

Beach Bonanza on the Southern Coast

Posted on

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A thousand miles of sunny, palmy, balmy, golden beach. This syrupy blurb of the travel brochure gives the impression that it is the thousand miles which make the Sri Lankan beach different from any other beach on a tropical island. The reality is very much different. Here is no mere duplication of the usual tropical beach, although the standard ingredients – warm sun, wide stretches of golden sand, and the shade of swaying palms are present in abundance. The Sri Lankan beaches are a special delight in a country of myriad attractions. They are a blend of nature and culture. The best known beach resorts of the South West and Southern Coastline, extending from Kalutara to the ancient port city of Galle and Koggala beyond, have been the home of seaside fishing communities for many centuries, and in addition to providing the usual beach fare, also give ample opportunity for exploiting the life-styles and cultural patterns of people with long traditions. Some of these resorts are the centres of special crafts and skills, and most of them open the way to a hinterland rich with the culture of Buddhism, paddy and coconut.

Kalutara where the Kalu Ganga – one of Sri Lanka's principal rivers flow into the sea, has been better known among travellers as the home of the Mangosteen. The luscious fruit there is in plenty in season, July/August, but the attractions of Kalutara as a beach resort are perennial. Hotels such as the Tangerine Beach, Meriviere and Hibiscus Beach open to a wide extent of unspoilt, palm fringed beach with all the opportunity for the best of beach delights from sunning, and swimming to snorkelling and surfing. Giving added attraction are the fishermen of Kalutara, who have been fishing off this coast for many generations, whose sail-blown craft are not only picture opportunities, but exciting craft in which to sail out into sea, too.

Nearby the Kalu Ganga is an invitation to exploration. Boating services, often arranged by the hotels, take you upstream into the serene quiet of woodland, dotted with small village communities on either side of the bank. Often the river

meanders through a heavy overhang of tropical trees and creepers, a real bird-watcher's paradise, and at other places flows by miles of shady rubber plantations. The occasional deer coming out to water and the chatter of monkeys overhead can add to a day's excitement.

Beruwela is reached 56 km South of Colombo along the Galle Road. Also called 'Barberyn' from its connections with Moorish traders through many centuries, Beruwela was renowned for its beautiful bay and picturesque mosque. It is believed to have been among the first Moorish settlements in the island, its name being a corruption of "Ba-ruwala" which in Sinhala means where the sail was lowered.

As the name indicates, Beruwela has always afforded safe anchorage for sailing craft. Today, the place lives up to its traditions by extending similar hospitality to the many tourists who come there by road and rail. In addition to having a thriving fishery harbour, Beruwela is today a well-known beach resort with many good hotels providing a variety of fine fare for a memorable beach holiday.

The Beruwela Bay where once cinnamon was loaded onto Portuguese and Dutch merchantmen is now a beach holiday makers dream-come-true, with plenty of scope and opportunity for a lasting intimacy with sun, sea and sand.

Nature's own abundance in beach fare is added to by the hotels here which provide facilities for a variety of water sports in safe seas, with plenty of fun and relaxation opportunities in the hotels. Several have swimming pools, and provide tennis, badminton, mini-golf, health clubs and well organised tours of the interior.

One hotel in Beruwela has gone traditional in health and fitness. It provides the services of expert ayurvedic physicians to advise clients on herbal cures and offers the rare experience of being immersed up to your neck for good health, in a trough of herbal medicinal oil.

Beruwela is also the home of many Moorish gem merchants, and their shops in the hotel arcades offer a fascinating variety of the best gems of Sri Lanka. Hotels that make a mark at Beruwela include Beach Hotel Bayroo, Confifi Beach, Hotel Swanee, the excellent Neptune Hotel which is next to the modest but invitingly rustic Palm Garden, the beach bungalows of Pearl Beach Hotel, Riverina Hotel and Wornel's Beach Hotel.

Less than 10 km South of Beruwela is Sri Lanka's best-known beach resort, Bentota.

It was the first National Holiday Resort established as the island made its entry into modern tourism nearly two decades ago, and remains the best beach location yet from the extent of beach fare offered in combination with good hotel service.

A halfway point between Colombo and Galle, Bentota, where the Bentota Ganga (river) enters the sea, has traditionally been a stop-over point for travellers to the South. Time was when the visitor to Bentota was served by a seaside rest house. The demands of modern tourism led to the rest house being converted into what is today the Bentota Beach Hotel.

Although initially publicised as a holiday resort catering to winter visitors from the West, Bentota is now a year-round beach resort with plenty of good quality beach fare to rank it among the best of such resorts in South Asia. Good hotels open out to the wide inviting beach, and provide a complete package of beach attractions. Swimming in warm blue waters snorkelling or scuba diving, wind-sailing and surfing on the crest of challenging waves, water skiing, diving, racing on water scooters and even para-sailing are some of the many attractions available at Bentota.

It is also the place for the quiet hours in the bright tropical sun, or in the many coves and little bays in the shade of green coconut palms. Exciting trips by outrigger catamaran or mechanised fishing craft for trolling in the sea, or for the thrill of being out sharing the day's life of fishermen, or helping haul in a fishing net on the beach, add to the fun of a good sunny day.

