

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

THE
GARDEN
COMPANION

A TOUR OF THE UNRULY GARDENS OF
SRI LANKA'S FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL



THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

THE
GARDEN
COMPANION

THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

THE GARDEN COMPANION

A Tour of the unruly Gardens of
Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel

DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



Published By The Ceylon Press 2025

Copyright The Ceylon Press

COPYRIGHT
2025 David Swarbrick

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR
HILARY

SCHOLAR & PLANTER

"Who's been painting my roses red?"

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



ONE
JUNGLE LOVE

"Once, when I was young and true," wrote Dorothy Parker in 1926, "Someone left me sad; Broke my brittle heart in two; And that is very bad." Fortunately, an early broken heart was not to be my fate. Gardens were. Plants. And especially trees. For it was gardens, not love, occupied my childish imaginings. Gardens, I concluded were all variants of a single standard – the best example to be found amidst the faultless flower beds of the governor's house, in Madras, the Raj Bhavan. This was a proper garden. Built in the 1670s, its regimented perfection even stretched out into a deer park, whose trees were as disciplined as they were well mannered. Of course, it helped that they were tended by armies of gardeners, but of these unsung heroes, little was ever said.

Later when I saw Versailles, it all came together. Gardens were actually houses albeit with green bits.

Over the years I tested this theory: in window baskets overlooking Scotch House Corner; on Bayswater balconies, Welsh seaside cottages, Oxfordshire villages. It seemed to hold. Until, that is, we set about gardening in the jungle. We had bought, incautious and without any help whatsoever from Excel, a 25-acre Plantation north of Kandy in central Sri Lanka. It had been abandoned during the JVP uprisings. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled a Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants. When the estate agent had closed the deal, the estate had reduced to 25 acres and a bewildering number of buildings, all of them as unstable as a Sunday morning drunk. Trees grew in rooms; animals lived on shelves. And rapidly, I realised that the real world was precisely like my childhood definition of a garden, only the other way around. Limitless green forest with the odd house attached – and forever fighting an unsuccessful campaign to keep

nature at bay. Earth Org, the environmental news website, agrees, stating that despite the interminable assaults made upon it, nature is still the boss. Just 20% of Earth's land surface is either urban or farmed.

So our jungle gardening is undertaken modestly, with the lightest of hearts, the boundary between wild and tamed conveniently blurred so that excesses on either side are easily tolerated. It's a green version of the balance of power and an opportunity to see Nudge Theory in practice.

Even so, this estate, having been abandoned for twenty years before we bought it, had sided a little too firmly with the jungle. The balance of power was extravagantly unbalanced. The estate road was undrivable; the plantations had become savage forests, and trees grew in its courtyards and buildings, guests occupying superior VIP suites.

Pushing these boundaries back was like sailing down the Nile: a slow voyage, with plenty of opportunities to become distracted by everything that happens when you blink. But slowly slowly our gardening team reclaimed parts of the interior and created 4 different walks to take you around most of it. Some areas remain wild, unvisited for a decade at least, cherished no-go zones left to shy lorises and civets.

Of these 4 walks, the gentlest of perambulations is The Home Garden Walk. This stroll begins just outside the main hotel office and porch, with both buildings shaded by THE PARROT DAKOTA, a tree named after New York's towering Dakota Apartments.

This Sri Lankan Dakota version is no less a Renaissance creation – a Java Cassia, or to give it its common name, The Pink Shower Tree. Flowering with puffs of

Barbie pink clouds in April and May, it fruits and sheds its leaves in December. Our specimen is over 120 years old; its hollows and defensive height making it our leading parrot apartment block. Amongst its many tenants are rose-ringed, plum-headed and Layard's parakeets – three of the world's 353 parrot species.

Layard's parakeet is an easy one to spot for it has a long light blue tail, a grey head, and a fondness of sudden, prolonged screeching. The green-all-over rose-ringed parakeet is a giveaway too - with a bright red beak and the slimmest of head rings. But the most striking is the male plum-headed parakeet. He is a stunner, his proud red head offset with purple and blue feathers. He would turn heads in any nightclub.

