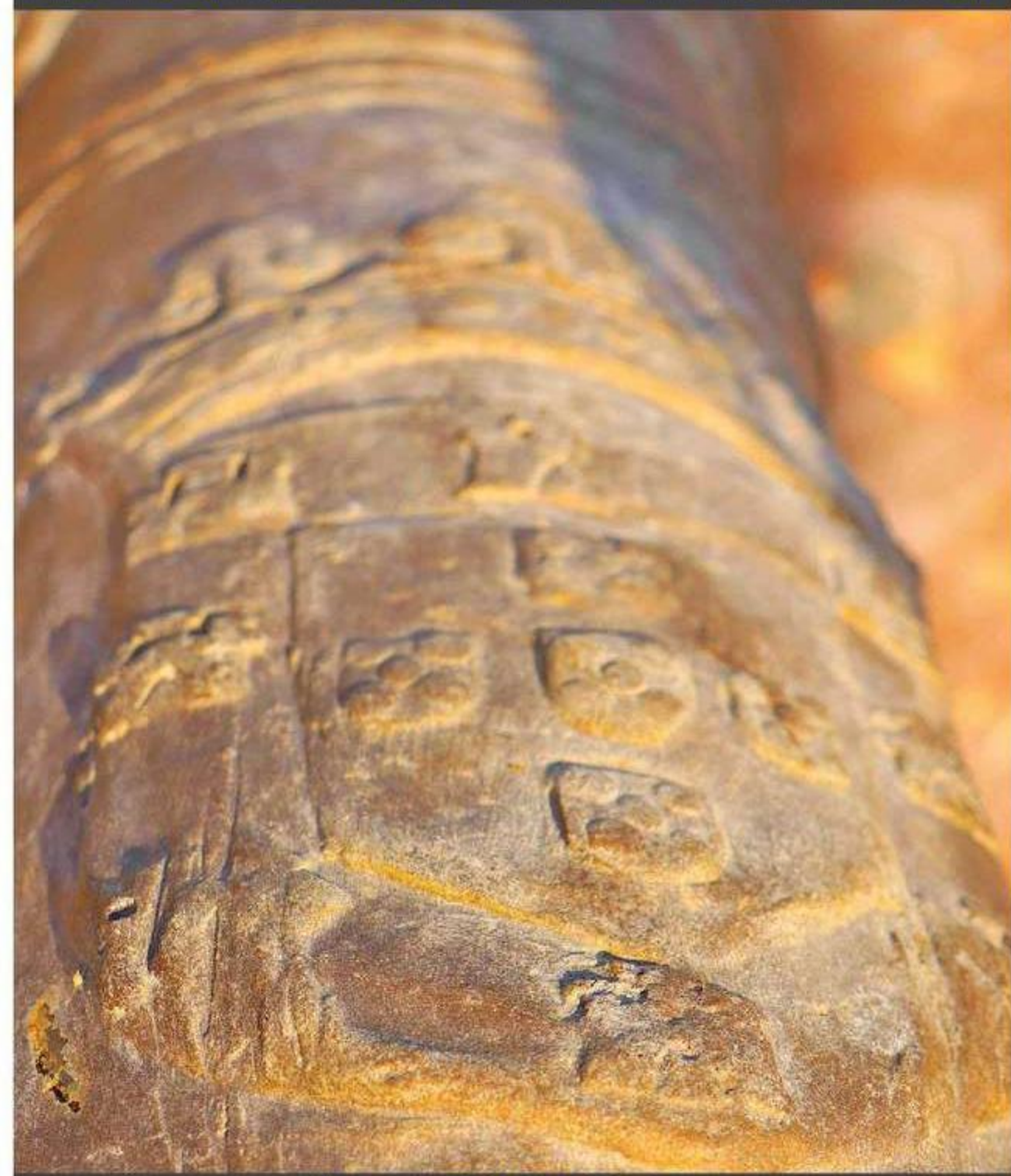




Coral in the columns came from the boat ballast as seen in The Black Fort



The mark of the English Canon

Daily News

# THE

To re-ignite the passions of town & country folk

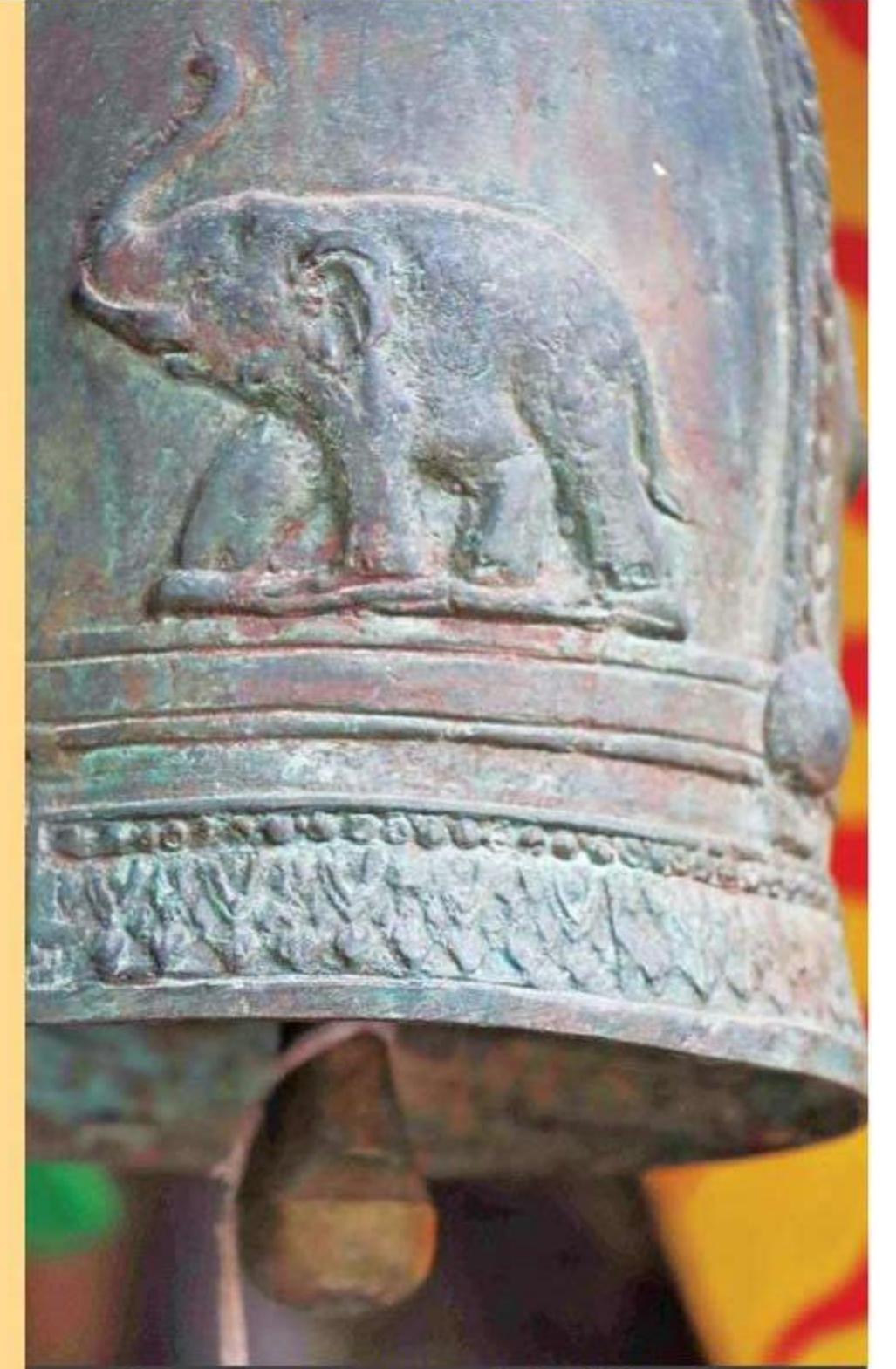
FEATURES EDITOR : (011) 242 9216 Fax : (011) 234 3694  
E mail : features.dailynews@lakehouse.lk



No 34 Hospital Street is an amazing spot to buy a souvenir of the old city

## SANTA CRUZ - THE PORTUGUESE BLACK FORT OF GALLE

The writer takes a look at one of the worlds most flourishing ports in ancient times and the reason it got the name Black Fort



History everywhere even in the little antique

JULIET COOMBE

Walking along the ancient walls it is easy to distinguish the black smoke covered walls of the Portuguese from the lower walls with the cannon positions built by the Dutch and later added to by the English.

Although we consider the fort started with the colonisation of the Portuguese, legend has it that Galle was originally the biblical city of Tarshish to which, many moons ago, King Solomon came in search of glittering gemstones to the woe the Queen of Sheba, along with purchasing exotic spices grown along the coastline, apes and peacocks to ward off the evil eye. There must be some truth in the story as it is the only place in the world where peacocks continue to wreak havoc on the roof tops of the ancient city, spices grow everywhere and gems can be found for sale even in the smallest of alley ways.

The Portuguese knew from the Arabic traders that this was a spice island rich in many different kind of treasures and trading opportunities. So in 1588 they built the first city walls known today as Black Fort with secret tunnels tall enough for the soldiers to walk through and huge prisons for the African slaves they brought to do the construction work of the ramparts, which was done entirely by hand.

Its name was as a result of the dark charcoal walls, which went black over the years from the fires to keep out the wild animals, combined with working smithies and the firing of canons and guns. For anyone who wants to step back in time nothing could be more interesting and romantic than watching the sun set from the most historic and fascinating part of Fort Galle found in the corner of Law Court Square. A place rich in trading history that was taken away from the Portuguese by Dutch in

1640 before passing into the hands of the British in 1796.

