Old-World Charm Meets Modern Day Decadence

Posted on



The central courtyard of Dutch Hospital

Tucked amidst Colombo's gleaming high-rise buildings, Dutch Hospital is Colombo's hottest and most scintillating shopping and dining precinct for the hip and trendy. The breathtaking 17th Century Dutch colonial splendour, with saffron-yellow walls, sprawling verandahs, cobblestone paving and two courtyards, is built to keep out the sultry humidity of the tropics, and remain cool in the evenings. Showcasing handpicked names from catering and retail, it will satisfy even the most discerning patron.

Words Imara De Chickera

This multifaceted haven, where old-world charm merges with the modern, has

elicited my deep infatuation. No matter how many times I visit, I remain smitten by its allure. It’s just 5 pm on a Friday evening and already a steady flow of tourists and after-work crowds are streaming in. Within an hour the place is jam-packed, humming with activity. The mellow sounds of the resident band, Missing Link, start up, and all my favourites, from slow-rock to reggae, seep into the vast, yet cosy courtyard, where each song is like a silky caress that blends into the breeze.

I meander over to the ODEL – LUV SL store where over-sized lamp-chandeliers, in brown metal birdcages lend a whimsical and quirky ambience. There’s a myriad of interesting souvenirs for tourists to take away as treasured mementos of an unforgettable holiday. There is also a range of exotic organic food items such as stuffed olives in mustard sauce. Shoppers will discover a tasteful selection of clothes, and a wide choice of backstage costume jewellery among this treasure-trove of fascinating items.

Next, I visit Shilpa, a store for locally created handicrafts. I stroll towards the dessert destination – ‘Heladiv Tea Salon, Dessert Bar and Boutique’. The décor is resplendent with baroque extravagance, show-casing turquoise, crystal chandeliers, gold-embossed wallpaper and ornate mouldings on the ceiling. Heladiv is known for its innovative range of tea with real fruit pieces. With enticing desserts such as ‘Death by Chocolate’ you have no choice but to give into temptation. There is also a range of cocktails, iced-teas and coffees to choose from.

Later, I peer into the shop window of Colombo Jewellery Stores and am hypnotised by the beautiful jewellery, sparkling seductively at me. The décor in this store is rustic and raw, just like the excitingly refreshing jewellery on display. While timeless elegance is a hallmark of Colombo Jewellery Stores, this store’s inspiring range of ultra-bold jewellery, takes my breath away.

Once outside, my attention is captured by diners at the Colombo Fort Café, sipping blue-berry mojitos from jam jars. This Tapas Bar and Bistro serves Euro-mediterranean food infused with flavours for the local palette. This is your everyday place with an affordable menu, and even if it’s not on print, the chef will be happy to make your heart’s desire, if the ingredients are available.

Next, I drop in at the well-loved Barefoot outlet where the vibrant explosion of colour makes my heart sing. Handloom fabrics and clothes with stunningly bold hues and colour-drenched soft toys and hand-painted porcelain tableware greet me. I sift through the exciting array of handpicked books by local and foreign authors.

Recycled notebooks and smooth stainless steel cutlery are also available while a selection of ethnic jewellery and sketches of local scenery catch my attention.

I then make my way inside Spa Ceylon where the buzz of the outside world seems like a distant dream. The fragrance of lemongrass fills my soul and soothing music lulls me into relaxation. Exotic exfoliating bars, floral water-mists and a plethora of products are exquisitely displayed in the black, green and white interior. I peruse the menu and am tempted to surrender myself to the heavenly sounding ‘Hot Sand Massage Ritual’. I make my way up the wooden steps and find myself in a luxurious sanctuary.

I then venture into Nature’s Secret, Beauty Spa and Showroom which specialises in beauty treatments inspired by Sri Lanka’s rich heritage of ancient, natural, beauty secrets. The Spa showcases their modern day beauty care products such as ‘Face Lifting Cream’ enriched with licorice and even ‘Men’s Anti-wrinkle Night Cream’.

My next stop is Ministry of Crab, which is “A Mahela Jayawardena, Kumar Sangakkara and Dharshan Munidasa Restaurant”. True to the innovative spirit of its founders this restaurant has turned the spotlight on the Sri Lankan Crab, celebrated for its succulent and flavoursome nature. By introducing this niche concept they have answered the prayers of all those who love crab. With its vibrant and informal atmosphere it is perfect for any occasion. Ministry of Crab’s three most popular dishes are their Pepper, Chillie and Garlic Crab. Served along with a hearty mushroom dish and bread they make a delectable meal. Other types of fresh seafood are also served, such as Grouper and Pomfret with lip-smacking flavours and textures. A unique dining experience, Ministry of Crab is definitely a must-visit for all seafood lovers.

I head on over to the interestingly titled restaurant “WIP”- ‘Work In Progress’, run by Hilton. This sophisticated place serves German and Austrian cuisine along with Asian inspired dishes. Their most popular dishes are the Nasi Goreng and Spare Ribs.

I am warmly welcomed by the friendly doorman at Semondu, the swanky restaurant managed by Sri Lankan Airlines. The interior is a stylish mix of glass, grey distress-painted walls, and wood and features a glass-enclosed show-kitchen. Serving fusion food, blending the East and West, Semondu’s tantalising menu and wine-list offers an interesting medley to choose from. Semondu’s most popular dish is the trilogy of seafood which is Salmon, Lobster and Seer, served on crushed potato with chili.

Later in the evening we go to the Brewery by ‘O’ and the atmosphere is exhilarating, with loud animated voices rising over the upbeat music. The décor is cozy and the bar is spectacular with an abstract metal sculpture hanging above it. The whacky menu, features items such as ‘Grease Yaka’ (Grease Devil) which is Devilled Chicken, Beef or Prawns and ‘R U Nuts’ which is spiced-up, cashew nuts. Matches are aired on large-screens and the T20 World Cup in September will be screened on the façade of the building facing the brewery for a larger-than-life experience.

The night is over, but I am already planning my next excuse to come back and immerse myself in this truly decadent and addictive atmosphere. The magnetic pull of Dutch Hospital just lures you back over and over again with the promise of a new experience every single time. Don’t fight it. Just Indulge.

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