A Walking Tour of Colombo

Posted on

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The Pettah, Colombo's old style shopping center. Photo: Pushpakumara Mathugama,

'Welcome the tourist with a smile – it costs you nothing,' the billboards scream. It is a rare local 'blade' indeed who will resist flashing his full smile to a foreign visitor. It's part of the islanders' spontaneous hospitality, as traditionally warms as Sri Lanka's tropical climate.

And Colombo – though a pulsating metropolitan hot-house of commerce, has an exotic charm of her own. Batik sarongs and the traditional snow-white banian shirt and cloth mingle easily with Saville Row suits, while gaily colored sarees vie with minis, midis and peddle-pushers. Taxis will perilously overtake on the wrong side; the buses will boisterously canter though traffic jams and pedestrians walk through

intersections that you may consider suicidal. But that's Colombo – not Hong Kong, nor Singapore or Kuala Lumpur.

Like most south Asian cities, Colombo has a cultural mix of architecture and lifestyles – a happy colonial hangover of highrise buildings and five star hotels trying to reach the heavens, with a lingering olde' world charm of the Dutch, Portuguese, and British colonial periods. These latter styles are evident in structures such as the Dutch muse um, the President's House, Khan Clock Tower, the old Scottish Kirk, St. John's Market and the Romanesque old Parliament building where Sri Lanka's President Junius Jayawardene has set up his offices, looking sagely out to sea.

Walking around the city is the best way to discover her intimately, to feel her esoteric rhythms and to eavesdrop on her many shrouded secrets, oft tucked a way in nooks and crannies. You can still use the rickshaw, truddle along in a traditional bullock cart or venture in style in a twenty-year old Morris Minor taxi.

Let's start our odyssey-on-foot to Colombo's two vibrant city centers, The Fort and Pettah from the sea-kissed Galle Face Green, where fitness fans stretch and jog at the crack of dawn. As the day relaxes into semi-noon, amorous 'umbrella lovers' nestle in their own tranquil corners alongside hundreds of kiteflying buffs. By evening, when the sun starts melting with the horizon, the Green takes on a carnival air when men, women and children in teeming numbers come to take the sea air and their fill of sweet meats, ice cream and snacks from vendors on the sidelines.

With the copper sun grinning down, its comfortable to kit yourself in light cottons and sandals or loafers, and to take the trek at a leisurely pace. Through the Green on the center road you'll make your way to the old Parliament and thence into the sensorium of The Fort. Along President's Boulevard is the President's House built in the days of the British colonial Raj, where you can see the impressive changing of the guards perform on the hour in the best of Beefeater tradition.

The Fort, where Colombo's tallest building the new Bank of Ceylon towers above a motley mix of 'fin de siecle' or older period pieces, is the island's commercial and banking hub. Here you can circulate freely, pattering through fissured pavements across Chatham Street, Sir Baron Jayatilleke Mawatha, Bailie Street and onto York Street, pausing awhile here and there to gaze in shop windows or at a more colorful side of life. Listen to the blind beggars' percussion, or the love song languidly

rendered by a medicant family under the knarled banyan tree. And no doubt you'll bump into the nimble dog and monkey street circus, performing not far from the gruesome frolics of a glass eater. The cobra charmer and python dancers too find a tiny pavement niche in The Fort.

The sidewalks of Bristol Street and Canal Row, sardine jammed with gem and black-money touts, penny peg bars and shady betting salons, are the haven ofsuch wizened soothsayers whose prophecies you cannot escape. But of course the most sought after clairvoyant is the randy lady palmist who will tell your future from a little sidewalk table stand. And of course you can't bypass the talkative herbal doctor – with a 'quack' in both his chattering voice and his little glass nostrums that have a promise of a cure for every ailment, from the common cold to cancer.

For a suitcase full of souvenirs stroll the pavement stalls, or better still the government owned art and craft store Laksala. It is loaded with brass and silver-ware, carved wood demon masks and tortoise shells, bamboo and reed items, jewelery, batiks and a thousand other exquisite items. It's a shoppers' paradise for authentic local handicrafts, and all at very reasonable prices. For gems and jewelery, there are a hundred different shops whose salesmen will boisterously implore you to "have a look- no need buy." But for authentic gems valued correctly the State Gem Corporation showroom is a sure bet. And don't miss the duty free shopping complex at the Ramada Renaissance Hotel for a choice of international brands of liquor, cigarettes, perfumes, toiletries, receivers, videos, garments, gems, ceramics et all.

