

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

ENCOUNTERS

AT THE JUNGLE HOTEL

A GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL



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A guide to Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR
SAMI
PATERFAMILIAS & GENIUS
HOTELIER

“Imagination is the only weapon in
the war with reality.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

A LITTLE BIT OF
HISTORY

Encounters at the Jungle Hotel is a behind the scenes look at Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. It starts, of course with a welcome. And a thanks, for coming our way, for most of the readers of this booklet will no doubt be our guests.

Whatever else is happening in the world, here at least there is a cake for tea; birdsong from dawn to dusk; and from everywhere the sound of civets, bickering monkeys that look a lot like Mr Trump; and squirrels bouncing on roofs like Keith Moon.

To have made it this far, your car will have managed our driveway of buffalo high grasses and untamed forest. Guerrilla gardening, we call it – it keeps at bay, if only metaphorically, what's best avoided to safeguard a long and happy life: televisions for example, or processed food, or terrorist warlords.

We enjoy being a secret to most and a companion to some. Our sophisticated friends in Colombo call this Village Country, all jungle; tiny hamlets, simple living, feral nature. But really, the jungle is far from feral.

What looks so random – is ordered, artful, and immeasurably peaceful. Its discreet hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion. Nightclubs, branded food concessions, still less a shop selling extra virgin olive oil – all have yet to open here. Somehow, we cope.

Nature, good food, schnauzers, art, walks, music, books, yoga, swimming, massage, few rules, bird watching, tree hugging, meditating, and that most lost of all life's activities – just being: that's what this tiny jungle principality is all about. That and the odd trip to a few places well off the beaten track.

This little guide will try to give you a glimpse of what makes things tick. And how on earth we got here in the first place.

Geographically, we are neither part of the Rajarata, the oldest kingdom that reached from Jaffa to the edge of the hill country; nor the hill country itself. We lie between the two, on the first high hills that rise from the dry northern plains to eventually reach Mount Pedro near Nuwara Eliya at 8,000 feet.

The hotel sits, belly button like, in the middle of 25-acres of plantations and jungle that dip down to paddy and up to hills of 1,000 ft, all of it surrounded by yet more hills and valleys, almost all given over to forest.

Until family wills and the 1960s land reform acts intervened, this estate was much bigger; a place where coffee, cocoa, and coconuts grew. They grow on still, fortified by newer plantations of cinnamon and cloves; and rarer trees.

Now almost 100 years old, the main hotel block, Mudunahena Walawwa, was built by the Mayor of Kandy. Walawwas, or manor houses, pepper the island, exuberant disintegrating architectural marvels, now too often left to meet their ultimate maker. In size and style, they range from palaces to this, a modest and typical plantation Walawwa with metal roofs, inner courtyards, verandas, and stout columns arranged around it like retired members of the Household Calvary.

But it was not always thus. This walawwa – like a caravan - moved to its present site when the water ran dry at its earlier location. The foundations of this first abode, on the estate's eastern boundary, can still be seen. It overlooks the Galagedera Pass, which found its 15 minutes of fame in 1765 when villagers - fortified by the Kandyan king's army - rained rocks down on an invading Dutch army that melted back to Colombo: fever, and early death. From that moment to much later, little happened. In the jungle that is.

Elsewhere America declared itself independent, the Holy Roman Empire got itself dissolved. Europe was beset by wars, the Napoleonic, the First, the Second, the Cold. Asia threw off its colonial masters. Not even the LTTE civil war that so rocked the rest of Sri Lanka made much of an impression here.

In fact, it wasn't until 1988 that the outside world caught up with the estate when a Marxist-Leninist insurrection crippled the country for three years in a blizzard of bombings, assassinations, riots and military strikes. Entrusting the Walawwa keys to three old retainers, the family left the estate; and for 20 years, weather and nature took turns budging it into a Babylonian wilderness. Landslides embraced it. Buildings tumbled. Termites struck. Trees rooted - indoors.

