A Dutch Vision

Posted on



The Pigeon lsland temple, Matara, viewed from the fort

Step into the Matara Fort to walk with the romantic spectres of the Dutch.

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Matara is one of our quaintest towns. The spray of the Indian Ocean is never far from its heart. The town’s main charm is that it looks forward to the sea, with colonial remnants cluttering it like salt-encrusted sea creatures.

To enter the Matara Fort is to turn the clocks back and enter a Dutch reverie. True, the Portuguese built the edifice in 1560, but what is left is essentially Dutch, from the stout yellow walls to the flagstone streets and those homely pillared verandahs where residents sit during peaceful evenings. The thick rampart stands barrel chested against the Matara town, but on all the other sides the fort has no protection other than the natural barrier of the sea.

The gateway today seems faded enough to be translucent, but once you drive through you are conscious of having penetrated a time-honoured barrier. This is not surprising when you see that the fort had kept itself distinct from the rest of the town for more than 450 years.

Time is trapped within the fort, which is a sentiment you get at the Galle Fort too. Genteel “verandah houses” stare at each other across narrow lanes. They are like stocky little strongholds, inside which colonial families felt secure pitted against the wilderness outside the fort. Some elegant Dutch domiciles look older and grander than others.

The courts complex is found within these walls, as are the Rest House and the Police Station. Black tied lawyers are a common sight. Especially in this part of the fort, little gives away that we are in 2016. It could be the ‘90’s, the ‘70’s, or very well the ‘40’s.



The entrance to the fort: once a hub, today calm and quiet

For a good part of its lifetime the fort was a cocoon of prestige. It was the best address not only in Matara but for a much bigger area. Sinhalese and Burgher families predominated, but there was a scattering of others too. Many of the stocky, elegant Dutch *walawwes* (mansions) have now second lives as guest houses or commercial enterprises. Only the most diehard gentry persist to inhabit the quaint houses.

We passed what was once a very grandiose mansion, with many balconies and stately woodwork, today a temple known as Migadaya Viharaya. But temples seem an oddity, really, in this space which is a colonial hangover, if not a little piece of Holland displaced in time. Churches are the real emblems of the Matara Fort.

The oldest surviving building here, as well as the most iconic, is the Dutch Reformed Church. It was first established in 1706. Though its walls were peeling, in the bright early morning sunlight the yellow building looked glorious. We walked through pillared verandah of the church. Above the doorway was the legend ANNO 1767:

the year the house of God was reconstructed after being damaged in the Matara rebellion. The high roofed, lit-up interior was simple and whitewashed. The pews were old and polished. Glass globes hung from the roof. Generation after generation of colonial congregations have prayed here. Today the place retains but a ghost of its past glory, but there was feeling of sanctity within its Spartan atmosphere.

The gravestones on the floor throw bright light on the colonial history of South Ceylon. The oldest gravestone goes back to 1686. One of them is quite captivating. Under it lies a man whose mouthful of a name reflects those early colonial times: “Dionysius Abraham Tillekeratne Dissanaike”. More intriguing is his designation: “Basnaike Nilleme of Dondra Devale.” Obviously, religious distinctions as we know them today had not become crystallized by this time.

Few originators have thought of tapping the touristic potential of the quaint fort. This is why the Dutchman’s Street is a trailblazer. This café and restaurant is remarkable for its design. It captures the romantic Dutch spirit with a classic exposed-brick building. A bicycle with a basket of spring flowers stands outside amidst unusual maritime antiques. The interior too is sunny, colourful and cheery, with a mélange of quirky antiques and collectibles. It had obviously been a labour of love for a mother and son duo to dream up. This wonderful space, incredibly, had no other architects or interior designers. S K Janaki and her son are now planning to expand the delightful place right down to the deep blue ocean.

Matara has another, much smaller fort whose façade is more famous than its interior: the Star Fort built to protect the main fort.Its decorated gate has become an emblem of Matara. It depicts the coat of arms of Van Eck flanked by two royal lions.

Few people who call Matara their home know that Van Eck was a Dutch governor, let alone that he was the 31st Governor of Ceylon. History, like the fort, is fast becoming irrelevant. But happily, people do not need to know dates to appreciate the fascinating beauty of the past, of which the Matara Fort is a glorious living example.

