In Search of Stamps in Sri Lanka

Posted on

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Wondering what you can take back home-either as a gift for family and friends or for yourself-that is reminiscent of your stay in Sri Lanka, that won't weigh you down or take up space in your luggage and that costs you relatively little? You could always buy from the ubiquitous displays of postcards that confront you everywhere or purchase a package of ready-made slides, but those are for the unimaginative. Instead, for an interesting and unique memento of Sri Lanka, why not try a collection of the island's wide range of attractive stamps. Colourful, beautiful and representative of the important places, people, events, monuments and flora and fauna of Sri Lanka, stamps are the ideal souvenir. The first postage stamp was issued in Sri Lanka in 1857 bearing the portrait of Britain's Queen Victoria. Since that time a total of 478 stamps have been printed which are broadly divided into two categories : pre- and post-Independence issues. Prior to Independence in 1948, the great majority of stamps portrayed the reigning monarchs of the United Kingdom, while the stamps of the post-Independence period have mainly been characterized by pictorials depicting a variety of themes and commemorating important occasions or celebrations. Festivals and flowers, butterflies and birds, hill country scenes and handicrafts as well as special events such as anniversaries of

private and public organizations, national projects and inaugural functions of significance have all found their way onto the stamps of Sri Lanka – along with various national heroes, statuary, temples and scenes of natural beauty.

The best place to begin your collection is the Philatelic Bureau of the Department of Posts located on the 4th Floor of Ceylinco House on Janadhipathi Mawatha in the heart of Colombo. The Bureau is open. from 9am to 3pm Monday through Friday and there you can choose from an array of all the mint stamps currently in stock, which at present consists of more than 100 individual stamps. New and recent issues can be purchased in sheets of 50 in blocks of sizes to your specifications or individually to give you the widest variety at the lowest cost. Denominations of postage stamps range from 10 cents up to 100 rupees are sold at their face value no matter what their vintage. Also available are first day cover issues which come franked on decorative commemorative envelopes and contain a pamphlet giving the background and detail of each stamp.

An especially good buy and are the souvenir sets which comprise blocks or strips of special stamp series printed within attractive presentation sheets – an excellent bargain since they cost you only the value of the stamps themselves. Additionally on sale at the Bureau are postage stamps of the other member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SMRC)-namely, India, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan and Bangladesh – as well as those issued by the United Nations Postal Administration.

A further useful service offered by the Philatelic Bureau is their standing order system. With a minimum deposit of US $ 30 for foreign clients, you can place a standing order to have new stamps sent to you at regular intervals or whenever a new issue comes out – it’s up to you. Then with every order you receive, a current statement of account will also be sent to you. An extremely effective way to stay in touch with Sri Lank long after you have left the island.

A free list of what’s currently available along with a standing order form can be obtained at the counter near the entrance of the Bureau . And if you are interested in having a serious and enlightening discussion about the stamps of Sri Lanka ask to speak to the Director, Mr Kulatilake who will be pleased to provide you with whatever information you seek on the subject.

Another source of stamps for the eclectic collector is the shopping area in Fort, just a short walk through the crowded streets and lanes, you will very likely be

