

Discovering Badulla

Posted on



The old Dutch market

Trees grow along the pavements of Badulla, wedged between buildings both old and new, bringing the lushness of the country to this urban environment. Be it night or day, the chatter of life and the liveliness of the town catches you off guard.

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St Mark's church, unveiled in 1857

On the outskirts of Badulla a man stood scratching his palms. They say that itchy palms means that fortune is near and they were right when it comes to Badulla – the wealth of the town left me awe-struck.

Badulla is the capital of the Uva Province, situated approximately 230 km from Colombo. While there are many ways to reach it, we came via Ratnapura, Balangoda, Haputale and Bandarawela. The drive was breathtakingly picturesque, suitable preparation for the wonderful sights to come. We arrived at nightfall, when the Badulla town was in its element.

Built in 1932, the Clock Tower stands tall in the centre of Badulla. The busy town didn't seem to be irked by the drizzle that evening: the businessmen just hurried to sell their goods so they could get home out of the rain. Chatting to their neighbouring shopkeepers and waving at passersby, they all seemed to know each other in this town.

From the market outwards the streets are one big maze; they were all interconnected and interlaced, and looked the same. The busy bus stop is in the middle of the market, making it a convenient spot to load and unload passengers. Music from a radio echoed through the air, a soundtrack to the beautiful hustle and bustle of a busy town.

The market area thumps with energy from morning to night, deals and prices of goods yelled to the skies. Inside a hairdressing salon with antique swing doors a man cleaned his equipment, quietly creating an almost cinematic scene. In Badulla time seemed to move slowly, though the chatter of daily life grows stronger and louder each minute.

The two-floor market compound is full of stacks of broken TVs, other mechanical goods, tailoring shops and outlets offering many services. Though away from the capital city of Sri Lanka, the people of Badulla maintain a certain lifestyle. Yet, everything about Badulla seems to be from a different era.

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People from all walks of life live here. Religious institutions calling the faithful for a minute of devotion during their busy schedules stand side-by-side with commercial buildings. The Muthiyangana Raja Maha Viharaya, is one of the 16 sacred places visited by Gautama Buddha. The smell of fresh flowers and incense gives a clue as to the compound's holiness, so people walk in barefoot. Flower vendors reach out with bouquets of flowers to passerby. And the beautiful blooms make it difficult to resist.

Built in memory of an assistant government agent in the province Major Thomas William Rogers, St Mark's Church is a graceful yellow edifice. With a graveyard for souls to rest in peace, this church is a haven to many of the area's Catholics. Rogers

is believed to have died after being struck by lightning - it's been suggested that Mother Nature was so offended by his activities as an elephant hunter that his tombstone was struck with lightning too - on seven separate occasions.

Another place of importance is the Badulla Kataragama Devalaya. Though its origins are a blur, its historical importance still attracts travellers and devotees from around the country. Boasting marvelous craftsmanship, this brown and white temple is said to have been reconstructed by King Rajasinha II after being destroyed by Portuguese. A *sinhasanaya*, or throne where the king would sit to watch the processions go by, can still be found. It faces the entrance to the temple, where these days you'll find merchants of all kinds selling their goods and helpfully handing out information.

Another interesting example of historical architecture in the town takes the form of an isolated wooden market. The building dating from the period of Dutch occupation is now an archeological site of Badulla. '*Pani dum kola*' or chewing tobacco, betel and *puwak* (areca nut) vendors are found in every corner of the market, catering to the men and women of the hills, who chew to distract themselves from the cold.

The combination is said to be helpful in the treatment of asthma, sore throats and headaches too. But the tea pluckers who make their way to the fields early each morning have permanently red-stained smiles thanks to the betel quid.

Rich in culture, history and architectural diversity, Badulla has much to offer. Sri Lanka's most beautiful sights, waterfalls and heritage sites lie within Badulla's boundaries, just waiting to be explored.

Unpretentious yet elegant, the bustling town is the perfect tourist destination all year round.

