



Sri Lanka — Ayobowan (welcome)

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Colombo experiences its second monsoon if you go in October, so it rains almost every day, coming down in huge torrents — like a sheet of water!

One dry afternoon, I snuck into the Borella Cemetery. Built in 1840, it has a special section from WW I and WW II. A large gate leads to a long pathway with graves on either side, some submerged in water after the recent showers.

Small lanes lead to both sides, marked by placards that quoted famous people and what they said about death, just in case the atmosphere was not eerie enough.

My next target was the older part of Colombo, the areas where the colonial buildings still don their old signboards and a walk on any holiday, when the streets are deserted, makes it very easy to imagine life in the 1940s.

The Slave Island Railway Station (also known as Kompanna Vidiya Railway Station), was built in the 1870s, and to this day, maintains the old traditional way of doing things.

Slave Island, as the name suggests, has a history of slaves working in the area, and according to a source quoted by someone, Arab owners “stored” their slaves here and castrated them to be used in their harems!

My next pit stop was Pettah market, where I caught snippets of people talking in Tamil, as most of the Tamil Muslims have shops here. The Jami ul-Alfar mosque, with its Moroccan interiors and a candy floss exterior, adds value to the Mid-eastern flavour of the market, along with spices being sold. The old town hall nearby is now a museum, but the main market area of Pettah still draws in pre-wedding shoppers, with everything from gold to fabric and other accessories available here.

My last weekend in Sri Lanka was spent on a day trip to the city of Galle. It took more than an hour along a swanky new highway, turning right as soon as you hit the sea, towards the Galle fort area.



The Dutch had taken over the city from the Portuguese in the 1640s, and built a fortified centre in the 1660s. The fort area today houses some of the prettiest little boutique shops, a little heavy on the wallet, but totally worth a visit.

Restaurants and cafes line the upper portion of an old hospital and the fortified walls still run along the sea.

I walked through the old streets, admiring the colonial houses with their wooden rocking chairs on the porch and the walls splashed with burnt orange or yellow colours.

The Dutch Reformed Church was built in 1640, and the floor is paved with tombstones from the cemetery nearby. The markings on these are significant, for instance a tombstone depicting a skull, bones and an hourglass, indicates to an untimely death i.e. sickness.

But before you leave Sri Lanka, do eat its most famous street food: Kottu Roti. Legend has it that a street food seller was about to wrap up his stall when a tourist showed up and instead of disappointing him, a mash up of left overs resulted in this delicious mix of flavours.

Kottu Roti is bread mixed with chicken/ beef/egg in a milk-based sauce and the hand rolled bread, or roti, which is chopped with veggies like cabbage and carrots etc. is done with a spatula type tool that makes a “tak-a-tak” sound.

I ate it at Pilawoos, possibly the most famous shop in Colombo, which was featured in the Time magazine and by none other than Anthony Bourdain.

Photo: Reema Islam

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