

Around The Fort in 80 Lives

Chronicling the history of a city

'The history of a man can be more interesting and instructive than the history of a whole nation, when it is written in no vain desire to arouse our sympathy'
- Mikhail Lermontov, 'A Hero of Our Time.'

By Rathindra Kuruwita

Chronicling the history of a city through the lives of its inhabitants is not for the faint of heart. But it is that sort of endeavor that Juliet Coome has undertaken. Although she has been residing in Sri Lanka less than four years, the feeling that the old world charm of the Galle Fort was disappearing with each day, propelled her to start an ambitious project of chronicling the lives of all those who reside in the Fort, almost one and a half years ago.

Now, after 18 months, three pairs of worn out shoes and thousands of photographs later, we have *'Around the Fort in 80 Lives.'*

"In the few years post-Tsunami years that I have lived in Galle I saw that the history was disappearing; people were selling their houses and were moving to Colombo or abroad," Juliet said. "I sensed that these people have lived here for centuries, but their stories will die with their migration. It was really important to chronicle their stories. Like UNESCO which was looking after the buildings I thought that I should do something to preserve their stories," she added.

At first she picked out several residents of the Fort who she thought were interesting, and recorded their stories via photographs. Originally, her plan was to exhibit these photographs during the Galle Literary Festival (GLF.) But the enthusiastic response of the people who came to see the exhibition made her realise that she should do more.

"I started the project a year and a half ago. At first it was planned to be a side show of the GLF. We had a big warehouse full of these photos that told the stories of these individuals and we got a tremendous response," she said. "People who visited the stall wanted to hear more stories, and

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300 houses 300 stories

In search of material for the book, Juliet decided to visit all the houses in the Galle Fort and talk to the owners of these ancient edifices. Since many of these individuals have been residing in the same house for centuries, she found out that almost all had an interesting tale to tell. She made a map of the Galle Fort and started visiting the houses in a systematic manner so that she would not miss out anything.

"I started visiting houses, but since my language was pretty basic back then, I took a translator with me. I made a map and I ticked off each house I visited, and if I could not meet someone I visited that place over and over again until I met the owner. Usually the people who have moved out to Colombo would come back, and we would talk about the stories of their forefathers and why they moved out," she said.

Although at first she thought the best time to visit people was during the evening, she quickly realised that this was not really the best time to knock on people's doors.

"As time went by I realized the best time to visit the people homes was not during the evenings because most of the people were busy watching their favourite soap operas," she said. "So the best time

to visit the people was the morning. So I went in the morning, had a cup of tea, discussed about their lives and the history of the houses they lived in," she added.

After visiting almost 360 houses and taking thousands of photographs Juliet realized that her initial idea of limiting her book to 80 pages was an impossible task. She found so many interesting stories and it would have been a pity to axe so many stories that deserved to be told.

"There are around 365 buildings in the Fort and with the vacant ones the number is closer to 400. Sometimes one visit was not enough. Each time I found new things to photograph. So I went back to the same places and would invariably find more stuff about them. In the process I wore out three pair of shoes," she confessed.

Local knowledge

Residents of the Galle Fort also gave Juliet information about the lesser known places in the Fort that she could photograph. Although the Fort has been photographed millions of times, she found out that the residents could give her some pointers that the other photographers, mainly 'outsiders' have missed out.

"People always told me about places that have not been photographed much. For example someone told me that the best place to photograph the Fort was from the sea. So I went and asked the fishermen, 'at what time will the sea subside?' and sometimes they would knock on my door in the

wee hours of the morning, to give me this information" she recalls.

"After several wild goose chases, I finally got the chance to take the shot, walking to the sea and 'shooting' from the ramparts. I learned new things and as I learned more, the project developed from 80 pages to 300 pages," she added.

Not just a guide book

Although at first she had no idea of including a glossary of commonly used words, and a compilation of places of interest in and around the Fort, she later realised that such a guide will be beneficial to a 'visiting outsider.'

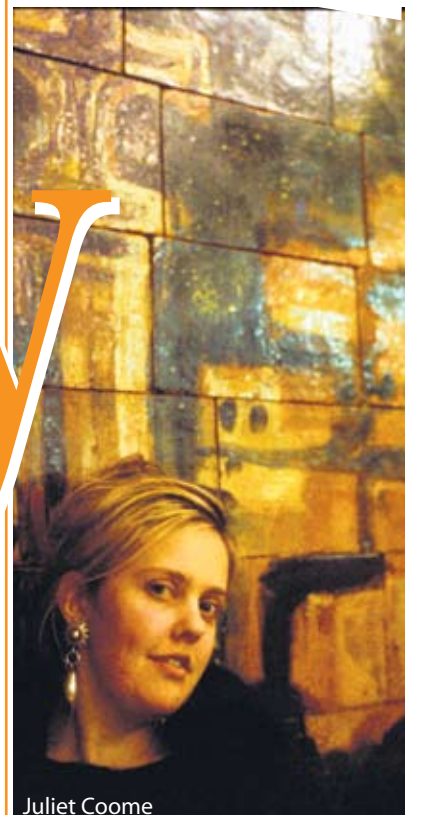
"I realised that there are a lot of things that may confuse a visitor who does not understand the language and the customs. I mean I know the meaning of 'Idiappa and Malu,' and I know that it's traditionally wrapped in banana leaves, but a 'foreigner' will be puzzled by what is inside this green parcel," she said. "So I thought that it was necessary to include a glossary of words that are used in everyday life. I realised that in the guide books about real life or about people. They never go out of the mainstream; they would never talk about the *Rotti* shop where people can buy tasty but cheap food. I thought it was important to include such places as well as the "boutique hotels," she added.

About the author

Juliet Coome is a photo journalist who has visited 143 countries around the world. But as she says, "it is only the Galle Fort that was able to stop me in my tracks."

"I went to the University in London and my first degree was in journalism. I did my MA in new media and wired technology. I then became a war correspondent, and covered many war situations. I came to Sri Lanka to cover the Tsunami and I met my husband here," she said.

At this year's third Galle Literary Festival January 2009, she will be talking about, "Everyone has a book in them" and, "How to turn an idea into a successful publishing venture." On November 22 she will be giving a talk at Cafe 42 at 42, Lighthouse Street on how to DIY your kitchen into a professional camera kit at 11am until 12 O'clock, with book signing afterwards. "This will include taking pictures with a biscuit tin, using silver foil as a reflector, tea bags as filters (and also a quick refreshment), bin liners as water proof casing and toilet rolls as camera light hoods," Juliet said.



Juliet Coome

