

Harmony Under Fire

(writing contest submission – 2004)

In the early hours of the morning when silent leopards and black-eyed jackals roam the land, the fishermen of Arugam Bay slip their small-sailed *oruwa* into the sea. Equipped with centuries of knowledge and a few worn nets, they fish until the fast-rising equatorial sun gets too high in the eastern sky. Many return before sunrise.

The fat-hulled boats fill quickly here. Located just below the eastern tip of Sri Lanka where the Indian Ocean endlessly courts the Bay of Bengal, the waters of Arugam Bay are a fisherman's exotic dream. On this morning, a pair of blue swordfish lay in the cold morning sand -- glaring at their captors who're busy untangling a flapping ray from another net. Once freed, villagers converge on the huge ray and begin slicing into its oily hide – coming away with chunks of flesh proportional to the size of stovepots back home.

The fishing lifestyle of Arugam Bay represents a legacy that predates Sri Lanka's tea plantations and colonial schoolhouses. The villagers claim that their small pearl-shaped bay was created when the god Shiva danced on the peak of Adam's Mount in the distance to generate the earth. The sea is life here, and sustaining life can sometimes be a challenge under the constant shadow of civil war. Razor-wire roadblocks and overstuffed checkpoints betray a shadowy tension in sharp contrast to the pace of sleepy fishing villages such as Arugam Bay. No one drives after dark.

Although the 18-year conflict between Muslims and Christians has been embroidered into the cultural fabric of Arugam Bay, the chance of witnessing violence rivals the chance of running into an old friend from back home – highly unlikely. For one thing, tropical heat and the district's arid landscape discourage prolonged activity throughout the midday hours. It's during this time that the hard-clay streets belong exclusively to packs of semi-hairless canines and happy schoolkids whose white uniforms are well-suited for the heat but not the dust.

As the day wanes and the afternoon seabreezes begin to rattle palm branches overhead, the sugary smell of crepe-like *rotis* is replaced by burnt coconut husk – the tropical firestarter. Shadows stretch, the sun stumbles and the village becomes an ocean of scents. From one house, swordfish steaks sizzle as the rising scent of *naan* bread cuts through the air. From another, a tangy whip of green curry assaults the nose and hollows the belly. And from somewhere on the beach where the fishermen sleep, the odd but not unpleasant odor of simmering Manta Ray glides ghostly around. Despite failed attempts at peace, expatriot “land-grabs” and global travel warnings, life in Arugam Bay seems timeless. For the fishermen who rise before the sun, the old ways are what provide stability and continue tradition. For the traveler tired of looking into windows and seeing a reflection of Western culture, the village offers a rare view of life as it was, is, and will be until the war is over and the battle for tourist dollars begins.

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