Two other parrot species live on the island but have yet to be spotted here: The Alexandrine parakeet is similar to the rose-ringed parakeet – only much larger. It's a bit of a city dweller. The other, the sparrow-small, endemic Sri Lankan hanging parrot or lorikeet is a rare creature: a twitcher's crowning glory.

All these birds can be found in G. M. Henry's celebrated 1958 Guide to The Birds of Ceylon, which sits in the hotel library, together with some of his original watercolours. Henry was one of the last great ornithologists – the sort you would fight to sit next to at dinner. A discoverer as much as a describer of species, he wrote extensively about the island's wildlife. Born on a tea estate in Sri Lanka in 1891, his bird guide is remarkable not simply for being comprehensive but also because it is so entertaining. His descriptions are unforgettable and funny; of the lorikeet, he remarks, the bird is not simply another parrot but a convivial and restless one with highly ridiculous breeding habits. Reading his identifiers, you almost feel you have met the bird concerned at a party, conference, dentist's

waiting room or orgy.

Close to our blushing Cassia is KASHYAPA'S CORNER, a small garden of Frangipani trees (*Plumeria Rubra*), named for the anonymous 5th century mistress of Kashyapa, the king who built the Sigiriya pleasure palace, partying there for 22 years before being murdered. Its frescoes show her holding the wickedly fragrant frangipani flowers – wicked, because, despite lacking nectar, their dreamy scent tricks moths into pollinating them. Arguments rage gently over whether there are twenty or 100 species of the tree; but none of this matters in Sri Lanka where the plant has been so eagerly adopted by temple goers that it is called the "Araliya" or "Temple Flower Tree". South American by origin, it spread around the world on the backs of gardening missionaries, though this does nothing to explain how its flowers came to be depicted over 1500 years ago in Sigiriya. A small tree, rarely more than 20 feet high, it flowers in shades of red and yellow, white, and peach; and even when bare is as close to architectural marvel as any tree can get.

Stretching out beyond KASHYAPA'S CORNER is a croquet lawn, rather unwisely planted with Australian grass for its smoother velvety feel; but continually under siege by the more rampant and feisty Malaysian grass which possesses the invasive qualities of pirates. A much-sheered golden dewdrop hedge (*duranta erecta*) surrounds it; the plant is liberally tolerant of the hardest pruning and has become something of a poster girl for tropical topiarists.

Growing through them are a few dozen stately Queen Palms - *Syagrus Romanzoffiana*. We call them DONA CATHERINA'S PALMS, after the island's most beguiling queen, Kusumasana Devi. Three times tempestuous queen of Kandy (1581 to 1613), Dona Catherina died

of grief, outwardly Buddhist, inwardly Catholic. It was her bad luck to be caught up in the wars between the Portuguese and the kings of Kotte and Kandy; and as the last descendant of the original Kandyan kings, she was a pawn of immense value. Nowadays, the various lines of Sri Lankan kings are all but untraceable; and these palms, like most surviving monarchs today are much more decorative than they are useful. Their saffron orange seeds have a mildly edible value, sweet with a flavour that moves from plum to banana depending on maturity.

The paved pathway that leads from the front porch to the main building is the LIPSTICK WALK, named for the young Lipstick Palms (*Cyrtostachys Renda*) that line it. This species crept inexorably from Southeast Asia to South Asia, its progress fuelled by a reputation for glamour and beauty, if not utility. An older pair opposite this walk was planted in 1926, the year of Marilyn Monroe's birth. Monroe, queen of lipsticks, and in many ways not dissimilar to these palms, used Guerlain's Rouge Diabolique lipstick, which is red as these palms. Her lithograph, by Andy Warhol, hangs in the Singing Civet Bedroom.

