

The Fishermen of Little Rome

Posted on

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The Dutch Fort at Negombo which was later used by the British as a jail.

Little did I realise that anywhere in the East, the passage of the day could be measured with church bells, until I arrived in Negombo. I was woken up at dawn to the sound of bells announcing the daily mass. I was reminded of lunch while strolling in the bazaar by the Angelus bells at noon, and, it was the Angelus again which made me get back to the Rest-house after watching a splendid sunset, seated on a beached catamaran. Even from first impressions, Negombo is what Sri Lanka is not. In a largely Buddhist country, where the Buddha statue at strategic junctions and dagabas in almost every town, reminds one of the predominant faith, the symbols in Negombo are the cross and the church. Cement crucifixes mark many street junctions here, and the churches proclaim the prevailing faith.

It is a very short drive from the International Airport at Katunayake to this quaint, Catholic town of Sri Lanka. Just ten minutes along streets shaded with coconut palms. If you have the time, my advise to any visitor is to head north from the airport, and take in the sea air at Negombo, before getting into the stride of the island tour. Negombo is the kind of place that can give an instant cure for jet lag, and prepare you for all the adventures the rest of the island holds. If your itinerary does not allow that, at least try to spend two days at Negombo at the end of your tour. Negombo lives by the sea. It is the home of one of Sri Lanka's oldest fishing communities. It was a fishing village when Moorish traders from the coast of India came to this part of the island, and discovered that the much valued spice, cinnamon, grew in abundance in the hinterland.

The impact of this contact with the Moors are still evident in the mosques in Negombo, and in the Moors who are today engaged in the tobacco trade, and carry on profitable trade in the bazaar. When the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in the early 16th Century, they soon replaced the Moors as the dominant influence in areas, and developed Negombo as a trading centre for cinnamon. It was the

Portuguese who brought the Catholic faith, which the entirety of the fishing community, and large number of the cinnamon growers were to embrace, making Negombo the predominantly Roman Catholic town it is today.

The Dutch who were also in search of cinnamon, captured Negombo from the Portuguese towards the end of the 17th century, and continued the trade in the Spice. The Dutch writer Valentyn, says the cinnamon plantations in the vicinity of Negombo were “among the best in the world”.

Coconut has today replaced cinnamon as the main cash crop of Negombo, but the harvest of the sea dominates the lives of the people, and also binds them to the church. From dawn the beach at Negombo is a fascinating hive of activity. Women and children await the arrival of the boats that set out the previous night. As the hour for the return of the mini-fleet of outriggers and catamaranas draws near, one notices a silent tension on the beach. And as the first sails appear near the horizon there are the smiles on the faces. The relaxation. A pattern of life which has continued unchanged for centuries.

On several points on the beach crowds of fishermen, young and old, will be drawing in huge nets, singing age-old songs of the haul – “Hodi Helei, helei, helei” they will sing, as they pull in the net and hope for an abundant catch. Visitors to Negombo are always welcome to join in the haul of the net. If the catch is good there is the chance of earning a fish for your labour.

If not there will be a smile of well-meant thanks. Sitting on the beach, or on the verandah of the many hotels along the Negombo beach, one can watch the fishing fleet sailing in, rust coloured sails billowing in the wind, pushing the craft towards the shore. As the vessels near the shore, strong muscular men, in their straw hats, and in short tucked-up sarongs, will jump out into the water to push the craft further up to the beach. The older men chewing on black cigars, and the younger men smoking cigarettes, will first bring the catch ashore, for a quick beachside auction, where the waiting owners of the boats, get the profits of the fishermen’s hard night’s toil out at sea.

Women who have already come to the shore will begin serving meals of rice and curry, with plenty of curried fish, to the hungry men. Tasty, spicy food eaten off fresh green leaves or tin plates on the beach itself. Some will take a drink of fresh coconut toddy, poured into a coconut shell off a clay pot.

