

The thrum of NEGOMBO

Pulling the brakes in Sri Lanka for a
laid-back weekend.

Text **Supriya Sehgal**

This spread: A view of
Negombo town and a fishing
boat in the foreground against
a dramatic sunset.

When the star pollinator of our holiday plan to Sri Lanka, a close friend, dropped out last minute, I decided to take the trip anyway to wind down. Having pinned Trincomalee on the eastern edge, I looked forward to bleached sandy stretches and the balmy sea to snorkel in.

But the unraveling of my travel plan had still not revealed itself in its entirety. Hotel bookings erroneously done for December 2018, and not 2017, I found myself at the Bandaranaike International Airport with a mood to hit the beaches but the 'Sold Out' plastered against each hotel on booking apps, or sky rocketing prices were preposterous, even for a year-end break. By the end of a conversation with Saliya, a cab driver, I settled for serendipity instead of solitude. Saliya was hitting the road back to his home in Negombo, only 40 km away from the airport. And he knew of a decent hotel by the beach, which wouldn't squeeze the wallet.

In the eight times that I had visited the country, Negombo had never featured on my list. 'Proximity syndrome' is what I called it; it was too close to the capital city of Colombo and a destination that had a weekend 'dash in-dash out' vibe to it. Saliya said it would be ideal to test various states of idleness – sink in the hammock, stroll on the beach, grab a drink at the local bars, and even slip in some time at the harbour.



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Clockwise from top left: A couple watching the sunset at Negombo Beach; A local sorting through fish to dry them; The year 1678 etched on the Dutch fort's gate.



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Clockwise from left: The slow but strong monitor lizards are a common sight in Negombo; A passage within the Angurukaramulla Temple; The starting point of Hamilton's Canal.

Saliya wistfully painted a picture of his adolescent years in the town – the then near-empty golden beaches, chasing monitor lizards at the famous Muthurajawela Marsh and making full use of his stringy young arms to exaggeratedly pull fishermen's nets to lend them a hand when they hauled kilos of fish at dawn. "It was a simple life," he sighed. "That was before the glitzy resorts addressed themselves at the edge of the sand." Despite this, he reaffirmed it was much better than the ubiquitous grey of the concrete of Colombo. I had little expectations and choice, so I decided to enjoy the thrum of Negombo, no matter what.

Saliya's Negombo emerged more pleasant than his gripping brushstrokes. I was sure I would catch him in the city, this time driving his brother's tuk-tuk, as he was taking a break from the cab over the next few days.

I reserved two of my four mornings for the main harbours of Negombo. Flip-flop slapping my heels, I strolled to the action-packed 'wet' harbour on the first day to watch the hauling of the fresh catch from the *oruvas* (outrigger canoes) to the large hall at the edge of the Negombo lagoon. Sifting, sorting and piling up of ocean riches in different stacks was

in full swing and no one lifted their gaze from the commotion. The salty seaside air was thicker with the strong smell of fish. On another morning, I shifted my viewing pavilion to the edge of the 'dry' harbour, where carpets of fish were laid out on the beach so that direct sunlight could suck the moisture out of each one. Crispy fish are a delightful snack that can be preserved for long. Even on the edge of the road, where the lagoon water trickled in, men stood patiently with rods to catch some for personal consumption.

Fishing is inextricably hemmed into the history of Negombo. Even centuries ago, it was a booming trading and fishing port of the country, tempting many nationalities to make inroads via its harbours and inwards in search of superior quality cinnamon. Negombo, formerly Migamuwa, was christened into its current anglicised version by the Portuguese. The decline of their power gave way to that of the Dutch. The protective embrace of the 17th-century walls of a Dutch fort now circle the town's prison. The year '1678' is firmly etched on a crumbling gate, bearing testimony of its age.

Looping around the city on foot is easy, but Saliya soon traced me. It would have been difficult for me to spot him from the sea of tuk-tuks on each junction, so I was thankful when he honked me out of my sauntering pace and asked me to hop in for an insider's view of the city. All of a few kilometres in radius, I'm sure I would have been able to explore the town over the next few days on my own, but I responded with gratitude to Saliya's enthusiasm to show me around.

Our first stop was the 200-year-old Angurukaramulla Temple. The 6m-tall Buddha statue and a dragon mouth entrance are less than alluring, but inside not a spot has evaded grand murals and structures. Stories from Buddha's life are depicted in bright colours and intricate designs. Our religious expedition of 500m included the grand St Mary's Church, and a Ganesha temple with a freshly painted gopuram overrun by angels, demons and other celestial beings.

The usual ticked off the list, Saliya brought me to a grey slim canal, its edges encrusted with a permanent spot for garbage. This was the Hamilton's Canal. Another colonial remnant, it was built by the British in 1802 to connect the region to Colombo, and named after Gavin Hamilton, the Government Agent of Revenue and Commerce. Once a clean meandering thread of blue, this was Saliya's former favourite spot in the city to watch the sky turn a blushed pink in the evenings.

He then whizzed off to Muthurajawela Marsh, where a boat ride made us step in with the rhythm of the steady canal water. The mangrove-fringed ride awarded us a glimpse of the unique wetlands ecosystem, including a slender loris, egrets and herons and even a monitor lizard scampering by the edge. The hour-long glide through the lush surroundings was the ideal antidote to the town's busy markets, where we would land next.

Late evening, Saliya deposited me at the beginning of the Portutoda Road, parallel to the beach. He recommended that I get a flavour of touristic things that seemed to give the town its heady edge over other more unassuming pit-stops. Shop fronts drooping under the weight of curios, clothes, bags and bright tea signage lent a festive air to the street. Constantly accosted by shopkeepers to sample 'this' and try 'that', it took me over half an hour to drag myself to Rodeo Bar. I had no cowboy hat to place on the table, but I dumped my spoils of the market – mostly tea tins as souvenirs – and asked for Sri Lanka's most popular beer, Lion. The next two hours was the only time that came close to my initial plan of a do-nothing holiday. But I wasn't complaining. ■



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Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Colombo from Mumbai. Negombo lies 38 km north from here and is well connected by road.

Fact File

Currency

1 Indian rupee = 2.39 Sri Lankan rupee (approx.)

Upcoming event

- Sinhalese New Year, April 14: Celebrate with locals the festival which symbolises prosperity and ethnic harmony

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