

Knuckles Mountains Waterfall Trek



The Knuckles Mountains are now a World Heritage site and as such are one of the wonders of the world. Virgin forest, jungle, mighty rivers and challenging wildlife all combine to make this trek one of the most arduous in Sri Lanka. Many set out, then turn back and even fewer make it – to sleep behind a huge waterfall high in the mountains.

Our expedition was in doubt all week, as the rains lashed the landscape. We knew would have to cross many rivers, climb to high altitudes and all would be impossible if the rain persisted. To wait out the weather we found ourselves taking a granddaughter of our host family back to her mother's house. It's not far but the roads are atrocious, even more so after the rains and landslides, but off we went, delivered the granddaughter, stayed for a hearty lunch of meat and rice.

We set off back via a new road everyone assured us was now open. Last April it was a mess of sand, culverts and machinery but it runs through magnificent remote countryside and some of the finest peaks in the Knuckles Mountains and we wanted to see how far they had got with it. Beautiful

to start with it soon became treacherous we battled through as we have done worse before. Inevitably though, we got bogged down in mud and slutch on a slope.

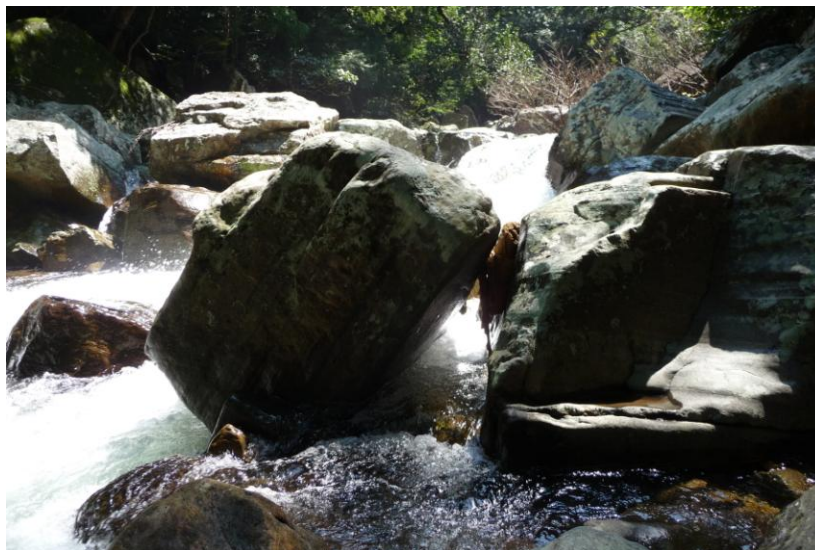
Sid clambered off to find a man with a tractor while I stayed with grandmother who is uncertain away from her valley. We sat on the banking plugging those nervous plants which curl up when you tease them for about an hour until Sid appeared riding shotgun on a tractor with a trailer. Suddenly people appeared from nowhere with no end of helpful men advising how to attach the wire tow rope and maneuver the tractor in



reverse to avoid the ditch. But was while before we were pulled free.



So it was Sunday before we set off on our expedition. Ever since 2006 I have been promised a trek to these four waterfalls which are on every picture I have taken of the view from the Abode, our place in the Knuckles Mountains. But the weather had to be right as you cannot do this, the hardest and most arduous trek in Sri Lanka, on a bad day - or two. You also have to make sure the many rivers are fit to be waded – or you get washed away and dashed on the rocks. And many a trek has turned back. All of this I was helpfully told about half way up a precarious mountainside. I think it was meant to be cheering thought...



It had been raining nonstop for about a week when got here so the signs were not immediately encouraging. But much worse, for me at least, were the leeches. I am used to picking up a few but not being besieged by them, for days on end.

