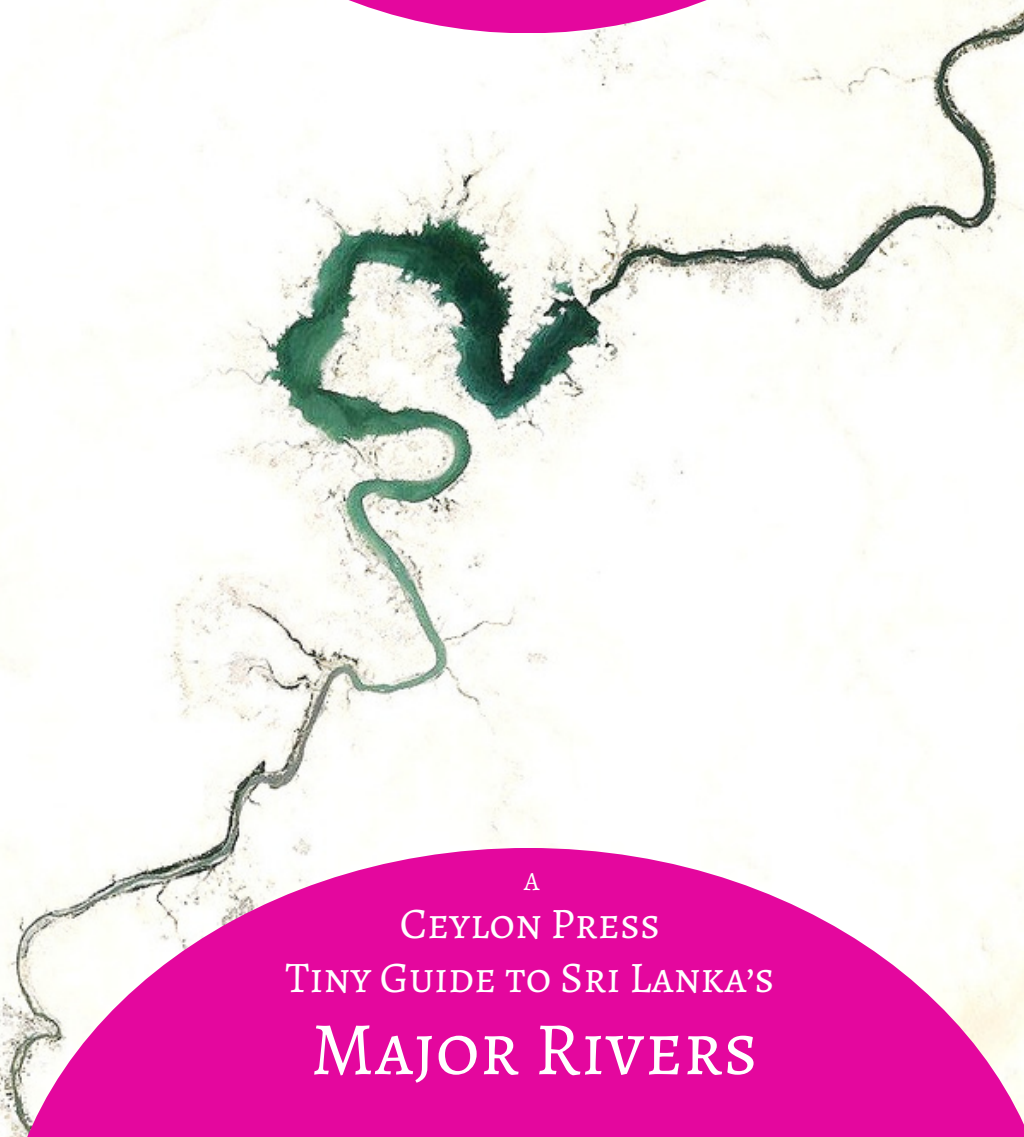


# GO WITH THE FLOW



A  
CEYLON PRESS  
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S  
MAJOR RIVERS

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In a  
Word  
or Two

"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." A. A. Milne

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 the very first  
kings were able to fuel their  
kingdom with the benefits of  
plentiful agriculture.

Urbanization, trade, religion,  
buildings, and society itself all  
came from a society that was  
able to grow its most basic  
crops with assured regularity.

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 1,500 would govern the island and whose bewitching influences would dazzle the kings and countries in lands right across the Indian Ocean.

No nation amounts to much without water, but in Sri Lanka its management became a national science and obsession since Vedic times. Perfected during the reigns of the great Anduraupuran kings, the turning of water into food and then gold propelled the country in its early and early medieval ages to levels of sophistication that dwarfed most countries in the west. 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 percent of the power generated now comes from hydroelectricity. Twenty-four massive dams and over twenty vast reservoirs lie behind this power source, backed up by over sixty smaller dams and eighteen thousand smaller tanks and reservoirs, many going back well over a thousand years.