The path first passes an old clove tree – our BABY SPICE TREE, so called because cloves are one of the island's most recent spices, having arrived here with medieval Arab traders. Its arrivistic status has not stopped its tiny fruits from being comprehensively absorbed into some of the country's most popular dishes, including black chicken curry, pineapple bread and, best of all, garlic curry, a savoury dish of coconut milk, garlic and cloves rarely tasted beyond Adam's Bridge.

The clove tree sits alongside our AUSSIE TREE. Grown from a seed from Stellenbosch, this Illawarra Flame

(Brachychiton Acerifolius) hails from Eastern Australia and is noted for its blood red flowers, famously varied leaf shapes and sultry nature. As Simply Red put it in their song "A new flame has come, and nothing she can do can do me wrong." This tree can do little wrong either, its shade of red eluding even the most subtle of pantone references.

At the end of the pathway is a tree we call KING MUTASIVA'S BELLY. To ayurvedic practitioners there is little this tree cannot cure. Its common name is the Beli Tree (Aegle Marmelos). For centuries it has been planted outside walawwas to ensure all-round fertility - from crops to heirs. Given this task, and the fact that this specimen is almost never without fruit. It seemed only fair to name it for the 4th century BCE King Mutasiva, the island's most fecund monarch. Six of his 12 progeny became kings.

Mutasiva is an oddly vexing historical being, the sixth recorded monarch on the island and only the second to rule from Anuradhapura, the city that would dominate the country for 1500 years before finally being obliterated by Tamil invaders.

But almost nothing is known about him. His grandfather founded the capital he was to inherit; and his son was to introduce Buddhism to the land. Between them, these three earliest of island monarchs can take the credit for much of the best of what the country was to become, even if the long reign of Mutasiva is a study in obscurity. Research into very early Sri Lankan history remains a singular endeavour, but the slightest glimpse of its times is enormously exciting, if only because it is so rare.

And ancient though Mutasiva was, a yet older item sits

in the hotel library, a ceramic dating back to 600 BCE, 300 years before Buddhism arrived; 200 years before King Mutasiva, and 50 years before the reign of the island's first recorded king in 543 BCE.

The path ends at the main hotel building. To its valley side lies the art deco Pineapple House and before it a retiled Spice Court, which was used in the old days to lay out such spices as pepper and cloves to dry naturally in the sun. At one end sit two large slabs of stones, used by croppers to sharpen their machetes.

TWO

THE IMMEDIATE
GARDENS

On the other side of the main building is ARCHIE'S IDYLL. Named for Tintin's Captain Haddock who made the journey from alcoholic sea Captain to a country gent, Archibald was born next door to Highgrove and has an ancestry that make the Windsors look rather recent. From his office, or on site, Archibald assiduously polices this garden, a home to the island's controversial national animal – the grizzled giant squirrel; and more commonly, Palm and Dusky Striped Squirrels, this former species not to be confused with the rarer endemic Layard's Palm Squirrel. Sri Lanka is actually home to seven squirrel species, only two of which are endemic, the Dusky-Striped Squirrel and Layard's Palm Squirrel.

The Grizzled Giant Squirrel, though not endemic, is the most impressive of the lot, with a nose to tail length of one and a half metres and death-defying skills enabling it to make the most impossible leaps from tree to tree. In Sri Lanka it hugs the central highlands and comes in three sub variants that are all but impossible to tell apart. All three sport brown fur, white legs and stomachs, and frosted faces. They have excellent vision but poor hearing – which is something of a blessing for them as their cry - a shrill staccato cackle – is the sort of sound that can curdle milk.

The garden is shaded by a wild Kohu Amba Mango, excellent for making chutney, and a Jaffna Willard Mango, the go-to fruit for instant gratification. Young yellow Frangipani shade the lawn. Beyond its gates runs the slip road for trade deliveries and a flight of steps that take you up into Singing Civet Hill.

