

Profiling Lives in Galle Fort By Ethan Gelber

Alice has her rabbit hole, Narnia's Pevensie children their wardrobe...and Juliet Coombe the 17th century Dutch gates of the Galle Fort, her medieval seaside citadel in southwest Sri Lanka. This sense of magical transport is clear in Coombe's new book, *Around the Fort in 80 Lives* (Sri Serendipity Publishing), co-authored with Daisy Perry, richly illustrated with Coombe's photographs and available at Barefoot, Exotic Roots, and most boutique shops around the Fort. More than a year in the making, and involving visits to 230 houses within the old ramparts to interview 293 people, the book's colourful images and prose bring to life the Fort's dazzling mix of personalities in a near-mystical setting.

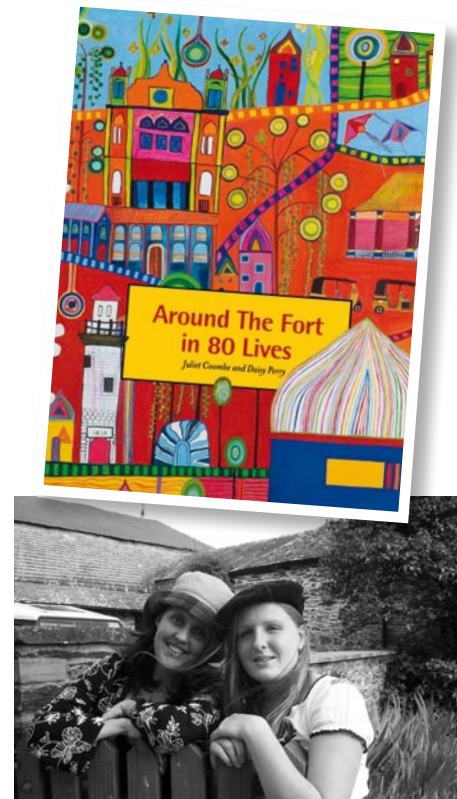
Destiny caught up with Coombe when, in mid-2006, less than two years after first coming to Sri Lanka, she settled there permanently. Destiny? Coombe, whose own profile, the last in the book, describes her as 'an international photojournalist, [who] always used to get the newspaper cover story and then move on to the next world-changing event', hardly seemed a likely candidate to succumb to such a fate. 'She has travelled to 143 countries', it reveals. 'But it is only Galle Fort that has been able to stop her in her tracks'.

Those tracks apparently began in her 20s in Australia. An *ola* leaf reading conducted by Sri Lankan friends 'matched her fingerprint to a leaf found in... Colombo.

This fingerprint horoscope revealed that she would live in Sri Lanka in the future and make significant changes through an unexpected love interest'. Today, her unwavering passion for the Fort is enhanced by her marriage to one of its local stalwarts, the birth of their son – a ninth-generation Fort child – and completed restoration of an 18th century merchant house near the exact Fort location where she was wooed. Magical transport and destiny indeed!

Around the Fort in 80 Lives is more than just character sketches. It includes a history of the Fort, as well as a guide covering the quirky places to stay, eat, shop, and indulge not covered in other guides. But it's the glimpses into the lives of the Fort's original families, professionals, street peddlers and newcomers that are most entrancing.

"In our choice of 80 characters I feel that we have given a realistic picture of the Fort community," says Coombe. This includes personal favourites like the fortune diver, octopus catcher, army general, and undercover detective, but also revealing anecdotes about a sweet-corn seller, a street artist, a mystic, gem merchants, lawyers, and the oldest man in the Fort, who daydreams about the halcyon days after independence from British rule. Mrs Sainambu is an older-generation Muslim woman who has not let her strong beliefs and values hold her back. Papa is the



dread-locked embodiment of the Fort's knack of instilling an all-embracing multicultural sense of freedom. Mr Gunasekara is the non-gambling proprietor of a busy horse racing bookie business. Dr Janaka is the guitar-playing doctor, who describes the Fort as "a common swimming pool, a common playground". And, of course, Coombe herself is a recent transplant.

"The Galle area, but particularly the Fort, has always been a place of change, flux, and incoming peoples from all corners of the globe," says Coombe. "It is no different today. In fact, this is what has made the Fort the place it is, with such a rich and diverse ancestry and heritage. There are sometimes problems and issues like in any other community, but with a general, peaceful co-existence and sharing of skills, ideas and beliefs. The fact that the people are generally so serene and content might seem mysterious for some outsiders. You may find yourself asking, 'Why is everyone so happy here? Is it just the highland tea or something more mystical?' Well, there is no doubt that there is something magical about the Fort. Some of you may never want to leave, and indeed many never do."

Ethan Gelber, a native New Yorker, is a freelance writer and editor. After 20 years on the road, much of it in the saddle of a bicycle, he writes more and more about sustainable travel.

Preview of Upcoming Collection



SRI LANKA: 275, R.A. De Mel Mawataha, Colombo 03. Tel: +94 11 2301555-9, +94 11 5376161-4 Fax: +94 11 2576950
 Airport - BIA Colombo Web Site: www.stone-n-string.com 15 Outlets
 Maldives: H. Orchid Maage, Ameer Ahmed Magu, Male' Tel: 3312227

INDIA

CHENNAI - Spencer Plaza HYDERABAD - Central Mall BANGALORE - Forum Mall, Central Mall PANJIM (GOA) - Opposite Hotel Delmon