The City in the South, Where East met West

Posted on



The imposing ramparts of the Galle Fort meet the glittering waters of the Indian Ocean

Holding its heritage dear, yet open to change, bustling one moment, but calm the next; there’s nowhere quite like Galle.

Words and Photographs Shyam Ranasinghe

Officially the capital of the Southern Province, Galle is home to a population of around 100,000. Easily reached via the A2 Highway, the Southern Expressway or the coastal rail line, Galle is indeed a place worth a stop. A quick zap through the

streets and you'll discover a city rich in history, potential and natural beauty.

It's said that Galle was the first landing point of the Portuguese, our first colonial masters, in the 16th century. A fleet of ships giving chase to Arabian merchants in a maritime trade war was caught in a storm and drifted to Galle. Having regained strength, Lourenço de Almeida, the leader of the expedition, set sail again to meet the king whose court was in Kotte, in present day Colombo. This voyage occupies an important place in Sri Lankan history thanks to the location where they docked – apparently believing it was directly facing Galle, they dubbed it 'Galle Face' and the name has held to this day. Today Galle Face is one of Colombo's most popular recreational sites.

Realising the value of Galle, the Portuguese wasted no time in constructing a fort to dominate the seas and protect their shipping routes. When the Dutch took over rule of the Island in the 17th century they enlarged it greatly with three bastions for artillery. The British thought that the Dutch construction was good enough as it was and the fort was left unscathed. True to the legacy of Dutch construction, the fort still stands strong, nearly five centuries on, and is one of the city's most prominent attractions.

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The unique neighbourhood within the walls of the fort is a picture postcard of the Dutch era. Its 17th-century architecture has been preserved, winning the place UNESCO world heritage status. A key attraction is the Dutch Reformed Church, home to some unusual features including a special platform away from the altar for delivering sermons, an original pipe organ dating back to the 1760s and a floor paved with numerous gravestones of the Dutch era. Even the street names and taverns of the fort convey the flavour of bygone days – visiting today feels like travelling back in time.

Across the road from the fort lies the Galle Esplanade. A number of informal football and cricket fields attest to the city's passion for sport, but the pièce de résistance is obviously the Galle International Stadium, considered to be one of the most picturesque cricketing venues in the world. It's also thought to be a very lucky

venue for the Sri Lankan cricket team. Whenever an international cricketing series is held in Sri Lanka, Galle is sure to be at the heart of the action.

> No visit to Galle would be complete without a hop down to Unawatuna, one of Sri Lanka’s most famous beaches

The calm, salubrious ambiance of the fort and stadium is nowhere to be found once you’ve crossed the main street where the city’s central transport hub is located. Galle Railway Station links Sri Lanka’s south to its capital, while the Central Bus Station provides connections across the busy city. The statue of Lord Buddha gazing down from the other side of the road offers the same reassuring presence it did when the tsunami devastated the city in 2004. This statue was among the very few objects that suffered almost no damage that tragic day. No visit to Galle would be complete without a hop down to Unawatuna, one of Sri Lanka’s most famous beaches. The colourful Bona Vista coral reef and friendly surf serve as magnets for both locals and overseas visitors, while the large number of tourism-related establishments cater to the growing demand.

Dominating Unawatuna’s skyline Rumassala, a high ground with an exclusive history. Legends date it to the time of The Ramayana. With its own unique biodiversity, Rumassala is a botanist’s paradise.

Galle is truly a treasure trove. It vibes with modernity yet maintains its age-old flavour. The simplicity of life there mingles very well with its rich history, new technology and modern society. That is what makes Galle rise above the rest.

