Surf and Beach Culture: Bentota and Hikkaduwa

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratne



A tourist once proudly claimed that he had received a letter from home in Europe merely addressed to him by name at the postal address “Hikkaduwa”. Yet Hikkaduwa is only a small coastal village in Sri Lanka’s south-west Travellers who prefer the planned and structured Holiday Resort of Bentota, also on the south-west coast, claim it is equally well known. It began as just another little fishing hamlet where the coconut palms sloped down to the sea’s edge and where the beach was wide and white. If the fishermen have made way for the Resort, they have certainly

not moved too far away. Neither has Hikkaduwa been totally abandoned to tourism! The people live and move and practice their age-old occupations in the environs of both places – even if they have also learned to produce the goods and services holiday-makers from all the world over are after.

Bentota, and indeed the entire coastal belt reaching down to the deep south of -he island were settled millenniums ago. Indeed they are some of the earliest human settlements in South Asia. Their bays and harbours were visited from ancient times by mariners bound from East to West and vice versa. If little is left of the artefacts of antiquity, and the signs of those early settlements are lost to the surging ocean itself. the reason is that the south west monsoon beats heavily each year against this coast. As a result of the frenzied winds and torrential rains the sands are ever shifting, the mangroves impound the soft soil and every trace of man is soon obliterated.

There was no time. however, when this region was without people. During two thousand years and more of recorded history the people of this part of the island, were. more than the others, exposed to alien cultures. visitors. travellers, merchants, migrants, sailors from other parts of the globe. It might be why they are a sophisticated lot! Why they so easily accept the travellers who come today to take a holiday in their mids. And why, above all things, the local culture has never been submerged by alien accretions. Why, you, if you find yourself holidaying in Bentota and Hikkaduwa and taking a walk down the beach, might veil be addressed in French or German or it could be Italian or Dutch by a little ‘beach boy’ or his elder bro her combing’ the beach! The boys would be well versed in their own languages too. In these parts the influence of the Portuguese, Dutch and English colonisers of Lanka were also strong, and if powerful enough once to make inroads into the old culture. he never succeeded in completely alienating the people from their own customs, traditions, lifestyles.

This is what makes a holiday in Bentota and Hikkaduwa so fascinating. Here are much more than wide, white beaches and a warm blue sea: much more than water sports where waters meet, surfing, skin diving, undersea exploration. All of which of course abound in the coral seas hardly a stones throw from the beach.

Hikkaduwa is indeed an ocean sanctuary, once enthusiastically described as the “Great Barrier Reef’ in miniature! Much of the coral is, alas ferried away for building purposes, in spite of checks and restraints and punishments enforced by law, but what is there and what keeps growing undersea is certainly spectacular.

A resplendent coral garden under the sea is what Hikkaduwa offers the visitor: a veritable kingdom undersea where jewel like coral fish spark in-between the waving masses of rainbow-hued coral formations, reminiscent of every leaf and branch and twig one has ever seen on terra firma. For those who dive deeper the bigger fish are also there, lurking among the delights of the ocean bed. Hikkaduwa and Bentota are indeed far more than sun and sea sports. Yards· away from the Resort areas are the people. Not too far away are their houses and fields. Crops of paddy flourish in the hir. qrland. Coconut thrives and generates several small industries like fibre making and coir processing, the firing of charcoal out of coconut shells, and the brewing of toddy, which in turn is distilled to make coconut arrack: the spirituous liquor for which Sri Lanka is famous.

A sight not to be missed is the toddy tapper balancing on ropes drawn from one tree to another as he goes about collecting the liquid of the “coconut flower” (spathe) from the pots hung beneath it on every tree, in season. It might be a trapeze performed specially for you, except that it is no act but his unerring skill in performing what is simply his daily task. Because the south-west coast has a ‘mixed’ population and votaries among the four great world religions it is not unusual in the vicinity of Bentota and Hikkaduwa to see temples, churches, mosques and kovils (for Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and Hindus).

A great 13th century temple with some exquisite stone work is not so far from the Bentota resort and is well worth seeing. It is called the Galapotha Viharaya, and the stone book and doors are unparalleled among granite carvings of the early Middle Ages in Sri Lanka. Hikkaduwa is still pervaded with the aura of the Ven. Sri Rahula, one of the most famous and talented Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka’s history. A gifted poet, he composed some of the Sandesayas or Message poems which found such favour with kings and people of Lanka in the 15th and 16th centuries Bentota and Hikkaduwa are structured for holiday-makers. In the Re arts an excellent line-up of hotels – 2 and 3 star – to match the environment of casual relaxation offer comfortable and well-equipped rooms and every facility for a beach holiday to remember. Innumerable guesthouses. resthouses, hostels and rooms-in-homes are also found in these places and in the hinterland, along the coast road that dips down to the deep south. flanking the ocean. Restaurants offer a selection o[both local and western food and Chinese food is also available for those who like a change. Hotels are manned by local staff with years’ of experience in serving holiday-makers.