ARCHIE'S IDYLL is surrounded on one side by THE JURASSIC WALL. The Maha-Madu Trees that grow above this retaining wall are descendants of the cycads that dominated the earth 300 million years ago; and

are growing on happily here, an inspiration for our tenacious old-fashioned values. Nestled amongst them are Poinsettias (popular with the 13th century Aztecs and later Western supermarkets at Christmas); Madagascan Traveller's Palms; sweet-scented Indo Chinese Sapu Trees (sacred to Buddhists and the largest of magnolias); Cook and Norfolk Island Pines; Flame, Jackfruit, Jacaranda, and cinnamon.

At the other end of the main buildings, overlooking the pool and the expanse of forested hills and valleys that stretch to the south and west is a small extension to this walk, a sort of OUTER GARDEN WALK. It begins at BIANCA'S AMPHITHEATRE. This amphitheatre, one of just three or four on the island, is named for the estate's most senior director, Kumarihaami, and opera singer, Bianca Castafiore, born beside Garsington Opera. It was built as much to forestall landslides as to direct Bianca's melodious version of the Jewel Song in Faust out into the jungle (by the way, the complete works of Tintin can be found in the library).

When we first arrived here gravity was sucking the buildings into the valley. To forestall utter destruction, the depth of the walls of the amphitheatre were built to about twenty feet, with a six feet width tapering to slim walls above ground. "And so rock bottom, wrote JK Rowling, "became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life."

Private sun igloos fill the amphitheatre's first terrace for people who want utter peace. In front of them is SHOSTAKOVICH'S TEA, a tea terrace is named for the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who reworked the famous "Tea for Two" Twenties hot song. His life, like the creation of this symbolic bank of Sri Lankan tea, was a struggle – but one that ended in success. We think the song celebrates the laid-back solitude of this

of this jungle estate. "We won't have it known, That we own a telephone, dear," wrote Irving Caesar, the song's creator in 1924, 100 years after the islands very first tea was planted – just 12 miles away in Peradeniya's Royal Botanical Gardens.

At the amphitheatre's bottom is COCO'S PAVILLION. Named for the youngest of the Estate's directors, and the one most given to the invention of new forms of relaxation, the Coco Pavillion is where yoga, massage, mediation and even a little exercise can flow without interruption. Opposite it is BERTIE'S KITCHEN. With his alpha appetite, Bertie, named after Tintin's Professor Cuthbert Calculus, is the muse behind this outdoor Demonstration Kitchen, where classic Sri Lankan recipes can be made and shared in the shadow of an Australian Foxtail Palm (*Wodyetia Bifurcate*).

This palm was a discovery made in the Aboriginal territories of the Bathurst Bay - that part of northern Queensland that points like a finger towards Papua New Guinea. Out pig shooting in the jungle in 1975 a wandering botanist came across a palm he was unfamiliar with. Years of checking, investigation and discussion with the local Flinders Island Aboriginal peoples eventually led to the conclusion that it was a totally new species. In honour of the tribe, it was named *Wodyetia*, in 1978. But its uncommonly fluffy leaves, which resemble the tail of a fox, soon promoted an alternative name: the foxtail palm.

The base of the amphitheatre is planted with papyrus, frangipani, date palms and rather truculent Kottamba trees, popular additions to roadside cafes for the gorgeous green shade their waxy leaves provide. Its leisure uses are eclipsed by its medical prowess for its leaves and bark have proven helpful in treating liver diseases, dysentery, diarrhoea, invasive parasites and

even some cancers. From here the view stretches into jungle deliberately left wild, the hillside dropping to paddy land and small streams.

From a side gate the walk continues into CITRUS ENGESTROMA. Here, in between the mother-in-law's tongue and lemon grass grow lemons, limes, kumquats, grapefruit, clementines, bitter oranges, tangerines, caviar oranges, and pomegranates – and a sprinkling of Ruffled, Stilt and Golden Palms, Areca and Coconuts. The grove is named for our Engeström family, who kept the lawyers of Malmo in work for over 100 years as the family sued one another down the generations. The official portrait of Edward Engestrom who built a small palace overlooking the Baltic, hangs in the dining room, along with family daguerreotypes from the 1840s.

