

Lellama: Fishy Business in Negombo



At the crack of dawn, the Negombo Lellama resembles an exquisite painting

The Lellama in the bustling beach town of Negombo comes alive even before the crack of dawn. Its endless hectic frenzy in the early morning is a beautiful spectacle of camaraderie and thriving trade that treasures the sea's bounty.

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Even though it was four thirty in the morning, the grand fish market in Negombo, 'Lellama' was teeming with activities as the deep sea fishermen were bringing in their catch.

High-pitched calls of price and variety, even louder quick bargains echoed all over Lellama as negotiations between buyers and sellers proceeded in the morning.

The air carried the intense smell of fish as well as seafood and the floor was slick

with water. The entire area was dim; only the shining bodies of fresh fish were lit up by the tiny bulbs hanging low over the makeshift stalls. As we moved forward towards the lagoon front, a flotilla of fishing boats in vibrant hues stood bobbing gently in the shallow waters. Whenever a new trawler arrived at the lagoon, workmen busied themselves at what soon took on a well-arranged chaos of hauling, weighing and loading fish into iceboxes. There was much good-natured banter as they occasionally burst into laughter amidst hauling in their catch for auction.



A variety of fresh catch from the deep seas

Heavily packed seafood treasures, at last found their way into lorries that stood parked in front of the Lellama. The fish were loaded onto lorries, tuk-tuks and even bicycles for delivery from Negombo to all over the island. A wooden or galvanized box was strapped to the cycles and eventually, the cycle vendors paddled down the streets, making their way through makeshift fish stalls and little teashops.

As the dazzling sunrays crept in, Lellama slowed its pace, an atmosphere of unwinding hung in the air as the workmen settled in corners to sip a steaming cup of tea. We made our way to the Negombo Bridge to catch a glimpse of the glorious sunrise.

As the golden sun appeared, mosaic shades of orange, pink and lilac mingled all over the sky amidst stunning patches of blue. The waves of the lagoon gently

brushed the pathway and then the disturbing noise of motorboats making its way across the brackish waters could be heard. A random cormorant took flight with a little fish dangling in its mouth, impatient to relish its morning prey.



The auction is about to begin at the wholesale market

After witnessing the stunning views over the lagoon, we next visited the famed Fish Market in Negombo, where piles of fish purchased from the Lellama were resold. Along the way to the market, cleaned and sliced fish were placed on coir nets on the ground and left to be sun dried into the salty delicacy - Dry fish, which can add instant flavour and character to any dish.

Suddenly, we were faced with a throng of buyers, both local and foreign, picking through stalls crammed with fish. The narrow walkways were crowded with mongers hefting iceboxes of Hurullo (Trenched Sardinella) and even massive fish like shark. Piles and piles of Saalayo (Goldstripe Sardinella), thick cuts of sailfish and red snappers were laid on tables for sale.

The island's culinary star, mud crabs and succulent jumbo prawns, ribbonfish as well as squid were available in the market and we also spotted a gleaming white octopus, the prized catch of the day.



Buyers flock to the market in the early hours to purchase the best and freshest catch of the day

Just a few steps away from the bustling market, one-day fishing boats were ashore with nets filled with fresh catch after a safe voyage. Intrigued, we watched the sorters who worked diligently and removed fish from the net as the others held the maze of nets. The thieving crows were everywhere, looking for a treat, while attempting to escape from bubbly waves. Fishermen rushed past us and headed to the main market with cane baskets overflowing with saalayo.

Far beyond this front, sails of catamarans dotted the ocean afar, reminding us of the strong thread woven between the oceanic charm and villagers who made a living from the sea's bounty. With the salty breeze cooling our senses, we bid adieu to the vibrant fishing town, craving for a scrumptious feast of seafood.