Later, we arrived on a holiday; and bought it – a sort of vacation souvenir that could only be enjoyed in situ. No excel spreadsheet; no SWOT or PESTLE analyses were manhandled into service to help escape the inevitable conclusion – which was, of course, to buy it. The estate, the buildings were lovely; and only needed some love back.

The love restoration programme that followed often felt like the unravelling of Denisovan DNA. Expect the unexpected, said Oscar Wilde. Prescient advice in the jungle as much as in Victorian London. There were monks, of course. They arrived to be fed, to bless and leave, their umbrella bearers running behind them. And five or six builders, not dissimilar to Henry VIII's wives: some jailed, some cherished. There was monsoon, material shortages, power cuts and work schedules giddily interrupted by alms giving and wakes. And of course the Easter bombings, COVID, the bankruptcy and collapse of the government, and shortages of everything from fuel to yeast.

But with each cloud came the most golden of silver linings, the fostering those most Sri Lankan of virtues - patience and fortitude.

As a thirteenth century Sufi mystic put it: "What comes, will go. What is found, will be lost again. But what you are is beyond coming and going and beyond description." With a wisdom you might expect from one who put up with Genghis Khan, Rumi was right. In the jungle everything, eventually, settles back down. Nicely. And so, finally restored, the estate opened as a boutique hotel in 2019, to become one of the island's Top albeit tiny 5-star hotels.

TWO

MOSTLY WILD

Most hotels start their blubs with room details or menus. This one starts with plants. As befits a jungle hotel, we love them. Especially trees. We have planted almost 8000.

The gardens that cradle the hotel include yellow and pink shower trees, frangipani, flamboyant and Illawarra flame trees; coconut, lipstick, and queen palms; mangos, and wood apples.

In outer garden grow cycads, orchids, sapu, Cook and Norfolk Island pines, jak, jacaranda, and tea. Rarer palms too - travellers, foxtail, ruffled, stilt and golden; pomegranates and citrus in force – from lime to kumquats, grapefruit to tangerines.

Small paths crisscross the estate with four easy walks laid out in the Garden, the Outer Garden and a half or full estate walk, with a fifth taking you further into the jungle and nearby hamlets.

Down one of these paths is our private Spice Garden planted with cinnamon, vanilla, pepper, cloves, turmeric, and ginger; nurseries of herbs, vegetables and rare saplings, the Elephant Graveyard, and a grove of cocoa. Beyond all this stretch the plantations where the jungle is kept at bay with ever more deliberate degrees of lassitude.

Deliberate – because that's what the wild creatures demand in most surveys we have carried out.

Birds especially. Over 200 species breed on the island, 33 endemic. We have counted over 50 species here including, kites, eagles, peacocks, paraquets, owls, hornbills, kingfishers, bee-eaters, barbets, swifts, woodpeckers, flame-backs, wagtails, bulbuls, babblers, warblers, flycatchers, flowerpeckers, and drongos.

Mammals too. Few countries of comparable size offer so diverse a range of mammals as this island. Its wildernesses support 126 species, 19 or so endemic; and some who give this hotel as their official address. Five waring families of Toque Macaque Monkeys live here. giant squirrels abound, along with lesser squirrels, bandicoots, gerbils, mice, hares, shrews, bats, fishing cats, civet, wild boar, mongooses, muntjac, and deer. Porcupines can be heard munching through newly planted shrubs at night.

Just ten kilometres the rare Sri Lankan leopard has been spotted, eating a neighbour's goats. Our own goats, descendants of a more populous harem, live in greater safety in the Corkscrew Orchard beneath the Hotel's Parking Area munching glericidia and watching Ceylon pond turtles.

Over 11,000 insect species inhabit the island, through only a fraction has been counted here, which is refreshing free of the most irritating ones: mosquitos and flies. Mayflies live their blink-and-you-miss-it lives for a few monsoon days; microscopically small bees, butterflies and moths abound. Four species of Asian jumping spiders have been discovered, but sadly not hopping around here.