THREE

WALKING OFF

The path leads into THE ORCHID WALK, an occasionally manicured jungle area of mahogany and flame trees, the odd clove and pine. This area of the walk is given over to orchids. One hundred and eighty-five of the world's 25,000 orchid species grow on the island, 74 of them endemic; and this walk is named for them. They grow in cracks in the huge stone blocks of an ancient wall, their space shared with skinks, and chameleons. In monsoon weather an adjacent well turns the area into a cathedral of evangelistic frogs, dedicated to nighttime choruses.

The path eventually takes you back close to the very start - the small garden of Frangipani trees that is KASHYAPA'S CORNER.

A longer walk beckons nearby. Taking THE PODI PATH is where you can kick off THE ESTATE WALK, just outside the front porch that leads into the hotel. A traditional kitchen constructed of mud and bamboo once stood on this path, managed by Podemenike whose life roughly and remarkably followed that of independent Sri Lanka. Around 1950 she began work on the estate as a lady's maid. It was just a few years after independence – and she stayed on to help protect the estate once the family fled after the 1987 JVP Uprising.

This violent Marxist-Leninist insurrection almost toppled the then government of President Premadasa. For over two years a state of near anarchy dominated life, with militant riots, mass executions, and assassinations affecting most areas of the island. Pro and anti-government militias added to the battle, the casualties of which, Human Rights Watch eventually estimated at 35,000 – a figure no sides yet agree on.

It wasn't the first such uprising. In 1971 a similar

insurrection occurred, this time against the Bandaranaike government, though its fatalities were considered to be less. But the 1987 rebellion was the first truly island wide event that deeply affected the estate, causing it to be abandoned by all except Podemenike and two elderly croppers, understandably fond of arrack. It was a terrible time for the country and although Podemenike's kitchen has long since gone, as you walk down this little path, you may, at least in your imagination, still catch the smell of real village cooking - warm spices and buttery rice.

THE PODI PATH cuts through a pepper plantation, arriving soon at a flight of steps on the left just before THE SPICE KITCHEN. Herein lies the entrance to THE KITCHEN GARDEN, with two special trees coming into touch on the right. The first of these is a Cannonball Tree or Sal Tree.

This is a mighty and magnificent wonder, with pink white architectural flowers like half open lids that give off one of the most perfumed and refined scents you are ever lightly to encounter on this good earth. It grows to over one hundred feet and the flowers eventually turn into seeds the size of cannonballs that hang off the main stems of the tree like a wayward artillery store.

The tree comes from South America and is the source of adamantly held confusions. Buddhists believe that Lord Buddha was born in a garden of sal trees in Lumbini in distant Nepal. But the Cannonball or Sal tree growing in Sri Lanka only arrived in South Asia in the 1880s.

The first one to have a detailed record is that in the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, planted in on the 14th of April 1901 by Geroge V and his alarming wife, Queen Mary. Given the extreme botanical spectacle that this tree is, it is no surprise that it has come to be conflated with the sal Lord Buddha would have known –

– shorea robusta, a smaller tree with little flowers and no fragrance. I hesitate to boast and brag, but the inevitable conclusion from comparing our Cannonball Tree with King George's is that our, being much larger, must predate 1901. Beside it is what looks like Breadfruit tree. Or possibly a jacktree?

Actually, it is both – a rare hybridising that occurred entirely naturally between these related species.

The relationship coach, Laura Doyle, famed, at least in California for her trademarked "Six Intimacy Skills™," remarked that "Only God is perfect. For the rest of us, there are apologies." And so it is for our Kitchen Garden. Invaded nightly by hungry porcupines; several times by a small herd of 20 wild boar, and often at the mercy of deer, squirrels, and monkeys, it is a wonder it ever produces any herbs or vegetables.