Behind latticed windows and craggy coral walls, gem merchants continue to exchange glittering sapphires fit for Queens and princesses. So finely do they cut their gems that Princess Diana's jeweller found the perfect blue sapphire stone for her engagement ring here. Elsewhere, groups of scholarly-looking Muslim men, clad in their white 'kurtas' and lace skull caps, creak along on old Singer bicycles, while street sellers go from door to door selling fresh fish and vegetables on blue carts with wooden wheels. In Law Court Square, you will amazingly hear the tappety-tap of Remington typewriters ping-pong out the latest important legal report and, besides the legal fraternity there are plenty of other characters and street sellers that frequent the square, where until only a decade ago cows meandered and goats scampered.

The sturdy and enduring fort rampart walls, made from coral and shells in parts and rock hewn from the area is in many ways one of the cradles of the ancient worlds trade routes that has many an interesting explanation in the fascinating Maritime Museum. It is a living city where you will find time-locked trinkets everywhere, like the 85ft working lighthouse, flanked by swaying palms, which still guides ships to safety through the treacherous rocks at night - but still from ancient trading times there are lots of remnants of old shipwrecks in the bay, and who knows what treasures lie beneath the waves. Perhaps, the Fort jumpers who soar from the towering bastion of Flag Rock into the turquoise waters below, where they swim with giant turtles and octopuses, know the true secrets of the sea and its many trading treasures.

The fort is a rare and peaceful place, where different religions live in harmony with each other. On Rampart Street, look out for the Buddhist Temple's



The people of Galle Fort are full of philosophical wisdom like antique dealer M L P Sugathadasa

bright white stupa, and glimpse vivid bolts of orange as groups of Buddhist monks give advice to those that visit. From there, wander on to the Mosque, overlooking the ancient city walls on Leyn Baan Street, where an aquamarine water basin is used daily for worshippers to wash in before proceeding inside this important place of worship. On Sunday, the city comes to life in the Dutch Reformed Church, built in 1755, next to the Amangalla hotel (formally the N.O.H) on Church Street. All religions are active in Galle and the spectacular Hindu kovil can be found just outside the city walls.

The pace of life remains captivatingly due to the creativity of artists, artisans and master craftsman. Most inhabitants cycle or walk, and there are still a few classic Morris Minor cars adorning the frontages of places on Pedlars Street. Take a leisurely stroll around the old city but don't rush, or you might miss something, like the fascinating Historical Mansion, which shows you how the fort was in the old days or The National Museum next to one of the most iconic hotels in Sri Lanka The Amangalla. At every twist or turn there's a fascinating sight, building or shop with beautiful things for sale inside. Even the columns have interesting stories to tell and in The Black Fort you can see exactly how they were made in the olden days as there are a couple stripped back revealing the clever way in which they built in years gone past.

Crumbling Moorish and Dutch colonial houses hug the narrow streets and often you'll pass a

beautifully refurbished colonial facade with wonderfully restored courtyards inside or a resting spot on the walls where you can enjoy the many picturesque views. This citadel is fast becoming a coveted place to live where even the likes of celebrity cricketers like Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara have bought historic villas, along with other people from all corners of the world. Light House and Middle Street have some of the most beautiful houses in Asia, each one celebrating the Golden Age Of Trade.

Like Zanzibar, known as the Spice Island in Africa, the first Arab traders named Sri Lanka 'Serendib - island of jewels', and today you can still buy every shade of sapphire in the Fort's dazzling portfolio of shops and workshops. Should you be feeling hungry, you can lunch at a top hotel like Fort Printers on Pedlar Street or grab a spicy street snack. Roti shops on New Lanes, just off Lyn Baan Street, start cooking some tasty bites at dawn, so grab a few 'wadis' or 'bondas' (deep fried lentil/potato patties) and wander off to look for the fruit sellers who cut up fresh pineapple or mango from one of the colourful blue carts on Rampart Street and make sure you dunk the pieces of fruit into a bag mixed with sugar and chilli, always the perfect way to cool down from the heat of the day. Walking the old city walls, you can enjoy the tranquil ambience as the ruby red sun ball melts into the horizon of the azure blue Indian Ocean, the Buddhist chants from the temple and the Muslim call to prayer mingle together with the calls of the street sellers and the peacocks as they display their feathers in front of one of the Black Fort canons as if they were in a movie shoot.

As dusk falls and the temperature drops, walk on up to the Moon and Star Bastions where the rest of the Fort seems like a skeletal structure in an astral chasm.

The Bastions loom out like lorises, with eyes like a deer caught in the headlights. From there, take a moment to gaze at the heavens - it is so clearly one of the best places for stargazing in Sri Lanka. The peaceful ambience of this world-famous merchant city will make you want to stay cocooned inside its ballast built walls forever, away from the hustle and bustle of a stressful high tech modern life.



Galle Fort Courtyards are captivating



Under fire in the Galle Forts Black Fort