

EXPLORING THE VIBRANT NORTH

Expedition by "The Nandus"

Expedition members:
Dulith/Ashan/Nishanthan
/Laroshi & Usman

Exploring magnetic northern Sri Lanka at any given time is always a rewarding experience. A distinctive world correlated to the rest of the island is well-adorned with quaint cities, backwoods brightly-coloured houses and colossal temples reaching out to the sky.

A remarkable first impression perhaps one could so effortlessly note is that the North is a living monument. Families who have lived here for generations continue to fortify the lands and most of them have endured the bitter outcomings of a civil war that terrorized the whole nation for nearly 3 decades. Strengthened by a tumultuous past that had halted the growth of an entire nation is no longer under affliction and therefore continues to live life in peace and benevolence. The northerners are the embodiment of resilience and perseverance and these are features mirrored quite clearly through each and every face we encountered on our backcountry expedition to the North.



For days we spent navigating through offbeat roads and streets of the north with nothing but a map in our hands and wearing our heart on our sleeves. As we planned to go “look for things” rather than sticking to a schedule was by far one of the best decisions we had made in our past travel experiences combined. Without familiarizing every inch of the lay of the land, we followed our hearts and connected the dots with our surroundings, people and places.

Wherever we travelled, we were never short of a stranger’s kindness. We realized what you get from your journey depends on what you bring; if you never stray away from the comforts of your hotel room and conventional tourist attractions, your days are forced to face monotony. Travelling would give much more meaning if you’re ready to step out of your comfort zone and be interested in getting to know the people, history, nature and art – all the things that really matter. If you appreciate the value of these humble things as we have, you may find as we have, that a lifetime is not enough.

Plans were set in motion when we met at the Colombo station as early as 6 am to board the bus to our first location – Udappu. With loud music blaring in the background filling the stillness of the air with frenzy, our very first public commute of the journey was anything but inanimate. If you’ve ever tried travelling in the local buses in Sri Lanka, this may not come as a surprise to you. Although none of us could delight in a decent nap, this gave us a chance to not doze off and admire the idle towns along the way. Pass the beautiful churches of the famous fishing village of Negombo, onwards we went to the sleepy town of Waikkal whose tile kilns are known to be used on the roofs of the Sri Lankan houses to keep cool during the hot summer days.

Two and a half hours into our bus journey, we were greeted by a close-knit community of Udappu. An ethnically diverse town comprising of 2500 families are every bit amicable and hospitable as we had imagined. With our backpacks stacked with essentials weighing on us, we quickly managed to hail a tuk-tuk to get us into the town. Although the skies seemed a little murky with thick clouds hovering over us, the weather wasn’t as hot and humid as we had expected.

Adorned with kaleidoscopic kovils and temples, the majority of the population in town Udappu comprises Tamils and we were quite excited to see the two most iconic temples of the area Sri Parsarathy Draupadi Amman Temple and Kali Amman Temple.

Sri Parsarathy Draupadi Amman Temple is known to be one of the oldest Hindu temples in the country was built by the early Indian settlers who first arrived in Mannar and then eventually settled down in Udappu. Every August, the temple celebrates a tradition that requires all worshippers to abstain from eating meat and fish. Our visit to this impressive temple was followed by a walk-through of nearby fish and vegetable markets selling seemingly a great variety of fresh produce from avocados to prawns to corn on the cob. Our next visit was to Kali Amman Temple which is known among the locals to possess cleansing powers. The temple used to be a solitary shrine on the beach with nothing but a humble hut sheltered with coconut leaves on its hey day. However, over time with increasing popularity and the spiritual beliefs laid upon its miracles, the temple expanded its grounds and currently stands testament to being one of the most venerated religious sites of the island.

The ancient rituals performed at the temple were used to protect the fishermen that went to sea and colourfully elaborated by an ‘Iyer’ (Hindu priest) we met at the temple.

Another highlight of this laid-back town is its prawn farms. With the help of the Hindu priest, we managed to get help from a local motorcyclist who directed us to a nearby prawn farm. Little did we know Siamurthi (the motorcyclist) had a farm of his own and was very eager to show us around his livelihood which spans over an acre of land.

We were spared no detail. The farmer has a certain sense of kindness and pride exhibited on his face as he showed us around. Siamurthi explained that he travels to Chilaw (which is about 45 mins south) every 3 to 4 months to purchase about 250,000 to 300,000 prawn hatchlings. As the prawn hatchlings have a 90% survival rate, he is able to generate about 3000KG of prawn in 4 months. In truth, we were a little flummoxed by how much effort it takes to be in the industry and little did it occur to us the complexity and how dedicated these farmers are on making their living.