When hunger pangs call, and you're era ving something simple and tasty, try some spiced rice and curry or string hoppers at a wayside 'bath kade' or rice boutique. There are Chinese and local restaurants and selfservice cafeterias as well. Sumptuous spreads are served day and night at the five-star hotels, of course; anything from fresh seafood cocktail to lobster or grilled fillet ..Frain The Fort, it's a few minutes' stroll to the Pettah, the island's premier bazaar center. Watch for two landmarks: the sentinel Khan Clock Tower on the left and the central Railway Station on the right; Pettah is sandwiched in between, by Main Street where the textile czars reign, and bustling Olcott Mawatha whose by-lanes form the central trading area. Pettah market, the Covent Garden of Colombo, satisfies the supply and demand for every conceivable consumer essential. It is here that prices for everything on your dining table are toted up for the day.

Fish whole-saling is brisk business in the early hours of any morning. Live crab,

frozen crustecia and varieties of wet fish from every coastal corner of Sri Lanka are brought to this rather primitive, yet turbulent ‘trading floor.’ Vendors ply their various wares and fiercely compete in deafening voices; odors mingle and clash in a jarring confusion of bazaar high financing. And once outside, virtually every street in the Pettah’s labrynth of byways specializes in some unique item.

At Sea Street, the bullion boulevard of Sri Lanka, hundreds of shops em ploy gold and silver-smiths who will turn out the jewelery of your fancy, traditional or modern. At Fourth Cross Street, sundry strains of rice, grams and pulses are heaped in standing gunnies, unloaded by coolies whose sweaty rip-cord muscles gleam in the sweltering heat. From the corridors of muggy Prince Street emanate the pungent odors of dried and salted fish and through it agile young roustabouts and aged laborers bend under monsterous bags, transporting aromatic teas from highland gar-dens, vegetables, pineapples, bananas and even brittle poultry eggs packed in bales of straw.

Third Cross Street is where Sri Lankans bee line to purchase hardware: aluminium cooking utensils, metal buckets, steel tanks and various types of handmade kitchen and garden knives. Then across to damp Fifth Cross Street, where every conceivable herb and spice is available, often over-flowing on to the pavement in semi-dried bundles, emitting ambrosial aromas to the city air. The open-air vegetable and fruit market is a garden of crisp fresh greens, reds and purples; an orchard of mangoes, bananas, pineapples, avocados, papayas and many local fruits.

Back on Olcott Mawatha you’ll come to the ‘world market’ next to the central railway station. This day and night bazaar is a cradle of textiles and garments, cheap cotton sarees and luxurious Indian silks, leathr good . oy . handicraft . h r i a place you ’11 find a hundred knick-knacks and for each you must bargain furiously.

Off the same road a little further north, you 11 spy a sample of Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa’s Million Houses Program; a complex of modern flats that were created under Sri Lanka’s International Year of Shelter and Housing, 1987.

Wherever you wander in Pettah and The Fort, you’ll see evidence of the country’s four main religions living in peaceful tolerance, their worship places standing side-by-side: a Buddhist temple and Bo tree in the middle of the central bus and coach stand, and the hundred year old St. Philip Neris Catholic church almost next door; the intricately carved facade of the Hindu ‘kovli’ and the red and white brick-domed Mosque within a whisper apart.

Time for refreshment? You may find the youngest tea-maker in the world-an 8 year kid with his mobile pavement percolator who'll brew you a ·sizzling cuppa; or a pineapple seller with sweetly salted slices; the frisky jacketed damsel expertly slices off the top husk of a golden skinned king coconut, exposing the delicious nectar and sumptuous milk kenel inside.