The Bentota River provides good opportunity for exploration. Dark-green mangroves which line the estuary, lead up to the fringe of the Sinharaja Forest, Sri Lanka's largest reserve of primeval tropical forest.

The Bentota Resort has its own shopping arcade, amply complemented by a whole street of shops which provide good shopping opportunities for those looking for the typical Sri Lankan souvenir, gifts to remember or handcrafted utility items. Whether it is a batik dress, shirt or wall-hanging, brass ornament, straw hat, reed bag or basket, hand-crafted wooden elephant, snake-charmer's flute, round hand-drum or rabana, the shops at Bentota always have a large and exciting range to choose from. Similarly the choice of gems and jewellery in the many gem shops here. It is also a one day's trip from Bentota to Ratnapura, the Gem City.

Fresh seafood is the speciality of the hotels and many other restaurants at Bentota as in other beach resorts in Sri Lanka. Jumbo prawns, Grilled Seer, fresh lobster or a

seafood platter can always be part of a meal to remember at an unbelievably affordable price.

The National Holiday Resort at Bentota comprises three hotels, the Bentota Beach Hotel, Serendib Hotel and Lihiniya Surf Hotel. Other hotels of class at Bentota include Hotel Ceysands, Emerald Bay Hotel, Club Paradise, and the small but inviting Warahena Walauwa, where one is entertained in the style of a typical Sri Lankan manor of old.

At nearby Ahungalla, is the Triton Hotel, the only 5-star hotel on the beach at Sri Lanka, which with its beautiful pool stretching up to the beach and full complement of five-star facilities, makes it a place of rare distinction.

Moving further South, Ambalangoda, situated 83km from Colombo, is the home of the traditional mask-makers of Sri Lanka. The craftsmen here make the colorful demon masks used in rituals of exorcism and folk dance, which are among the best known of Sri Lankan souvenirs today. The masks are made in keeping with ancient guidelines which have been passed through generations from father to son.

Ambalangoda is also a fine beach location, as it has been from before the expansion of tourism.

After the fascination of watching a mask-maker carve a mythical image on soft wood one reaches Hikkaduwa (99km) made famous for its coral sanctuary. While the underwater realm of coral and tropical fish is a lasting attraction here, so are the many other beach attractions, which are found in plenty. A large number of beach hotels hug the coast, with rooms opening out to the fresh sea-breeze, and lobbies just a few yards away from the soft, sandy beach. A ride in a glass-bottomed boat will give you more than a glimpse of the beauty that lies beneath the waterline, while for the more adventurous there is all the scope for diving among the coral and tropical fish.

Here the Coral Gardens Hotel which offers a perfect rendezvous, also features an international casino complete with Blackjack, Baccarat and Roulette, in addition to the many other pleasures of sun, sea, sand and surf.

While good sea-food is the boast of the many restaurants here, souvenir shopping could also be interesting with the variety of goods available. Worthy of exploration from Hikkaduwa is the Buddhist temple at Totagamawa, a renowned centre of

learning in the past, and made famous by its association with a famous scholar-monk-poet Totagamuwe Rahula. A short run from Hikkaduwa, at Baddegama is the first Anglican Church built in Sri Lanka in 1818, with pillars of ironwood.



Under the shade of woven palm leaves.



There is a wide space for strollers on the southern beaches.

Galle, where traders from the West first came into contact with Sri Lanka is 116 km South of Colombo. First occupied by the Portuguse and later the Dutch, Galle has more traces of Dutch occupation than any other town in the island- It has a well-preserved Dutch Fort, extended from the original Portuguese fortification, which remains the hub of administration to this day. It is the home of lace makers, lapidarists, and makers of ebony elephants. It is also an excellent beach resort, and its harbour is today the welcome berth to many yachts that come to Sri Lanka. The beach at Unawatuna, a few km South of Galle town, ranks among the best of Sri lankan beaches and has been a popular seaside holiday centre with a wide, well-sheltered bay, plenty of sunshine and an inviting fringe of coconut palms. Surfing and windsailing, diving among the colourful shoals of tropical fish teeming in these waters and water-skiing are among the many attractions to be readily indulged in at Unawatuna.

While the New Orientaal Hotel offers accommodation in the midst of old-world charm within the Galle Fort, the Unawatuna Beach Resort provides good facilities on the beach at Unawatuna.

A few km away is the Koggala Beach resort area, situated near an abandoned airstrip from World War II days. The airstrip is now used occasionally to ferry guests by helicopter and light aircraft to the Hotel Horizon or Koggala Beach Hotel which offers good relaxation beside one of the best and most secluded beaches in the south. Nearby is the mangrove swamp and lake around Madol Duwa, one of the most popular places for bird-watching in this part of the country.

There is a variety of accommodation available in the beach resorts of the South West and South Coast regions. In addition to the larger hotels there are many

smaller guest houses, and homes which take in paying guests. Most of these are approved by the Ceylon Tourist Board and provide good service at reasonable prices.



Beach holiday plus. A beach-ride on the back of an elephant. Suresh de Silva.



In the quiet of a sunset by the beach.