Before settling down for breakfast, we had one more stop penned down. A visit to a local school in the area called Udappu Tamil Maha Vidyalaya. The school has close to 600 students from nearby villages. Burdened by poor infrastructure and fewer facilities, what made our heart sink was to see a computer lab with not a single computer in it. Even in recent times, the school had constructed brand new toilets for its students, the wrath of the thunderstorm and strong winds didn't make an exception in destroying everything. Despite adversities, we were amazed by the commitment and dedication that beamed through their eyes like a ray of hope glittering in the dark.

By the time we said our goodbyes to the children, our stomachs were rumbling. Although we felt a little overwhelmed by the experience of our previous visit, we needed to fill our bellies with some food to get on with the rest of our journey. Some hot vadai (balls made up of chickpea) and paratha (type of flatbread) did the trick. We then hopped on the number 87 bus that took us to Meddawachchiye. The bus was overcrowded with people and although we found it quite difficult, the other passengers had a look of ease which only made us think this must be their commute daily. As we got on to the next bus that took us to Mannar, there was an increased change in the lay of the landscapes. Parched and arid, the landscapes were deserted and unvisited. The sight of an iconic Palmyrah tree we saw at a distance meant we had entered the infamous Northern Province of the island.

Reaching Mannar, although we were famished, we didn't have much of an option to look for a decent place to settle down for lunch. So instead, we decided to sit down at the closest place we could find although the food we had was anything but satisfying.

Our overnight stay will be at a place we had planned earlier called Hotel Ahash.

Day 2

Luck seems to continuously elude us when it came to a decent meal. Last night we had yet another disappointing dinner although to be fair we were expecting much. The prawn noodles were served with a minuscule version of dried shrimp which of course is substandard but also a little comical now that we're reminiscing things.

An early start to the day and we had a lot planned out for exploring. Although initially, we wanted to wing it with public transport, with the experiences we had yesterday albeit interesting, we weren't too keen on making any delays. So, for this particular day, a group decision was made to hire a private van in the area thus reducing the time spent on the road. This was somewhat of a luxury for us after roughing it out the first day in buses and tuk-tuks.

A quick yet very local breakfast was served at the hotel which we gulped down immediately. A mouthwatering combination of idiyappam (rice noodle dish) with some dahl curry, boiled eggs and spicy coconut sambal were served and we couldn't help but think if this is the only yummy dish we would find for the day.

Finally glad to be back on the road again stretch out our legs along the way. We looked at the big impressive baobab tree as we passed by and thought about how Mannar is known for this particular feature. Although not native to our island, these trees are remnants of what Arab traders back in the day had left.

The Dutch Fort was our next site, which was built by the Portuguese and eventually passed over to the Dutch colonies. This fort is quite tiny in comparison to the other forts on our island. It hasn't been properly conserved through the years, although there was some restoration work going on today. Hopefully, this will aid in the restoration of some of the damage caused by erosion and the 30-year struggle throughout the years. From December to April, this fort, which borders the lagoon, is a fantastic place to photograph flamingos and other migratory birds.

Around 08.30 a.m., we proceeded along the Eluwamkulam Road to see the Doric Bungalow, which was once Sir Frederick North's home. Later, this bungalow was used to resurrect and manage the local pearl fisheries. The bungalow has been exposed to extreme weather conditions due to its proximity to the shore, and it is now mostly in ruins due to a lack of upkeep. We imagined what this old home could have looked like in its heyday — it must have been magnificent! When friends were invited over, the spectacular views of the Indian Ocean must have taken their breath away.

The settlement of Kunchikulam is about a 20-minute drive from the bungalow, passing through a dense forest that was both beautiful and exciting. According to legend, the local people used to be quite formidable back in the day, with most of the males standing at 6 feet tall and the ladies being the most beautiful. When the Yodha Wewa, or Giant Tank, was being created in ancient times, the king turned to the town of Kunchikulam for assistance.

We met a youthful and enthusiastic guesthouse owner when we visited this town. His location provides basic rooms as well as a meeting and function area. During our brief conversation, he revealed that prior to the pandemic, he had been receiving visitors from all over the world, including the United States, Australia, and even Estonia. We were ecstatic to see how determined and focused he was, as well as the manner he established himself, despite the country's recent calamities. Throughout it all, he was gracious enough to offer us a freshly plucked wood apple from his garden.

In Sri Lanka, hanging bridges are uncommon. We did, however, come across one of the best-kept hanging bridges, the Kunchikulam Hanging Bridge, which is suspended above the Aruviyaaru River. If you are not afraid of heights, this 100-meter bridge is an excellent location for taking beautiful photographs.

