

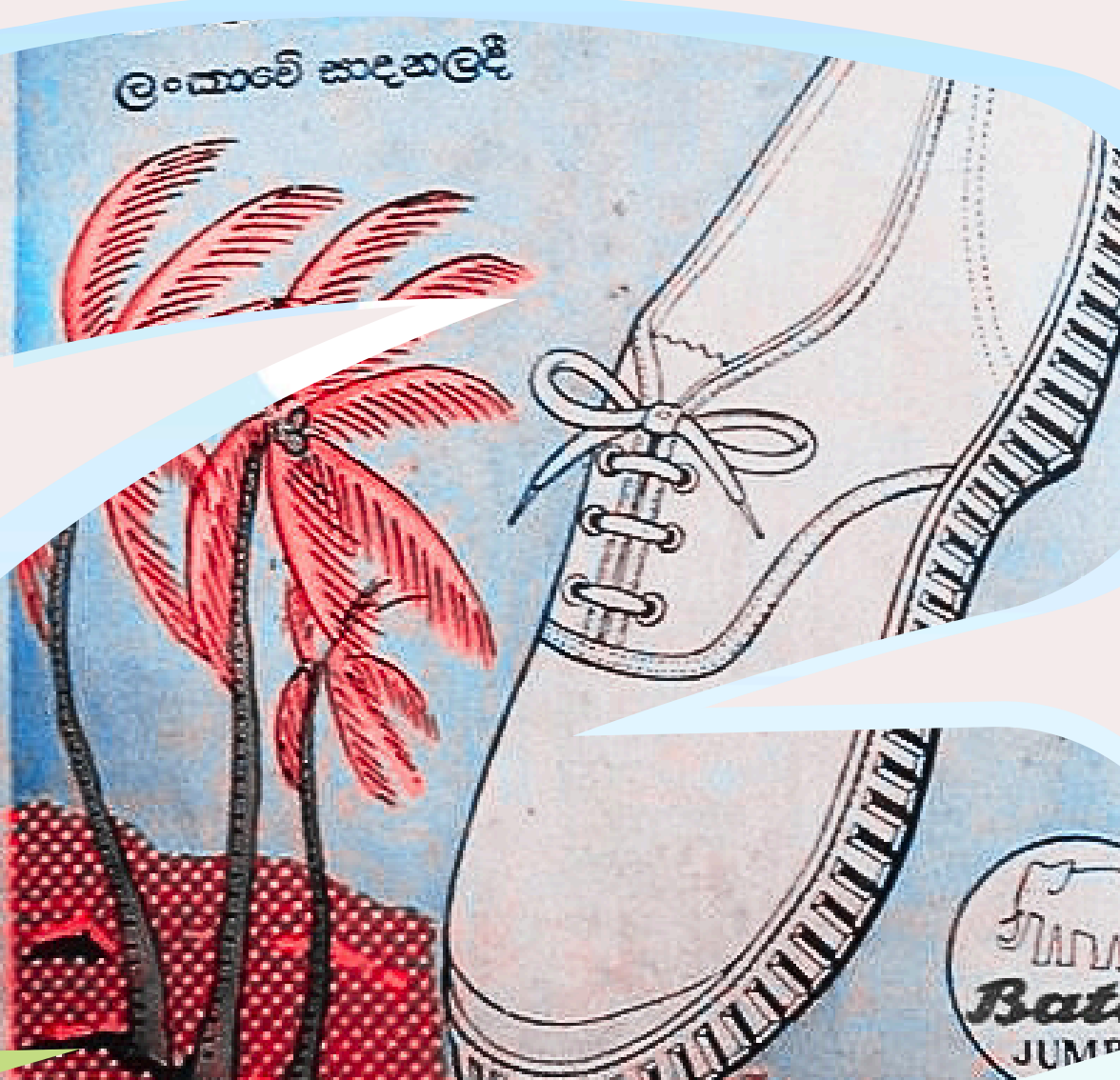
A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

VERY

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

10-15 MILES

ATTRACTIONS & ACTIVITIES FROM
SRI LANKA'S FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL



THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

VERY CLOSE
ENCOUNTERS

THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

VERY CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Attractions & Activities 10-15 miles from
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

BELINDA

DURACELL BUNNY. GODDESS

“When the day becomes the night
and the sky becomes the sea, when
the clock strikes heavy and there’s no
time for tea; and in our darkest hour,
before my final rhyme, she will come
back home to Wonderland and turn
back the hands of time.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Very Close Encounters are the subject of this guide - a travelogue fixed on those attractions, adventures and activities that lie easily within a 10-15 miles journey from Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Kipling believed that to understand a country you had to smell it. Especially the perfumes of its past.

