

Sail Away to the 17th Century



Traversing through the Colombo Port, Navy and cargo ships impinged our immediate surroundings. As we approached the Bandaranaike berth we were transfixed by the extraordinary vision that seemed to have abruptly materialised before us. Anchored serenely, stood the graceful yet imposing Andalucia Galeon and we were about to climb on board to experience the naval wonders of the 17th Century.

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“Andalucia”, the vessel’s namesake is a large region in southern Spain harnessed with a rich history and culture where Christopher Columbus launched his expedition that led to the discovery of America. Embarking on its voyage from Seville, the capital of Andalucia, this emblem of culture and history of Spain finally arrived in Sri Lanka following several similar stops on its long route, including Malta, Haifa in Israel and Sudan, its final destination being Shanghai in early June in time for the China Expo 2010. In Sri Lanka, the crew including the captain were received by Stasshani Jayawardena, on behalf of Priya Jayawardena, Honorary Consul for Spain in Sri Lanka.

As in all destinations of its voyage, at the China Expo the Andalucia serves as a cultural and economic platform and facilitates business opportunities as if a throwback to the 17th Century where the port of Andalucia was a hotspot for the shipping trade of Spain. Back in the day this Galeon would ply along the Atlantic and Pacific routes trafficking large numbers of people, animals, food and other goods.

The crew comprising of 30 members including two women bustle about the decks while a few provided us with guided tours of the masterpiece. Supported and funded by Nao Foundation of Spain and other private companies, the building of the Andalucia Galeon and its voyage is the second of its kind. Feeling out of place in present day attire, while precariously crossing the wooden floorboards of the Galeon’s many decks, we were easily enthralled by its craftsmanship and authenticity. At 40m high and 50m in length it’s a faithful replica entirely in wood; an African hardwood “iroko” and pinewood. What’s more, this multi deck sailing

vessel is completely handmade! Built in just 17 months it demanded the labour and commitment of 150 people.

Apart from the six decks that mainly served as manoeuvring areas, a kitchen, dining area and the towering masts, the vessel also comprises of 12 canons with two at the upper and ten at the lower deck, sparking silver screen worthy imaginings in ones mind. It would take the might of 14 crew members at a time to manoeuvre a mast amidst cries of un, dos, tres! We learnt much more including terms such as “tolta”, an upper deck where only the captain ventures and “bridge” where the steering wheel stands and that the mild sensation of keeling over was due to the gentle rocking of the Galeon and not due to lightheadedness! The lower deck while housing the cabins for the crew, would have converted its space to an exhibition area for the Expo 2010. The ship also has two large anchors each weighing 450kg.

As our tour into the 17th Century naval experience gradually came to an end, we reluctantly made our way off the main deck and finally back on ground. In a few days the Galeon would be on its way to the next destination, Singapore the crew informed us. With a final gaze at the historical and captivating Andalucia Galeon, we bid goodbye, while I thought yes, savvy!

