the maritime gateway to the island.

Much of the ancient port now lies beneath the sea - but once, through its roads and the Malvathu River came gems, pearls, cinnamon, elephants, and spices, packed up for export.

And back came a royal princess in the 5th century BCE to marry the country's first Singhala king; warrior Tamil invaders; merchants and emissaries from Persia, China,

, and Rome.

Today, the river knows no such glamour, harnessed by water resource schemes and travelling through lands long forgotten by the mainstream, to provide the workaday water solutions needed by the farmers and settlements around its banks. But in memory of those marvellous ancient royal times is the inspirational Thirty-Two Slow-cooked Curry Feast, a dish favoured by the island's early kings.

This gargantuan feast required its partakers to eat 32 mouthfuls of red rice, each with a different curry. Fish, chicken, beef, lentils, jackfruit, pumpkin – all were simmered, slow cooked, roasted, steamed, and tempered with every possible spice from tamarind, cinnamon and fenugreek to pepper and coriander.

Oceans of coconut milk were added. Its more modest and – from a medical point of view – acceptable descendant is the traditional Sri Lankan Village rice and curry – a capacious set of dishes that varies from place to place and fills many happy hours.



UPRIVER
SETTLERS

Twenty-four massive dams and over 20 vast reservoirs lie behind modern Sri Lanka's energy grid, backed up by over 60 smaller dams and 18,000 smaller tanks and reservoirs, many going back well over a thousand years. With an average rainfall of over 1,700 millimetres per year, Sri Lanka receives more rain than all European and most African and Asian countries. Dams and reservoirs are still being built today – with one especially massive new entrant slated for the waters of the Kumbukkan Oya.

At 116 kilometres, the Kumbukkan Oya is the country's twelfth-longest river, collecting its waters near the blameless hill town of Lunugala and flowing into the Indian Ocean at Kumana National Park through a series of lagoons and shallow brackish tanks. This is home to many visiting and endemic birds, including the black-necked stork and the exhausted pintail snipe that will have travelled over 10,000 kilometres to escape the Siberian winter.

Quite how the area will survive the proposed Kumbukkan Oya development project, which aims to create a reservoir of almost 50 million cubic metres of water, has yet to be fathomed.

The river collects its waters around Monaragala, a lush area in the southeast of the island and famous for the antiquity of its Muslim community. Muslims make up the second largest ethnic group here and have a history that goes back well over 500 years.

The area is dotted with old mosques and shrines, its folklore rich with Islamic story lines and the countryside sprinkled with the very distinct archaeology of the community. It is the perfect place to order up Watalappam – the island's most popular pudding. Made with eggs, coconut milk, jaggery, nutmeg, and

cardamom, the dessert arrived on the island with the Malay Moors, the Muslims of Indonesia who knew it as srikaya, a festive dish favoured for Eid.

Not all of Sri Lanka's guest arrivals or river folk were so benign. The Chinese, one of the island's lesser-known invaders, can be traced to a river and to food, to HBC, or to Hot Butter Cuttlefish. This popular starter is made with deep-fried squid or cuttlefish and enlivened by chillis, peppers, onions and lakes of butter. You can find this almost everywhere, but the most appropriately historic place to eat is by the banks of the Kirindi Oya.

At 117 kilometres, this is the country's eleventh-longest river. It collects its waters in Namunukula, a spectacular mountain range near Badulla that stands so tall that the Ming Admiral, Zheng, used its mass to navigate his way towards Sri Lanka.

The admiral led a notable invasion of the Kotte kingdom in 1411, triggering the Ming Kotte War and kidnapping the king, only to return him several years later as a puppet king. The Kirindi Oya flows into the Indian Ocean at Bundala, whose 4,000-square-hectare wetland supports a glamorous roll call of rare native and distinguished international visitors, including the always-welcome but increasingly rare pink flamingo.

The first of the European invaders were, of course, the Portuguese, and hints of their abiding history can still be heard around the banks of the Mi Oya.

At 109 kilometres, the Mi Oya is the country's fifteenth longest river, collecting its waters in the flatlands halfway between Kurunegala and Anuradhapura. Although no toddler in terms of water catchment - receiving over 1,500 cubic metres of rain a year in a

catchment area of over a thousand square kilometres - it releases a mere 3% of what it gains into the Palk Straights near Puttalam. The town is noted for its tiny surviving population of Kaffirs, descendants of Bantu slaves deported from Niger and the Congo as part of the sixteenth-century Portuguese slave trade. The faintest murmurs of Portuguese Creole can still be heard spoken in their homes, places where you will also find generous quantities of Love Cake consumed.

