

# An Afternoon in Jaffna Town



One of the bastions at the Jaffna Fort where the surrounding waters could be seen clearly. Stepping carefully one can walk to the edge from the narrow paths in the four corners

***We had just finished lunch and had the rest of the day ahead of us. As the sun spread its afternoon rays we scrambled out of the vehicle to stretch our legs and explore the curious town of Jaffna.***

**Words** Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

The Jaffna New Market was a conspicuous, bright yellow building that grabbed our attention instantly. As we made our way towards it, we were constantly drawn to the various shops and stalls that lined the street. Red chillies, colourful grains, salted dry fish, crispy *vadais* of all varieties and peanuts, all combined to create flavoursome aromas that tingled our taste buds. Bright colours seemed to be the theme of the day where in one shop there was a collection of pastas of various shades and in another, cordials of green, purple and orange. Along Stanley Road we walked peering into any shop/store that caught our attention.

Grapes! We crossed the road and hurried towards the piles of juicy grapes that were on sale. Since it was late afternoon we bought a bagful and walked along the footpath into a maze of little shops. While one section was vegetables all the others sold sweets, savoury snacks, *thal hakuru*, cordials and cooking utensils. Not wanting to be tempted by the flavoursome snacks around we returned to Stanley Road and headed towards Power House Road.

The town was a hive of activity—ladies on their scooters and bicycles, others walking quickly to their destinations, shoppers entering and exiting shops laden with goods. Buses and other vehicles were tooting their horns and we seemed to be in everyone's way! The New Market can be accessed from this side as well. The shops on Power House Road comprised more of clothes, materials and jewellery as well as electrical goods. It was the same with the New Market. We walked along its length checking out the various items on sale. The New Market itself is a unique building—bright yellow with columns of intricate detail as well as a design on the surface of the building. We entered the side road that connects Stanley Road with Power House Road, which gave us a glimpse inside the New Market. There were courtyards on either side and shops upstairs too.

### **The town was a hive of activity... scooters and bicycles, Shoppers walking, entering and exiting shops laden with goods**

We were back on the road and now on Hospital Street. The Jaffna Teaching Hospital was the central feature of this street. Ongoing construction was also evident. There were bookshops and curio shops as well. And just next to the Hospital was an older building, which was part of the Hospital and could have been consulting rooms or used for medicine storage. Inquisitive, we peeped through the windows and allowed our imaginations determine the function of the building. We entered the compound to find out that electricity to the town was provided from here, though with the opening of the Chunnakam Power Station that function would be transferred to that facility.

It was a breathtaking site, the massive Fort set against the Northern skyline. We walked along the path that led us towards the entrance of the Fort. The two sides were lined with limestone walls. Jaffna Fort is said to be the second largest fort in Sri Lanka. This pentagonal shaped fort has an outer rampart with five bastions. We walked across the star shaped moat to arrive at the entrance of the Jaffna

Fort. There are two entrances; Land Gate and Water Gate, it is through the Land Gate that we entered.

## **Our next stop, was the magnificent Jaffna Fort...**

The Jaffna Fort was originally built by the Portuguese in 1619, though their intrusion into Jaffna began in 1544 and finally established in 1591, where the king of Jaffna was killed during an attack and a Portuguese protégé replaced his place. However, it was during the Dutch period that Jaffna Fort was really expanded to become one with the best military architecture in the East. In 1795, the Dutch surrendered Jaffna to the British.

Within the Fort, it is said that there was the Dutch Queens House, which was later used as the British Governor-General's House. Then, a church, police quarters and court complex among other buildings. The five bastions were named, Zeeland, Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht and Friesland after provinces of the Netherlands.

Today, the Jaffna Fort is under renovation and is breathtaking to say the least. Walking through the entrance tunnel, certain areas on the walls had been marked to identify the original plaster. There was a sudden coolness as we entered the tunnel. Stone slabs that made up the floor was cooling to our feet. There was a side room that detailed the various places to see in Jaffna. Though the Fort had changed hands from the Dutch to the British, the characteristic features of Dutch architecture are very much evident such as in the doors and windows with arches.

The large grounds within the Fort is said to have been the parade grounds, and though there are no buildings to be seen except for the ruins of the church, which is now being rebuilt, the entire structure of the Fort seems to be getting a new life. The walls which have been originally built with coral and limestone are now being further strengthened and renovated. Walking along the ramparts is pure bliss. At each bastion is a large area where one could sit and just observe the happenings either in Jaffna Town itself or from the other side, the great blue ocean and the roads that lead to the various surrounding islands.

We could sit and absorb the tranquil beauty of the Fort forever. On one end there were remnants of the bell tower and on the other the hangman's tower. Right below seemed to be the prisoners quarters with barred windows and an opening on the ceiling, where from top we could see below.

## There are many statues around Jaffna Town. Here are a few that we saw:

The view was awe inspiring... walking paths were being laid along the shore line and we could see the happenings below. I was in Jaffna, a place that I never thought I would be able to visit. It is a place that had been under the rule of Portuguese, Dutch and British. Today it is a place for everyone...