With an average rainfall of over one thousand seven hundred millimetres per year, Sri Lanka receives more rain than all European and most African and Asian countries. Most of this is carefully collected – but, claim the detractors, it is then poorly managed, and, they say, the country has plenty of room to improve its hydroelectric contribution by greater efficiency in storing and protecting the water it accumulates.

Central to all of this, are of course, the country's rivers. Most start their tiny rivulet lives amidst the great mountain ranges that rise up in the central section of the island, and cascade down through cloud forest, rainforest and dry zone scrubland towards lagoons and the sea.

Many – like the Kalani Ganga – have become workaday work horses,

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 the greatest river - by a long shot - is the Mahaweli: three hundred and sixty-five kilometres long flowing out from Horton Palins, through Kandy and across the dry scrubland of the northeast of the country towards its ultimate destination at Trincomalee

The  
15  
Major  
Rivers

# DEDURU OYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF DAILY MIRROR.

At one hundred and forty-two kilometres, the Deduru Oya is the country's fifth equal longest river, collecting its waters in the Gommuna Mountains near Kurunegala, the start of a catchment area one and a half thousand square kilometres in size. Harnessed by massive hydroelectric structures and vast reservoirs,

and fed by over three thousand million cubic metre of rain annually, it still manages to deliver over a quarter of its total water to the sea at Chilaw on the eastern seaboard, a Heraclean 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 - perhaps, still - that most elusive and endangered of sea beasts, the dugong.

# GAL OYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF CEYLON PAGES.LK.

At one hundred and eight kilometres, the Gal Oya is the country's sixteenth longest river, collecting its waters in the mountains around Badulla, a town built on tea. The town is also 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 religions traditions as it is possible to have. Not that it gets to flow 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 one hundred thousand 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.

# GIN GANGA



IMAGE COURTESY OF MITHRA WEERAKONE.

At one hundred and thirteen kilometres, the Gin Ganga is the country's fourteenth longest river, collecting its cool waters from the mountains around the Sinharaja Forest, a Jurassic era rainforest whose scores of endemic trees, insects, amphibians, reptiles,



birds, and mammals make it the Celestial City for nature lovers and spotters of all sorts.

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 being where many of the country's plywood tea chests are made.

# KALA OYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF NISHD

At one hundred and forty-eight kilometres, the Kala Oya is the country's third longest river, collecting its waters in the Omaragolla Mountains in the centre of the island and snaking its way through the flat dry zone to drain into the Puttalam Lagoon near Kalpitiya.

True to its long-established function, it discharges its waters into over six hundred tanks and reservoirs along its length, its most famous being the Kala Wewa reservoir built across Kala Oya, one and a half thousand years ago and still in use today.

At Kalpitiya its seeps out into the ocean through reefs, saltpans, mangroves swamps, and marshes creating an environment perfect for nature spotters of all sorts.

# KALU GANGA



IMAGE OF KALU GANGA AT RATHNAPURA C.1870S. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

At one hundred and twenty-nine kilometres, the Kalu Ganga is the country's tenth longest river, collecting its waters in Seetha Gangula and draining them out in Kalutara. Few rivers could have so illustrious a footprint for Seetha Gangula is one of several streams that runs out for 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 moves on to flow through Sinharaja, the Jurassic era rainforest that is the country's greatest biodiverse zone.

As it runs, it passes through Ratnapura, with its history of throwing up glittering gemstones from riverbanks and on past Richmond Castle, an Edwardian palace as grand and sad as a disposed Tsarist princess. It finally reaches the western seaboard and the Laccadive Sea at Kalatura, home to the mangosteen.

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

# KELANI GANGA



AN ILLUSTRATION BY W & S LTD OF A VIEW OF THE KELANI RIVER FROM  
KURUNEGALA, TAKEN IN 1895. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Despite enjoying the kudos and bravado that goes with being the river that flows through Colombo like a celebrity through the doors of the Burj Al Arab, the Kelani River is forever bound to be second best, heir to a position held by a watery queen who will never abdicate. For at three hundred and thirty five kilometres long, the Mahaweli River is the country's

longest river by any country mile. At one hundred and forty-five kilometres, the Kelani River is the but the country's fourth longest river.

As Colombo has grown exponentially, the river has become ever more its work horse, used for everything from sewage disposal and mining to hydroelectricity production, transport and - of course - the supply of (in this case) eighty percent of the city's water needs.

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 it is not always well behaved.

# KIRINDI OYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF FOREST BIRD.

At one hundred and seventeen kilometres, the Kirindi Oya is the country's eleventh longest river, collecting its waters in Namunukula, a spectacular mountain range near Badulla that stand so tall that the Ming Admiral, Zheng, was able to use its mass to navigate his way towards Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century. The



Kirindi Oya then flows out into the Indian Ocean at Bundala, whose almost-four thousand square hectares of wetland supports a glamorous roll call of rare native and distinguished international visitors, including the always-welcome but increasingly rare pink flamingo.