Yet the past is documented in so many different ways - in books, or architecture; in music or even food. In Sri Lanka, it is the temples that best hold its story.

The island's temples are far more than just places of worship. Read them right and you read the real record of the land.

They are garrulous witnesses to its kings and wars, its festivals and customs, everything in fact that reflects back the country's life for over two thousand years.

Fortunately, two of its greatest medieval temples lie near at hand, together with a Buddhist temple that looks Hindu; a Hindu temple built by the last Buddhist king; a temple equally favoured by both religions; a Victorian church that's escaped from the home counties - and the holiest Buddhist site on the island.

Equally close is a mountain range beloved of trekkers; and one named for gnomes adorned by a vast statue; a lake beloved by cormorants and pelicans; a forest sanctuary for birds - and probably the best botanical garden in Asia.

In between these places are lands of a different sort - tea plantations; a farm famed for mushrooms; melancholy cemeteries and a battlefield where colonial ambitions met a bloody end.

Close by is the island's greatest surviving royal palace; frescos that tell tales centuries old; a rock pierced by a road; and an antique version of the Nine Arch Bridge.

And for oniomanias there is a shop and museum dedicated to tea; a village dedicated to copper and brass and an antique shop that never ends.

But let's start with a song.

TWO

KANDY
CENTRAL

All good days begin with a rousing hymn and this one starts with "All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, The Lord God made them all."

So goes Mrs Cecil Alexander's anthem in "Hymns for Little Children," published in that most revolutionary of years – 1848.

But it is her second verse that calls most to twitchers and eager ornithologists. "Each little bird that sings," it goes: "he made their glowing colours, He made their tiny wings."

It is a tune worth humming as you drive to UdawaththaKele Forest, 12 miles away from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel and perched just above Kandy's Temple of The Tooth. It is one of the country's loveliest bird forests: remote, wild – but accessible.

All creatures great and small live in its 104 hectares, along with orchids and ferns, four hundred and sixty plant species; butterflies, snakes, snails, lizards, toads, frogs, insects, monkeys, civet, deer, loris, boars, porcupine, the ruddy mongoose, giant flying squirrels, bandicoots, and bats.

But it is of course the birds that draw most of all.

Over eighty species have been recorded, many endemic, including Layard's parakeet, the yellow-fronted and brown-capped babblers, the Sri Lanka hanging parrot, the three-toed kingfisher, mynas, golden-fronted and blue-winged leafbirds, spotted and emerald doves, Tickell's blue flycatcher, the white-rumped shama, the crimson-fronted barbet, the serpent eagle, and brown fish owl.

Appropriately, for a trip inspired by a hymn to animals, just beneath the forest lies the Church of St Paul, built in 1846, two years before Mrs Cecil Alexander's hymn was published.

Over succeeding decades, the church's terracotta bricks - now weathered to a red-ochre hue - would have echoed with the tuneful musical notation added to her hymn by William Monk.

Monk's great other hymn was "Abide with Me" - and that is precisely what this most home counties of Anglican churches has done. It has withstood more than the most expected tests of time.

Just two years after its completion it weathered the shattering 1848 Matale Rebellion - and then all the succeeding wars and insurrections that beset the island, protected by vast gates of wrought iron fabricated far away in Edwardian England. Inside the dimly lit church is a majestic pipe organ donated by Muslim businessmen from Bradford, a silver-gilt communion set gifted by the King of England - and a blazing 1874 stained glass window of the Crucifixion, the Ascension, the Angel in the Tomb, and the Nativity, the gift of a planter's widow.

Outside, beyond its residual beam is Kandy Lake, and its prospect of a bracing walk. Known as the Sea of Milk, the lake is surround by a dramatic Cloud Wall across much of its three-kilometer circumference and is overhung by huge rain trees.

Across its eighteen-metre depth lurk whistling ducks and monitor lizards, turtles, cormorants, egrets, pelicans, eagles, owls, herons, and numerous fish including an exotic and savage 9-foot-long alligator Gar - a fish with a crocodilian head, a wide snout, and razor-sharp teeth.