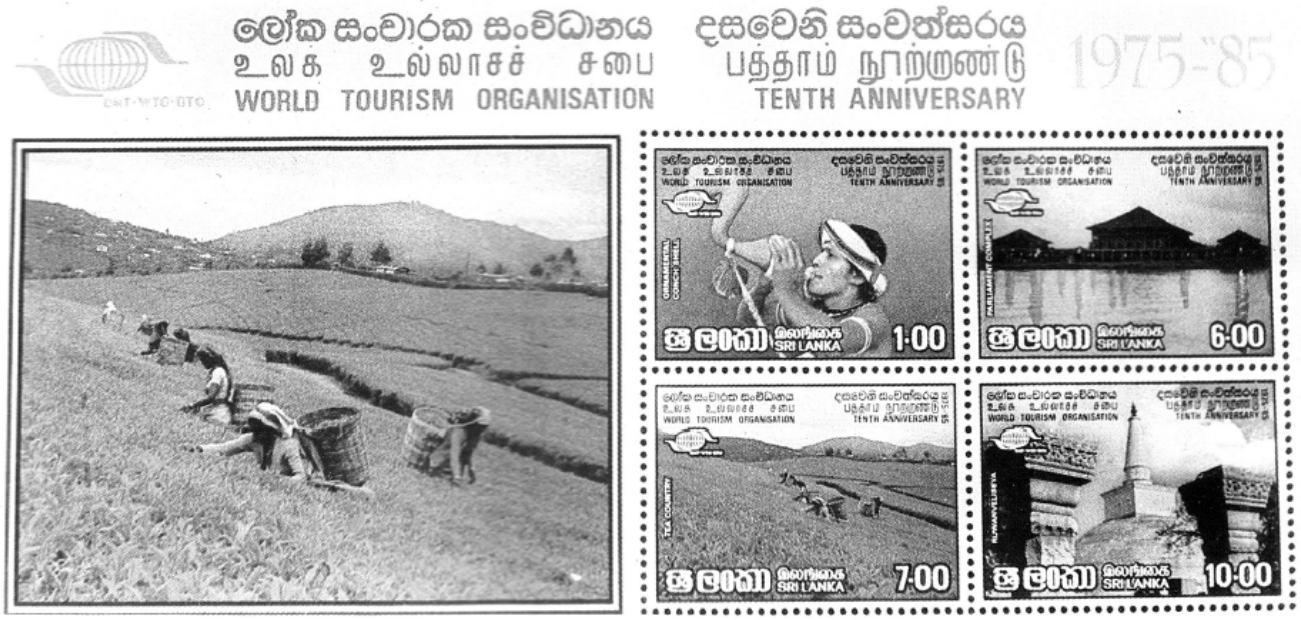
approached by vendors peddling both used and mint condition stamps, usually in packaged assortments or mounted sets.

Also located in the Fort area are most of the shops dealing in new and old stamps. Tucked unobtrusively away on Chatham Street is the only store in Sri Lanka catering exclusively to the philatelist: the Oriental Stamp Service, the oldest stamp store in the country, which is owned and run by Mr L Amararatn who has been in the stamp selling business for over 45 years. Mr Amararatna's store offers an extensive selection of stamps – not only in Sri Lanka, but from countries all over the world – first day covers, albums, and books on stamps. Although the shop is quite small, just big enough to accommodate you, the proprietor and his large offering of stamps and related items, it is a treasure trove to delight the philatelist. Here you can obtain many of the stamps from the Pre-Independence era which are not available at the Philatelic Bureau, and Mr Amaratna's prices are remarkably reasonable. The Oriental Stamp Service is usually open only from 10.30 am to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Several of the gem and jewellery dealers in this part of town sell stamps as a sideline and a little further down Chatham Street you will come across such a shop: Noor Hameems Mr Mubarak Ali, the gentleman in charge of the stamp section is himself an avid and knowledgeable collector and will be more than happy to give you background information on Sri Lankan stamps and tell you about the present day situation of philately in the country.

In both these shops, packaged assortments of used stamps are sold, ranging in price from about 70 rupees for a packet of 35 to 500 rupees for the king size packet of approximately 250 different stamps. Prices for the first day covers vary and are determined by their rarity and popularity; and if they are no longer available from the Philatelic Bureau, will cost you considerably more than if you had obtained them when first issued. Most prices in shops are more or less fixed but bargaining is not out of order, especially if you intend to make a fairly sizeable purchase.

Delving deeper into the back streets and alleys of Fort, you will discover many more small shops offering a smattering of the unusual as well as the common in the way of stamps. With little trouble you should be able to come away with an inexpensive but significant souvenir of your sojourn in Sri Lanka.



A commemorative souvenir stamp sheet available at the Philatelic Bureau