# KUMBUKKAN OYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF @HANEKKK.

At one hundred and sixteen kilometres, the Kumbukkan Oya is the country's twelfth longest river, collecting its waters near the blameless hill town of Lunugala and flowing out into the India Ocean at Kumana National Park through a series of lagoons and tanks of shallow brackish water. This is home to many

visiting or endemic species, especially birds including the black-necked stork, and the exhausted pintail snipe that will have travelled over ten thousand 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 fifty million cubic metres of water, is yet to be fathomed.

# MADURU OYA



PICTURE COURTESY OF INFOLANKALK.

At one hundred and thirty-six kilometres, the Maduru Oya is the country's eighth longest river, collecting its waters in the mountains beyond Mahiyanganaya, halfway from Kandy to the Indian Ocean at Batticaloa. The streams around its nursery collection points are much revered, being said to have once

hosted Lord Buddha himself who came to settle a dispute between warring tribes.

All along the dry scrubland banks that enclose it can be found the ruins of the outer most reaches of the Anuradhapuram Kingdom – including sixth century irrigation structures – bisokotuwas, built to maximise drainage – that it took the west a hundred years more to invent.

The river drains out at Kalkudah, a small town surrounded by beaches still abandoned since the ending of the civil war.

# MAHA OYA



IMAGE OF SITA KIDNAPPED. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

At one hundred and thirty-five kilometres, the Maya Oya is the country's ninth longest river, collecting its waters in the Rakshawa Mountains – home, it is said 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 .

history for this folly, the river is known to be one of the country's hardest working waterways , supplying H<sub>2</sub>O to such major centres as Kurunegala, Gampaha, and Kegalle and providing, en route, multiple sites for sand, and clay mining.

It flows out on to 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

# MAHAWELI RIVER



IMAGE BY CONSTANCE FREDERICA GORDON CUMMING (AUSTRALIAN, 1837-1924)- THE MAHAWELI GANGA BELOW GANGAROWA, CEYLON , 1873. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

At three hundred and thirty-five kilometres, the Mahaweli River is, by a long shot, the country's greatest 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 Winne-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 on the make, entrepreneurs, paid-up members of the A, B or C list, or even environmentalists. Nothing about this area is remotely fashionable. Even so, Like Robert Frost's "Road Less Travelled," it becomes a river of great tranquillity, stillness, silence; everything that is that has become the antithesis of the modern world – even though from upstream run off and illegal mining pollution has started to poison its waters leaving several species of butterflies extinct and driving other endemic species to new levels of existential threat.

# MALVATHU RIVER



IMAGE COURTESY OF 307KAMALP.

At one hundred and sixty-four kilometres, the Malvathu River is the country's second largest river, and was once what the Tiber is to Rome, the Thames to London or the Nile to Egypt. Spiling from the streams of the Inamaluwa Mountains around Dambulla and Sigiriya, it flowed onto the ancient city

of Anuradhapura, connecting the renowned capital with what Ptolemy mapped in the second century CE as Medettu – known in Sri Lanka as 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 the gems, pearls, cinnamon, elephants, and spices, packed up for export. And back came a royal princess in the fifth century BCE to marry the county's first Singhala king; the warrior Tamil invaders; the merchants and emissaries from Persia, China, and Rome.

All this excitement awaited the Malvathu as it arrived at Anuradhapura, reaching a fever pitch of activity at Mannar itself. 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.

# MENIK GANGA



IMAGE COURTESY OF HARSHA WJUEWARDENE.

At one hundred and fourteen kilometres, the Menik Ganga is the country's thirteenth longest river, collecting its waters in Namunukula and draining then out at Yala. 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 percent of the waters it has captured along its way.

# MI OYA



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

At one hundred and nine 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 one and a half thousand cubic metres of rain a year in a catchment area of

over a thousand square kilometres – it releases a mere three percent of what it gains into the Palk Straights on the western seaboard near Puttalam.

The town is noted for its tiny but still surviving population of Kaffirs, descendants from 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.

As rivers got the Mi Oya is unremarkable, unless of course you are an admirer of water pants, for growing in its waters – and only its waters – is *Cryptocoryne Wendtii*, an aquatic plant with small lushes fronds of reddish leaves that leave its small but loyal band of admirers mad with delight.

# WALAWE RIVER



IMAGE COURTESY OF FACULTY OF MEDICINE, SABARAGAMUWA UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA.

At one hundred and thirty-eight kilometres, the Walawe River is the country's seventh longest river, collecting its waters off Adams Peak at Belihul Oya. It is an area of waterfalls - one, the Bambarakele Ella, the highest in the land at over eight hundred and sixty feet high. The river itself is constrained by a dam - 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.



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