



Fishing boats return with their catch in the morning

A rhythmic chorus rang in our ears as the fishing boats were hauled ashore. The tranquil beach of Arugambay was in a rumble amidst the rays of dawn.

Words Keshini de Silva

Photographs Menaka Aravinda



Ready, set, go! Heading out for the day's sale

Lazily wandering along the sandy beach of Arugambay, we were enjoying the spectacular sunrise on the east coast. The wind thrust its salty fragrance up our nostrils as we braced ourselves against its embracing breezes.

Suddenly our ears picked up the sound of chatter, it was hectic and yet sometimes rhythmic. As we headed closer to the bay we saw the fishing village of Arugambay was bustling with activity. The beach strip where the fishermen dwell was crowded with crafts of all shades, shapes and sizes as well as boatsheds in a neat row. Just beyond was a maze of people and piles of gleaming fish. It seemed, the boats that had left an hour or two after midnight were returning.

After circling the bay in search of the right wave, boats glided ashore with a quick push from the waves, each heavy with nets filled with fish. It was interesting to watch the boats wash ashore with their motors pattering and fishermen crowding around with yells to gather manpower to assist with hauling in the net. As the boats are pushed and pulled ashore, the breathless fishermen together sing a chorus of words, almost unintelligible to anyone who do not know their lingo. To our ears it sounded like "Ho-dee... Ho-dee...", each word uttered with a puff of air and a huge heave together.

Arugambay's Busy Fishing Hamlet

In a sequential manner, the fishermen stood in a row; some held the nets, while others removed fish from the net and sorted them by quality and species. Others would carefully coil the cleaned net. The sorters worked with speed, chattering with each other, usually with a quick witted joke. At times they would toss a fish to their trusted canine companions: the dogs who help guard the day's catch from the thieving crows. It seemed we had arrived during the season for small fish. *Saalayaa* (sardines) and *anguluwo* (*Mystus gulio*) among other smaller varieties of fish flapped in these nets. However, in one boat we spied a prized lobster.

After circling the bay in search of the right wave, boats glided ashore with a quick push from the waves each heavy with nets filled with fish.

In pairs fishermen rushed past us with cane baskets or crates overflowing with fish, both sorted and sold. They had grins on their faces, their muscles taut by the weight of the sea's bounty; the heavier the better.



An artistic moment, sorting the day's catch

A commotion from the beach caught our attention. A makeshift auction for the fish was in progress, with the *mudalalis* or shop sellers bargaining for fish or bidding against each other. The batch of fish in demand stood amidst them. The verbal battle continued for minutes, and remained intense. However, the fishermen on the beach were undisturbed; these were the usual proceedings for the day and they were used to it.

Arugambay's Busy Fishing Hamlet

As the sun rose higher some of the nets were being rolled onto the boats. The next flotilla of fishing boats, the ones that had gone off to sea at dawn, were expected between 10-11am. Hence, those who had finished their share of work headed to the village to relax and possibly enjoy a cuppa and snack until it was time to work again. Yet, the action on the beach was far from over.



The Arugambay fishing village is a hive of activity as fishermen, buyers and sellers gather

As we made our way to Arugambay fishing village, fishermen hurried past us to the road by the beach. Here the fish were loaded onto lorries, motorcycles and even bicycles for delivery from Arugambay to Akkaraipattu, Siyambalanduwa and even as far as Monaragala. The cycles that handled deliveries in the villages close to Arugambay had a box strapped to the back. A weighting scale hung off the box, and with a ring of the bell or honk of a horn, they would ride off, making their way through the coconut thatched houses and walls of the village.

Before we decided to walk on to Main Street, I looked back at the hectic frenzy on the beach. It was a beautiful scene of comradery, trade and leisurely surfers seeking the best waves. All of them were drawn here by one thing; the deep blue seas off Arugambay's shore.

Arugambay's Busy Fishing Hamlet

