A Visit to Kayts

Posted on



Fort Hammenhiel in the distance, a picturesque setting as the sun sets in Kayts

The largest islet off mainland Jaffna–Kayts intrigued me… We drove across the road that bridged the oceanic gap and we were soon upon the picturesque setting of Kayts. It was like a different world, almost another time.

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The name Kayts seems to have originated from the Portuguese term Cais, which means harbour and was associated with the trade of elephants from Sri Lanka to India where the island was referred to as Cais dos Elefantes. With the advent of the Dutch, the little island was known as Leiden and finally it was christened as Kayts

during the British era and continues to be known by this name today. Wandering along the many little roads in and around Kayts, the simplistic life of this quaint island drew us further in.

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Kayts, supposedly had a port— Urundai—and with that a fort. However, this fort is in ruins today. Built using coral and sandstone like many others in the region, it takes a little bit of imagination to conjure an image of what it would have been like. A few sections of the walls remain, demarcating the boundary of the fort. With the ocean just a few steps away, the view from this fort is beautiful. Fort Hammenhiel, built by the Portuguese and later occupied by the Dutch and the British was regarded as the key to Jaffna. This is situated on a small islet between Kayts and Karainagar and could be seen from where we were standing. It was evening and catching the ferry that took people across did not seem to be the best use of our time so we continued on with our exploration.

Kayts town was very small, with just a few buildings that reminded us of a little country town in Europe. Everywhere we turned, there were buildings from a very different era. There were those that were somewhat intact and others just skeletons of their previous selves. It is said that Kayts had been a vibrant place and little by little life seemed to be returning to this beautiful isle.

This thought just struck me— Kayts is an island of an island… like so many others around the Jaffna peninsula… interesting. Kayts was as laidback as any other part of the country, but also had a certain feeling that I would say was unique to Kayts.

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As the evening sun spread its glorious rays, the autumn leaves gave colour to the dry landscape. We had heard of Charti Beach, and that is where we headed. It was the time of year where seaweed is pushed ashore and as such the ocean was a different shade. The beach spread as far as the eye could see and maybe when the tide is low you could walk right along till the end. Charti Beach is also well known as a swimming spot and with all the facilities of changing rooms and shower areas it is ideal for a relaxing morning or afternoon.

With the sun receding in the Northern sky we bade farewell to this little island, vowing to return very soon. We had only captured a few moments of Kayts but it was apparent that we had only touched the tip of the iceberg.