We realized it was time for another snack after stepping across the unstable bridge, and pol roti (coconut flatbread) with lunumiris (sambal paste made with shallots, lime, and chili) worked just fine! Lunch in Colombo usually consists of a big dose of rice and curry, but because we were on a strict timeline today, we all agreed that a couple of pol rotis would serve for the time being, and we had another round of Asamodagam just to be sure.

After our humble "lunch," we drove 15 minutes to the Nambikay Farm House. This is a fantastic organic farm with a goat farm adjacent to the Giant Tank. This farmhouse's rooftop offers breathtaking views of the surrounding paddy fields and tank. We also discovered that the farmhouse serves lunch, and at this point, we wished we had waited and not eaten those pitifully small pol rotis. This farm also helps to rehabilitate people who were directly involved in the 30-year-long conflict by providing them with a sustainable livelihood. It's always a wonderful feeling to see businesses eager to give back and help those in need in their communities.

We returned to our lodging, collected our hefty backpacks, and drove to Talaimannar, where we would spend the night. We noticed that the land on both sides of the road was quite desolate, but there were plenty of donkeys, the majority of which were injured, on the way. A disheartening sight.

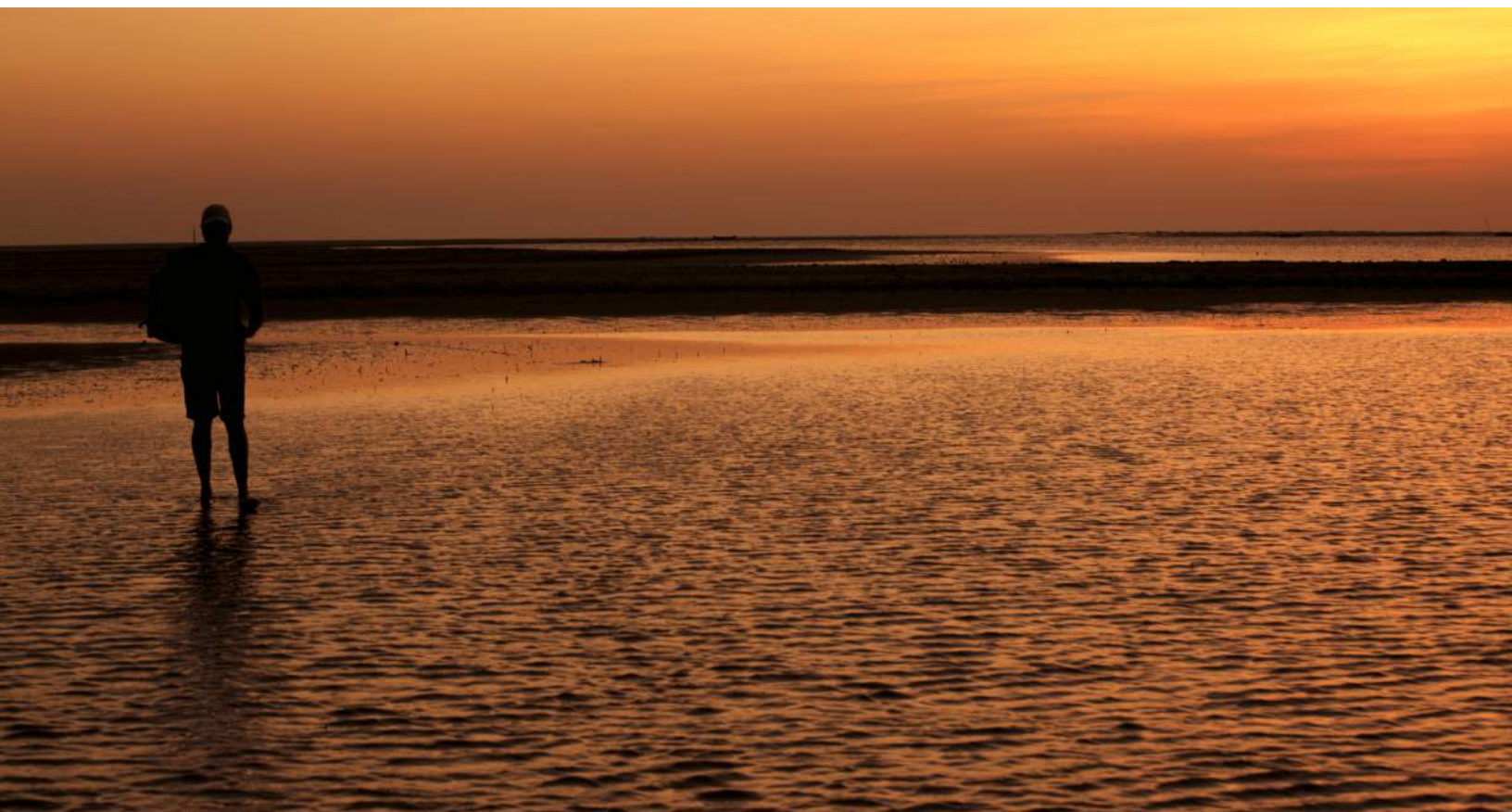


The manager greeted us when we arrived at the Donkey Clinic at 02.30 PM. He sure seemed glad to have us at the site and tell us in detail how all of this donkey welfare came about. Following the civil war, this Sri Lankan-born Australian wanted to give back to his homeland. He noticed a lot of injured donkeys in the area, and the people in the villages didn't like them because they were causing traffic accidents. After overcoming a few obstacles and receiving no local support in the matter, he was able to establish the Donkey Clinic in Mannar in 2016. The clinic has a fully up and running medical unit, a separate enclosure for injured animals, and three separate pens. All of the donkeys have names and their own medical records. We were fortunate to meet a few of the popular kids on the block, including Museaus, Ronaldo, Mathilda, and Jo. They ate corn and chickpeas and it was a pleasure to be in their company. The manager went on to say that, in addition to donkeys, they occasionally deliver veterinary care to cows and dogs in the surrounding area.

We arrived at our hotel for the night, Vayu, at the northwestern tip of the Mannar island, at 04.30PM. We came across two young children playing with marbles by the road on our way here. It was a beautiful sight that reminded us of how peaceful life is in these parts of our island. As we entered the lounge area, we were greeted by spectacular views of Adam's Bridge. At this point, we truly felt cut off from the entire world. While enjoying the scenery, we eventually realised we were hungry and that the pol rottis we had earlier were slowly wearing off. As a result, we decided to eat rice and curry. The food was incredible, and we absolutely loved it – we were received multiple vegetable dishes, a chicken curry, and poppadom, which we devoured ravenously.

We took a quick stroll to Adam's Bridge to beat the fading sunlight. The first island took us 45 minutes to reach. We could practically see the tide coming in while we were standing there, and as a result, we couldn't go any further. Since a stroll along the Adam's Bridge's second island was on our bucket list, we decided to try it again in the morning.