The Negombo fishermen's day does not end with the return to the beach. The nets have to be repaired and dried, the ropes checked and gathered, and the boats readied again for the next day's catch, or sometimes to set sail the same evening, if the signs of a good catch are there.

Negombo is on holiday every Sunday. The Catholic fishermen observe the sabbath very strictly, as the Church commands. Nothing will make them go out to sea on a Sunday. Sometime ago, a Sri Lankan government abolished the Sunday holiday, and replaced it with the days of the four phases of the moon, held sacred by Buddhists. The fishermen of Negombo continued to go out to sea on the new weekly holiday, and kept their Sundays free from work.

From early morning on Sundays the people begin the trek to church. Clad in their Sunday best, people almost pour out of the many lanes and by ways the thatched houses by the sea, from the banks of the mangrove swamps that make up the Negombo lagoon, almost like a colourful procession in parts.

In church they sing their hymns to Christ and Mary, and the many patron saints after whom the churches have been named, in Sinhalese, Tamil. English and Latin, and return from service with a look of joy, more of achievement than of expectation.

A church feast is a very special thing in Negombo. While Catholics in other parts of Sri Lanka, celebrate Christmas and Easter with a big bang, the Catholics of Negombo take special pride in the feast of their Parish church. Each feast day of the patron saint of a church is an event for much festivity. Nine days before the feast proper, a huge flag-staff is raised in the church compound, very similar to the main mast of a ship, with many-coloured flags fluttering from the ropes holding up the mast. A tradition obviously came from the Portuguese sea-farers who converted the fishermen of Negombo to Catholicism.

On the feast day, usually a Sunday, the church square becomes a typical fair ground. Trinket stalls line the grounds and the streets. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, depending of the congregation of each church, dressed in their festive best join in a procession which takes to the streets, carrying the statue of the patron saint.

Special altars are built along the way. Western Brass Bands often lead the procession, playing well known Christian hymns or popular Western, Sinhala and Tamil songs. Some processions have eastern drummers too. Loud firecrackers are

lit all along the way.

There are so many Catholic Churches in Negombo, most Sri Lankans call it the island's "Little Rome" – a not unjustified description. Most churches in Negombo are built to huge proportions, in the style of those in Rome, Spain and Portugal. Among the better known are the church at Grand Street, in the heart of the town, dominating it, and the church of St. Sebastian at Sea Street, beside the beach, where the fishermen come and place their nets on the altar and whisper a prayer for a good catch and safe return. On the feast of the Sea Street church the fishermen put up a continuous canopy along the long street, made up entirely of many coloured fishing nets, making it an unusually colourful arcade to pass through.

Another famous church of Negombo is across the lagoon at Duwa, where every other year, on Good Friday, is enacted a play depicting the Passion of Christ. The players are all from the fisher families of the area;- and the tradition of the Duwa Passion play is believed to be nearly two centuries old.

The Dutch built a canal and a fort at Negombo. The Canal which is still in use runs parallel to the road which links Negombo to Colombo, and passes through colourful marshland and large extents of coconut grove. The Fort was converted by the British into a gaol but still has many of the remains of the old Dutch ramparts and wide arches.

With its many natural attractions, specially excellent beaches and the colour of the fishing community, Negombo was one of the first areas of Sri Lanka to become a major draw for tourists. The result was the opening of several good hotels along the beach front affording fine views of the sea and life on the beach, and good opportunity for sea sport and entertainment. This development of Negombo's tourist facilities has extended as far as Waikkal in the North and Talahena on the south.

Whether walking along the beach, watching the fishermen at work, helping haul in a heavily loaded net, riding a typical Negombo bullock cart through the quiet streets of the town, bargaining at the bazaar, or boating lazily on lagoon or up the old Dutch canal. The Negombo experience in this "Little Rome" of Sri Lanka is bound to be a unique one.



The church of St. Mary at Grand Street. typical of the proportions of Negombo's churches.



Activity on the Negombo beach. The name of the boat in the foreground is 'Victory for Jesus'.



A Negombo buggy cart with the roof projecting out for shade, in front and back.

