

Cherished Reminders of the Past

It is possible to experience several countries in a day without leaving Sri Lankan shores, as you explore the remnants of the island's colonial era.

How about a thoroughly English afternoon tea with fresh scones and jam after a stroll in the rose garden, just the thing to set you up for a game of cricket? Maybe you'd prefer to hunt for antique porcelain and hanging Dutch oil lamps, or to wander through the remains of old Portuguese fortifications in the hope of uncovering a few stray coins hidden between the flagstones.



The first Europeans arrived in the early 16th century, attracted by the island's spices and gemstones. The *Portuguese* established a number of coastal trading settlements, converted some of the Sinhalese aristocracy to Catholicism, and built fortresses to protect their ports.

Few traces of the Portuguese remain, their fortifications absorbed into fortresses later built by the Dutch. However, the Catholic faith still remains strong, and a number of Portuguese words have been absorbed into local languages. Even more striking is the use of Portuguese names such as de Silva, Fernando and Pereira among many Sinhalese, even after they abandoned the religious faith that once came with such names.



When the Dutch received the monopoly of the spice trade in return for getting rid of the Portuguese in the mid-17th century, they renamed the island Zeilan.

Reminders of the Dutch can be seen in 300 year-old forts along the coast, in the churches, forts and homes of Galle, a remarkably preserved UNESCO World Heritage Site built entirely within walls and ramparts, and in the magnificent public buildings, churches and private houses in many coastal areas of Sri Lanka.

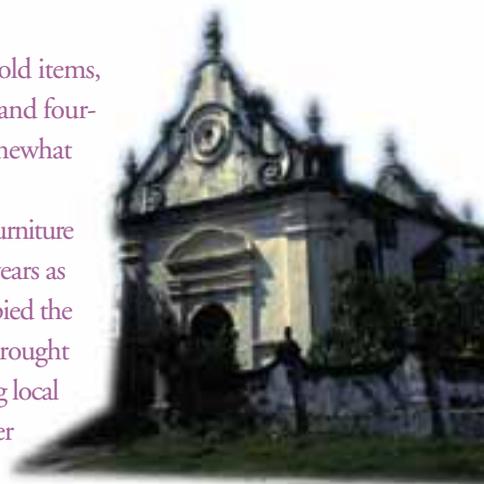
In a narrow street in the heart of Colombo's seething bazaar of Pettah, sits an imposing white-washed mansion, its terracotta-tiled roof held up by eight massive unadorned pillars. Built in 1780 as the residence of the Dutch governor, this is now home to the *Dutch Period Museum*. The heavy wooden furniture,

cabinets of household items, hanging oil lamps and four-poster beds are somewhat sober in style.

However, colonial furniture changed over the years as local carpenters copied the original furniture brought by the Dutch, using local woods. Their lighter touch and

different taste transformed the furniture from often clumsy items into furniture of beauty and charm, still eagerly sought after in the antique stores of Colombo and along the west coast.

The Dutch left more behind than just furniture. In upmarket antique shops in Colombo, in crowded, dusty treasure houses along the west coast and in Galle, a host of Dutch homewares await discovery. Porcelain tableware, cutlery, glassware, hanging glass oil lamps, candelabra and stoneware water filters are easily found, and who knows what other treasures lie beneath that pile of bric-a-brac.





The British took control of the coastal ports at the end of the 18th century, and renamed the country Ceylon.

They literally changed the face of parts of the island, introducing large-scale planting of tea in the 1870s, a crop which flourished and went on to become the finest tea in the world. Many charming bungalows built for tea estate managers have recently been converted to make unique guest houses or boutique hotels.

The British established hill resorts such as Nuwara Eliya, complete with English gardens, cool-climate produce including strawberries, trout fishing, horse racing and golf.

They also introduced the railway system (which still transports thousands of people every day), and above all, cricket. Now a consuming passion among Sri Lankans, this is arguably one of the most enduring and cherished legacies of Sri Lanka's colonial past.

For further information, please contact Sri Lanka Tourist Board or click onto www.srilankatourism.org

