

Boatful of Negombo

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Like sardines – trawlers stationed along the lagoon waters

After a rough day, casting nets and sailing in the vast seas, what do the fishermen of Negombo do? They sleep... heavily. And while they catch their zzzs, the coastline and lagoon inlets become a display or parking spot of sorts abound with vessels.

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The narrow coastal roads of Negombo late in the afternoon swarm with shoppers, and tourists, having avoided the sweltering midday heat. In contrast though, the fishing community that busied themselves in the early morn having set sail for their daily bread had long returned ashore, sold their freshest and appeared to have simply vanished from sight.

Along Sea Street, past Lewis Place where an abundance of eat outs, guest rooms, rest houses and shops overwhelmed the roadside, we reached the open coast. The roadside view framed a blissfully clear sky that soared over a browned beach strip. Along its arching shoreline catamaran after catamaran were stationed lightly with sails tucked away. With its traditionally quaint structure these multihull boats bore an almost ornate presence along the coast. The typical catamarans seen here consist of the main hull supported by its smaller outrigger. The main hull or canoe itself appears impossibly narrow however it is this geometry that allows a fisherman to stay the course in high winds and rough seas.

In the distance a lone catamaran had set sail and we wondered if we could witness its graceful return. A fisherman who had cast his fishing line in the shallow waters, urged us to observe its sail. If the fishermen intended to return the sail which would be loosened, would begin to flutter. Although the usual schedule for these fishermen begins at 9:00am to return after two hours at sea, this seafarer however appeared a determined one and stayed out at sea in the afternoon sun.

We headed towards Lellama, the main fish market of Negombo where fishermen haul in their catch for auctioning. In the mornings it is usually a frenzy of activity with the intensity of aroma filling the air. Enroute fell the Negombo lagoon and here the larger and bulkier trawlers stood bobbing gently. They encompassed a colourful splash across the lagoon water as each were personalised along with names that read from 'Sun Marine', 'Monika', 'River Jordan' to a dedication to a daughter 'Nadee duwa'. 'Sindathri', was splashed across one, a name of a goddess that the locals of Lellama offer their prayers to in particular fishermen in hopes of a safe voyage and bountiful catch. Aboard were an assortment of fishing equipment, fishing nets, piled up buoys, and even clothes lines with clothes hung to dry as while stationary they convert to boathouses and shelter for a quiet afternoon nap for these weary fishermen.

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For some however the remains of the day was spent in the shade, mending long yards of fishing net while others showered their boats to wash off grime. Travelling over the bridge offered a longitudinal view of the lagoon that seemed all too crowded. Motorboats too aligned the shores in overwhelming numbers and now and then one or two returned from sea after a late catch, causing ripples across the

stationary boats.

At Lellama fishmarket, the fresh catch of the afternoon had arrived and people after work made a quick stop to purchase fresh fish to take home. With bags full of fresh tuna, seer fish or other favourites they returned to their homes while sellers sat plunged in small pockets of buyers eager to make the best of the bargains.

As a scarlet tinge crept across the sky we sped away from Negombo, leaving behind its salt wind, small alleyways, and an awakening nightlife while the catamarans stood still on an otherwise empty shore, turning to silent silhouettes in the distance.

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