Under the Midsummer Moon

Posted on

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The Pizzeria – Inter Continental

Like lovers, schizophrenics and mating crustaceans the island of Sri Lanka is definitely moonstruck. It’s not just that in a predominantly Buddhist country, full moon days are festival nor even that the country’s stunning variety of landscapes is, without exception, best appreciated by moonlight. No, it’s something deeper

than that, a resonance in the backbone, a kundalini snake that begins to writhe sexily at nightfall. Take, for example, the old Sinhalese belief that it never rains on a Poya (full moon) day. Village superstition, or so I thought until I checked it out for myself and found a disturbing concurrence with fact. Some Colombo hostesses are hip to the phenomenon and pick full moon nights for alfresco parties; the lighting effects, courtesy of Mother Nature, are an added attraction. The principal Buddhist festival is Vesak, the full moon in May at which the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha are concurrently celebrated. In Sri I.anka's lunar calendar, however, even. Vesak must give way to Esala Poya, the July-August midsummer moon. At Esala, the old gods, the dark pagan gods, stretch forth their power again. Strange rhythms pulse in the blood of the people. In Kandy the spectacular Esala Perahera, a sort of Sri I.ankan Mardi Gras procession, takes the street. At Kataragama, the southern shrine that in the Tantra of Asian geography represents the base chakra, the point of origin of the kundalini serpent, penitents gather to tease their flesh with hooks and skewers, and to walk the fire.

Magical stuff; but what has it all to do with nightlife in Colombo? Little enough, on the surface. Little enough, unless you're willing and able to sound your bloodstream for that old pagan back-beat. Like all good rock 'n' roll, you can feel it in the feet, the hips and the shoulders; and you can dance to it.

But if your feet are the sort that require lubrication before they start tapping, you've got a problem. By government fiat, the sale of alcohol is forbidden on Poya days. You could carry a hip flask, but even this is frowned upon. Far better, do what most Sri Lankans do, and pick the night before Poya to do your carousing. That way, you can have your fill of full-moon boogie mixture plus all the booze you can drink. And since – also by official proclamation-every Poya day is also a public holiday, you can sleep it all off, undisturbed, next morning.

So Esala Poya caught me in Colombo this year, with practically everyone I know out of town, and there was nothing for it but to make the most of the moonlight. Half an hour's intense telephoning located an old friend who likes to dance, and Esala Eve was on the runway, cleared for takeoff.



Blue Elephant Hilton

Moonlight being a priority, we chose to eat at the Intercontinental Pizzeria. Most people choose to sit in the sheltered lower section by the sports centre, but if you climb the steps to the upper deck, you'll find yourself on a wide covered patio with a superb view of Galle Buck, its seawall and the road to the harbour (almost deserted after dark), the lighthouse with its probing electric finger, and a very cinematic-looking granite outcropping against which the surf crashes, throwing fountains of spray high into the air and occasionally showering the diners.

Ah, romance! All this and a full moon. . . as close to full as makes no difference. The waiters are friendly, the pizzas are great, the place is rarely crowded (the groundlings all cower in the sheltered part, afraid of the spray) and you can it around as long as you like without making the management restles . There's too much light and the railing round the patio rather spoils the view, but aside from these little defects the place is super. What's more, it's inexpensive-dinner and drinks for two, and we still got change out of five hundred rupees. We spent an hour or two discussing lunar topics (like where have all the lovers gone) before moving on to more serious matters and places. With lunatic perversity, we decided to spend the rest of the night underground, at the Blue Elephant.

The Hilton disco was originally planned as an exclusive members-only club, but the concept was quickly abandoned when it became clear just how popular the place was going to be. Why tum up your nose at a good thing? Still, the prices (the Elephant certainly isn't cheap) and the small size of the place conspire to make it quite exclusive anyway, -and there's a definite 'Elephant crowd', all young and rather well-heeled. Walk in on a night like this and you're confronted with the spectacle of five hundred beautiful people crammed hip to haunch and working up a pretty authentic funk. Fresh sweat, Chanel and that old heathen backbeat. .. the visuals are great, too. The girls are nice to look at (young, well-cared-for and rather more smartly turned out than at most other nightspots) and the boys dress better; there's a no-jeans rule the weeds scruff-boxes out at the door. As for the place itself, it's simply the best-looking nightspot in town. The hexagonal dance-floor is surmounted by the sci fi fan tasty of lights and scaffolding and the lighting effects are both spectacular and thoughtfully planned. The music is contemporary disco (a trifle vacuous but well suited to the crowd) and the beat never stops. Full marks for interior ambience. The bar fronts the dance floor, which is great for mixing the occupations of barfly and wallflower -and the men behind it know their stuff, which is not usually the case with Colombo bartenders.

As any vampire will confirm, the influence of moonbeams extends underground. At the Blue Elephant it struck sparks off stiletto heels and glimmered with cold fire in secluded comers. There are lots of secluded comers-more than any place this crowded has a right to, a piece of architectural wizardry much appreciated by the youthful clientele-and once you've got some architecture between you and the dance-floor, conversation of a sort is possible. If you'd rather drink than talk, head for the bar and a shot-glass full of tequila.

All of a sudden, this relatively exotic liquor has become the rage in smart Colombo.

Clubs and bars where malt whisky was once considered flash are now crammed with people licking up salt, sucking at limes and making faces like Hollywood Mexicans. Those of us whose acquaintance with the spirit went back a little further looked on wonderingly as bartenders were inundated with requests for ‘tekwillah’ and people dug salt out of the cellar with coffee spoons. Now the craze has spread about as far as it can go, so it’ll probably die out soon. Place your bets on Jack Daniels; old hat, I know but destined nonetheless to be the Next Big Thing. Several tequilas later, my feet began to get in each other’s way and my partner (who sticks to vodka on the grounds that the wages of gin is breath) was starting to look petulant. Outside, Esala Poya had arrived and the moon was about as full as it was going to get. We emerged into the silver light and made for the car park, keeping a weather eye open for vampires and nocturnal sprites. Under the midsummer moon, anything could happen.

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