

Negombo Fish and Tradition

Posted on



Most cities, towns and villages have a distinctive identity. With Negombo it is fish. Mixed with the tang of salt, the smell of mud from the lagoon and canal (which, if one is imaginative, can conjure up a whiff of Venice!) is the unmistakable smell of fish. It is there; to smell and to see: on the beach – freshly caught, drying in the sun, being loaded into ice-filled lorries and boxes on bicycles, in baskets carried by the vociferous fish vendors ... FISH.

Negombo is situated on the western coast, 36km north of Colombo. During the north-east monsoon season of mid-October to March, this town has always been a lively seaside resort, attracting people from other parts of the island as well as tourists. It was once a centre for cinnamon but this has almost vanished and has been replaced with coconuts.

As a town it gained importance when the Portuguese captured it and made it a sanatorium for their troops. Having built the customary fort, they surrounded it with cinnamon which was stated to be “the best in the world and most abundant.” The Portuguese also brought with them the Catholic faith which they forced upon most of the inhabitants they ruled.

When the Dutch took over they rebuilt the fort area. The narrow streets, old houses with trellis work that looks like something out of a fairy-tale illustration, and the canal can still be seen as monuments to a colonial occupation. The fort itself is not impressive (little is left of the original fortification) and at present the main buildings within the fort are the prison and the local tennis club. Overlooking the lagoon and built on what was once the ramparts is the Anglican Church. More than 100 years old, it is a typical English country church and is considered one of the beauty spots of Negombo.

Negombo is predominantly a Catholic town known as “little Rome” with churches or statues found at almost every other street corner. The church is the dominant influence in the life of almost 90 percent of the people. Perhaps this accounts for

the relative peace and tranquillity enjoyed in this area even when turmoil has engulfed other parts of the country.

A typical church feast (and there are many throughout the year) lasts over a week. The highlight is the procession on Sunday evening. Roads are decorated with fish nets strung on poles and from these nets dangle flowers, tinsel and lots of coloured lights. People of all ages, dressed in their Sunday best, follow the statue and sing hymns that are part of the tradition. These celebrations are also occasions for families to get together for feasting and merrymaking. On Good Friday every year, Christians from all parts of the island converge on Negombo to witness the famous Duwa Passion Play. Fishing, of course, is the main occupation of the community. Although now many use mechanised craft and even trawlers, there are still those who go to sea in the age-old sailing boats. The return of the fleet of catamarans with their billowing sails in various shades of brown, skimming across the sea, entering the lagoon and then moving to their landing points, is a memorable sight. The catch – silver fish enmeshed in nets gleaming in the sunlight – is then sorted and buyers choose fish to take to the different selling points.

The main fish market is dominated by women. Clad mainly in black (they are constantly in mourning for one of their relatives or friends), puffing their pipes or cigars, they ply a vociferous trade. Fish is sold by the slice if it is large, or by the heap if it is small. Prawns and crab are sold the same way. A good bargaining session leaves both buyer and seller satisfied.

To see Negombo, a bicycle is best. The roads are narrow and during the day are usually chaotic, but on the whole no one is in a hurry. It is common to see three cyclists riding abreast so that they can converse on their journey or cars parked alongside each other in the road while the owners exchange the news of the day.



Fishing is the main occupation of the community

The Dutch canal, also known as Hamilton canal, flows through Negombo. It begins near the point where the Kelani River flows into the sea and stretches as far as Chilaw. It once provided the main mode of transportation and even today you can see the Pada boats (barges that are poled by men) which used to carry the main

cash crops – coconuts, cinnamon and plumbago – meandering on these waterways. In the evenings, the canal is full of people bathing along with their dogs and you may see a carter bathing his bull and the cart too.

As the sun sets and golden spears of light filter through the overhanging trees, the fishermen in their boats mend their nets while drinking toddy (a beverage made from coconut sap). If you are going to Negombo by car, it is fascinating to drive from Colombo alongside the canal. Turn off the main road at Wattala, where there is a signboard to the Pegasus Reef Hotel.

Once you reach the canal bank drive on until you see the sign to Uswetikeyawa. Cross the canal and continue alongside the sea. It is not a marine drive like the one to Galle, but the sound and feel of the sea is always present over the sand dunes. This road goes through many fishing villages and is unpolluted by heavy traffic. Before the south won most of the tourist trade, Negombo was a premier seaside resort. If you are in transit, it is an ideal spot to stay, being only 10km north of the airport. It has a number of hotels, most of them situated on Lewis Place, and an incredible number of guest houses. “Room to let” is a frequent sign and the prices range from Rs50 to Rs200 per day depending on the accommodation provided. This area also has numerous restaurants. Seafood is, of course, popular but it is advisable to avoid cold seafood or seafood that has been frozen over a long period. The best way to eat it is either grilled or cooked in a curry.

The other speciality in Negombo is sea-bathing. During the season the waters are warm, greeny-blue and the sea looks calm, but check with the hotel or lifeguards before venturing out into the deep. Mora Vale (shark hole) is so called because a shark was once washed over the reef into this bay during a storm. It is NOT a hole for sharks, but the safest place to bathe in Negombo. It is partly surrounded by the reef and you can enjoy many hours in the clear waters with just a mask and flippers.

If you are living in the hotel area, the best way to get across is by catamaran, an exhilarating experience. Should you plan to spend the day at Mora Vale, bring some food.



No one is in a hurry on Negombo roads



Negombo beach: - fishermen and catamarans.