Beach delights on the South-West

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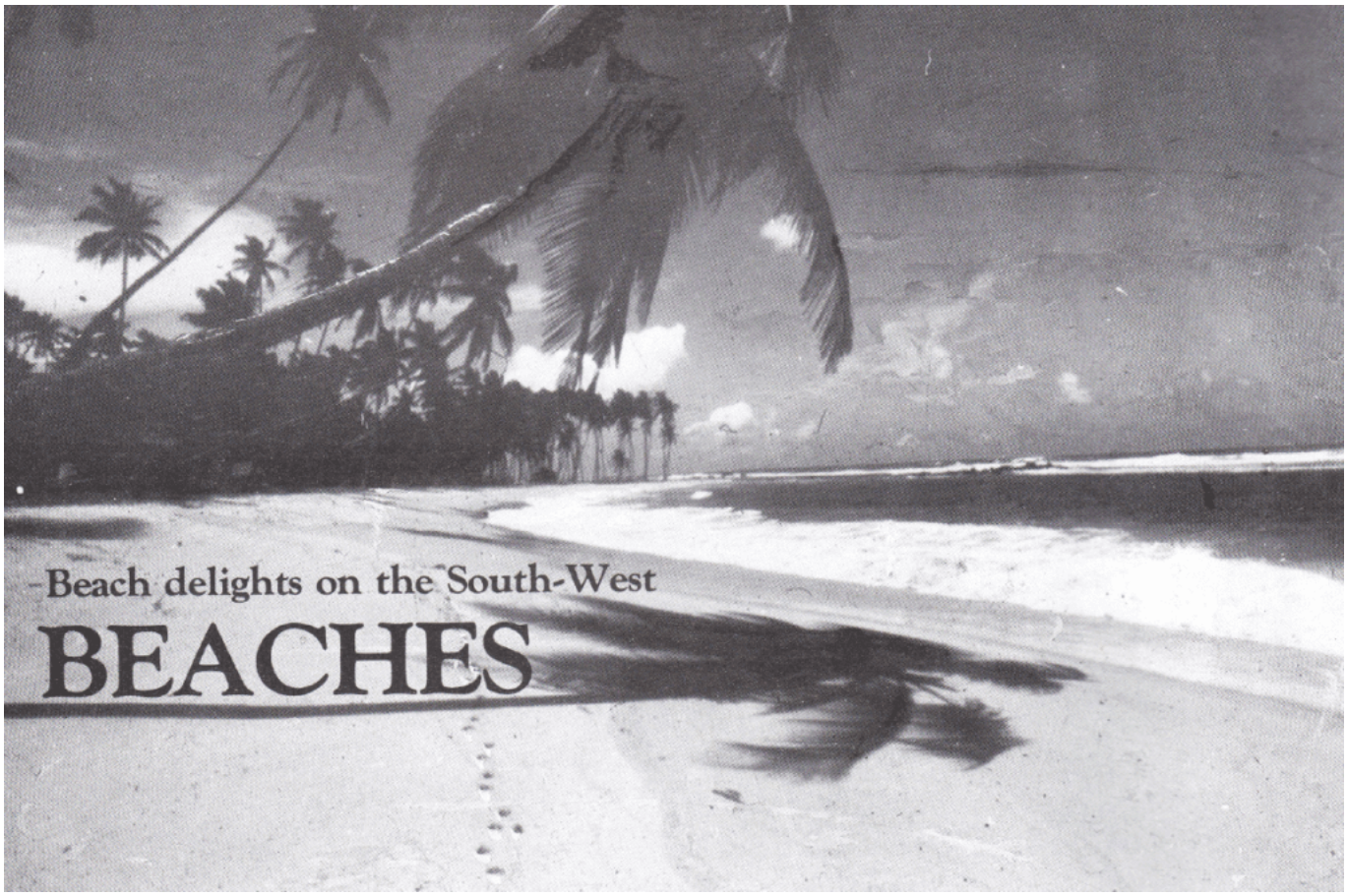

Portuguese adventurer Laurenco de Almeida was en route to the Maldive Islands in 1505, when he lost his way. A faulty compass and strong winds drove him to the trading port of Galle on the south coast of Sri Lanka. Marvelling at the cargoes of elephants and spices being loaded into ships, Almeida decided to travel up the south-western coast to the port of Colombo. Here, he sought an audience with the Sri Lankan king who signed a trading treaty with him. Although he did not know it, Almeida’s accidental incursion triggered off three and a half centuries of colonial rule in Sri Lanka.

