

The Colombo Guide – press release

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7° north of the equator lay Ceylon, an island which has always been a strategic naval point in the Indian Ocean for centuries. Because of this importance it was repeatedly colonized by different countries from the West. The different flavours of architecture throughout the landscape tell a story of changing hands among foreign powers, all of which has shaped Colombo into the city it is today. But due to years of civil war and blockage of certain areas within, the city is vastly unknown, even to its own habitants. The Colombo Guide by Sri Serendipity Publishing, the first comprehensive city guide to Colombo. Brainchild of Publisher, Juliet Coombe, opens up Colombo to the world and shows even the locals, things they didn't know were hidden among the buildings, roads and people of this now booming city. During the war, people coming into the country always avoided the Colombo, the country's commercial capital, on their way to other picturesque parts of the country, overlooking the heritage and over 300 years of history of the city.

Explaining where the inspiration came from, Juliet says "Well Colombo was always going to open up after the war, with new businesses coming up and new global interest in the country on the increase." She feels that Colombo was always overlooked by tourists, either because it wasn't safe or because they didn't think there was anything interesting about it. Many parts of the city that were considered high-security zones due to the government institutions or people located in the area, were under lockdown and the general public nor tourists weren't allowed to visit them. This was the case for the 30 years of war that the country had to endure. Being closed off for so long, the timeless artefacts and monuments of its past just faded away from the memories and hearts of people. But now with the conflict ended and restrictions lifted, Juliet thinks the time is right to rediscover Colombo, discover its forgotten memoria and secrets.

All guides will tell you that they aren't just any other guide book, but end up being more of the same. The Colombo Guide is not just your average directory of numbers and collage of photographs, labelled a guide. Comprising of a team with both local flavour and international experts, young, old, single, married, unfaithful, the guide takes you through the smallest of streets, into the hearts of the people who colour Colombo with their lives. It is not just the buildings or the people that make up this city; it's the smells, the colours, the sounds, the heritage, the history, the synergy of its inhabitants breathing together, one heart beating, proof of life after the years of terror attacks and being shrouded by the clouds of bad international publicity.

The team of writers have walked through the capillaries of this beating heart, brushing their hands along the warm walls of the sun baked streets from Pettah to Slave Island to Mount Lavinia. Their noses have swum the fragrances and odours of the weekend "Pola's" to the Bombay Sweet Mahals to the salty beaches. They have followed the colonial trails from the Lavinia Hotel to the Clock Tower in Fort to the Dutch Museum, they have done it all. The guide tells a story made of little stories of people and places around the city. Some heard of before, like the story of Kuthan, the doorman at the Galle Face Hotel, who's been working there for 72 years and others, not so known like that of Ramesh Ranasinghe and

Kamaya de Soysa. Ramesh and Kamaya run, the Quintessence of Spun Sugar, which is a small cupcakery in the heart of Colombo that bakes cupcakes that Juliet says are as good as the ones found in New York. The writers have been there, tasted the cupcakes and spoken directly with the individuals who make it happen and really experienced the essence of the establishment and its sugary delights at the risk of their health and developing diabetes.

The guide adds exciting new places to existing categories like the coffee houses. It's not just an address and a number, the guide gives you a taste of the coffee and experience even before you go to the place. One of the newly discovered places is Coco Veranda, a Sri Lankan business that is challenging the better known and longer established international coffee shop franchises. From its very personal service to its wide use of social media, it is somewhat a pioneer in the market that the guide was lucky enough to find. The writers wrap a story around the coffee shop through the eyes of the people who run it. In our drive to discover we walked the streets of Pettah, through the Friday prayer crowds, dodged speeding transporters who aren't looking where they are going, eaten of out unheard of shops in the hope that they may have something worth writing about.

We also discover forgotten treasures like the Colombo Lighthouse. Yes, there is a lighthouse in Colombo. It was only the people who work around the area, military persons manning the area and government officials passing through on their way to the presidential palace. All these years since the bombing of the Central Bank and closing of the road, the lighthouse has been hidden behind the Ceylon Intercontinental Hotel building. Further on from there and show everyone the alien looking 'Stupa on stilts', the Chaitya Dagoba. Apart from these, the guide also takes you into the institutions like hotels, restaurants and shops that give Colombo a unique edge. Take for example Casa Colombo, the boutique hotel. Hidden away from all the other commercialized hotels that are a staple in most guide books, set in a 200 years old mansion, Casa is the epitome of unique, starting from its pink pool to custom interiors designed by the owner himself. The book also shows you a business through the eyes of its creator, like in the case of Shanth Fernando. If you don't know who that is, he is the owner of the Gallery Cafe, Paradise Road and Tintagel, and this way of portraying a place rather than just saying a lime juice costs Rs.200, helps the reader really feel the place even before going there. Did you know that the Gallery Cafe used to be Geoffrey Bawa's old office? Exactly, you didn't.

Regular guides would tell you to go visit the museum when in Colombo, but what else, isn't there more to do and see in Colombo? The book was written solely to help young couples with finding the perfect spot for a good date. In the Top 5 dates section, the writers actually went out and researched with people from various generations and social classes on what their idea of wooing someone would be. This section is a must read for all those Casanovas and Divas, looking for the perfect lead up to a dalliance. Another important thing the book focuses on is the art trails in Colombo. From the Theertha Art Gallery to the mini gallery at Odel and the artists on Green Path, the book gears people up for what will be Sri Lanka's biggest art event, the 2012 Colombo Art Biennale. The first art Biennale took place during the Galle Literature Festival in 2009 and is a showcase of Sri Lanka's artistic talent, and the second one will take place in 2012, where Sri Serendipity Publishing will be doing the official book on the Biennale and all the artists involved in it. Sri Lankan art is going to explode in a big way and highlighting certain things, is our way of preparing the world for it.

Set to be distributed in over 40 countries worldwide and being the first comprehensive city guide, the Colombo Guide is sure to permanently nail Colombo all tour guides and travel plans for Sri Lanka in the years to come. Being cited by the international media as one of the most exciting post war cities in Asia, the writers have walked its streets extensively, often risking being hauled away by police on the charge of spying or engaging in suspicious activities in a high security. We have ridden the escalators in the malls, battled the sun and traffic to map the streets, tasted everything that we've written about, gone on the dates, walked through somewhere till our legs said no more and truly diffused into the sketchy or dodgy or whatever you call it, parts of town in the search for stories, in the search of people, that we believe, make this city what it is. Through their eyes, we show you the forgotten old king's cell in Fort, we take you to taste the best Samosas in town and take you on a journey you can guarantee is unique. So dare to discover, mystery, secrets and what it means to really live in Colombo, Sri Lanka's beating heart.

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