Hikkaduwa itself simply growed – as one might put it and with it the elements of a

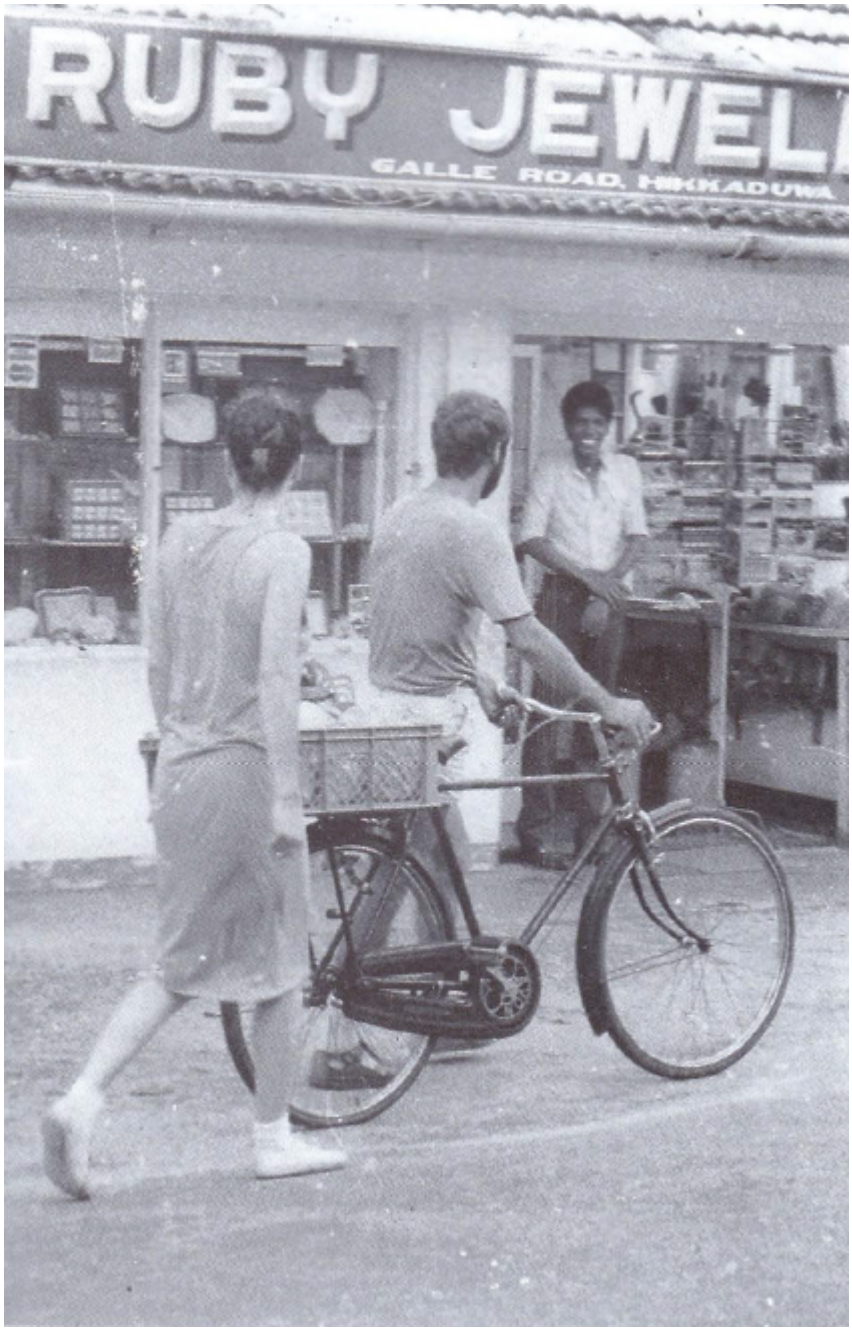
touristic beach spot are also obvious and no to everybody’s taste : the more discriminating might find they prefer the staidness and slower pace of Ben total But no-one would want to miss the charm and beauty of the large bays, the sprawling. so -sand beaches, the sea-scapes, the enchantment of the fishing hamlets dotting the coast and the people, so hospitable in a most natural and friendly way.



Typical scene of the southern coast of Sri Lanka.



Boutiques, kiosks, jewellers, silk, and batik vendors – part of the sea at Hikkaduwa to day.


RUBY JEWEL
GALLE ROAD, HIKKADUWA