

Vibrant Shades In Jaffna



Sun setting over the palmyrah fronds

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

A cool evening breeze passed swiftly through the busy streets of Jaffna, sweeping away the afternoon's heat, bringing out eager shop-goers and young cyclists onto their midst; and as the sun began to descend gradually beyond the palmyrah fronds the northern capital shimmered a beautiful shade of gold, making it strangely magical and unreal.

The northern peninsula is connected to the rest of the land through a mere causeway at Elephant Pass and is also accessible through the Sangupiddy Bridge at Pooneryn connecting Mannar and Jaffna through the lagoon. Its low-lying

terrain surrounded by shallow yet expansive lagoons is a haven for birds and butterflies. All around lay acres of flat land and water stretching as far as the eye meets. Beyond this scenic beauty highlighted by the greenery of vegetable and fruit plantations, and the innumerable little kovils peacefully sitting in between on either side of the road, lies Jaffna's commercial district.

The commercial hub of the Jaffna town is centred on and around Hospital Road and Stanley Road and we began exploring the age-old maze of streets marvelling at their cultural and commercial splendour. The streets were lined with vibrant shop windows exhibiting everything from colourful garments and shoes to kitchen utensils. Inside the little shops especially on Kasturiam Road, brightly coloured textiles and saris lay neatly folded and stacked from floor to ceiling. Outside, rows of mannequins stood sentinel clad in vibrant salwars (a typical South Indian dress) with far-away looks and eternal smiles fixed on their faces. Also on showcase were fancy necklaces, bracelets and anklets that went with the colourful attire, not to mention the gold jewellery. Jaffna ladies who love their bright colours and fancy jewellery mingled among the garments picking out their favourites under the evening light. The friendly sales folk kept tirelessly encouraging the passers-by to try out their fashionable goods.

As the streetlights slowly came on one after the other blending in with the golden evening sunlight, we edged our way towards the nearby vegetable and fruit market. Just as we entered we were greeted by the smiling vegetable vendors, their produce sprawling on the market floors looking extremely colourful lying in piles next to each other. Freshly picked red onions extensively grown in the area were in plenty along with other fresh vegetables including green beans, capsicum, aubergine (eggplant) and many more. Further in were the sweet wine sellers pouring drops of their pinkish grape wine onto the bottle caps for us to taste and smell the rich flavours.

They are 'locally produced wines from Jaffna's own vineyards' they were saying. Next to the wines were the famous canned 'Nelli' cordials made in Jaffna, a favourite among Sri Lankans. Nelli is a small sour fruit, rich in vitamin C, an important medicinal fruit used all over the country for many diseases either alone or combined with other herbs.

The highlight of the Jaffna market however, is the palmyrah palm products reigned by the jaggery and kotta kilangu (palmyrah root). To make the jaggery,

sweetened palm toddy is boiled down until it's syrupy and is poured out into tiny baskets (also made out of palmyrah leaf) called Kuddan. These are then allowed to cool and harden to a certain extent. This jaggery is supposed to be far more nutritious than cane sugar and is used as an ingredient in making a range of sweet dishes. Apart from the jaggery there were other delicacies such as sesame sweets, sweet murukku, vadai and popcorn, adorning the little sweets stalls with colour and variety. Admiring the produce neatly laid out before us, we pushed our way out among the shopping crowds bargaining and laughing with each other.

What we were experiencing were the daily rituals of a commercial hub that refused to give in to the fading daylight. Caught between the activities and the raised voices of the vendors, my mind raced back to lessons learnt as a child. Centuries ago before the Dutch and the Portuguese had occupied it, the northern peninsula had been called 'Yalpanam', and its seaport had been referred to as 'Pattanam'. However, the sailors and traders of the time had soon joined the two and named the current northern capital 'Yalpanam Pattnam', the Portuguese again transforming this into 'Jaffna Patnam' meaning the 'sea port of Jaffna'. Being so close to South India, Jaffna had very early on developed into a major trading centre. Along with the cotton industry, silk, mat and basket weaving, fruit and vegetables, even elephants from the Vanni region had once been exported from Jaffna to India.

As the streetlights slowly came on one after the other blending in with the golden evening sunlight, we edged our way towards the nearby vegetable and fruit market.

As the sun transformed into a flaming golden disc hovering just above ground level in the orangey-purple skies and dusk fell on the northern peninsula, we retraced our steps back from the town's commercial centre, with bags full of sweet delicacies unique to Jaffna and hearts full of the fondest memories to last a lifetime.

[nggallery id=37]