Even so, we limp on, brave as Obi-Wan Kenobi, planting organic wonders that will flourish all the better once we finally get around to fencing in the entire acre. The happier plants grow in a large greenhouse, mostly soft vegetables, and herbs. The area is surrounded by shade nurseries, home to hundreds of hand reared trees, destined for timber plantations or our rare trees arboretum.

Returning back to the steps up which you first came to enter the kitchen garden you then pass, on your left
THE SPICE KITCHEN.

This modest building was made in the traditional way as a Pandemic project in 2021 by our whole team, using bamboo, mud, and leftovers. It is the place for staff teas and lunches, and a creche. Part of the building is used to process latex, the raw white juice extracted from the estate rubber trees that is then half

dried and rolled on machinery made in Wolverhampton
in the 1940s.

At the building's end is another flight of steps, this one
leading up into THE HOCKIN'S SPICE GARADEN. The
path through the spice garden is circular, eventually
returning you back to this point.

FOUR

SPICE GARDENS

And now you are in the Estate's private spice garden, planted with cinnamon, vanilla, pepper, cloves, turmeric, and ginger and named for two sassy polyamorous Methodist family cousins who lived, ménage à trois, with a German POW on their remote Cornish farm for 50 years. Their three graves, side by side, overlook the sea near Morwenstow. The only graves here however are those of the three estate elephants, their limitless night songs still heard in the hearts of those best able to join in the occasional elephant Séance.

The vanilla vines we grow in THE HOCKIN'S SPICE GARADEN are descendants of the 19th century plants the British brought to the island, hoping to eclipse the commercial success the plant enjoyed in Madagascar. But it was not to be. Fastidious, fussy, and economical, it never amounted to much even through vanilla experts commend the unusual taste that Sri Lankan vanilla has evolved to produce - "a more complex flavour profile with delicate sweetness, subtle floral notes, and hints of cherry and caramel," or so they say. Hand pollinated with the sort of brushes favoured by watercolourists of the more exquisite schools, it is nevertheless a bit of a hidden gem – and one that offers plenty of opportunities to practice patience. The cloves, cinnamon and pepper planted alongside it is far more robust and grow on through any amount of animal attack. But the turmeric and ginger tubers have to be husbanded carefully for they offer wild boar treats of almost libidinous pleasure and excess.

Getting back to the main path from its entrance point, THE PODI PATH then leads through a large plantation of pepper vines, growing gleefully up gliricidia poles.

Gliricidia is the perfect plant for this, being fast growing and erect - and pumping the ground around it with lots of nitrogen. It is also much used as a living

fence.

The path moves on through jackfruit and clove trees and past THE ELEPHANT'S GRAVEYARD. Marked by Ceylon Oak or Koan Tree, the estate's 3 elephants lie beneath it. The last elephant died in 1977, a few years after standing very firmly on her mahout. The plant itself is still even longer living – and this one is about 130 years old.

All around it are more Jackfruit trees, some wild with smaller leaves and other more domesticated with larger crinkled leaves and more abundant fruit. The tree grows to around 70 feet in height and produces around 200 jackfruits a year from stems budding directly from trunks and thick branches. It is one of those wonder superfoods that the West has recently discovered; but here it has long been popular in cooking –the seeds fried for chips, the flesh curried like pork, and the riper fruit made into puddings.

From this point the path is lined with new cocoa trees. For well over 100 years cocoa was core estate crop, and its oldest trees still grow here in the deeper jungle. Just 30 miles away is the island's very first cocoa plantation, planted in 1819, 4 years after the British occupied Ceylon. This path of new trees, ALICE'S ALLEZ CHOCOLAT, is named for Alice, our Swiss family matriarch and first hotelier, from Appenzell, famed for its extraordinary cheese - and its liquor chocolates.