And then there are of course the animals that dare not speak their name – the reptiles. Of Sri Lanka's 208 species of reptiles, 116 are endemic.

Amongst them are crocodiles, lizards and monitors and turtles, the increasingly rare star tortoise; and, of course, as in any tropical country, snakes. Stylish little skinks and colour changing chameleons can be found everywhere, along with the odd monitor lizard, and melancholy clucking geckos, whose great service is to vigorously munch their way through all manner of insect pests.

Barometers of just how good the air quality is the tender-hearted lichen. Sri Lanka records nearly 1,000 species, many flourishing on our trees in glorious greys and oranges. For trees are of course at the heart of the estate, with well over 70 different species. Jak abounds, huge green fruits growing out of the stem and thicker branches, a superfood in its own right. mahogany, sapu, nadu, satinwood and teak are planted across the estate. And ebony - black, hard, snail-slow, fussy, and so rare it is sold in kilograms,

At a more practical level are the island's utilities, once as endangered as the rarely spotted Sri Lankan mountain palm civet. The Ceylon Electricity Ltd.'s many supply breaks offer unrivalled opportunities to practice patience. Occasionally, monkeys add to the fun by chewing through wires, kamikaze style. The Hotel takes its electricity from a private substation run off the national grid to provide for greater supply security but when the power is cut, the hotel's diesel-run generator kicks in. Bottled gas, bought in from abroad, is (after wood) Sri Lanka's go-to cooking fuel: more reliable and cheaper than electricity.

With water, feast or famine is the mantra of the water board, who are struggling to keep up with King Parakrama Bahu's declaration: "in a country like this, not one drop of rainwater should be allowed to flow into the ocean without profiting man." The Hotel's water comes from a 350 foot deep well bored through rocks. It is now supplemented by a link to mainline water from the new Galagedera-Mawathagama Water Supply Project. Water management, irrigation, storage, collection, and distribution was what made Sri Lanka's great Anuradhapuran 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.

Bills can be paid in the main Hotel Office. They include a 10% service charge, a legal requirement here, although its distribution and timing are often anachronist. At our hotel, we give all staff members, regardless of seniority, the same percent share of it, and it is paid within a week of the month's end. Any tips given are added to the Service Charge Fund and distributed evenly. By agreement, 1% of the Service Charge is retained in a Staff Welfare Fund set up to help our staff and their close family members deal with unforeseen problems.

THREE

ALL AROUND
YOU

Sri Lanka is blessed with its range of locally grown fruit and vegetables, spices, and herbs. And a tradition of blending local with European recipes. So we don't have to go very far to find our own particular bit of kitchen fusion magic, captured, in our drinks, breakfast and a la carte menus. All we serve is made-to-order, and unprocessed, with fresh ingredients. Do let us know if you'd like to order a picnic lunch if you are going on a tour or if you are celebrating a special occasion so that we can arrange for things to be exactly as you need them to be.

Cars, Tuk Tuks, Vans & Taxis can be booked via the Hotel Office: we only keep a few very trusted drivers on our register so book ahead if you know your plans. Tours can also be organised exactly as you would like them.

Manicure, pedicure, physiotherapy, massage, and yoga are all available to book. Coco's Pavillion in our Amphitheatre is specially constructed for yoga and massage and Bertie's Kitchen for outdoor cooking demonstrations.

For connectivity with the outside world, the Hotel Wi-Fi and Telcom comes courtesy of Sri Lanka Telecom, a loving network of routers and underground cables that is surprisingly stable.

The Wi-Fi Password is flame2021. A curated 100-hour Flame Tree Music playlist mixes French jazz with Russian folk, German Lieder with Scottish classical; Indian raga with Motown, pop & indie.

Our shampoos, soaps and conditioners have been specially developed for us by Green Leaf Herbals, a pioneering local company whose products are environmentally friendly, alcohol, caffeine and animal

ingredients certificated free. The Pool is open 24/7, shared with skinny-dipping swallows. Old fashioned board games live in the library: cheating at Monopoly is mandatory.