We were treated to a delightful treat for supper – crabs! Fried rice, coconut sauce, and pittu were served alongside (steamed cylinders of ground rice layered with coconut shavings) and needless to say, we rounded off the evening with a few pints of Sri Lankan lager (by far the best meal on this trip). We're looking forward to a restful night's sleep before heading to Adam's Bridge in the morning.



Day 3

We awoke well-rested this morning, maybe thanks to the comfort of this luxurious suite at Vayu, or the excellent dinner we had enjoyed last night or perhaps a mix of both. Whatever it was, we felt revitalized and re-energized – an excellent start to the day!

We set off on our morning exploration of Adam's Bridge's islands at 0615AM, as low tide was anticipated in the morning. The skies were crystalline, and the views were breathtaking. It was an enchanting place to be. Two friendly dogs joined us as we walked on the sand, and they sure seemed to know the lay of the land. Unfortunately, when we approached the edge, we discovered that the water level had not receded from the previous night and was rather high. While we were discussing what our options are, one of our furry friends braved into the water and guided us to the first island. Easy-peasy! We trusted in our four-legged guide and followed him into crossing the river in waist-high water. Our goal was to reach the second island but the sea level was too high, so we decided not to risk it. We were carrying quite expensive camera gear and thought it would be better not to risk our lives. As we returned to the hotel, the dogs happily escorted us along the way. We couldn't have asked for better guides!

We had a delicious breakfast of kiribath (milk rice) with lunumiris (a zesty local sambol or paste served as a condiment). It is comprised of dried chilli flakes, Maldivian fish, sea salt, onions, and lime juice (which is typically ground using a traditional grindstone or an electric grinder). This is a common breakfast dish in Sri Lanka, and it is also served on significant auspicious occasions. We were provided chicken sausages, tempered kidney beans, and toast in addition to the kiribath. As we were all starving after our stroll, everything on the table was devoured in just a few minutes!

We needed to get to Mullaitivu today and planned to take the local bus. The only option was to take the bus from Mannar to Vavuniya and then another bus to Mullaitivu. At the time, there was no direct bus service from Mannar to Mullaitivu. So we boarded the local bus at 12 p.m. and left Mannar. The ride was noisy and rough, but we arrived in Vavuniya by 0230PM. By 0430PM, we had changed buses and arrived in Mullaitivu. At the end of this rather r\frantic bus ride, we felt quite exhausted and disgruntled.



We met a local graduate from the University of Jaffna in Mullaitivu. She was very warm and polite, and she invited us to her quaint and colourful home in Kallapara. There, we met the rest of her family, including her father and brother, both of whom were fishermen. Her mother had compiled a delicious meal of rice and curry for us, and we were grateful. They had gone so far as to prepare different curries for us – cuttlefish, prawn, fish, and crab curry! In her home, we felt completely spoiled and well-cared for.

