The World Market Bargains Galore

Posted on



Colourful designs

The World Market in Colombo Fort is filled with great bargains in clothes, shoes, souvenirs and many other items. It’s also a fun shopping experience, as you haggle over prices with the stall owners and experience the uniquely Sri Lankan joie de vivre that defines this place.

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The World Market in Colombo is easily found, as it's located right next door to the Fort Railway Station. It's a rabbit warren of criss-crossing stalls and small shops, filled to bursting with a variety of bargain goods. A large overhanging roof gives it protection from the elements, making it a cool place to shop even on the hottest of days.

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We made our way into the World Market from the "station side" (the other end is called the "bridge side"). Tall trees bordering the market provided shade as I began to slowly meander through the stalls, looking for a bargain. The best thing about this Market, besides the bargains of course, is the happy-go-lucky attitude of the stall owners. They love to share a joke, and seem to take particular joy from their skills in knocking back a bargaining customer. I found myself simply standing by and laughing at their tactics as they convincingly made their sales, wrapped up in a smile and sometimes even a friendly pat on the back!

This is unmistakably the place to shop for T-shirts, as T-shirts of every imaginable colour and design are hung up from the roof and on the sides of stalls. There are cricket and football team t-shirts from almost all countries and clubs, business-style T-shirts, T-shirts that make a statement (literally!) and even "rock-star" T-shirts covered in phosphorescent skulls that would be snapped up by any heavy metal band. Walking through some of the alleys between stalls, you will soon start to feel like you're in a T-shirt bubble! Clothing items dominate this Market, and jeans, pants, batik kaftans, children's clothes, men's sarongs, skirts, blouses and shorts fill many of the stalls.

But there are lot of other interesting deals here too. Shoes are probably the second most popular item here, judging by the number of stalls. Shoes and sandals made of leather, canvas, synthetic leather, rubber, plastic and everything in between can be found here. A few stalls only deal in colourful flip-flops (or "rubber slippers" as they're called in Sri Lanka), with a wide variety of colours and designs to choose from.

Fine-quality pure leather goods are another good bargain here. Bags, hats, belts, wallets and small ladies coin purses are all beautifully made with designs carved

into the leather by hand. A few of the stalls even had leather ottomans and large travelling bags made entirely of treated and carved leather.

Keep walking on and you will also come across several souvenir stalls scattered throughout the market. One stall specialised in painted black velvet wall hangings, while another had mostly wood carvings. Other stalls had a variety of different souvenir items, from brassware to ceramic items.

Another bargain find here are the baseball caps. Dozens of designs, mainly of sporting teams from around the world and covering a variety of different sports make these cap stalls colourful and easy to find. Here, you will find a baseball cap for the New York Yankees sitting right next to a black cap with the silver fern of the New Zealand cricket team! Having heard that there was a stall with straw hats, we managed to hunt it down, and found that they had straw hats in a variety of designs and sizes, as well as frilly fabric hats for little girls. There are also stalls with hand bags, briefcases, umbrellas, silver jewellery and other fashion accessories and even batik scarves and bandanas.

There are over 400 stalls and shops in this market, and you can spend as much time as you want browsing through, or simply head for the stall you want and make your purchase.

Turning a corner, we bumped into a group of young boys who were busy haggling over prices with the long-haired owner of what looked to be a reggae-fashion shop. I lingered a while there and listened on the eager bargaining style of the boys as they went back and forth with the shop owner. Finally, they made a deal that seemed to please everyone, and I nearly clapped with approval! The “Rastafarian” look seems popular with teenage boys, and several shops cater to this fashion style, with Bob Marley T-shirts, wooden bead chains, colourful knitted beanie hats and wrist bands stocking their shelves.

The rule of thumb at the World Market is bargaining. The stall owners seem to thrive on it, and the discussion and joking that goes along with their style of setting a price is truly unique. Many stall owners are trilingual, and can bargain with you in either Sinhala, Tamil or English!

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pavement-hawkers along the Fort and Pettah streets were gathered into one, organised place by the local authorities. Initially this market was a day-night market, open for almost 24 hours. But many of the stalls now open by around eight in the morning, and start wrapping up by around nine at night. During the main shopping season in April and December, they can be open as late as midnight.

Why it’s called the World Market is a question that none of the stall owners could answer. But no matter the moniker, there’s certainly a world of bargains to be had in this very unique shopping mall.

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