This classic Portuguese dessert, "Bolo d'l Amor," arrived inland in 1505 with the first Portuguese and has become a celebrated dessert. Made with semolina, cashew nuts, cinnamon, cardamom, and nutmeg, it is a dense, cake-like, dainty confection, made even more delicious by being flavoured with rosewater.

As rivers go, the Mi Oya is also the in place for admirers of water pants. Growing in its waters – and only its waters – is *Cryptocoryne Wendtii*, an aquatic plant with small lush fronds of reddish leaves that leave its small but loyal band of admirers mad with delight.

THE DUTCH
& BRITISH

The Dutch, who followed hard on the heels of the Portuguese, are especially associated with Lamprais, Colombo and the Kelani River. Lamprais resembles a multipurpose picnic that has become generously and terribly mixed up. Rice, meats, plantains, brinjal, onion chutney, eggs, potatoes and practically anything else that might take your fancy is wrapped up and steamed inside a banana leaf.

The resulting food is then jumbled up by hand and eaten instantly.

The Dutch brought the dish from Java, the snack of choice for a leisurely Sunday feast – or a very practical option for a busy Dutch colonist, eating on the hoof.

There is no better place to have it than at the VOC Café in Colombo's Dutch Burgher Club, the unbeatable bastion of Dutch Sri Lankan history. Winking just a stretch or so away from its windows are the waters of the Kelani Ganga - the river that flows through Colombo as a celebrity might through the doors of the Burj Al Arab.

At 145 kilometres, the Kelani is the country's fourth-longest river. One of four rivers that the poets say, "jump from the Mountain of Butterflies, Crawl through the hills and valleys, flow, hiding glistening gems below," the Kelani today often passes barely noticed as it reaches the city, and the neat embankments of cement constructed to channel its course.

But every so often, torrential floods upstream and in the city itself upend its banks and remind its punters that, yes, it is there and, unlike Lamprais, is not always well-behaved.

The last of the invaders, the British, are memorably called to mind by the Kalu Ganga. At 129 kilometres,

this is the country's tenth longest river, collecting its waters in Seetha Gangula. Few rivers could have so clearly illustrated a footprint. Seetha Gangula is one of several streams that run out from Adam's Peak, a site revered by almost all the country's religions. Even so, the best is yet to come, for the Kalu Ganga flows through Sinharaja, the Jurassic-era rainforest that is the country's most biodiverse zone.

It passes through Ratnapura, with its history of throwing up glittering gemstones and on beside Richmond Castle, an Edwardian palace as grand and sad as a deposed prince.

Built by a notable Sri Lankan aristocrat, Don Arthur de Silva, and resembling an opulent English country house deposited gracefully amidst a grove of coconuts, this is the best place to sip tea, the most notable of all modern consumables, introduced by the British.

All around the palace, Kalatura tea grows – a strong energy-inducing lowland tea guaranteed to recharge one's depleted batteries. The Kalu Ganga finally reaches the western seaboard between orchards of mangosteens.

This fruit is rarely seen beyond the island – a quarantining that could quite possibly be deliberate, to moderate the inordinate moral damage its fragrant flesh has on the lips of anyone so fortunate as to bite into it.



A SIP OF
STRONGER
STUFF

Almost as popular as tea in Sri Lanka is lager – especially Lion lager, first brewed in Nuwara Eliya in 1849 by Sir Samuel Baker to wet the arid throats of colonial tea plantations.

The brewery drew its water from the tributaries of the Mahaweli River, which, at 335 kilometres, is by a long shot the country's largest river. Twice as long as its nearest rival, it winds down from Horton Plains, through Kandy, before its jubilant union with the ocean at Trincomalee.

But, as Winnie-the-Pooh so wisely knew: "By the time it came to the edge of the Forest, the stream had grown up, so that it was almost a river, and being grown-up, it did not run and jump and sparkle along as it used to do when it was younger but moved more slowly. For it knew now where it was going, and it said to itself, "There is no hurry. We shall get there some day."

True to Pooh, the Mahaweli's long and mesmerising course achieves a condition rare to most rivers: seclusion. As it moves in slow Pooh-style, it bypasses, ignores, and rebuffs most of modern Sri Lanka, its main cities and settlements, its most popular regions and places, temples, profane or spiritual.