The path continues below The Pineapple House and amphitheatre towards INKEN'S ACREAGE. Here, stretching out from a single Ginger Thomas tree (Tecoma Stans), are acres of cocoa, teak, mara and other classic highland trees kept uncultivated for wildlife. The Ginger Thomas tree comes from the Andes and is as highly ornamental as the person it is planted

for, artist and family member, Inken Engstrom. Inken's paintings hang in the hotel and in private collections in London, The Vatican, and Sweden. The tree itself gives immense protection against the excesses of nature, producing a leaf paste whose bio-chemicals bind with cobra venom enzymes to inhibit the poison.

At this point the path divides, the more walkable stretch of it going uphill into CINNAMON KATIA, a hill of newly planted cinnamon and named for Katarina, a family member.

Ceylon Cinnamon is known as true cinnamon for its unique sweet, aromatic, and delicate flavour. It dates back at least to King Solomon who imported it from Sri Lanka and refers to it in the Bible:

"Your branches are an orchard of pomegranates with the choicest of fruits, with henna and nard, with nard and saffron, with calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of frankincense tree, with myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices." Two rare Trincomalee Wood Trees, beloved of shipbuilders, grow on its edges, protected by Presidential orders.

At the top of the hill is THE AMBALAMA RISE, a hilltop named for Ambalamas, the resting places for pilgrims, and travellers since the ancient times.

The nearest real Ambalama is 16 miles away, a remarkable 200-year-old structure built near the famous Kadugannawa Pass, a rock pierced to make the Kandy-Colombo road in 1820.

This one is shaded by Cook Island Pines originally from New Caledonia and famous for having a tilt dependent on the hemisphere of their location, growing upright on the Equator but leaning south in the northern

northern hemisphere and north in the southern hemisphere. Also present are Jackfruit Trees and a Breadfruit Tree, remarkable for its carbohydrate-rich fruits. Breadfruit was introduced to Sri Lanka by the British in the late 18th century after Captain William Bligh, famous for the mutiny on the HMS Bounty, collected saplings from Tahiti – with disastrous consequences.

FIVE

FROM SINGING
CIVET HILL

From here the path cuts across SINGING CIVET HILL, named for its occasional civets, and planted with cinnamon, Cook Island Pines, Sapu Trees, Poinsettias, red Flame Trees (*Delonix Regia*), originally from Madagascar; yellow Flame Trees and Australian Jacaranda. Somewhat unexpectedly civet farts are widely known on the island to be so pleasant as to smell of the flower of the joy perfume tree – the *Magnolia Champaca*, a scent immortalized in Jean Patou's famous perfume, 'Joy', a fragrance that outsold all others, excepting Chanel No. 5.

If by now the walk is proving too arduous, you can cut back to the hotel through steps and a side gate – or alternatively walk on overlooking GABI'S CLOVE GROVE. Named for Gabi, a family member, the 600 young cloves planted here grow in the protective shade of ancient rubber trees, still occasionally milked for their sap. They are descendants of the first rubber trees sent in 1876 by the British Colonial Office, from Kew to Sri Lanka. Thousands of ferns from up to 20 species grow underfoot including Silverback, Forked, Eagle, Sword, Whisk, Oakleaf, Limp leaf Ferns and Spleenworts.

Beyond this are the estate's WATER TANKS. The estate water come from a deep well bored 300 feet through filtering rocks. Hydrologists and geologists picked the drill spot, but it took a traditional water diviner to nudge it on to its real mark. The water is then pumped up to these tanks, plentiful in the wet season but rather miserly in the dry season. Thankfully, our water supply is now supplemented by a recently acquired link to that rarest of all jungle species: mainline water from the new Galagedera-Mawathagama Water Supply Project. Water management, irrigation, storage, collection, and distribution was what made Sri Lanka's great Anuradhapuram Kingdom possible in the first place,

from the 5th century BCE onwards. Even today it is a critical resource, powering over 50% of the electricity grid.