The Portuguese, the Dutch and the British successively took over the island. For all of them, however, it was the south-west of the country that yielded most of the

riches they sought – precious stones, cinnamon, spices and tea. Also known as the Wet Zone, this corner of Sri Lanka is heavily populated because of its fertile lands. From May to October each year, the rain-bearing winds of the south-west monsoons blow in from the Indian Ocean flooding the rice-fields and watering the tea and rubber plantations. Along the coast, millions of coconut palms thrive on the moist, sandy soil providing food and jobs for the people of the fishing villages that Almeida passed on his coastal journey.

In modern times, visitors to Sri lanka travel the same route on land with no thoughts of trading conquests. In fact, they seem quite content to let the country conquer them with its overwhelming beauty. A well-known traveller once exclaimed, “there is no prettier sea-shore in the world, nor a more beautiful surf’. Another described the Colombo-Galle road as forming “an almost continuous avenue through overarching coconut palms with frequent glimpses of the Indian Ocean on one side and of fresh-water ponds and small lakes on the other”. Before the days of the motor car, travellers went by coach along a narrow, muddy path which ran through the coastal villages. Halfway houses along the route provided a change of horses, meals and a resting place for the traveller.

Today, modern roads and a railway have replaced the coach route while comfortable hotels, offering everything from air-conditioned rooms and excellent restaurants to landscaped gardens and swimming pools, can be found right along the south-western coast. Tourist flying into Katunayake International Airport, north of Colombo, do not have far to look for a beach resort. The fishing town of Negombo lies perched at the mouth of a lagoon a few miles from the airport. When the Dutch succeeded the Portuguese, they built a complex system of inland waterways. One of the bAst preserved canals still in use runs from Negombo to Colombo. To get to the beach hotels, turn off the main road into one of the small, curving lanes that run between private homes and fenced-in gardens. You will soon find yourself at the canal with the prospect of a pleasant drive along its stretches where children splash around amongst the fishing boats moored there.

The port city of Colombo has, as its western boundary, the sea shore. South of the capital lies the beach suburb of Mount Lavinia, lent distinction by a gracious hotel, a former British governor’s residence, overlooking the curving shoreline. After leaving Colombo and its environs, the next major town on our south-bound route is Kalutara, where river meets the sea. The broad crowded streets of the town centre gradually give way to a view of the ocean.

The road skirts the shoreline and soon the breakers seem to roll right up to the outer edge. Occasionally, stretches of coconut trees, sheltering small houses and kilns for burning coral, act as a buffer between road and sea but you never really lose sight of the foam-crested blue for very long.

It has been remarked that the Colombo-Galle road was like an extended front garden for the villagers who lived alongside it. Doors and verandahs open onto the road just a few feet away. Children play dangerously close to passing cars and buses, and men chat with unconcerned ease on slow-moving bicycles. An occasional bullock-drawn cart ambles down the road carrying wooden barrels of fresh toddy, the juice of coconut flowers. you can often spot a toddy tapper balancing across precarious rope bridges between tree-tops – a sharp curved knife dangling from his waist. The women sell home-grown fruits and vegetables in makeshift stalls outside their homes. As you near the busy resort areas, the green and yellow bananas and bright orange king coconut make way for shops selling batik clothes and other handicrafts considered appealing to the tourist.

