



Fort Fantastic

“Hurry up!” the bus driver barks at us.

With a look of impatience, he shoves our backpacks towards us, and we stumble off the bus.

We stand by the side of the road looking at each other in disbelief as the bus roars off, kicking up a cloud of dust and rousing a dog sleeping by the road.

Our rude disembarkation follows a crazy bus ride that has seen our driver overtake cars, buses, tuk-tuks and trucks despite oncoming traffic, all the while with loud music playing from a DVD player at the front of the bus.

This bus ride is a sharp contrast to our first days in Sri Lanka.

BY REBECCA ARNOLD

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My boyfriend and I have come from Galle, two hours south of the capital Colombo, where we slowly wandered cobblestoned streets, munched on mango dusted with chilli powder while the sun set, and lazed in the sun watching boisterous cricket games. A far cry from our white-knuckled bus ride from hell.

Gala means rock in Sinhalese, one of the official languages of Sri Lanka, and it is from this word that the town is believed to have derived its name. The town is divided into two parts: the old town, called Fort – surrounded by the fort walls – and the new town which has built up outside the fort. Now a UNESCO World Heritage site due to its historical, archaeological and architectural value, there are only a few hundred families who live in Fort itself.

On our first morning in Galle we're lucky to join a tour with Juliet Coombe, a renowned British war journalist who first came to Sri Lanka to cover the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. She stayed, married a Sri Lankan man, reported on the country's decades-long civil war that ended in 2009, and has written numerous books about the country. She's also set up a small publishing company and owns a restaurant and tour company called Sri Serendipity. Since her business has grown she has passed the mantle of tour leader on to her staff, so it truly is serendipitous that today we've wandered in when she's decided to take this morning's group.



She leads us around the streets of Fort, streets so narrow that two cars can barely squeeze past each other. We head up to the fort walls. These are the walls that protected the town from the rage of the ocean in 2004, with no damage or injuries in Fort. The people living outside the old town were not so lucky; many people in and around the new town bus station were killed. The Fort basically became a hospital after the tsunami, with hotels opening their doors to those injured.

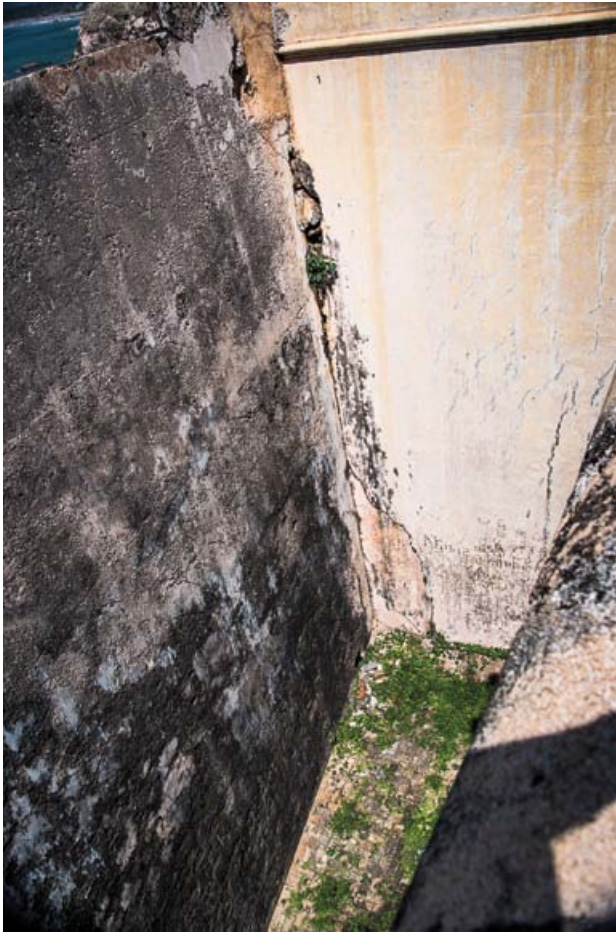
It is believed that students at the Arab College, who still study navigation by the stars, predicted the tsunami but didn't have a word to describe it, so their forecasts went unheard.

Built by the Portuguese in the 16th century, ninety percent of the fort walls are made from coral harvested from the waters surrounding the town.

In the 17th century the Dutch drove the Portuguese out of Sri Lanka, taking Galle Fort in the process. They made extensive fortifications and it became Sri Lanka's major port. Later, the British occupied Sri Lanka, and the importance of Galle Fort diminished as attention turned to Colombo.

Shipwrecks litter the waters around Fort, showing that the Chinese and Arabs were trading in this area long before the Portuguese accidentally discovered the harbour.





We visit the slave pits that housed the imported African slaves that built the fort walls. Each night, slaves descended into their cramped depths by ladders, which were pulled up afterwards. Stories abound of cannibalism amongst them, and the Dutch reportedly wired their mouths shut during the night.



When the slaves were freed by the British they remained in the area, and entire families lived in the caves and tunnels that snake through the fort walls.

It takes us only a few hours to traverse the walls of Fort, stopping along the way to sample king coconuts expertly cracked open by the man selling them from a bicycle, taste the delicious local ice cream and marvel at the wares of the many jewellers.

The historic old town continues to transform and is now a haven for many artists, writers, boutique shops, jewellers and cafés. The Dutch buildings remain, along with art deco style houses, many under renovation.

Later that day we head to the lighthouse to watch the sun set. Under the orange glow of the sky, families wander together and play in the waters around the fort walls.





In a place as charming and historical as this, I expect to be surrounded by tourists and touts, but this view is largely undisturbed, and we get a sense of everyday Sri Lankan life as people relax in the evening.



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Protected by the reefs that surround the area, the waters are calm, the sun reflected in its softly rippled surface. We watch boys jump off Flag Rock, their shadows silhouetted in the slowly sinking sun, and cheer on the multiple games of cricket: in the space of only a couple hundred square metres, three cricket games are being played simultaneously.

In a place as charming and historical as this, I expect to be surrounded by tourists and touts, but this view is largely undisturbed, and we get a sense of everyday Sri Lankan life as people relax in the evening.

On our last morning, the call to prayer from the mosque at the end of our street wakes us early, and we take a final opportunity to explore the streets, savouring the early morning calm.

Now, to catch that bus on to our next destination...



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