The Bentota

Posted on

Beach Walk

Royston Ellis takes a stroll

Photos by Neel Jayantha

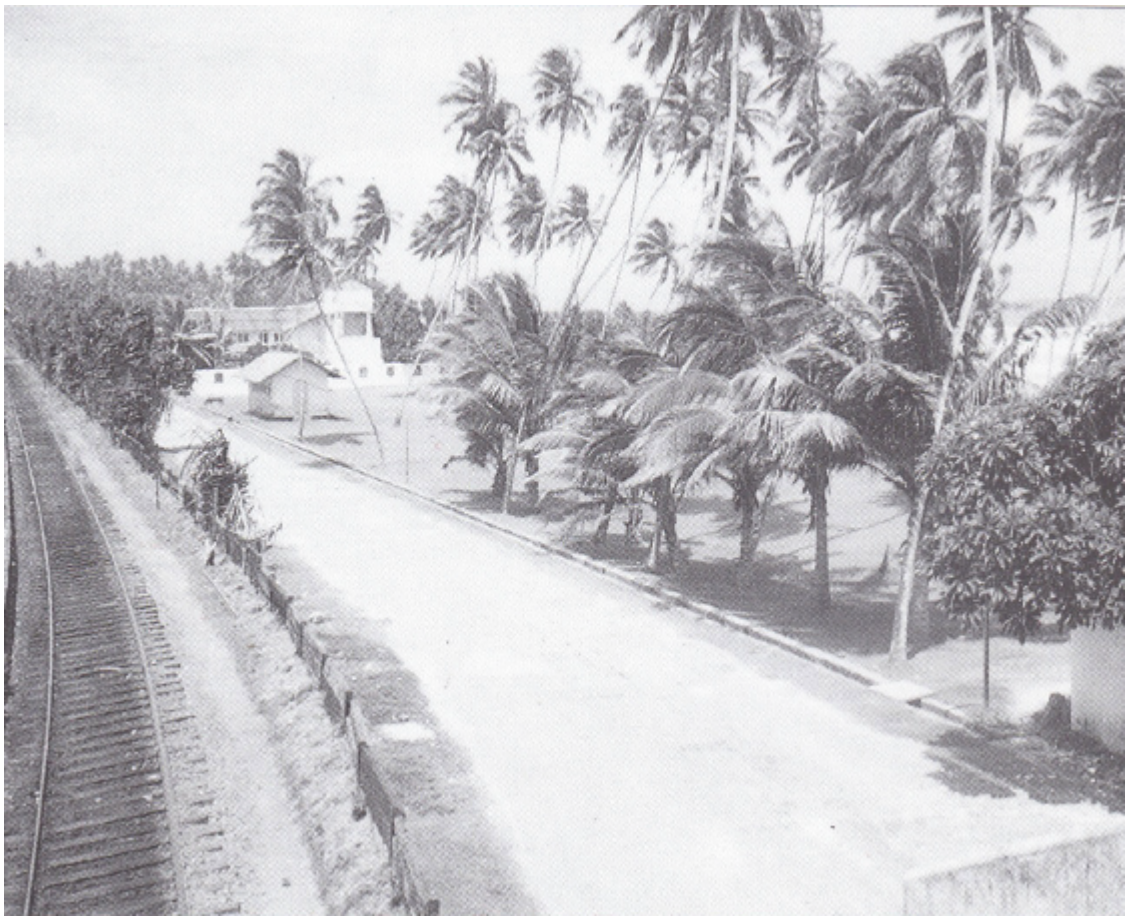


It took me IO years to walk from one end of the beach at Bentota to the other. Most visitors who walk the five kilometre stretch of sun-gilt sand do it in a couple of hours. Bentota is on the west coast, halfway between Colombo and the southern fortress port of Galle. A tourist enclave was created there by the tourist board in the 1970s as a self-contained holiday resort with hotels, shopping arcade and bazaar, town square, bank, post office and picturesque railway station by the beach.