We explored the Mullaitivu fishing beach after spending time with this lovely family. We had planned to meet with some ex-LTTE child soldiers in the area before checking into our hotel for the night to discuss their lives and transition from the war. This discussion was, as expected, an enthralling experience for us. Our emotions were confounded by the stories that were shared. We were curious to know the answers to all the questions and problems that arose. A conversation later left us with a heavy heart. However, we'd like to believe it helped. Many people in the circle were motivated to share their peace as a result of the conversation.

We arrived at our hotel late, and because we have a full day tomorrow, we decided to share our fascinating conversation with the ex-LTTE child soldiers tomorrow. This will allow us to quickly eat dinner and get some much-needed rest. Tomorrow, we're headed to Jaffna – and it is most exciting!

Day 4

We were deeply moved by last night's intimate discussion with ex-LTTE child soldiers. It was interesting to understand these people and how they were enlisted at such a young age by the LTTE. We met outside our new friend's house and sat on the beach together, enjoying a few casual drinks. Walking down the memory lane about their childhood and how they came from underprivileged families received us yet again with a heavy heart. They described how, at the age of 15, they were trained to join a Tamil militant organization and how they fought for their cause for as long as 15 years. They learned how to be disciplined and orderly through the LTTE, and they were able to complete their academics as well. They were, however, given credentials from the LTTE for their education, which is no longer recognized in today's society. It was extremely difficult for them to seek jobs as a result, and they were forced to settle for common day-to-day labour or fishing instead. Their recovery, however, didn't come so easy because it was such a difficult challenge for the four of them to break free from their war mentality. But accepting each day one step at a time helped them come a long way and we're so happy that they did.

When we awoke in the morning, we felt extremely lucky to have had such a great upbringing. We didn't have to be concerned about guns or fighting for a cause in which we may or may not have believed. During our childhood, we were more occupied with our education and who could shoot a hoop or run the fastest. Humble yet rewarding events quite like these drive you to reflect in new ways inspire you to count your blessings.

We began this morning at 0745AM, which was later than the previous mornings. We ate paratha (Indian flatbread) with coconut sambal, dahl curry, and omelettes for breakfast. We drank a cup of hot tea to wash it all down.

After our chat on the beach the night before, one of our friends was eager to show us around Mullaitivu before we took our leave from Jaffna. We were excited to learn more about this site and it was helpful to have someone who understood the area. Vattarappalai Amman Kovil is one of the largest Kovils we've seen, and it's tucked right across a nice lagoon where some gorgeous migration birds can be found. The residents practice a number of peculiar rites and beliefs that are reflected in this Kovil. Seawater is collected during the dedication ceremony and transferred through two other Kovils in the vicinity within a week before arriving at this iconic Kovil. Blessings are invoked on the thousands of pilgrims who attend the rite once the lamp is lit with the seawater collected.

We came across another fishing town after our visit to the Kovil, only to discover that this community was from the very first area we visited – the seaside village of Udappu. These seasonal fishermen and their families base themselves in the Mullaitivu area for 6–8 months a year to take advantage of the east coast's richness at this time of year. They return to their native hometowns of Udappu and Chilaw once September arrives, marking the end of the eastern fishing season. We couldn't help but wonder how challenging it must be for them to uproot and travel across the island. Their families must be extremely appreciative of the sacrifices and devotion made by these fishermen in order to provide them with a better quality of life.

We boarded a local bus from Mullaitivu at 1120 a.m. for a three-hour ride to Jaffna. We were relieved to have our masks on because the roads were dry and dusty. Since the bus ride was not too bumpy, it provided a window for a little nap which we indulged in. When we arrived in Jaffna, we stopped at a local fruit stand and each had a refreshing thambili (king coconut) — the perfect cure for a hangover!

In a rented van, our friend Nathan had plans to meet us in the town hub. We had a few visits on the outskirts of Jaffna today, and we would have spent a lot of time on the road if we had used the local bus. St. Anthony's Church, popularly known as the Sinking Church, was our first stop. As it was completely inundated by sand in the 1990s, the church was henceforth known as the Sinking Church by the locals. The amount of sand on the beach alters with the seasons and wind patterns. A church once magnificent was abandoned over many decades.

The presence of Casuarina trees is one of the area's most notable characteristics. The objective of the trees, which were planted in the 1970s, was to keep the earth from exploding and to protect the beach and adjacent villages. The grove of trees is unusual in Jaffna, especially because it is not seen anywhere else in the north.