Rooms are cleaned, and beds made daily: linen and towels are changed every second day of your stay. If you would like them changed sooner, or do not wish for housekeeping to come, do inform the Hotel Office.

Please ask the Butlers to provide you with any tea or coffee you may want in your room; alternatively, if you would prefer to use a room-service tea making kit, please ask the Duty Manager to place one in your room.

Essential items such as toiletries, medicine, cigarettes etc can all be obtained in our local village, Galagedera. Priyanka, our tuk-tuk driver can take you or simply fetch things; and can be booked via the Hotel Office.

Useful Telephone Numbers include the Hotel Office: + 94 81246 1265; and the General Manager: + 94 77 189 8586.

Don't be alarmed by strange noises heard in the dark – it is usually porcupine, wild boar, civets, frogs in radiant song & owls. Wiji, our Nightwatchman, is available all through the night in the main hotel block to manage the unexpected.

If anything, however, minor, in your room or elsewhere does not work or causes you problems please let our team know so we can put things right quickly.

Scattered around the hotel's nine bedrooms and public spaces are hundreds of pieces of art.

The hotel's three dimensional art includes Phoenician, Tamil, Sri Lankan, Bengali, and Javan statues; a Tamil Kovil statue of a dog, made in Jaffna around 1930.; painted wood panels, Altar Screens and Lion Guardians, stained glass and cut glass from Orrefors & Kosta Boda; Kandyan bridal clothing; nineteenth century Swedish cutlery and Indian art deco silverware; Portuguese ceramics and Welsh urns; gold art deco heliconia Lamps, glass and metal chandeliers from Cairo, Marrakesh, and Damascus; chiming clocks from Ängelholm; Japanese lacquer and Chettinad Palace Doors; and, oldest of all, a mysterious ceramic animal statue unearthed in Sri Lanka and dating back 2600 years.

Amongst the paintings are lithographs by Warhol, Miro, Chagall, Picasso; and of King Emperors and Rajas; Patachitra scrolls, tribal tapestries, panels from Vietnam, Ethiopia, and India; propaganda posters of Sophia Lauren films and the Viet Cong; daguerreotypes and 19th century ethnographical, and Imperial photographs; canvasses from Auroville, Oxford, Sri Lanka, Bahrain, Geneva, Calcutta, and Leh; 18th and 19th century cartography; Japanese, Indian & Scandinavian engravings and woodcuts; and a wide range of contemporary Sri Lankan art. This includes a large collection of rare batiks from Ena de Silva, one of the island's great modern artists. Specially commissioned paintings by some of our favourite artists are for sale in the hotel's Entrance Hall.

Much of our furniture is carefully restored island antiques including Ayurveda Dispensers, 19th century four poster beds, Victorian hand painted chests, ebony day beds, dining tables from lost hill clubs; desks, trollies, Pettegamas, card tables, newspaper racks, chairs, dressing tables, and carved cupboards of ebony, mango & burtha, mahogany, jak, teak, satinwood, mara and nadun.

FOUR

COMMUNITY

Polishing our furniture is one of those tasks that never ends and is one of many assignments fulfilled by our team – a community of 25 who run and nurture the hotel and its estate.

Many of its members live in the hamlets that abut the estate including our housekeepers, Yassika; Chandra, and her husband Ruan, one of the estate gardeners; Shyamalee, our head housekeeper and her husband Manju, our supervisor and butler. Nearby too is Mahesh our Maintenance Supervisor; Kasun who has chefed here from boy to man, and our learned butler Nandana.

Others are a just tuk tuk away, including Ananda, Bandara and Janaka in the gardening team. Thamod, our youngest butler comes from nearby Rambukkana, a stone's throw from the Elephant Orphanage. Wiji, our schnauzer whisperer, once worked on the estate plantations before retraining to be our nightwatchman, waking the hotel up at 5am and putting it to bed when all are asleep. Nadeeka too made the same transition, moving into the housekeeping team from cropping. From further afield come Shalitha our Demi Chef, and our butlers Herath, and Lahiru.

