Travel In Time Leagues Beneath The Sea

Posted on
One of the galleries at the Museum displays a collection of artefacts and displays related to maritime trade and influences

Silver coins of the Moghul empire, curiously shaped soda bottles manufactured in Ceylon, and a whole host of intriguing artefacts recovered from shipwrecks and other sites, piece together events of maritime trade of old Ceylon. The only Maritime Archaeology Museum in Sri Lanka is fittingly located in the historical Galle Fort, paying homage to history buried leagues beneath the sea.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Facing Queen’s Street the resurrected museum building itself has historical significance. The walls bear a tone of antiquity with the entire expanse applied with a deep amber of samara paint. Originally a warehouse used by the Dutch then the British, in later years its original structure was obscured with alterations made to house administrative offices. Restored to its authentic state, the walls now shelter artefacts centuries old and models of ships, providing a mine of information on events of maritime trade.

Of the two access ways, the first bears ANNO 1670 inscribed on its arch, setting a date in the time of Dutch rule, while the second more prominent entrance bears the British Coat of Arms. The earliest visitors from foreign lands to the shores of the island are depicted by paintings that adorn the lobby of the museum, setting the precedent for what one could expect within its walls.

The tour of the museum begins with a 15-minute video of footage captured underwater, accompanied by an informative narrative that raises anticipation for what’s in store. The video presentation reveals three shipwrecks.

The ‘Silver Coin Ship’ discovered in 1961 by explorers Mike Wilson and Rodney Jonklaas near the Great Basses Reefs marked a turning point in Sri Lanka’s maritime archaeology, a discovery brought to the world’s attention by Sir Arthur C Clarke.

The ship is so named due to the large number of silver coins from Surat in India that it contained. Several of these coins are displayed in one of four galleries. Inscribed on the coins is the name of Moghal emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), son of the famed emperor Shah Jahan. Some of these coins, which were transported in bundles of thousands, are also at the Smithsonian Institute in America.

The ‘Bottle Ship’ wreck was another extraordinary discovery at the landside of the Great Basses. Named because of the discovery of numerous bottles found aboard the ship, the bottles, said to be manufactured in the then Ceylon, have an unusual torpedo shape. The legend inscribed on them reads ‘Superior Soda Bottles, Clark and Company Ceylon’. The company existed in 1850 placing the shipwreck at more recent times. The bottles are displayed in the original condition in which they were found. Other artefacts recovered from the same wreck include ceramic ware and metal nails.

Explorations in the bay of Galle carried out in 1993 uncovered a total of 26 archaeological sites, 12 of which are shipwrecks. Among them, the site of greatest importance is the Avondster, which sank in 1659. In fact the Museum saw its beginnings with the ruins of Avondster and today an entire gallery is dedicated to this ship, including a model of the shipwreck as she sits at the bottom of the sea. The vessel was commissioned by the English East India Company and was a warship during the Anglo-Dutch War until captured by the Dutch in 1653. She was then sent to Netherlands and refitted, adjusted and renamed as Avondster by the VOC Dutch East India Company. The name means Evening Star.

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Records of the fateful day she sank reveal that the ship, which was anchored near the Black Fort in Galle, slipped its anchorage in the night due to the negligence of the skipper. The Avondster hit the shore northeast from where it was anchored and broke into two parts.

Surface explorations of the ship were carried out from 1997 to 1999 and yielded ceramic ware, wine vessels, and a portrait of a bearded man. In 2001, data from these explorations were recorded. Further explorations unearthed ropes of various sizes in fragile condition, one of which sits in the Museum display encased in a glass

vacuum.

Six large cannons, a large anchor, kitchen utensils, ammunition and rifle bullets and vessels were also recovered. Following the unearthing of artefacts the whole site was covered in a nylon net. This site and some others in the harbour can be visited by licenced divers paving way for in-situ sightings for enthusiasts.

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Although over 2,000 artefacts and data recorded were painstakingly prepared for display, in 2004 the tsunami washed away a number of antiquities. The Museum project commenced again with the involvement of the Central Cultural Fund, Western Australia Maritime Archaeology Museum, the Archaeology Department of Sri Lanka and the Netherlands government. It re-opened in 2010.

Among other shipwrecks and their antiquities that have found their way to the museum are the Godawaya shipwreck, recognised as the oldest shipwreck in the Asia Pacific area, and another one from Ambalangoda.

As well as the shipwreck displays, there is much more to see and learn at the Museum. Gallery One lays the groundwork, offering an introduction to maritime archaeology, maritime history and developments. Visitors are also introduced to the Musuem’s logo, a symbol found inscribed at the ancient Duwegala rock temple that is believed to date from 2BC, indicating that knowledge of maritime activity existed even then.

Not only does the museum showcase items recovered from the seabed, but from inland sites as well. These have relevance as they arrived ashore as a result of international trade. For instance Chinese ceramic ware, a Persian storage jar recovered from the ancient hospital in Mihintale, Roman coins unearthed from Baragama in Hambantota, are just a few in this large collection.One of the key indicators of early historic maritime trade in the Indian ocean was the distribution of ceramic ware. And there are many examples displayed at the Museum.

At the end of the tour around the Maritime Museum, it is evident that Sri Lanka was situated in the path of numerous ancient shipping lanes amidst much historical

maritime activity.

