Legging it around Colombo

Posted on

Nalin Wijesekera takes a stroll through the city



The romanesque former parliament house is opposite Le Galadari Meridien Hotel

How can a city just eight km long and around five km wide hold so many surprises, so many impossible contrasts?

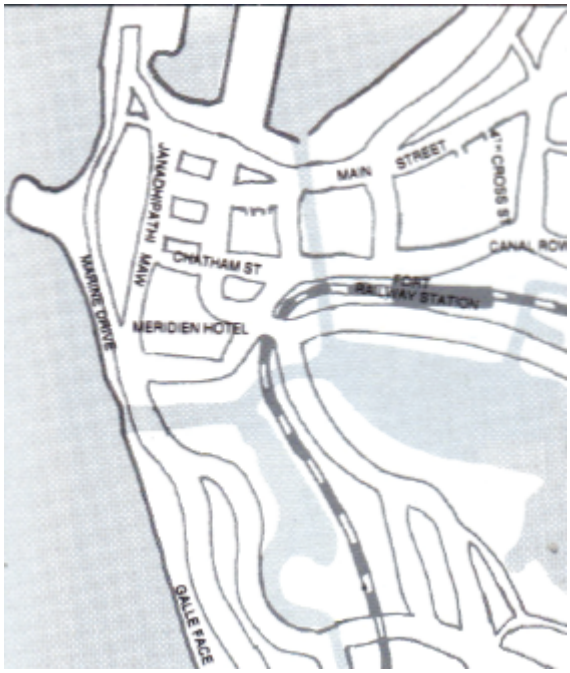
In this tropical fantasy of Colombo are planted commercial high rises alongside quaint, Dutch and Portuguese shophouses, while on its western flank is the busiest harbour in South Asia. Colombo is a city on the threshold of modernity. where the

age-old abacus is never far from hand.
To see the sights and penetrate off the beaten track, you need to view Colombo's Fort area and Pettah on foot legging it around the city and savouring its sundry, spectacles, its brilliant views and even its various odours.

A walk from the central Galadari Meridien Hotel will lead to many interesting places: a museum with Dutch memorabilia is near by, an old Scottish kirk stands close to Galle Face, and the romanesque former Parliament House is opposite the hotel. Fort, in the southern quarter of Colombo, and Pettah m the northern quarter, are vibrant centres where the scene changes from one street to another. As you walk down Janadhipathi Mawatha (street) towards the Chatham Street clock tower (a lighthouse marooned in the city) blind beggars play instruments and snake charmers will try to attract you. If you are lucky you may even see the ferocious spectacle of a glass eater in full cry. Around Bristol Street and Canal Row in the heart of Fort, blackmarket touts and gem traders do brisk business near betting shops and seedy bars. A crowd gathers around a herbal doctor rattling away merrily with herbs and concoctions for various ailments, from a common cold to cancer. A woman clairvoyant nearby makes a prophecy and at pavement stalls other soothsayers are immersed in their business.

For serenity and sanity, walk along the Galle Face Green and its seaside promenade. Health freaks exercise in earnest there from the crack of dawn, and kite-flying buffs gaze skywards, oblivious of the lovers sharing the shade of open umbrellas. When hunger pangs strike, you may prefer to skip the hospitality of your hotel and venture to taste a spicy rice and curry in authentic Sri Lankan style. Roadside kiosks offer rice and curry packets for less than a dollar. This is what the city workers eat for lunch.

There are trendsetters in minis and midis but the sari is still proudly worn.





A walk along Lower Chatham Street and across Olcott Mawatha, by passing the Fort railway. station, brings you to Pettah. It is the city’s most popular bazaar centre with the World Market alongside the station. The bustling central market of Pettah’s Main Street is best visited from 07.30 to I 1.00 hours on weekdays. Then business is brisk as fresh crabs, lobsters, shrimps and a variety of fish are unloaded. The din can be deafening when vendors shout out their offers. Only the adventurous spectator would join the melee. At Fourth Cross Street, which leads off Olcott Mawatha in the Pettah and parallels Front Street and First, Second, Third and Fifth streets, the local

salesmen let things rip. The neighbourhood rhythm is a cacophony. This is the “rice bowl” of the city where sweating coolies load and unload sacks of rice in the sweltering sun or occasionally in a pelting downpour.

The scene is similar in Prince Street, only the odour of dried and salted fish is more pungent. Here yo4 will see labourers wielding iron hooks carrying bales of highland tea, vegetables and fruit. Third Cross street is where most of the city folk buy their cooking utensils, buckets, cutlery and steel tanks. On Fifth Cross street you will see mountains of herbs and spices on sale.



The century-old Philip Neri’s Roman Catholic church stands near the Central Bus Terminal at the northern tip of the Pettah, where a Buddhist temple looks down serenely on the multitude. Only a short distance away off Main Street, a Hindu Kovil or temple, with an intricately carved facade, and a mosque with a red-white dome can be seen. Colombo is a city of many fashions. There are trendsetters in minis and midis. but the traditional sari is proudly worn. Business types may prefer western suit on appropriate occasions, but the sarong and banian (shirt) 1s the national attire of men. At times the tempo of the city can be boisterously busy with people rushing past. Then an eight-year-old boy pushing his cart equipped with a percolator will flash a smile and offer a cup of specially brewed tea. He chatters gaily as he prepares your beverage.

When the curtain of dusk begins to fall on the horizon and the air cools off. take a stroll back to Galle Face Green or amble along the waterfront of Marine Drive. This

extends across the northern tip of the green, giving a panorama of ships with a thousand twinkling lights. turning the Colombo Port in a kaleidoscope of dancing colours. If tout or beggars should get in your hair. Just say mata mukuth epa. I don’t want anything.” or karunakara wada denna epa. ‘”please don’t worry me. You’ll be safe in Colombo as long as you don’t encourage strangers.•



The Chatham Street clock tower is a lighthouse marooned in the city



Colombo street performers practising their art.