We arrived in Point Pedro around 4 p.m. after a 30-minute van ride and realized we had completely forgotten to eat lunch. We stopped at a nearby restaurant because we were hungry, and we merrily gorged ourselves on Mutton Fried Rice, Seafood Noodles, and Beef Biriyani with a little paneer mixed in. It was such a treat!

We were eager to learn more, so we went to the very tip of the gaping dragon's mouth formed by the Jaffna peninsula. Of course, we posed for the customary photo in front of the large plaque with the national flag as it's almost a tradition not to miss it. When you stand at Point Pedro, you always feel a sense of achievement. A few kilometres further, we weren't planning to miss out on a visit to Point Pedro Lighthouse, which is patrolled by the Sri Lankan Navy.



We passed by the former LTTE Commander's neighbourhood on our route to our hotel for the next few nights. We immediately remembered our new acquaintances from last night and their meetings with the organization's leader.

We decided to try something new for supper tonight. We're going to take a 10-minute walk to a nearby restaurant to sample some local cuisine, which hopefully won't be anything shady. Nevertheless, we're always prepped with a bottle of Asamodagam on hand at all times.

Day 5

We weren't particularly hungry by dinnertime after yesterday's heavy lunch. We took a short walk to the restaurant Rice & Spice and decided to share a round of pittu. This was served with spicy mutton curry and coconut sambal. We were tired when we got back to the hotel, so we were ready to sleep... until we noticed that our tiny room had these flashing lights with different colours. It gave us the impression that we were in a shady club.

We were surprised to be served pittu for breakfast as well, and we resolved not to eat pittu again during our stay in Jaffna. Before we left, we had to try some authentic crab curry!

We witnessed the ceremonial unveiling of a Baobab Tree in Punkuduthivu this morning at 9 a.m. This lovely tree stood next to a Kovil against the emerald sea. When the war was raging in the north, most people fled the country and sought refuge elsewhere. Several Punkuduthivu villagers sought refuge in Switzerland, where they have established a thriving Punkuduthivu community. This community decided to hold fundraisers and collect donations in Switzerland in order to support and develop their hometown. These were then delivered to their town for the maintenance of the Kovil and the rest of the village.

We then went to see a local non-profit organization. The foundation's goal is to provide fresh water to the village while also creating job opportunities for the community. The foundation was able to purchase two water bowsers for the village after raising funds and collecting donations in 2001. To date, the water is sold at a cost of LKR 1 per litre, and this has been the case since the beginning. This generous act greatly benefits the people of the village, especially when it comes to finding freshwater, which is a fundamental need.

By 1230PM, we had discovered a small juice shop about 4 kilometres from the Nallur Temple. We were astounded by the variety of juices available, and some of the names were unfamiliar to us! The shop's owner was an ex-LTTE soldier from Mullaitivu who had come to Jaffna four years ago in search of work. He had lost both of his legs during the war, but he was determined to rebuild his life. He has grown this shop through hard work and determination, and he now employs about 15-20 people. This time, we all decided to try soursop juice. The quantity and quality of the juices were excellent, and we would strongly recommend it to anyone visiting Jaffna.

We then walked to the loud and vibrant Chunnakam Market, which is located in a building from the Dutch occupation. The market was crowded, and there were numerous stalls selling almost everything – from vegetables to fish, textiles, and palmyrah products. It was quite satisfying to watch people move around the market looking for good deals and trying to haggle, particularly after witnessing the country go through the recent pandemic.

Kadurugoda Viharaya is an ancient Buddhist settlement in the town of Chunnakam, in the small hamlet of Kandarodai. It is one of the few remaining Buddhist temples in Jaffna. Kadurugoda is a Buddhist burial ground with more than 36 different stupas. It was an incredible sight to see all of these different sized stupas all in one place.

We met up with our friend Nathan once we returned to Jaffna. While we waited for him at the fort, we snuck in our second tuk-tuk lesson from a nearby tuk-tuk stand. Despite the fact that it is a common mode of transportation in our country, driving one is quite difficult. As it is a hybrid of a car and a bike, shifting gears and controlling the pedals can be challenging. Regardless, thanks to this crash course, we were able to get it right this time. We were also intrigued by the presence of a tractor nearby. We also tried driving it! It's a massive piece of machinery, and driving it for the first time was thrilling!

Then we rented three scooters and went for a ride around town. The roads were congested, and the heat was unbearable, but it was an unusual and exciting experience. We ended up at the Jaffna Archeological Museum. It housed various artefacts dating from Sri Lanka's early settlements to the British period.

Today's lunch was also vegetarian. At around 4 p.m., we stopped by a small restaurant called Akshathai and had dosai (rice pancakes) with sambar (vegetable stew with lentils) and some ulundu vadey (special lentil donuts). Tonight's dinner definitely needed some meat, and we were all looking forward to it.