The nearest it gets to strident popularism is as it flows through Kandy. Thereafter, until it reaches the near-perfect natural harbour of Trincomalee on the eastern seaboard, it passes through a dry and underpopulated land, little visited by tourists, politicians, celebrities, or even environmentalists.

Nothing about this area is remotely fashionable. Like Robert Frost's "The Road Less Travelled," it is a river of great tranquillity, stillness, and silence; everything that is that has become the antithesis of the modern world. This, of course, gives you all the time and space you.

need to consider how it helped create what is today the 60 billion rupee plus business that is Lion Lager, with its malty crisp and fruity caramel notes.

Consider too, pouring yourself a second pint of Lion Lager, the untapped wealth of river just north of here, the Yan Oya, at 142 kilometres, the island's fifth-longest river that begins near Polonnaruwa and follows the Mahaweli further north to spill out onto the remote beaches of Pulmoddai whose black sand, unmined since the civil war, contains large deposits of ilmenite, rutile and zircons.

Tea and lager are not the only drinks the island is famous for. There is also toddy or arak toddy, made from the fermented sap of coconut flowers, especially from the Gin River in south-western Sri Lanka.

At 113 kilometres, the Gin Ganga is the country's fourteenth longest river, collecting its waters from the mountains around the Sinharaja Forest, whose scores of endemic trees, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals make it the Celestial City for nature lovers.

The Gin Ganga flows south, pausing briefly at Thelikada where it has been dammed to create a reservoir, before flowing towards Gintota, a little village near Galle famous for where many of the country's plywood tea chests are made. Along its banks grow the coconut, Palmyra, and Kittul palms, whose innocent flowers, harvested by rope-leaping toddy tappers, go into making the heady alcoholic drink.

Sri Lanka's rivers are as entwined with its religions as they are with its foods and drinks. Its most totemic dish, kiribath or milk rice, is perhaps the one dish that can be said to be truly Sir Lankan – the one without aid,

influence or evolution from any other culture.

Put rice, coconut milk, water, cinnamon, and cardamom to boil until almost solid. Cool, cut, eat. Nothing could be simpler. Or more delicious.

It is the most fitting dish to nibble on when making the ascent to Adam's Peak, the country's greatest natural landmark. From here flow the streams and rivulets that make up the 138 kilometres of the Walawe River. It is an area of waterfalls, the Bambarakele Ella being the highest at over 860 feet high. The river itself is constrained by the Samanala Dam, a stalwart hydroelectric power generation scheme – albeit one with a leak that has to be constantly monitored. The river drains out into the Indian Ocean at Ambalantota, once the great port city of the ancient Kingdom of Ruhuna.



RIVER GODS

Heading north, you hit the Tamil parts of Sri Lanka, which begin at Chilaw, whose very name derives from the Tamil word "Chilaw" meaning "border". This was where the old boundary began between the ancient Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms.

Through the town flows the Deduru Oya, the country's fifth-longest river at 142 kilometres. Its catchment area, near Kurunegala, is 1,500 square kilometres. Harnessed by massive hydroelectric structures and vast reservoirs and fed by over 3,000 million cubic metres of rain annually, it still manages to deliver over a quarter of its total water to the sea at Chilaw, a Herculean labour for which it gets little commendation.

Even so, a small pean of praise is due for these waters help feed the brackish lagoons for which Chilaw is famous and where live that most elusive and endangered of sea beasts, the dugong. The area is also home to vast numbers of mud crabs whose sweet meat pairs perfectly with that greatest of all South Indian delicacies –
hoppers.

Made from fermented rice flour and coconut milk into concave pancakes or spaghetti-like entanglements, there is almost nothing that does not also go with this dish. If you are allergic to shellfish, fall back on eggs, marmalade, baked beans, foie gras or bacon and honey instead.

The shared life of the island's religions is beautifully remembered as you travel along the banks of the Gal Oya, nibbling on a bowl of kottu.

This Tamil-Muslim dish, beloved of all God-fearing folk here on the island, pairs well with anything and is the island's most popular street food. Shredded flat bread, vegetables, eggs, spices, and any type of

curry are mixed, ruthlessly chopped into pieces and fried on a griddle. The waters of the Gal Oya, with their taste, touch every part of the soul.

