Main Street Pettah A feast for your senses

Posted on



Entrance to the Main Street, Pettah

If you enjoy being jolted out of yourself even for a few minutes, Main Street Pettah may just do that for you. Overwhlem yourself with innumerable choices and bargains.

Words Mamduh Waheed **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

Long established as a traders' haven, Main Street in Pettah and the adjoining streets and lanes can be fairly described as a lively nerve centre for the many enterprising traders who have set up shop here. Located north of the Fort Railway

Station in Colombo, it is less than a ten minute walk from the station if you are coming by public transport.

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As I made my way to Pettah, the closer I came to the trading areas, the thicker the traffic and the number of people walking on the streets. And so were the clusters of vendors who were trading on the pavements. It was a humid day, and I saw a thin film of dust already rising from the grounds, probably prodded by the traffic and the many people walking on the streets. At the outset, it is like any other densely housed commercial street. However, once you enter the Main Street and go along passing the side streets, you realise the amount of activity that goes on here is perhaps far more than any other area on the Island. Hundreds of names of businesses are displayed from the three to four storied buildings lining the streets. They are a true testament to the diverse and dynamic entrepreneurial spirit of the Sri Lankan people. Some of the names are vernacular, using local languages while others are a cross between English and other languages spoken in the Island. While some are plain and simple – 'Real Cap', or 'Razana Watch Repairs,' for instance, others are creatively misspelt or deliberately improvised; 'Body Wear Faashion', or 'For Evver'.

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Once you are half way through the street, be prepared to be flooded by a range of noises, aromas and continuous movement, be it goods being carried around or people moving in all directions. As it was a Saturday, other than the wholesalers who were sending off various shipments to distributors island-wide, there were many who had come from Colombo or nearby areas hoping to find a good bargain or some rare items they may not have been able to obtain in the city shops. The colours and the sheer amount of people who pass you by, give you an idea of not only the rich mix of ethnicity that make up Sri Lanka, but also an idea of the range of products that is been transported throughout the country on a daily basis. In this sense, I felt I was walking through the economic nerve centre of the Island, responsible for daily distributions of not only daily food items you will need – rice, flour, sugar, seafoods and vegetables – but also the many items required to run a home and maintain a family, not to mention the many items required to run

businesses and commercial enterprises.

There were many vehicles – vans, trucks and three wheelers – carrying various goods and sometimes passengers from one point to the next, but a sprawling, organic cluster of streets such as you find here can best be experienced and explored on foot. However, if you pose on the pavement to contemplate a shop window without paying heed to passersby, you may find yourself nudged, or if it is a busy spot, even pushed, so do be mindful of this. Similarly, while walking in the narrow streets, you also need to be careful not to be in the way of, or bump into some of the many three wheelers that make their way through the lanes.

Once I found myself adjusting to the heightened rhythm of the area, slowly, different patterns fell into place. The initial flood of sensory stimuli gave way to a sense of how the space was organised and how the traffic moved. Products are clustered into different areas of groups of small lanes that stem from the Main Street. While Front Street is one of the roads going into the Main Street, you will find hundreds and hundreds of shoes, bags and suitcases lined up on the pavement. Running parallel to Front Street are a series of Cross Streets, named 1st Cross Street,2nd Cross Street and so on. While in 1st Cross Street you will find electrical goods and hardware, 2nd Cross Street houses dealers in jewellery, fabrics, cosmetics and perfumes as well as tailors' shops. On 3rd Cross Street also, you will find more fabrics and on 4th Cross Street, spices of all varieties.

A series of smaller streets run across the grid of Cross Streets, And though not so devoted to one category of product, they offered a seemingly infinite range of items; children's toys, clothing and apparel, fruits, sweets, spare parts for electrical items and phones, kitchen utensils, cutlery, toiletries, door locks, dried fish, to name just a few.

Despite the busyness of the streets with its constant movement, there was little by way of trouble that I noticed. Some porters who were off loading sacks of dried fish from a truck even joked around as they went about their business in the heat of the day. Conceivably their daily routines were made more engaging by such convivial banter among colleagues, even though the tasks they were undertaking would require immense energy and perseverance. Perhaps a broader reflection of this mutuality, I also noticed there were three prominent places of worship within walking distance of each other in Pettah. A temple, a church and a mosque, all prominent landmarks with high visibility and certainly visited much and celebrated by inhabitants of the area.

As I left the Main Street, by the same way I had come in walking, I was left with a sense of appreciation of the regular pace of the normal lives of most of us. Spending two hours in such an activity filled and noisy environment did not, surprisingly, diminish my interest in the range of items on display, most for a fraction of the cost I would normally pay in a city shop. I wished to come back soon and find some good bargains.

