

Galle Face: Colombo's Green Promenade

Posted on

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Part of the vast expanse of the Green with the Galle Face Hotel on the left.
Photo – Fred R. Malvenna

A sight so common but very dear and still admired is Colombo's Galle Face Green. In the early morning rush it gladdens the heart and lightens the spirit of passers-by with its blue skies and gentle breezes. In the sweltering midday sun the green and large expanse of sea beyond is cool and inviting. The young lovers in Colombo often accept the invitation and they are as common a sight on the Green under their colourful parasols. as are the vendors and regular walkers. At twilight the restaurants on wheels come out and park themselves for the night to serve all of those who still end up at Galle Face Green for a night out.

Galle Face Green as we know it has come a long way. The most interesting period in its past began with the British who came in 1796. J.L.K. Van Dort, writing in the Times of Ceylon about Galle Face in the 1840s, said "Those were the days when the

cadjan thatched oval bungalow which stood on the site of the present club and assembly rooms on Galle Face did duty for the grand stand ... " At this time the old ramparts of the Dutch Fort were still in existence and the clock tower and lighthouse that now abuts from Marine Drive (Chaitya Road), were non-existent. Colombo's beacon was then displayed to ships at sea from the 4th storey of the present signalling station behind Queen's House, renamed in 1972 as the President's House. In the 1840s Van Dort was describing the venue of the horse races held in the city. Racers of the period were chiefly Arab horses, with the favourites being the riders and not the horses.

The most popular rider of the time is described as "Old Barton" who was Captain Barton of the Guards and later Post Master General of Ceylon. Describing him, a writer of that period said "With the collar of his old fashioned jacket hiding the nape of his neck, cheeks and ears, and his equally old fashioned riding breeches reaching up to his armpits, he was first favourite always and cheered everywhere." The colours he sported were red and white. Another popular figure was Captain Price of the Commissariat who sported sky blue and white. On cup day the Governor graced the occasion and the band on duty was the Ceylon Rifles in their uniforms of green and gold. Everyone enjoyed a day at the races. Van Dort records that the vendors poured in from early noon, servants on leave spent their day there, school boys who didn't make it to school, "Family Bandies", "palanquin carriages with shutters down and curtains drawn conveying Mohamedan ladies" and of course the European community. A marked difference in the mixed audience was that the Sri Lankans, or natives, as they were then called, watched the most exciting races come to a finish in deafening silence and the European community mainly in the vicinity of the race bungalow saw the finish with deafening cheers. A writer of that period describing the race course said "A hundred years ago the Colombo race course was also in the Galle Face and the centre road ran through it. A nasty course it was. Hard in dry weather and sometimes very heavy going in wet, with a couple of hundred yards of steep up and down at one end, and the dangerous turn near the garrison cemetery, which made it always a relief to get safely round, at the other."



A family on an evening's outing at Galle Face promenade. Photo - Pushpakumara Matugama

British Governor of Ceylon Sir Henry Ward had the promenade which skirts the sea front built; it was completed in 1859. As the inscription has it Ward "recommended it to his successors in the interest of the ladies and children of Colombo." His successors obviously took his advice as it still remains the most popular promenade among the women and children of Colombo and its suburbs. In the evening the early hours of the morning, the leading personalities of the day - men and women - take the morning air before they start work. Enterprising journalists have often resorted to the same practice following the maxim that "the early bird catches the worm."

Writing around 1880 Haeckal describes the scene at Galle Face quite differently. He said "the gilded youth of Colombo exhibit themselves on horseback-some of them on miserable hacks indeed, the ladies, with bouquets in their hands recline languidly in their carriages, in the lightest and most elegant toilettes. But no sooner is the sun gone down that all hasten home; partly in order to escape the fever-laden evening air, partly to go through an elaborate process of 'dressing for dinner' which is usually at half past seven, and of course in the indispensable black tail-coat and white neck tie as in old England."

Just prior to this period Galle Face came under a major threat from the government when the original rail way track from Colombo Fort to Moratuwa, in the south, was marked to transverse the Galle Face Green dividing this stretch of open ground which included what was then known as the Galle Face Walk. The only concession made to the public outcry this caused was that trains would not run during the time of the evening drive, that being between 5.00 p.m. and 7 .00 p.m. This was not accepted by the general public and a public protest was made.

The Legislative Council on March 9th 1875 resolved that "The interests of the public would be seriously injured by any curtailment of the Galle Face Green for any purpose whatever. The space should be strictly preserved as the only recreation ground where the sea breeze can be enjoyed by visitors and the inhabitants of Colombo." Shortly thereafter, a petition of protest was submitted to the Governor and on May 26th 1875, the Governor announced the Government's decision to re-route the track, so that the line would not pass along the Green. The railway to Moratuwa was opened to traffic on March 1st 1877 and the Green still remains intact. Galle Face Green has played a prominent role in the recent political history of Sri Lanka. In the period immediately before independence from British rule, which came in 1948, and in the first two decades after independence, it was the main venue for political rallies, especially of the leftwing political parties.

This association of the Green with politics is almost natural. For the imposing brown sandstone building near the northern end of the Green beside Beira Lake, was the State Council under British rule, and later the Parliament of independent Ceylon. It is now the Presidential Secretariat. At the other end is the Galle Face Hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Asia, and itself a landmark in the city. Beyond Galle Face Centre Road, which skirts the Green on the east, is the Hotel Taj Samudra. Exactly one mile from President's House (the old King's House) the Taj Samudra is built on a site which housed a Dutch seminary, and later housed the Colombo Club. The quaint elliptical building with colonial architecture and a whole panel of windows facing the Green, which has been preserved in the Taj Samudhra premises, was once the Grand Stand when the Green was the Race Course in the city.

Today the Galle Face Green is a place for all seasons and all peoples. It is where the physically overburdened attempt to walk their excess calories away; where kids come to buy and fly kites, that dance in the sea breeze; where little cricketers practice their strokes, and future soccer stars practice their kicks. In the festive season, and especially as the New Year dawns on December 31, it is last stop for most revellers who come there to cool off after a night's dancing, and others who

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come to greet the New Year with a burst of song and exuberance in the sea breeze. The Green remains the best known landmark in the city; a favourite place not only for the ladies and children to whom it was dedicated, but for all citizens and the many visitors who seek its soothing balm at one time or another.



Young lovers like this are a familiar sight at Galle Face. Photo – Fred R. Malvenna



Galle Face Walk is dedicated to the Ladies and Children of Colombo-1856.
Photo - Pushpakumara Matugama