

Mt Lavinia: Sun, Sea, Sand and a Governor's Tryst

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Mount Lavinia just south of Colombo city is among the best known of Sri Lanka's many seaside resorts. For many years, much before Tourism emerged a major industry and beach resorts became prime commercial property, Mt. Lavinia was known for its long stretch of wide golden beach and swaying coconut palms, complete with the outrigger catamarans of the fishermen. It was the place where many in Colombo came out to on Saturday and Sunday mornings for swimming and sea bathing, surfing, or just lazing under the shade of coconut palms.

The place gets its name from the rocky promontory which for centuries was a familiar point on the coast to sailors, who because of its prominent shape named it "the pregnant wench". It was a welcome sign to captains in the days of the old steamers and the older wind blown craft that the green tropical island was at hand.

Mt. Lavinia has also been known to many for the hotel which has the same name, and it is here that history and legend become interestingly interwoven to add to the romance of a beautiful location.

Among the many famous visitors who enjoyed the old-fashioned welcome of the Mt. Lavinia Hotel was Somerset Maugham, the great English writer. He used to enjoy his lunch of curry and rice and watch the crows and gulls swoop over the waves and beach. That was after he had decided to give up writing. Otherwise, Mt. Lavinia may well have inspired Maugham to write a story about a lovely local lass named Lovina, the daughter of a low-caste retainer of a powerful British governor, who pleased the representative of the British Raj so much that he decided to have his country mansion just eight miles away from his city residency.

Sir Thomas Maitland who was a bachelor even at 46, came to Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known to the world, in 1805. He soon complained to the Colonial Office that he did not have a country home befitting his status. The home he built was later to become the Mt. Lavinia Hotel, most of which is still well preserved in today's hotel by the same name.

Many are the stories still told about the Governor's romantic trysts with the lovely Lovina, whose name soon became Lavinia, and of how the mansion by the beach was occupied more often by the governor than his official residence in the city. But that is unrecorded history, which always adds spice to tales of how this place was named Mount Lavinia.

There are other explanations too, rooted in geography and the natural surroundings. The Sinhalese who lived on the coast had for long named the promontory "Lihiniya Kanda" or "Lihiniya Gala" (lihiniya - sea gull) meaning the Hill of the Sea Gull or the Rock of the Sea Gull. The derivation of Lavinia from Lihiniya by those unused to the sounds and pronunciations of the East does not tax one's imagination.

The local name for the place today and for a long time has been "Galkissa", "kissa" being a somewhat obsolete Sinhala word for a key. So Galkissa could have been rocky key. Legend takes over again with the story of a large treasure from a shipwreck being hidden among the rocks here. Some of the local divers who find Mt. Lavinia a rewarding place for their deep sea fishing still claim to seek this long lost key to good fortune. Whatever the legends the place had always been one of beauty, from the days when it was a marshland overgrown with many wild herbs and medicinal plants, to the time when it became an important fishing village, in a tradition which still continues, and later became a beach resort with all facilities and natural charms for those seeking a rewarding holiday by the sea.

The early Western colonisers of Sri Lanka had much to do in Mount Lavinia. The Portuguese who did not tolerate the presence of Buddhist and Hindu temples where their writ was enforced, destroyed many places of worship of the people which stood in this area, and no doubt built churches for those, largely of the fishing community, who embraced Roman Catholicism. But those churches, too, were lost with the advent of the Dutch, who in turn did not tolerate the faith of the Portuguese.

The Dutch built their first church here in 1705. This too went into a state of disrepair with the ousting of the Dutch by the British in the 1790s. However, the British Governor Robert Brownrigg rebuilt the church and made it the pleasant Gothic structure it is today - Christ Church, Mt Lavinia

Among the other interesting shrines at Mt Lavinia is the Chapel at St Thomas College down Hotel Road, which has an interesting painting of the Resurrection by a famous Sri Lankan artist, David Paynter. St Thomas' College, down Hotel Road, which has an interesting painting of the Resurrection by a famous Sri Lankan artist, David Paynter, St. Thomas' College is itself part of contemporary history, being one of the few schools modelled on the famous British public schools of Eton and Harrow in the days of glory of the British Empire. The school is now over 100 years old.

The Buddhist Temple at Karagampitiya, situated down a lane just south of the Mt. Lavinia junction on Galle Road, is believed to be built at the site where an ancient shrine stood, which was destroyed by the Portuguese. It is well known today for the many Buddhist temple frescoes which depict the style of Buddhist religious art of the past century, and for the beautiful statue of the Buddha which has eyes of Blue Sapphire.

If Mt. Lavinia came into official recognition as far back as 1805 when Governor Maitland for the first time used the postal address "Mt. Lavinia, Ceylon" writing to the then British Secretary of State, Lord Castlereagh, knowledge of the healing nature of its sea and climate was discovered by the West in 1900, during the Boer War in South Africa. The British built a sanatorium here to accommodate the Boer prisoners-of-war, which later expanded to a centre to nurse back to health British troops as well.

But it was during World War II that Mt. Lavinia, and the old governor's house

which was already a hotel, became one of the best known hospitals and centres for Rest and Recuperation for the Allied Troops. British, American, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian troops who were injured in the great battle of Burma, Malaya and Singapore came here to be nursed back to health, many a novel written about the war and the Eastern Theatre makes mention of Mt. Lavinia, its lovely hotel/hospital, the beaches, the sea and sand, tropical palms, and the proximity to Colombo. World War II also involved Mt. Lavinia in a different way. On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1942, it was a troop camping ground, from where one of the first Japanese aircraft was shot down in Sri Lanka's brief bloodying in the war.



Children enjoying the sea and sand at Mt. Lavinia.



The sunset at the Mt. Lavinia beach, a popular place for evening relaxation.

The lazy beachside village was soon to be enveloped in urban advance. The area became a fashionable suburb of Colombo, with spacious houses, well manicured garden and plenty of shady lanes and avenues leading up to the main attraction, the beach.

The emergence of Tourism as a major industry in the 1960s saw Mt. Lavinia soon develop as an important tourist resort, so close to the city, but without all the rush of metropolitan life. Here less than half-hour's drive from the city's hub one could enjoy all the pleasures of sun, sea and sand. New hotels came up to cope with increased visitors, and the old Mt. Lavinia Hotel itself underwent modernisation, while retaining its old charm. The many spacious beachside homes opened their doors to tourists as Guest Houses. Mt. Lavinia now has restaurants catering to many tastes, with fresh fish brought by the fisherman nearby being a speciality. There is a casino too, at Mount Royal Hotel, keeping up with new trends in tourism and entertainment. With all this Mt. Lavinia still retains the essential charm of being the ideal place by the sea where the fishermen still go out in sail-driven outrigger, and vendors will sell you a fresh pineapple, a young coconut or a necklace of sea shells, as you enjoy the sun or the shade of a coconut palm.



A cool walk after the heat of the day. (Suresh de Silva)



Sun shades of woven coconut leaf are an attraction on the beach at Mt. Lavinia.