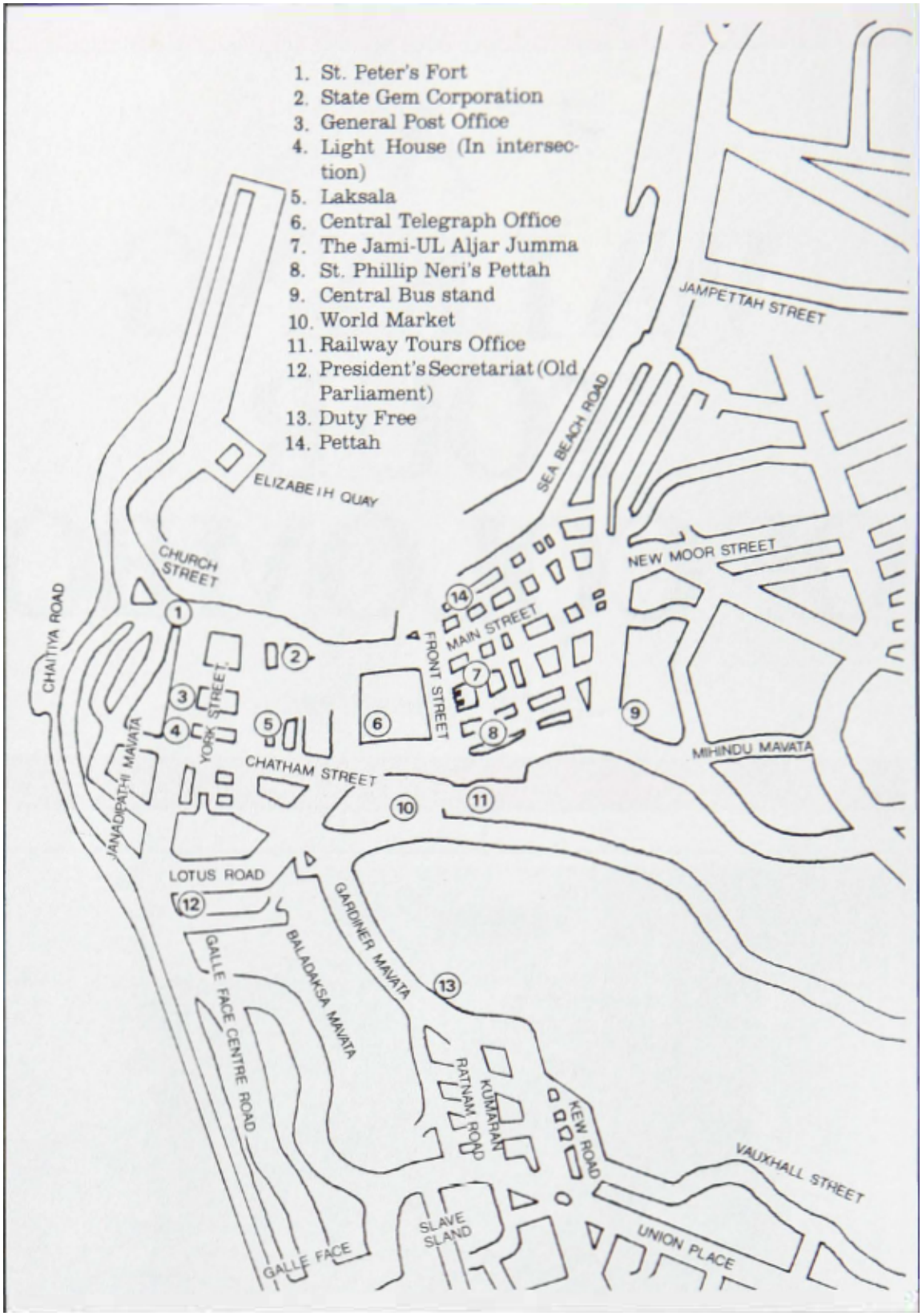
As dusk pulls its dark quilt of night around the city and the stars peep out, wrap up the day with a stroll along the water front, where harbor lights twinkle with the promise of warm romance. As one admirer said, "one of the pleasantest parts of starting any journey is the regret of leaving it." Think of Colombo as the apertif before the banquet; the rest of Sri Lanka's delights lie invitingly ahead of you: the golden beaches the ruined cities and 1 ush tea gardens in the cool highlands. They are readily accessible from Colombo-the roads passable, the distances short and the train is spewing out a nostalgic hiss-waiting to carry you off.



The red and white banded Pettah Mosque. on Second Cross Street.
Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



The heart of Pettah -a treasure trove of trinkets. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.


1. St. Peter's Fort
2. State Gem Corporation
3. General Post Office
4. Light House (In intersection)
5. Laksala
6. Central Telegraph Office
7. The Jami-UL Aljar Jumma
8. St. Phillip Neri's Pettah
9. Central Bus stand
10. World Market
11. Railway Tours Office
12. President's Secretariat (Old Parliament)
13. Duty Free
14. Pettah
JAMPETTAH STREET
SEA BEACH ROAD
ELIZABETH QUAY
CHURCH STREET
NEW MOOR STREET
MAIN STREET
FRONT STREET
CHAITIYA ROAD
YORK STREET
JANADIPATHI MAVATA
CHATHAM STREET
MIHINDU MAVATA
LOTUS ROAD
GARDINER MAVATA
BALADAKSA MAVATA
GALLE FACE CENTRE ROAD
KUMARAN RATNAM ROAD
KEW ROAD
VAUXHALL STHEET
SLAVE ISLAND
UNION PLACE
GALLE FACE



A bullock cart with wizened owner rest in a quiet alley amidst the downtown rush. Photo courtesy: Athula Mahawalage.



You’ll see colorful dress of all sorts on The Fort’s busy streets. Photo courtesy: Athula Mahawalage.



Hindu statuary enliven the streetscapes of Colombo. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.