At the mouth of the Bentota ganga (river), the village straddles an extensive spit of sand and palm trees that separates river and sea. Faithful visitors from Europe return to the resort year after year, appreciating its relaxed atmosphere of respectability as well as its broad and beautiful beach. I made my first visit IO years ago but it was only recently that I departed from my holiday routine of crossing the beach's width to bathe in the sea, and decided instead to explore its length. The best time for the Bentota beach walk is early morning before the sun, and the beach boys, are up; or during the haze of the late afternoon when there is a chance of glimpsing the green flash of the sun setting into the Indian Ocean. I began by walking southwards, scrambling over a promontory to a vast stretch of deserted beach where waves whipped up by the tail of a storm, smashed onto the shore. The walk turned out to be a serendipitous exercise, albeit a hot one since the equator is less than 800km further south. Serendipity is apt, as the word was born out of the Arab name for Sri Lanka, Serendib.

My first happy, unexpected discovery was at the far end of the beach where there is a shelter of screwpine thatch and a sign saying "Turtle Paradise." In the jungly vegetation behind it, Raju and his discovery was at the far end of the beach where there is a shelter of screwpine thatch and a sign saying "Turtle Paradise." In the jungly vegetation behind it, Raju and his can hatch undisturbed. They raise the baby turtles in tanks for three weeks until they are hardy. Kitsiri releases 600 into the sea each month and I was invited to help him set scores of them flapping towards the surf. To celebrate this launching, Raju produced a drink of cloudy liquid drawn from a conical wooden bucket. It had the aphrodisiac smell and effervescence of champagne but the taste of sweet beer. Called toddy, it was the sap tapped that morning from the bud of a coconut palm. Toddy is distilled into arrack, the scotch of Sri Lanka. It is gathered by men in navy blue loincloths who shin up coconut trees with mallets and clay pots. Like squirrels they scurry along coir ropes linking one treetop with another, tapping each bud to fill their containers. The sap has to be processed within 24 hours before it turns to vinegar so throughout the day bullock carts laden with wooden barrels of toddy trundle along the road by the beach to the state distillery. I resumed my walk and met a youth on his haunches beside a clay pot simmering over a wood fire. He offered me a taste of its contents: blue-shelled mussels. They were picked from the rocks minutes before, washed in sea water and boiled in their own juice. Mussels can only be found at the end of the monsoon season, before the sea turns to its winter calm. Although October to March is considered the best season for Bentota, because that's when the beach broadens and the sea becomes lagoon-like, there is plenty to do in the other months of the

year. Then the cost of staying drops to off-season levels. There are several family-run beachside guest houses and some small gracious hotels amidst the palm trees, as well as the major resort hotels of Lihiniya Surf, Serendib. Bentota Beach, Ceysands and Robinson Club. All the hotel have swimming pools in garden setting for when the sea is too rough, and beach bars where visitor can restore their energy after the long. hot walk along the beach. In the season, there are more diversions from beach idleness on offer: elephant rides or jaunts to an offshore rock by local catamaran a canoe scooped out of a single tree trun with a log for outrigger. Watersports and boat trip up the Bentota river to see the 12th century Galapatha temple and estuarine crocodiles, are available through the hotels or from the Rainbow Boathouse by the road bridge.



The picnic area at Bentota Beach from the bridge over the railway line

The last lap of my walk took me past the hotels to the northern tip of the beach where the Robinson Club is hidden from view by den e tropical foliage. The guests, mostly from Germany but Sri Lankans and resident expats are welcome too. are treated to endless rounds of fun, mountain of good food and use plastic beads for money. I ended my walk by wishing I had done it every year when I found, in the tree of a small island reached by a sand causeway, a lone Buddhist temple, perfect for freelance meditation. Beyond it gaped the wide mouth of the river with cata-marans waiting.

What for?

To ferry visitors across the lagoon to another vast strand of beach on the other side. I hope it doesn’t take me a decade to walk along that one. How to get to Bentota: There are fast trains to Galle from Colombo Maradana and Fort stations which stop at Bentota station, right by the beach. •