A circuit of the lake starting at The Temple Of The Tooth itself takes you all the way round to the Temple's back entrance where lies, most conveniently, Slightly Chilled, a hilltop bar slavishly dedicated to snacks and cold beers.

Here also, just beside the temple's back door, lies the entrance to the British Garrison Cemetery, created in 1817 - two years after the formal annexation of Kandy.

It is home to almost two hundred souls, laid out like crazy paving, including John Robertson the last European to be killed by a wild elephant in Ceylon; William Robert Lyte, grandson of the author of "Abide with Me;" and the colonial ruler, Sir John D'Oyly whose penchant for sarongs and beards made him the country's first foreign hippie.

A visiting Englishman wrote that "a stranger visiting this spot would be charmed at the magnificent scenery which surrounds it. In this lonely spot lie many hundreds of kindly Scots, who cut off in the very prime and vigour of their manhood, sleep the sleep which knows no waking, under the rank weeds and wiry grasses which cover their neglected graves. Many a sad tale of hardship, agony, and pain, could the tenants of these nameless graves tell, were they permitted to speak."

In equal sorrow - if not the same disorder - lie two hundred of the eighty-five million victims of World War Two, intombed in perfect order at the flawlessly maintained Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. Ceylon escaped much of the horrors of that conflict but rather eccentrically found itself the location of Southeast Asia Command, set up in Kandy under Lord Mountbatten to be in overall charge of Allied operations. Far from the real battlefield, Queen Victoria's great grandson, found plenty of time to

invent cocktails at the nearby Queens Hotel where he is still occasionally remembered.

The hotel, once the Walauwa mansion of the British Governors, is now the hotel equivalent of an aging maiden aunt, chasing an elusive restoration as an improvised Jane Austen bride might a suitor. It's bar, where somnambulance has evolved into a competitive sport, is the ideal spot to collapse in after a visit to the Kandy's greatest and most overwhelming sites – the palace of its last kings and The Temple of The Tooth.

These two places, though part of the same complex, are easily mixed up, a confusion that makes clear the unremitting opacity of the line between religion and state has always existed in the country.

To most Sri Lankans, the Temple is holier even than St Peter's is to Catholics and at least as sacred as the Kaaba's Black Stone is to Muslims. Even so, it is merely the last and latest temple to give a home to the relic that makes it so important. The relic - said to be Lord Buddha's left upper canine tooth - arrived on the island around 371 CE hidden in the hair ornamentation of an Indian princess.

Almost immediately it became the island's most precious possession, legitimising the reign of kings and validating a priestly theocracy. Often on the move to escape war, capture, thieves, frenzied Catholics, rival warlords, or Tamil invaders, it lived in almost a dozen other temples in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Dambadeniya, to Yapahuwa, Gampola, Avissawella, Kotte before coming to rest in Kandy.

As a relic it has plenty of competition. Scores of alternative artefacts assert a connection to Lord Buddha – including bowls, hairs, and bones. But the tooth is

considered the most important for it touched the words he uttered as he prayed.

Across the world, thirty-two other places claim ownership of Buddha's teeth. If all are credible it would account for the teacher's entire set - eight incisors, four canines, eight premolars, and twelve molars. But somehow, by dint of custom, history, worship, faith and record, the tooth now in Kandy is by far the most celebrated one.

And as for the tale that the original tooth was pounded to dust by the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa in a fit of excessive evangelical catholic excitement: well, no one really believes that.

The relic's continuing importance can be measured by the fact that a victorious President or Prime Minister's first call on winning an election here, is to the Temple of the Tooth. There, like hundreds of thousands of devotees, the winning leader receive a monkish blessing.

For much of its existence the temple has also been a target, destroyed by both the Portuguese and the Dutch; by weather, war, and insurrection; and the temple you visit today is in its fourth or fifth edition (depending on your definition of restoration).

The building, designed in classic, gracious Kandyan style, has double peaked tiled roofs underpinned by a panoply of pure gold and is surrounded by a golden fence. Elaborate frescoes adorn its walls. The chamber is richly decorated with elephants, guardian stones, and moonstones restored after LTTE bomb blasts. Seven caskets studded with gems and shaped like stupas fit one into another, the last holding the relic itself. Rituals are performed three times daily: at dawn, noon, and

dusk. Once a week the tooth is symbolically bathed in water scented with herbs and flowers. And once a year it is paraded around the city streets in a vast Perehera procession of elephants, priests, fire eaters, dancers, and acrobats.