The river itself, at 108 kilometres is the country's sixteenth longest river, and collects its waters around Badulla, home to two of the country's most notable shrines: Muthiyangana temple, one of the sixteen places on the island that Buddhists believe to have been visited by the Lord Buddha himself; and the remarkable Badulla Kataragama Devalaya, a shrine dedicated to Kataragama, a Tamil goddess who transitioned into Buddhism.

The river flows out into the Indian Ocean near the Eastern Province town of Kalmunai, a place noted for its Muslim community. The river's journey is as fine a meander through the country's varied religious traditions as it is possible to have.

Not that it flows out immediately, for in 1948 the river was dammed to create the Senanayake Samudra — a large reservoir and part of the Gal Oya scheme. This colossal water resource grew to 100,000 acres, and though it is now an essential part of the region's agriculture, the resettlement of Tamils and Sinhalese at the time provoked some of the earliest ethnic riots in the country.

The guardian deity of Kataragama is also the endpoint of the Menik Ganga, the country's thirteenth-longest river at 114 kilometres.

If given the choice of any river to flow at the bottom of your garden, this would be one of the better choices you could make, for Menik Ganga means River of Gems. There, in the soil under, beside and around the river are fecund deposits of bling waiting to be discovered and to enrich their prospectors.

The river flows on through Kataragama, whose temple has defied decades of religious tension to remain a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and even Veddas – all much minded to take a dip in its waters before walking into the holy site.

Having done more than most rivers ever do, the Menik finally flows out through Yala and into the Indian Ocean, offering to Neptune just ten per cent of the waters it has captured along its way.

Sitting there by the sea is the ideal place to order up Fish Ambul Thiyal, a remarkable Sri Lankan dish popular in the area. Made mostly from tuna, cooked with pepper, turmeric, curry leaves, and pandan leaves, it is the addition of goraka, also known as Malabar tamarind, that gives the dish its extraordinary sour, tangy flavour.

Fish is also the go-to dish to feast on when ending any river journey along the 148-kilometre Kala Oya, the country's third-longest river.

Collecting its waters in the centre of the island, it snakes its way through the flat dry zone to drain into the Puttalam Lagoon near Kalpitiya. Along the way, it discharges its waters into 600 tanks and reservoirs, the most famous of which is the Kala Wewa reservoir, built across the Kala Oya. Cooked with pepper, turmeric, curry leaves, and pandan leaves. The dish is distinguished by the addition of goraka, also known as Malabar tamarind, a practice dating back 1,500 years and still in use today.

At Kalpitiya, it seeps into the ocean through reefs, salt pans, mangrove swamps, and marshes, creating an environment perfect for nature spotters of all sorts. To accompany the fish curry, order a side of the ever-popular polos curry, made from unripe jackfruit and flavoured with tamarind, toddy, coconut milk, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, pandan leaves, and ginger.

turmeric, chilli powder, curry powder, cumin, coriander, black pepper. It tastes and looks like pulled pork but is infinitely kinder to pigs.

Just a little south of here, near Negombo, the country's ninth-longest river, the Maha Oya, ends.

One 135 kilometres long, the Maya Oya collects its waters in the Rakshawa Mountains, home to Ravana's golden bed on which sat the lovely Sita, a married goddess for whom, sadly, almost no disaster was ultimately unexpected.

As if in recompense, the river is known as one of the country's hardest-working waterways, supplying water to major centres such as Kurunegala, Gampaha, and Kegalle and, en route, providing multiple sites for sand and clay mining.

It flows out onto the western seaboard near Negombo at Kochchikade, a town famous for housing a scrap of St Anthony of Padua's tongue at his eponymous Shrine, a church magnificently restored by the Sri Lanka Navy after the Easter Bombings of 2019 exploded amidst its pews, and which was built by a catholic priest in hiding from the ruling protestant

Over the centuries, many of the island's rivers, like the Kalani Ganga, have become workaday workhorses, supplying water and facilitating mining along their banks.

Others combine this role but flow into shallow brackish lagoons, rich with wildlife – such as the Kala Oya, the Kirindi Oya, the Kumbukkan Oya, and the Maha Oya.

Some, like the Kalu Ganga or the Menik Ganga, glitter with gemstones washed into their waters.

One — the Malvathu River — comes as close as any river can to the memory of a once grandiose history, connecting to ancient trade routes from China to Rome, exporting precious stones and jewels and taking, by return, princesses, invaders, and emissaries. But all describe along their course, the delicious history of the island for those minded to note it, or even consume it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. He gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director for sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

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