



There must have been a thousand elephants, every one of them for sale. Some were draped in cloth studded with jewels, others shone as though polished. They were of many hues, some painted bright red, others the pure dark sheen of ebony. They were of different sizes, some no bigger than your thumbnail, ideal for putting in your handbag as a lucky charm.

This extraordinary perahera of elephants is to be seen in one of the showrooms of Lakmedura. They are all carved, of course, with a skill that makes them look real as they

seem to march along the shelves around the room. It was these elephants that most appealed to me since they are a distinctive souvenir somehow typical of Sri Lanka; the ideal, unusual gift to take home.

In Lakmedura, though, there is no shortage of ideas on what to buy as presents. Possibly every kind of souvenir that represents Sri Lanka is on sale. Visitors can browse freely, taking in the section selling tea, the doll department, the leather goods showroom and, of course, there are batiks in abundance and even a gem showroom.

The point about Lakmedura is that you can do all your souvenir shopping in one place and not be pestered by sales personnel as so often happens when you just want to look while you decide what to buy. There are many handicraft shops in Sri Lanka, but none with the same approach as Lakmedura.

Ten years ago, the store was opened by a group of hoteliers and travel trade people as a service for visitors, geared to tourist needs and shopping habits. Goods are priced reasonably without the mark up of fly-by-night dealers. Although Lakmedura is a private company with local shareholders, the souvenirs on sale cost no more than those sold at government-controlled sales outlets. "This is possible because we pay our suppliers on the spot, even those who supply gems and precious stones," the manager, Lucky Pieris, explained.

Lakmedura's convenience for shoppers in a hurry, perhaps those on the way to the airport, is obvious. But you should allow time, while in Colombo, to choose carefully from their range of souvenirs. Postcards, stickers and books on Sri Lanka are also available and, for home cooking, there are special "rice and curry" packs. Lakmedura's customers are not all tourists. Sri Lankans and resident expatriates patronize the shop for gifts to send abroad. Payment can be in rupees or foreign exchange (the day's rate is displayed behind the cashier) or by international credit cards and the local Golden Key card.

Lakmedura has been so successful over the years when it operated from its premises off the Galle Road (at Rotunda Gardens, Colombo 3) that it is scheduled to move into purpose-built premises this month (August). The new showroom is by the roundabout, opposite the Red Cross building and near the public library, at 113, Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 7. Opening hours are 0930 to 1830, Mondays to Saturdays, and 0930 to 1330 Sundays and holidays.

Shopping for gifts and souvenirs in the new premises at Lakmedura promises a pleasant as well as a rewarding experience. You won't leave empty-handed, even if all you buy is one of those cute little elephants.