The palace that surrounds the temple it is a poignant shadow of its old self, the British having destroyed half of its buildings. Even so, the ones that remain are outstanding examples of the zen-like elegance of patrician hill country architecture, with wooden pillars, decorative carvings, distinctively pitched roofs, and walls and windows that open out interior spaces with so artful a restraint as to give the resulting light a unique and calming luminosity.

This can be seen most immediately in The Royal Audience Hall, the Magul Maduwa, a wooden structure, built by King Sri Vikrama Rajasinha in 1783.

Much good it did him - for here it was, in 1815 that the Kandyan Convention was signed, brutally ending the island's last kingdom.

Unhappily, many of the palace's buildings have become squats for lucky civil servants, their unbending bureaucratic domicile, twitching with room partitions, plastic furniture, and rusty fans, distorting most of the original architectural features that once made these buildings so exquisite.

The stunningly graceful Ulpange, built in 1806 by King Sri Wickrama Rajasinha as a bathing pavilion for queens, is a police post. The Wadahindina Mandappe Audience Palace is home to the stuffed remains of Rajah, the chief elephant in the Kandy Perahera, who died in 1988, prompting a full day of national mourning.

The Pattirippuwa, an immeasurably stylish octagonal pavilion, has been commandeered by a library. The King's Palace, the Raja Wasala, is a Museum.

The Queens' Chambers, the Meda Wasala, with its fetching courtyard and veranda, has been commandeered by the Department of Archaeology; and wild horses are not likely to drive them out.

But at least the Maha Maluwa, the boundless terrace adjacent to Kandy Lake has not been encroaching upon; and at one end bears a stone memorial beneath which is buried the skull of Keppetipola Disawe who led the failed rebellion against the British in 1818.

THREE

KANDY
SECRETS

Whilst in Kandy there are several other special places to drop into, not least the Royal Bar & Hotel, an old walawwa that dishes out welcome bowls of chips and frosted glasses of lime juice.

It is typical of many of the buildings that haunt the city's tiny, crowded streets, betraying with hints of bashful sorrow, the still remaining traces of striking 17th, 18th, and 19th century vernacular architecture. Balconies and verandas, screened windows and opaque courtyards hide behind shop hoardings that have yet to be bettered anywhere on the island for their chronic ugliness. Even so, to the discerning eye, beauty is there to be glimpsed; there to remind you that all is not yet lost, architecturally.

The Kataragama Devalaya, a Hindu shrine built by an 18th century Buddhist king is a perfect example of just such a surviving treasure – its architecture enlivened by the most intricate carvings, and colours chosen to forever banish grey.

Still more dazzling is the nearby Pillaiyar Kovil, a Hindu temple dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Siva; and built by a Buddhist king for his Tamil Dobhi. To meet the establishment, head for the Malwatu Maha Viharaya, the Ground Zero of Buddhist authority.

This complex of temples and monasteries dates to the 14th century pleasure gardens of the earliest Kandyan kings and is the home of the Siam Nikaya, the largest of the two most prominent Buddhist chapters on the island, and the one so memorably supported by one of the last kings of Kandy, Kirti Sri Rajasinha.

The last kings of Kandy were actually Tamil imports from the Nayak Dynasty of Madurai, India, though this

did not nothing to hinder their enthusiastic Buddhism.

Kirti Sri Rajasinha was an especially passionate devotee, and it was his reforms that restored Buddhism which had been badly damaged by the unrelenting forces of colonialism, especially – at the time – from the Dutch.

Barely five miles away from Malwatu Maha is another of Kirti Sri Rajasinha's temples: the Galmaduwa, the loneliest temple in Kandy. Barely anyone goes there; indeed it is not even a proper temple, its construction being abandoned by the king whose busy mind had moved from temple making to fresco painting.

Yet it is an arresting building, the most Hindu of Buddhist shrines with a high tapering gateway exactly like those used to highlight the entrances to temples across Tamil Nadu. The frescos the king abandoned Galmaduwa Viharaya for can be seen a mile or so up the road at the Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihara. With hindsight, the king's change of priority was bang on for the frescos that cover the walls of this temple are among the very greatest ever commissioned by any of the island's kings.

Despite being inevitably religious in character, telling with due piety, the story of Lord Buddha, their sub text, as well as their sheer artistry, marks them out as exceptional. Into their scenes are incorporated the images of their times – Portuguses firearms, for example, the uniformed attendants of the kings, processional elephants, fish, trees as stylised as corals, the inside of homes, flowers, furniture, coaches, queens, guest arrivals and dinner parties.

