Kandy: Seeking The Unseen

Posted on



The Queen’s Hotel Kandy

We stood small against the sublime centre, the heart of the last capital of the Sri Lankan monarchy. The morning sunbeams showered the Temple of the Tooth with a golden radiance against its vast and verdant backdrop. But this time, it was not in search of this grand memorial of Buddhist religiosity that we crossed the threshold of the beautiful hill country capital Kandy…

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The familiar hustle and bustle began to enliven the streets with activity. Throngs of pious devotees in white hastened past us, flowers and incense in hand; a refreshingly soft breeze that swept over the emerald waters of the Kandy Lake wafted in, heavy with the sweet scent of lotus and jasmine. And as the humdrum of

another day unfolded itself at the Sri Dalada Maligawa, we turned around and changed our course to follow a variant trail, one enriched with the impressions of a long ago era.

Awestruck And Inspired By The Old World Charm And British Architecture Of These Time-Worn Specimens Of A Long Ago Era, We Continued Our Walk, This Time Towards The Hub Of Kandy Town

Our first stop was the Church of St Paul's, a stone's throw away from the Temple of the Tooth. Towering high into the bright blue heavens, its decaying yellow stones bore testimony to a century old past. Established in the early 1850s, primarily intended for the British Garrison stationed in Kandy as well as the Government Agents and other high officials, it has once also been called the Garrison Church. A hundred years hence it still stands strong, brimming with eager worshippers at regular Sunday service.

On one side of the church runs the ancient Deva Veediya, the narrow street across from which stood a line of foregone buildings now housing the offices of the attorneys-at-law. It is believed that this unique structure, remnant of the forgotten 19th Century had once been the stables where the colonialists housed their horses. Clustered together with the St Paul's church on the other side were two other regal white washed edifices called the Billimoria Building and the Banbury Hall constructed in the late 1800s by the Buddhist Theosophical Society to house Dharmaraja College. It is the first Buddhist school in Kandy to be launched by the society, led by Sir Henry Steele Olcott in 1887 to fulfill a need for Buddhist education in the British Colonial period. Today they have become part of the Natha Devalaya, (the school having later shifted elsewhere) sublimely blending in with the tranquil atmosphere of the temple grounds.

We soon found ourselves back in the wake of the Dalada Maligawa facing another large colonial building housing the Museum of World Buddhism. Built in 1887, this stately structure had once been the High Court of Kandy. Awestruck and inspired by the old-world charm and British architecture of these time-worn specimens of a long ago era, we continued our walk, this time towards the hub of Kandy town.

The giant sprawling Mara trees along the bank of the Lake generously shaded the visitors enjoying a walk around the expansive body of water; among them, we were now facing the Queen's Hotel dispersing its beautiful white structure on to the Dalada Veediya – the main street of the Kandy Town – on one side, and the

Trincomalee street on the other, forming a peculiar V shape. The Queen's Hotel has originally been the Governor's Mansion with a small cluster of buildings constructed to house British troops. This had later become the main complex of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment.

We Mingled With The Crowd Criss-Crossing Our Way Through The Numerous By-Ways And Alleys Ending Up Midpoint Of Trincomalee Street

We joined the ceaseless sea of people; eager shoppers and colourfully clad foreigners with bulky cameras on the Dalada Veediya. The highlight of this thriving artery was a concatenation of colonial architecture in the form of the Bank of Ceylon building, the Cargills building, the White House and the Bake House among a host of others scattered on either side of this exceptionally grandiose Dalada Veediya.

In the midst of the archaic stood the Kandy City Centre, an embodiment of all that is contemporary, representing the 21st Century. Its modern interior greeted us with a burst of colour and variety, adorning the laid-back town with a modish hype.

We mingled with the crowd criss-crossing our way through the numerous by-ways and alleys ending up midpoint of Trincomalee Street. We were now in pursuit of another unique destination: the Trinity College Chapel. Turning right we were suddenly embraced by the inviting shade of a lush green grove. On our right was the Kandy Town Hall, the mansion named Dunuwille Walawwe which had been taken up by the Municipal Council in 1870. We walked past the building deep into the trees which proved to be a challenging climb to reach the chapel gates. More climbing was due, on a narrow winding path that cut across a tunnelling row of trees. A sudden clearing and we gasped at the massive structure that loomed before us.

An Epitome Of Sinhala Architecture Its Designs Resembled Those In Polonnaruwa…

Having so far witnessed countless compositions of colonial heritage, there we were staring in wonderment at another construction made during the British era yet completely different in style and architecture. Part of the Trinity College, Kandy founded in 1872 by Anglican Missionaries, the Trinity Chapel or the "Holy Trinity Church" was an open stone structure with its roof supported by 50 stone pillars, all embellished by exquisite Kandyan craftsmanship. An epitome of Sinhala Architecture, its designs resembled those in Polonnaruwa, an ancient capital of Sri Lanka. The Trinity College Chapel had also been the first open chapel in the world.

We slowly walked into its dark interior through the narrow isle enveloped by the surrounding serenity and moved by the grandeur of this unique open church. We admired the rare work of art which is the Trinity Chapel before turning back and retracing our steps back down into the bustling town.

Having lived well over two decades in the beautiful Hill Country capital of Kandy I wondered how I had taken so much for granted. On that particular bright morning walking the streets I had trodden for years, I opened my eyes for the very first time to a uniquely striking heritage along those thriving streets that blissfully balanced a distant past and a flamboyant present peacefully sitting side by side awaiting the call of a fast approaching future.

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