Following that, we took a long walk around Jaffna Fort. During the walk, we noticed that the Fort Bastions were very well preserved, despite the fact that the interiors were in shambles – primarily due to the conflict. This fort is beautifully shaped into a pentagon, which can only be seen from above. We finished the walk with a glass of local toddy (palm wine). This popular white drink has a sour taste, and we paired it with small snacks of masala vadey (small spicy chickpea cakes).

We arrived at the hotel exhausted and decided to have a light dinner of egg parathas from Rice & Spice because we had an early start tomorrow. We're going to bed excited about our trip to Delft Island in the morning!

Day 6

We had to arrive at the Kurikattuwan Pier early this morning to catch the public ferry to Delft Island. We checked out of the hotel at 6 a.m. and took the bus from Jaffna to the pier. We arrived at the pier at 7:30 a.m. We were hungry, but we were eager to make it to the local ferry on time. We patiently waited in line to board the ferry.

We tightened our face masks as we boarded the crowded ferry. The ferry was packed with people, all of whom were wearing facemasks and life vests. We all realized as we sat on the floor that it would not be a comfortable ride. Nonetheless, it was an adventure. It's not for the faint of heart because the tightly packed bodies of humans and even sometimes animals cause a strong odour combo. We left promptly at 8 a.m. Because the seas were calm, we arrived at Delft Island in about 50 minutes. During the trip, we had a good laugh with a Navy serviceman who was returning from his authorized leave. He provided us with useful information about the island, its inhabitants, and the neighbouring islands. The sky was clear, and the sun was shining brightly. It was a beautiful day for an adventure!

The local officials were waiting for us when we got off the ferry to take our IDs and check our body temperatures. We were pleased that such a small island has such good health and safety precautions in place. Before we began, we quickly ate some breakfast. We ate hot rotis alongside spicy omelettes and lunu miris.

Following that, we met with our local contact in Delft. He was born on the island and previously worked as an English teacher. He'd also worked in Singapore and Saudi Arabia. He went on to tell us about his family, including the fact that he had six sons. During the first few minutes of our chat, we found a new perspective on the war than we had heard in Mullaitivu, where his son was kidnapped against his will by a terrorist organization. During the war, there must have been many more occasions where innocent lives were lost and families were torn apart. Hearing these stories is always heartwrenching. His children were unable to continue their studies as the civil war raged on.

Delft, formerly known as Nadunthivu, is the largest island (48 square kilometers) among the neighboring plots. We drove around in a truck with benches attached to the back. The roads were rough, and the terrain was difficult. We only wished that the road network around the island had been better so that logistics would have been easier. This island has a lot of interesting places to visit. First, we stopped at the Delft Fort. The Portuguese built it out of limestone and coral. We walk around the ruins, which are shaded by many Palmyra trees.

On this island, there is a massive Baobab tree that was planted by Arab traders in the 16th century. The base of the tree trunk has an opening large enough to accommodate a few people. We also stopped by the Old Dutch Hospital, which was evidently built by the Dutch and was subsequently transformed into an administrative center in the 1900s. The British coat of arms can also be seen here. There are some distinctive units built in the gardens for messenger pigeons, which were used to carry messages between Delft and Jaffna back then. The locals believe that a large human-like footprint embedded in a rock belongs to Hanuman. We drove through plain grasslands, where we saw a large number of wild ponies. Even though they were always running away from us, it was a wonderful sight!

We had seen the island's main attractions by 1 p.m. and were ready to leave because we had finished ahead of schedule and the local ferry wasn't leaving anytime soon. Our host was quite accommodating, and he requested that his sons drop us off in their "plastic" boat. We arrived in Nagadeepa and paid a visit to the Hindu Kovil. At the Kovil, we also had a short vegetarian meal of red rice, dahl, pumpkin curry, and sambar. We soon returned to the boat and walked back to the pier. We were able to get at the Kurikattuwan dock 1.5 hours earlier than intended thanks to this generous gesture.

Day 7

Today we were going to go on an in-depth tour of Jaffna. We didn't intend to visit any major attractions, but rather to meet interesting people in the community who had exciting stories to tell.

We had string hoppars for dinner the night before, and we were served string hoppars for breakfast as well. What a letdown! It was amazing how this kept happening to us! We agreed, as we did with the pittu earlier this week, that we would not have string hoppars for a while. We were hoping for a better lunch.

We left the hotel at 9 a.m. today in Nathan's car. We took advantage of the late start. Our first stop was not far from the Nallur Kovil. We met some wooden artisans here and were able to see the carving of beautiful statues and images. This entire village offers a wide range of wooden crafts, and they are the masters of carving the chariots used in the Kovil processions. They sculpted the wood with such assurance and precision. This was a delight to watch.