On the opposite and western side of Kandy, barely fifteen miles from The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel lie yet more incomparable temples – albeit ones whose

daily visitor numbers can be recorded with the forlorn fingers of a single hand.

The greatest by a whisker is the Lankatilaka Rajamaha, built around 1350 by the kings of Gampola, Versillian rulers with a reputation for enjoying all the finer points of culture. As the Black Death destroyed faraway Europe, Sri Lanka's late medieval kings enlisted the artistry of a Tamil architect famous for his Hindu temples to create a Buddhist edifice that merged the Sinhalese architecture of Polonnaruwa period with Dravidian and Indo Chinese flourishes. It could have been a car crash of a building; instead Sthapati Rayar, the architect, pulled off a masterpiece. Elegant, highly incised white walls stretch into a roof of patterned tiles across three granite stories, the inside adorned with frescos.

A few miles on is the Gadaladeniya Temple. Built around the same time as the Lankatilaka Rajamaha, by the same kings, to the design of another renowned Tamil architect, Ganes Varachari, this temple is, if anything, yet more distinctive, its Vijayanagar architecture blending Dravidian, Deccan, Islamic, Hindu and Rajput features with other more common Singhala qualities.

Three miles north lies another, much smaller temple, the Danthure Rajamaha built centuries before the events that were to immortalise it occurred. For it was here that, after almost a hundred years of military pre-eminence, the Portuguese colonial forces met their bloody end.

Shameless cheek, betrayal, gorilla skirmishes from impenetrable jungle depths, abysmal weather and escalating terror

marked the campaign. It was to end on the 8th of October 1594, the Portuguese army of twenty thousand men reduced to just ninety-three at the battle of Danthure. The survivors were left wishing they had not outlived their compatriots as their noses, ears and gentiles were severed.

The political, military, and religious machinations that led to this point were as intricate and complicated as anything since the ascent of man. They involved the scandalous conversion of Buddhist kings to Catholicism, the betrayal of a kingdom, the reassertion of Buddhist militarism, the forcible marriage of the last dynastic princess to a succession of Kandyan kings, and the last great throw of the dice by the Portuguese to seize control of the entire island.

Portugal's failure marked the blossoming of the last kingdom - the kingdom of Kandy. The kingdom was to endure for over two hundred years; and to meet head on the invasive forces of two more colonial armies - the Dutch and the British. And although it ultimately succumbed, betrayed more from within than without, it put up such a fight as to ensure the continued survival of the island's culture until it could be better cherished after independence in 1948.

So sit under the quiet shade of the Bo tree brought from Anuradhapura to this little temple in Danthure - and contemplate the tumult and torture of those times; and all that came after.



FOUR
HOW TO
GROW A
CUPPA

After so unrelenting a historical record it is time to take a cup of tea – something that can best be done just a few miles on from the battlefield, at a place called Giragama.

Here, a short hop from where the very first tea bushes were grown on the island is the Giragama Tea Plantation – its hills rolling with tea bushes and its factory processing the tips into temptation.

Tea first arrived on the island in 1824, with plants smuggled from China to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya.

Now the island's dominant culinary export, the crop began life accidentally. Famous though the island is for its remarkable teas, it was first famous for its coffee.

In 1845 there were just thirty-seven thousand acres of the crop but by 1878, coffee estates covered two hundred and seventy-five thousand acres.

Tamil labourers arrived (seventy thousand per year at one time) to help the industry grow and in 1867 a railway was built from Kandy to Colombo just to carry coffee. It was, said the papers, a "coffee rush," but one that benefited many – for a third of the estates were owned by native Sri Lankans.

Investors flooded in and by 1860, Sri Lanka was one of the three largest coffee-producing countries in the world.

But in 1869, just as it seemed as if the coffee boom would go on and on, the crop was hit by a killer disease - *Hemileia vastatrix*, "coffee rust" or "Devastating Emily" as it was known by the planters. It took time to spread – but within thirty

years there were barely eleven thousand acres of the plant left. The industry was wiped out. That the country did not follow suit is thanks to a Scot named James Taylor and his experiments with tea. He emigrated to the island in 1852 to plant coffee and spotted early the effects of coffee rust.

On his Loolecondera Estate in Kandy he immediately started to experiment with tea until, from plant to teacup, he had mastered all the necessary techniques and processes necessary to succeed with this new crop.