At the halfway point between Colombo and Galle is the predominantly Muslim town of Beruwela. It was· a well-known port in the past as seen from its name which means “where the sail is lowered”. Ships often sheltered here on trips up and down the coast. From Beruwela onwards, a steady line of white foam a few hundred yards from the shore signals the beginning of the reefs which have made the south-west coast so popular. The reef moves inward as you approach Bentota town where river and sea meet in turbulent waters.

Bentota is the site of a 100-acre beach front tourist complex of hotels, shopping arcades, restaurants and a railway station. The 2-mile spot of sand across the mouth of the Bentota river is a favourite· spot for fishing and also contains several private holiday bungalows. One of the largest hotels in Bentota is built on the site of an old Dutch fort overlooking both the river and the sea.

Heading closer towards Galle, you must pass the town of Ambalangoda famous for its puppets and masks. While both are used in folk dramas, the masks are also used in special ceremonies to drive away demons and to cure a variety of ills. The tradition of puppet and mask-making continues in families whose skills have been passed down from one generation to the next. Common folk dances featuring some of these masks are regularly performed for tourists at hotels and in theatres. However. exorcism and other rituals are only conducted for the purpose of healing patients.

Until very recent times the people of southern Sri Lanka were looked upon ·with some fear, by those who considered them as traditional experts in the arts of witchcraft and black magic. Other attractions in Ambalangoda include the Resth-ouse in the centre of town overlooking a rocky pool, a favourite spot for swimming and Sunday lunches.

A few kilometres south of Ambalangoda, roadside batik and curio shops sprout up in every corner as the town of Hikkaduwa comes into view. here, the reef is transformed from darkened, moss-covered rock into brilliant colours and formations. Beautiful fish swim between the living coral only a few feet away from shore delighting dedicated snorkellers. For the less versatile, recourse is available in the form of glass-bottomed boats, to be hired for a fee.

Hikkaduwa is like no other town on the south-west coast. Its atmosphere is best described as bohemian with scores of young, sparsely dressed tourists looking very much at home as they wander around the town and its beaches. There is a wide range of guest-houses, beach shacks, small hotels and several large resort hotels catering to the more exclusive tourist. Many a Hikkaduwa beach-comber live in cheap lodgings containing the most basic amenities. He or she spends most of the time sunbathing on the soft white sands or soaking in the warm.placid waters protected by the reef. The more adventurous dare to ride the breakers on surf boards beyond the coral reef. At night, the lamplit cafes, open to the sea air under thatched roofs, come to life. You can order dishes from curried lobster to fish and chips as the thunder of the surf mingles with strains of Bob Marley and the Wailers.

The sedateness of Galle, steeped in memories of Portuguese and Dutch rule, is a complete contrast with Hikkaduwa. The town is dominated by an extremely well-preserved 90-acre Dutch fort surrounded by ramparts over a mile long. Overlooking the sea on three sides, the fort is very much a part of present-day Galle. It houses government offices, mercantile establishments and private homes within its walls. The grassy ramparts, commanding a view of the town and the sea, are wonderful for an evening stroll. Among the many impressive buildings within the fort is the first Protestant church to be built in the country. The remains of Dutch soldiers, merchants and administrators still lie within the church premises. About two kilometres away from the fort, also perched on a headland looking out to sea, is another elegant British residence converted into a hotel, the Closenberg. Further outside town is the Unawatuna beach where wealthy Dutchmen from Galle built their country residences. Unawatuna has now been developed as a resort for those who wish to savour a quiet bay and beaches even further from it all.

Galle is the last major port on the south-west coast. The .railway line from Colombo terminates at Matara town, a few kilometres away from Dondra Head, the southernmost tip of the island. As the road continues along the shore, the towns and villages start to thin out. The lushness of the Wet Zone gives way to open country dotted with small trees and scrub jungle. The waves wash up on a whole new world that looks out over the Indian Ocean unbroken to the South Pole .



Sri Lanka’s South Coast has many opportunities for sea-sports. A skier at Bentota.



A typical scene on the West and South coasts of Sri Lanka. when the fishing boats return.