Day one we went the relatively minor distance to The Abode, which acted as our sort of base camp and was the place from which to take the final decision as to whether to go for stage two. Food was left for the Gods, leaves symbolically draped on trees with a prayer and the next day we set off. We were four. Me, Sid. Agora – grandmother’s son - and Milema, a man who lives in the village. We took as little weight as we could, which was still a lot split between us and soon they were carrying my load too as I was weighed down by heat, humidity and the constant battle with insects.



It was 13 miles that first day. Down the steep mountainside of the Abode to the valley bottom, slipping on leaf mould, fragile loose soil and winding between trees, watching out for clinging liana vines clouting you on the head.

Agora and Milema have been clambering these mountains since birth and I had a lot of catching up to do. By that I mean learning how to place my feet on such loose soil and twisted roots, how to deal with insects, jump across streams, manage the huge boulders in rivers and still keep the pace. But they were great, manhandling me when necessary as I could not stretch as far as they could, hauling me upright when I slipped, at one time literally by my shirt tails as Milema was behind me and he is very strong.

Once in the big valley bottom, we had to climb four shoulders of hills, drop down their valleys, navigate their rivers and up the other side until we came to the foot of the first of four waterfalls. The force was tremendous and the views incredible of the way we had come and of the Abode high up the mountain behind us where we set off from that morning. Here we ate. Grandma had sent us with a packed lunch like you have never experienced before.



Wrapped in a parcel of bamboo bark, enclosed in big green leaves was rice, meat, vegetables – a typical Sri Lankan meal and far better than any in a hotel or restaurant. For me, cheese and biscuits, rice and oranges as I cannot eat spicy food.



Off upwards again through dense jungle to reach the foot of the second fall. We were sleeping on a ledge on its third level that night and everyone was anxious to get there before darkness which falls around 6.15pm in these parts. It was hot, humid, we were tired, slouched up and my legs were a wobbly mess.



The views and magnificence on the way helped. It was truly indescribable seeing the huge natural growth there, the crystal clear mountains and blue sky, the power of the water in mighty streams and waterfalls. The cave underneath the second waterfall where we spent the night was breathtaking and the photos only do it a little justice. Once there, sodden clothes, painful bites and exhaustion forgotten, we clambered around like little kids trying to find the best point and light to photograph.



Agora made a campfire up while I went for what was the most terrifying shower I have ever had in my life. We picked our way behind the might waterfall to stand on a ledge not 12 inches wide under the main force, with a drop of 60 feet below to solid rocks, no pool. I was OK if I stood with my back to the drop but when I faced it my knees crumpled with vertigo. The force of the water pushing down on your head and back was like sledge hammers and it was both tremendously exciting and horrifying at the same time. Wow!



I slept on the coffin like shelf in the cave feeling like one of those stone statues of Knights they have on raised tablets in a church, while the men slept alongside in the main well of the cave. It was fairly cold in the night but Agora got up and made the fire for he was frozen. The stars came out and I could see them winking in the sky beyond the fringe and drips of the waterfall we lay under and it felt like there was nothing finer to be experienced in this world.



Watching dawn appear the next morning was a truly memorable experience. Not pink for we were too far up for that, about 5,400ft, but the golden glow of the sun as it caressed the distance peaks illuminating them one by one in stark relief against the disappearing night. Silent we watched in awe.



We set off back along a different route the other way out of this high place by climbing behind the waterfall and struggling against loose soil, jungle growth and steep inclines to emerge out onto a high plateau of green and basalt rock.



From here it was another four hours of up and down, as we mounted hillside after hillside to extract ourselves from this wild wilderness. The heat was overpowering, the insects relentless and our exhaustion pretty evident that day.

That is until we came to this idyllic spot where we spent a glorious half an hour recharging our batteries – which for me meant soaking my feet and absorbing the awesome views.



Only seven miles the second day but much more down hill as we had to come down from 5,400ft. In our sights was the home of Agora's mother in law, food, a stream to bathe in and a chance to stop!



Yes, it was exhausting, challenging on all fronts, but none of that mattered for what we saw, felt and experienced was beyond words.