In 1875 Taylor managed to send the first shipment of Ceylon tea to the London Tea Auction. Despairing coffee-planters, sat at Taylor's feet to learn tea production. Within about twenty years the export of tea increased from around eighty tons to almost twenty-three thousand tons in 1890. Tea had caught on. The few estates that made up the eleven hundred acres of planted tea back in 1875 had, by 1890, grown to two hundred and twenty thousand acres.

Today, the country is the home of the cuppa. Its climate is perfect for the plant and its modern history is molded by it. Tea accounts for almost two percent of total GDP and employs directly or indirectly, over a million people. Its bushes cover over seven hundred square miles and its sales, to places like Russia, the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, the UK, Egypt, and Japan amount to almost three hundred million kilos.

Tea tourists typically head for Ella or Nuwara Eliya to wallow in this history; but the cognoscenti go no further than the Giragama Tea Plantation, a mere jump away from where tea first began on the island. Here, amidst hills of evergreen *Camellia sinensis*, the tea museum offers Stalinist-inspired but always enjoyable tours and tastings.

But be picky. Different regions of the island make quite different teas. The most subtle is said to be the teas from Nuwara Eilya. Here at six thousand feet the climate is rugged, bracing, cold enough for frost, and best able to foster teas that are golden-hued with a delicate, fragrant bouquet.

A more balanced flavour comes at four to six thousand feet from the Uva region. Here the bushes are caressed by both the NE & SW monsoons; and a drying Cachan ocean wind that closes the leaves, forcing a high balance of flavour. It is aromatic, mellow, and smooth. A very tangy flavoured tea comes from Uda Pussellawa, at five to six thousand feet, a thinly populated region, famed for rare plants & leopards, and bombed by the NE Monsoon to give a strong dark pungent tea with a hint of rose.

From Dimbulla, at three to five thousand feet, comes a tea with a very clean taste. The region is drenched by the SW monsoon – which means crisp days, wet nights, and a complex terrain that makes a reddish tea, most famous as English Breakfast Tea. Kandy, the first home of tea, is noted for its most classic of tea flavours. Here the tea plantations are typically at two to four thousand feet, to inspire a bright, light, and coppery tea with good strength, flavour, and body.

A more caramel flavour is found at a little over sea level - Sabaragamuwa, home to sapphires and humid rainforest. The region is hit by the SW monsoon which makes for a robustly flavoured dark yellow-brown tea. The last and lowest lying tea region is Ruhuna which runs from the coast to the Sinharaja Rain Forest. The region is shielded from monsoons and has a soil that promotes rapid long, beautiful leaves that turn intensely black and make strong, full-flavoured dark teas.



FIVE
TRAINSPOTTING,
SACRIFICE &
BRASS

The trip to Giragama also sets you up nicely for a little retail therapy a mile away at Pilimathalawa. Every so often as you travel the island you hit upon a village dedicated to the obsessive production of just one item.

There's one that only does large ceramic pots. Another is lined with cane weavers. One, more perilously, is devoted to the creation of fireworks. Down south is one for moonstones; another for masks. And here in Pilimathalawa, just eleven miles from, The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, is one dedicated to brass and copper.

The ribbon village of shops and workshops, keeps alive an expertise goes back to the kings of Kandy, for whom they turned out bowls and ornaments, religious objects, and body decoration.

Three hundred years later the craftsman remain, melting and molding, designing, and decorating, stamping, and sealing, engraving, and polishing. The little village is also home to the Theological College of Lanka, an unusually ecumenical union of Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians dedicated to teaching new ministers in Sinhala and Tamil, and no stranger to "Hymns Ancient and Modern."

Five miles away lies another village, this one a beacon to this history of transportation. Kadugannawa shot to modest fame in 1820 when the British, fresh from having seized the entire country and put down a major rebellion, set about building a proper road to connect Colombo with Kandy.

At the Kadugannawa Pass they faced a rock of such magnitude that blasting it away or circumnavigating it was no option. Instead an army of builders lead by Captain Dawson of the Royal Engineers, pieced a sufficiently large hole through it to allow horses and

carriages access. Although Dawson died of a snake bite before the road was completed, the Captain was credited with building the island's first modern highway; and, rather extraordinarily, his own workers clubbed together to build a tower in his memory, the Dawson Tower. Somewhat shakily, it still stands.

