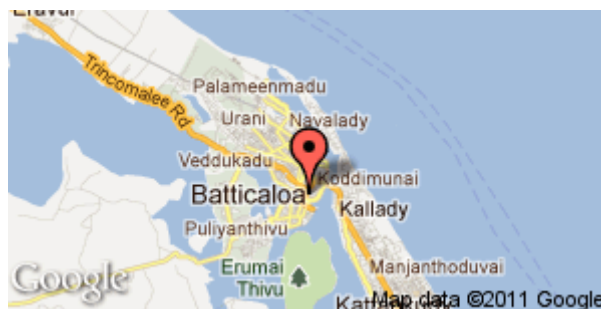


## Beautiful Batticaloa

'Do you want your beer opening normally, or the explosive way?' asked the muscular bouncer cum barman at an out of town drinking place on the way to Batticaloa. 'Explosive...' - for who wouldn't? The man grabbed the beer and tackled the bottle top with the head of a water bottle. There was a mini explosion as he flicked his wrist and the beer bottle was suddenly opened – and not a drop was spilt. Not one person in the place flickered an eyelid – and this in a town which had suffered much in the 26 years of civil war – killings, bombings, disappearances and great explosions. Remarkable.



This isn't a place I have been before, in fact we have actively avoided it because of the security situation. Batticaloa is the English name for 'Mattak Kalappu', the regional capital of Eastern Sri Lanka which has been one of the most disrupted and devastated areas of the island since the civil war began in the early 1980s. Ethnically and culturally diverse, the Eastern province has been under the control of different military authorities: the Sri Lankan army, the Indian Peace-Keeping Forces and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), however, none maintained full control of the Eastern areas until May 2009 when the Sri Lankan Army successfully defeated the LTTE.



We therefore have had little enthusiasm to visit. We tried in 2008 at a time when UNHCR reported that 7,038 families and 26,484 people still remain displaced but got no further than the outskirts where we turned right to go inland. And again in 2009 a disputed local election result and a riot prevented us reaching the city as the place was sealed off. In September 2010 we were again discouraged by the fact that around 62 people including Sri Lankan policemen, civilians and two Chinese nationals were killed in a massive explosion that rocked the Karadiyan-aa'ru area, situated 20 km northwest of Batticaloa city, when containers with explosives parked close the police station exploded destroying the entire police station.

So it was finally with some reluctance that we ventured into Batticaloa in October 2011 down the brand new immaculate tarmac road from the north. On the way we stayed the night at Passikuda and walked its famous beach.



The sea bed is flat and sandy and has a pleasant effect on the feet which can be experienced up to nearly 150 to 200 meters from the shore. It consists of sea cucumbers, which resemble a baby pool. Sadly it has been taken over by developers who plan the sort of complex that you find in any cheap

Mediterranean beach resort and in our view will ruin the beautiful beach we have enjoyed in the past. But judge for yourself. Above was before development, below shows the scene in October 2011.



But I'm glad we went further for the Batticaloa area is beautiful – and unspoilt!

The city stands on a long, sandy spit of land pointing northward and separated from the mainland by a large brackish lagoon which extends southward for many kilometres. There's fort, where the city's main administrative offices are, and when we were there a major Hindu festival was being celebrated in the courtyard, with large bags of incense poured on a fire.



But can you find a street map? Not a hope. The council offices did not have one, the tourist police shook their heads, the library was shut and all the Tourist Information office had to offer was a single sheet of paper listing notable religious sites in the area. And there is so, so much more to Batticaloa! The official national guide book was the 2009 version and only had one paragraph on the city, noting that it had been heavily affected by the civil war. So you are left to go it alone.....

And we did, off away over the original Kallady Bridge. Alongside, another bridge is being built to ease the load, for at peak times a one way system is in operation, conducted by policemen with big white luminous gloved hands which glow in the dark commanding you to either wait or go across. It is quite eerie to see these hands appear in the darkness, especially in a rainstorm when the owner is shrouded in a big army brown cape and indistinguishable in the gloom.

Batticaloa is famous for its singing fish. The musical sounds are supposed to be heard in the lagoon near the bridge when the night is lit by a near full moon and when the wind is minimal. A priest named Father Lang recorded this musical charm and broadcast it in the 1960s over the SLBC (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation).



If you are lucky, it is said on a moonlit night, you may hear the singing fish . However, In October 2011 the locals told us the phenomenon is no more. The nearest we got was a shattered fountain left marooned on land which had been devastated in the Tsunami.



Batticaloa Lagoon presents unique opportunities for boating, fishing and bird-watching. Moreover, there is the added attraction that the forbidding crag of Friar's Hood dominates the surrounding scenery. You can see it below, the peak with cowl shaped top. We climbed it several years ago on a two day trek across acres of long grass and unforgiving trails. But the views of Batticaloa from up there are superb.

A major part of the population is concentrated in the narrow strip between the sea and the lagoon. The western portion of the lagoon is sparsely populated and 90% of the paddy lands are found in this area. We drove around this area up to Buffalo island, which is joined to Batticaloa's Bone island by a rickety metal bridge with popping plates as you drive over it. We were dubious about whether it would take the weight of our little Maruti car until a great lorry stormed across without a ripple.

The area is wonderful spectrum of orange tracks stark against true blue skies and the lagoon. The land is mostly ploughed paddy, with Hindu temples on practically every bend of the way and road workers hack the undergrowth in large wide brimmed hats – the first we have seen in Sri Lanka.



The star of Batticaloa for us though is its beach. Unspoilt, designed for local people to enjoy, without any sign development, its circular shelters are havens for local men lazing away the heat of the day, local families to eat their rice and a lighthouse stands over it all, proud and simple. It is peaceful, practical and there is not a concession in sight. The pictures below speak for themselves and long may this place remain as it is.





**The beach at Batticaloa**



**You can get a boat to the sand spit**



**Here the sea meets the lagoon**



**Fishermen lay out their nets**