Big Big Boats

Posted on



A vessel with a new look and its old identity hidden

We were approaching Hikkaduwa, when the roadsides suddenly transformed with looming vessels in a display of vivid shades. We had stumbled upon a boatyard where men were busily building very large boats.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

We stood below one of the vessels dwarfed by its sheer size. The owner of the boatyard Susantha, was amidst a bustle of activity but was ever ready to offer us a quick tour of the place.

About 15 workmen were either high about the decks, or leaned against the wide arching bodies, or were involved in some other intricate activity of mixing paints or shaping industrial nails.

These boats Susantha explained, are '*bahu dina yatra*' or large fishing boats that take to the seas for as long as a month. They rose to a height of eight feet in height and 41 feet in length. What was most curious was how the paint job was done for the surfaces. We stood gaping at two halves of large-as-life moulds for each side of the boat.

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The workers were busily painting along its inner surface. A wax is first applied to the mould before the bright pigments such as yellows, blues and reds. This is so that the pigments don't stick to the mould. Another workman was mixing the pigment with a catalyst that allows the paint to dry quickly. All in all, it seemed a laborious task to paint such large surfaces before drying up.

When both concave surfaces of the mould are painted to completion, the boat sits in between the two mould halves. The halves are then joined and locked together, enclosing the boat, so that the paint 'prints' on to the surface of the boat. Looking at the completed paint jobs of the boats around it was hard to imagine how it could have transpired without creating a single smudge or mishap.

The basic body of the vessels are brought down to the boatyard from a factory in Homagama. Made of fibre glass it is only a shell of the final product. At the boatyard, painting, fixing the deck, the roof, engine and timber fortifications are all carried out till the boats are ready to be handed over at the pier in Hikkaduwa. We were caught amidst each step in progress. Some were anointing resin on fibreglass mats to build a mount for the engine. Others high up inside the boat were applying resin and fibreglass to the timber edges of the boat – in what appeared to be the final touches. Another was applying white paint on a slab, which turned out to be the deck. All of this would finally come together to complete the large vessel in all its shiny new grandeur. We were, however, curious to see the high reaches of the boat. A ladder stood secured to the side of the vessel. We braved the slightly dizzying heights to reach the deck. Here the work continued with resins being mixed and the roof of the cabin being secured. The interior of the cabin was a shockingly electric blue and could accommodate up to six people.

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On board the vessel, we gingerly side stepped the nitty gritty of work. And we

wondered how such large vessels could be transported from one place to the next. We soon discovered a simple iron contraption that served as a mount on which the boat is hoisted. It is then drawn to a tractor and wheeled away. The vessel we disembarked was nearing completion and would soon be delivered to its new owner, usually fish merchants.

Susantha revealed that he receives up to 30 orders that keeps him and his crew very busy indeed as sometimes it takes up to four months to complete a boat. All hands on deck and finally these large, and vibrant boats would soon find their way to the deep blue, where they dot the horizon like tiny gems.

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