We then made a brief stop at the Jaffna Railway Station to purchase our train tickets to Colombo. As today was our last full day in Jaffna, it was still a little difficult to believe that seven nights had passed in such a blur.

Moving on, we came across a Palmyrah Craftsman in Jaffna's outskirts. He is a 70-year-old retired CTB (Ceylon Transport Board) bus conductor. He began working with Palmyrah as a hobby and grew it into a small but prospering business. He was able to make us a small memento in less than ten minutes. It was amazing to witness the creation of this trinket. We proceeded our journey to Casuarina Beach, a popular spot for a sea bath. However, the stars did not align for us to take a dip in these calm, refreshing waters...

We arrived at the Cattumaran Bungalow around 2:30 PM, which is about 30 minutes away from Casuarina Beach. It is a three-bedroom villa that has been meticulously restored using none other than Channa Daswatte's brilliant design concept. We were overjoyed to be able to eat here for lunch. We were served rice and curry with prawn, crab, dahl, brinjal, and long beans, as well as carrot sambal. Needless to say, after several servings, we polished our plates clean. And the presence of Ajantha (the owner of this bungalow) added a bubbly flavour as she shared her many anecdotes during lunch!

Around 3:15 p.m., Nathan and I went to see another nonprofit that worked with children. When we met with the Director, he came off as a really passionate individual who was genuinely interested in assisting underprivileged children. This foundation consists of 12 buildings, each housing approximately 8-10 children. Each house has a foster mother who looks after the kids. Each foster mother is granted a stipend, which she spends on food and other necessities for the children. During the civil war, seven of the foster mothers were ex-LTTE combatants. They've been rehabilitated and given child-care training. The Hindu faith is represented in nine of the residences, while Christianity is represented in two.

This organization currently cares for 147 orphaned children who are victims of the post-war period, as well as parents who are physically or mentally unable to care for their families. We were so grateful for these people who were dedicating their lives to ensuring that these deprived children were integrated into society while visiting the foundation. The program also includes a vocational centre where older students can hone their language and practical skills in fields such as beauty culture, IT, A/C and refrigerator repairs. A truly unforgettable experience to be had during a visit to Jaffna!

By 5 p.m., Nathan had dropped us off at our guesthouse. We took a fast tuk-tuk trip to the Nallur Kovil from here. The parade had already begun when we arrived, and there was loud Hindu music playing. It was an astounding sight to see more than 500 people. To gain access, guys must remove their shirts and enter topless.

The pooja is a glamorous occasion. To participate in this holiest of ceremonies, which is bursting with brightly robed devotees and colourful decorations, one might commit to being a vegetarian for a period of time. The flamboyant and eye-catching gold jewellery that goes with their attire is a common sight and is said to draw out negative energy while only attracting positive.

Rio, a popular ice cream parlour, is about 200 meters away from the Nallur Kovil. A trip to Jaffna isn't complete unless you try the delicious ice cream from this parlour. We were quite satisfied after indulging in various ice cream flavours.

We all agreed that we were hungry for chicken for dinner. We discovered that Jaffna had a KFC. As a result, for our final supper, we ordered burgers to go, and on our way back to the hotel, we purchased a bottle of Vodka for one last round of drinks!

Tomorrow, we'll get an early start. Our train departs from Jaffna Station at 4 a.m., and we have arranged for a tuk-tuk to pick us up at the station around 3:30 a.m. We expect a long day tomorrow because the train ride is approximately 6.5 hours long. However, we have thoroughly enjoyed our recent travels and interactions with the local community. It was a wonderful experience backpacking through the north, seeing different attractions and meeting wonderful people with diverse characters and personalities. This is a journey that we'll never forget!

Day 8



By 03:40 a.m., we had arrived at the Jaffna train station. Our train wasn't due to leave until 4 a.m., but we preferred not to be late. We were keen to get home after such an epic adventure. The train left the station at 4 a.m., and we were relieved to be seated comfortably. We were definitely going to take a long nap because the trip was about 6.5 hours long. We fell into a semi-deep slumber as the train swayed us softly...

As we left the Northern Province, we noticed the shifting vegetation outside our window. The now-familiar landscape of barren lands and Palmyrah trees gradually gave way to verdant green paddy fields and coconut plantations. We had seen almost all of the places we had planned to see, met wonderful people, and most importantly, learned so much about our island paradise. We couldn't wait to tell the rest of our office team about it. We'd been to humble homes, eaten simple meals, travelled in loud buses, gotten mild digestive problems, and made new friends. The last seven days have been truly life-changing!

EXPLORING THE VIBRANT NORTH

WRITTEN BY THE NANDUS