# Batticaloa by the Waters

Posted on



Fishermen casting nets by the Bar Road, where the lagoon meets the sea.

**Welcome to the City of the Singing Fish, declares the archway that waves us into Batticaloa town. The town itself traverses the lagoon and seems to be its governing feature at each turn. Situated at the east coast, the brackish lagoon that penetrates deep inland isn't the only offering of scenic waters – the vast expanse of beach adds not only to the charm of Batticaloa but further contributes to the prevailing theme that symbolises Batticaloa.**
**Fishing, it appears is part and parcel of the day-to-day lives of the people.**

***Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Mahesh Prasantha***

It's not the large hauls of fish, and the busy fish markets awakening in the wee hours of the morning that impress upon me but the odd fisherman that I encounter across the length and breadth of the town. The lone fishermen of the lagoon are in abundance and I wonder how Batticaloa became the City of the Singing Fish. The town's clock tower and prominent buildings are adorned with the symbols of fish and what appear to be mermaids!




The Batticaloa lagoon is one of the largest in the Island partially enclosed from the coastal waters. It spills through the District from Eravur at the north to Kalmunai towards the south offering a large expanse of navigable lagoon. Regardless of the time of day, be it under the hot sultry sun or late into the night, the fishermen would take out their signature fishing gear for the catch of the day.With the occasional sights of hook and bait at the White Bridge (Dawala Palama) or at the banks of the lagoon, casting out nets is the more popular choice for the solitary lagoon fishermen. The mornings beckon the fishing boats as they take posts far removed from one another and the fishermen labour over their nets. The fling of the net cast out like a web before it lightly lands on the waters is a sight that never tires.

Statues of mermaids at the town centre



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The lagoon is a resource for any fishing opportunist – even without a boat – as I soon discovered,  undeterred locals chest deep in water, nets or bait at the ready. Their heads remained emerged above the water like dark buoys and at closer range I spot bags of fish hanging from their mouths. Some would find coveted spots of shallow waters to creep up surreptitiously on the lagoon bed. Others stood stock still at their post shaded by makeshift umbrellas forming silhouettes in the afternoon light. While I was getting accustomed to the determined vigilance of these fishermen another more curious method came to light. Bent in two, perusing the waters with his watchful eyes alone, this lagoon fisherman only seemed to be armed with a coconut leaflet. With the leaflet he would form a loop in the lagoon bed and from the trapped soil he would retrieve small shrimp, which he would quickly dismiss into the bag at his waist.




The Kallady Bridge at dusk

As I indulged in the soothing sights of Batticaloa, from the town's walkway bordering the lagoon, from the Kallady Bridge situated southward from the township, at Kallady Beach just beyond, from the soft sand sea bed of the Passekudah Beach at the District's northern coast and even where the lagoon meets the sea,wherever I looked there they were. Sending a boat out to sea, or sun-baked lads cycling inland with their latest catch – this was everyday life at Batticaloa.

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As for the famed singing fish of Batticaloa, they remained elusive or maybe it wasn't the season for their songs. It is said that they are best heard from the Kallady Bridge on a full moon night. In the fading light I stood at the embankment that offered a captivating view of the Kallady Bridge, losing concept of time. In the darkness of the night only illuminated by the blinking reflections in the water of moving traffic, soft melodies echoed from a distance. They had returned. Still as the calm lagoon waters they lay in wait, little pocket radios playing their favourite songs to bring relief to their tedium. The soft tunes gently intruded the eerie quiet of the night air and I thought to myself… the sounds of the singing fish…



At Kallady: wrapping up for the day


In chest deep water



Heading back from fishing at Passekudah Beach


Parking spot for fishing boats by the lagoon


Lads outs at sea, baskets and nets
weighed down with fish