

Kandy: Jewel of the colonial heritage

Mahil Wijesinghe walks the streets of the beautiful hill country capital, the city of Kandy, home to the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Kandy, the last capital of Sri Lanka, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. With 2,500 years of flourishing Buddhist heritage and British colonial architecture since 1815, it is a city where you will find architectural jewels which ever way you turn



VIGNETTES FROM A VIBRANT PAST: Having visited the Temple of the Tooth, I made up my mind to explore some old world British architecture of a bygone era, scattered in the heart of the town. Continuing my walk towards the hub of Kandy town, the first stop was the Queen's Hotel, a historic building in the city, on the bank of the Kandy Lake, shaded with sprawling Mara trees. The magnificent white structure is located on the Dalada Veediya, the main street in Kandy on one side, and Trincomalee Street on the other, forming a V shape. The original building was constructed to meet with the requirements of British colonial administration shortly after the fall of Kandy in 1815. The building complex used as Governor's Mansion by the Government was later transformed as the mess complex of the Ceylon Rifles Regiment, and named Malabar House in 1840. Malabar House became a Royal Boarding House. In 1879, the entire complex passed into the hands of Miss Piachaud, who made it a popular spot for the British planters, army officers and visitors to Kandy. In 1895, Miss Piachaud's hotel was acquired by Kandy Hotels Company Ltd., while retaining the title as Queen's Hotel. It bears features of 19th century 'British Railway Station architecture'. Rounded pillars and steel girdles are retained even today.



TREASURES OF A BYGONE ERA

I mingle with the crowd of white clad pious devotees of the Temple of the Tooth at the end of Dalada Veediya and reach the northern end of the Maligawa complex to the west of Pattini Devalaya where the water spout can be seen. Shortly after the British occupation of the country, coffee was introduced as a main plantation crop, and an organisation was formed by the coffee planters. They constructed the 'Coffee Planters' Fountain' in 1855, to commemorate the visit of the Prince of Wales to Ceylon, in December of that year.



BUDDHIST EDUCATION IN THE PAST

Not far from St. Paul's Church is another glistening white building with Kandyan architecture, the Billimoria Building and Banbury Hall constructed in the late 1800s by the Buddhist Theosophical Society, to house Dharmaraja College. This was the first Buddhist school in Kandy to be launched by the Society, led by Sir Henry Steele Olcott in 1887 to fulfil the need for Buddhist education in the colonial period. Today, the building has become part of the Natha Devala and the school has been shifted elsewhere. But, still the name 'Dharmaraja College' stands on the top of the building.



MILITARY TALES

Along the road encircling the Kandy Lake, I came across another colonial edifice known as Hotel Suisse which is one of the oldest and most picturesque hotels in Kandy. After the British occupation in 1815 the ownership of the building had changed in 1818, when it was acquired by the British Army for the commanding officer and was named, 'Haramby House'. It was bought by a planter's wife, a Swiss lady, who converted it to a residential hotel named Hotel Suisse. During the Second World War, it became the residence of Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces.



THE COLONIAL STABLE

Walking past the water fountain towards Deva Veediya, I came across an old, forgotten building with marvelous architectural features going back to the colonial period, standing along the street of Deva Veediya in front of St. Paul's Church. This building now houses the offices of Attorneys-at Law. It is believed, this unique 19th century building had once been the stables where Britons housed their horses. Looking at the structure, one can perceive that it is on the verge of collapse as sections of it have cracks on the upper part even though most of the lawyers still occupy the building.



FIRST KANDY KACHCHERI

I walked back to the Dalada Maligawa through the Natha Devala entrance and came upon another large colonial building adjoining of the Maligawa, housing the Museum of World Buddhism. This building within the Temple complex of the Sri Dalada Maligawa is located behind the Magul Maduwa of the Maligawa. Built in 1887, this structure had once been the High Court of Kandy. This was originally used as the Kandy Kachcheri. It is an impressive building, solidly built. In 1880, the Department of Public Works had spent Rs. 144, 700 for the construction of this building.



KANDYAN REGALIA

Amidst the traffic congestion of the city streets, I headed towards another unique destination: Kandy Town Hall. The Municipal Councils for Colombo and Kandy were set up by Ordinance No. 17 of 1865. The Kandy Municipal Council was inaugurated on March 2, 1866. Long before the Kandy Municipal Council was established, the city was well administered with city amenities during the Kandyan period. The Municipal Council office is housed in the Dunuwilla Walauwa in Kande Veediya, a prominent aristocratic building of the Kandyan period.



TESTIMONY OF FAITH IN STONE

My next stop was St. Paul's Church situated within the sacred city area of the Temple of the Tooth with a towering abbey like tower. This splendid Anglican House of God looms majestically and is probably the only terracotta brick building left from the British era. Established in the early 1850s for the British Garrison stationed in Kandy as well as Government Agents and other high officials, it had once been named, Garrison Church. The centuries old church still stands strong, brimming with Anglican worshippers at regular Sunday service, adding an old world charm to the Buddhist environment.



STILL IMPOSING

Back in Dalada Veediya, I joined an endless sea of people: students, Bhikkus, shoppers and colourfully attired foreign tourists in the bustle street of main street of Kandy. There are several colonial buildings on either side of Dalada Veediya. One of the thriving colonial architectural marvels is the Bank of Ceylon building. A peculiar V shaped building, it contains several architectural highlights, such as arched-windows and doorways. The Cargills building and Bake House are among the other colonial buildings lining Dalada Veediya on either side.



OLD POST OFFICE

Having witnessed some of the enduring compositions of colonial buildings in the city, my final stop was the old Post Office of Kandy which stands majestically near the Railway Station. The old post office which originally housed the Railway Hotel, was constructed in 1867. In 1902, it was converted for use as the Post Office of Kandy following its acquisition by the Government from the Hotel's liquidators. This massive colonial edifice contains four storeys featuring massive arched windows with intricately carved mouldings around it.