Past the WATER TANKS is BEATA'S LOOKOUT. This viewpoint captures the spot where the immense dry plains of northern Sri Lanka begin their rise into the Central Highlands. Here, at 1,000 feet, the Galagedera Gap stretches out below, where in 1765 the Dutch Army were defeated by soldiers of the Kandyan king. Stones rolled down onto the army from the adjacent hill. The Dutch sued for peace and returned to Colombo and defeat. The Dutch Coat of Arms that hangs on the hotel's front porch was made a little before this date.

The path then winds down through FRANGAPANI VALLEY, notable for its absence of frangipani trees, but soon to be the site of a newly planted arboretum of rare trees and out onto the main estate road where it touches the main entrance gates. Here the path is metaled - though when we first arrived it had reduced to a single walkable track. Repaired and enlarged, it became THE RED ROAD.

Only you can walk your journey, but many are on the road. So say native American Indians of THE RED ROAD, a metaphor for the sense of obligation and personal commitment to purposefully live your life.

This RED ROAD, the main access to the estate, is carpeted from April to May by flowers of Flamboyant or Flame Trees (*Delonix regia*) planted across the estate. Grown from seeds from Madras, Sri Lanka, Australia, the Malay archipelago, the Caribbean, Africa, Egypt and the Gulf, the flowers vary from pale scarlet and almost orange to deep russets and vermilion. Batiks commissioned from Sri Lanka's celebrated artist, Ena de

Silva, on the flame tree theme hang all around the hotel. Hundreds of varied crotons, a plant noted for its kaleidoscopic leaf colours and patterns bank the road. On one side a pepper grove underplanted with sapu, teak, mahogany, African Tulip trees and mango stretches down into a small valley. On the other side rise a hill of rubber and cloves.

And just before the walk ends back at the main hotel entrance porch is JAMES'S CORKSCREW ORCHARD. This area is home to the estate's goats, Imelda, and Ponzi who mated "inter familia" to produce scores of Ptolemaic offspring, now farmed out to goat loving vegetarian households nearby.

Intended for a life of productive utility, the goats succumbed instead to a life of ornamentation and ease. Their paddock is planted with mango, rambutan, star fruit, coconut, tamarind, and guava. A pond and 2 old wells of terrapins collect water naturally from the surrounding area. The orchard is named after James, a fond follower of the long and winding road.

If the Estate walk proves too easy a promenade, then THE JUNGLE & VILLAGE WALK beckons. This walk leads out from the main estate through feral undomesticated of rubber and cocoa, into cinnamon, jungle and eventually through a string of hamlets that abut the estate where many of our staff have their homes. A small river runs alongside it, with acres of paddy, and the little road winds its way back to the main estate gates.

DISCOVER MORE

A HISTORY LIKE NO OTHER

Contrary & creative, Sri Lanka built a tropical Versailles as the West constructed in wattle & daub. When the Cold War ebbed, its own began. The Ceylon Press History Of Sri Lanka Podcast unpicks its serpentine history.

BEHIND EACH GREAT STORY

From elephants to sapphires, tea to cricket, Island Stories: The Sri Lanka Podcast explores the things that make Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan.

OFF PISTE

The Ceylon Press' Alternative eGuides go to the places without crowds; forgotten as they are by most academics, historians, and modern travellers.

LESS IS MORE

The Ceylon Press' Tiny eBooks fillet the essentials of their subject from nature to history, culture to travel.

INSTANT OVERVIEWS

With their short, and readable introductions, The Ceylon Press' Pocket Professor eBooks illuminate Sri Lankan subjects from ancient dynasties to endemic mammals.

COMPANIONABLE LOOK-UPS

The Ceylon Press Companion to Sri Lanka and its subject Companions makes visible the whole island – from its arts, wildlife, & landmarks to religion, food, & history.

A LITTLE LIGHT RELIEF

And least it gets too serious, enjoy the off-grid Jungle Diaries blog & Podcast; and Archaeologies, the blank verse diaries of an occasional hermit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Today its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts - and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com.

It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. Simply drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:

GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com