Sudesh, our talented sous chef, lives in nearby Kandy with his young family, as does Dissanayake, our kitchen assistant, whose smile always reminds you that life is actually rather good.

Ajith Molligoda our Commercial Manager lives a short drive away, though is still lamenting the loss of his classic sports car, sacrificed by the need to upscale to a family car. Ranjan, our Assistant Operations Manager comes in from further afield and is still trim enough to see a jog around the estate walks as barely worth the mention. The team is overseen by Angelo

Perera the Hotel's empathetic all-rounder General Manager, who wears his wisdom and talent lightly; and who had to help build the hotel before he could then run it.

A board of directors oversees everything. The most eminent of its five senior directors is Bianca, born beside Oxford's Garsington Opera. Her husband Archibald arrived from a country pile beside Highgrove. Together they instigated Coco and Cuthbert, who live the lives of smitten drama queens, along with Coco's youngest daughter, Nestor. The junior directors are Mikael and David, who bought the estate back in 2007 whilst on holiday; and, in Colombo, the banker, Ranjani Goonetilleke.

Sitting as we do in the middle of the island; we are in striking distance of a great many of the country's most important sites. There are over eighty remarkable attractions, adventures, and activities to be found within sixty miles of the estate, two thirds of them no more than five to thirty miles away.

One of these, almost never visited by tourists, is a place associated with Sri Lanka's first queen. Kuveni is remembered today as a mother, lover, and wife – but also a demon, a metamorphoser, an outcast, an avenging fury, suicide, traitor, murderess, ghost, and mistress of deception. A descendant of gods, she is also a goddess to the country's still living aboriginal peoples. The site of her presumed tomb, almost two thousand five hundred years old, is to be found barely twenty miles from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. Her husband, Prince Vijaya, a shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls "evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds," is said to be buried at another site close by – and equally unvisited by anyone today.

In amongst these first sovereigns is the lost masterpiece of one of the world's great wood carvers; some of the best mountain ranges for trekking; prized bird sanctuaries; an orphanage for elephants; the forest retreat of reclusive monks; the hidey-holes of a freedom fighting king famed for his boomerang resilience; the village of a latter day Robin Hood with Oscar-Award winning looks; the home of the bible of Buddhism; and an eccentric vertiginous jungle tower.

Elsewhere are to be found some of the island's greatest medieval temples; Buddhist temples that look Hindu; Hindu temples built by last Buddhist king; Victorian churches that have escaped from the home counties; and the holiest Buddhist site on the island.

Equally close are melancholy cemeteries; forts; and battlefields where colonial ambitions met a bloody end; the island's greatest surviving royal palace; frescos that tell tales centuries old; a rock pierced by a road; an antique version of the Nine Arch Bridge; the best botanical garden in Asia; tea plantations; and an antique shop that never ends.

But just before this guide ends – here are a few reading tips. Try Jasmin Gooneratne's novel "The Sweet and Simple Kind," one of the greatest friendship novels you will encounter. Or Shyam Selvadurai's magical cross-dressing drama "Funny Boy;" Ameena Hussein's "The Moon in the Water," a colossal drama of love and maybe even forgiveness; and anything by the astonishing Askok Ferry, whose powers of compassion and identification, let alone of the ridiculous, are irresistible. Read also "Mosquito," by Roma Tearne; Ru Freeman's "On Sal Mal Lane;" Shehan Karunatilaka Booker prizewinning "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida;" and "Blue Skinned Gods," S. J. Sindu's tale of futuristic magic realism, about a boy born with blue

skin. Books of every possible kind are as precious as trees at The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, which is also, and not unsurprisingly home to The Ceylon Press, a digital publishing initiative set up to tell the story of Sri Lanka and whose many eBooks, podcasts, histories and guides can be downloaded for free at the ceylonpress.com.

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.

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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