As befits a location of such transportational importance, the country's National Railway Museum is also to be found in Kadugannawa. The country's first train ran in 1858, and the network now covers fifteen hundred kilometres using a lock-and-block signaling system of such antiquity that trainspotters mark the country as their number one travel destination simply to witness history in action.

Harder critics argue that little has changed since the 1858 – not least because the railway department runs one of the country's greatest deficits – averaging an annual forty-five-billion-rupee loss.

But, as Seneca said, "it is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor." And who can be poor who can ride in trains and carriages of such vintage beauty, with doors and windows open to catch the breeze; with food sellers who scamper up and down with doubtful offerings; and – from time to time - destinations that are all to briefly reached. All this history is celebrated at the Museum, home to innumerable old engines, locomotives, rail cars, trolleys, carriages, machinery, and equipment.

Despite all this, the real and most secret glory of Kadugannawa is actually a bridge. Trainspotters, tourists and pontists flock like sheep to the Nine Arch Bridge, a viaduct built in 1919 between Ella and Demodara. But connoisseurs go to a smaller, older one much closer to home – the Triple Arches Bridge of

Kadugannawa, built in 1887 when the first rail lines were being laid. Today it is a dreamy ruin, its arches lost in the ever-encroaching jungle. Listen hard – for here you can still catch the chatter of long departed passengers heading to the hill country.

Hills are of course what Kandy and the area around The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel are all about. And trekking across them delivers lavish benefits: exercise; adventure; nature - and an intoxicating sense of virtue.

Of the many places to set off from, Hantana is one of the best. Kandy itself can be spied from its seven peaks - along with tea plantations and the awe-inspiring Knuckles mountain range, mist draped across them like decadent boas, and the sound of all creatures great and small filling the sky.

The wilderness is close to another more famous mountain, Bahirawa Kanda, or Gnome Mountain, home to one of the tallest statues of Lord Buddha – and once, more memorably, home to some atypical human sacrifice, involving a particularly beautiful girl, Dingiri Menika who lived right next to the Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, in Galagedera.

Selected to stimulate the moribund fertility of a Kandyan queen, the girl was kidnapped by soldiers, loaded with jasmine, and propelled with elephants, drummers, and banner-bearers to a stake for overnight consumption by demons.

Quite why anyone thought a feast such as this might make the despondent queen procreate is a mystery. Fortunately, the king's elephant keeper got to Dingiri Menika first; rescued her, married her, in fact - and set up home with her in Welligalle Maya, in Cross Street, close to Kandy Super Phone, Ltd, a present-day telecommunications equipment supplier.

But although the king, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, chose to terminate all future human sacrifice, his late-burgeoning liberal values were not destined to bring him any greater luck.

Within a few years he had been exiled to India, along with at least two of his four wives, the third of which was to use her exile for bankrupting shopping sprees.

SIX

GARDEN GLORY

Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe met a pitiful end after a seventeen-year reign that had itself been a Big Dipper of misery, murder, and misfortune. Hopefully, if only for brief moments, the beleaguered king found solace within the green oasis of his most famous pleasure garden at Peradeniya, eleven miles from The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel. Here, glorious, drunken avenues of Cook's Pines, Palmyra Palms, Double Coconuts, Cabbage Palms, and Royal Palms lead off into shady dells.

The garden was refashioned in 1821; and is today one of the finest, if not the finest, botanical garden in Asia; the modern garden set up by Alexander Moon for the receipt and experimentation of plants introduced for commercial development.

Moon's catalogue published soon afterwards listed one thousand one hundred and twenty-seven "Ceylon plants." This commercialization of land was the start of a massive period of deforestation in the country. In 1881, eighty four percent of Sri Lanka was forested. In less than twenty years, British colonial agriculture reduced forest coverage to just seventy percent.

Moon was one of a line of prodigious British gardeners in Sri Lanka, an enthusiastic enforcer of a project begun in 1810 under the advice of Sir Joseph Banks when a garden was opened on Slave island in Colombo.

In 1813 the garden moved to Kalutara where there was more space for planting, before finally transferring to the better climate of Peradeniya. Now the gardens stretch over one hundred and fifty acres with four thousand plant species filling the space.

Its palm collection is among the best in Asia with about

two hundred and twenty species, but the garden's chief glory is its arboretum of ten thousand trees, many over a hundred years old and relied upon to flower in stunning colours. Among them is a Javan fig tree with a canopy of about 1600 square meters.

There is even an arboretum of trees planted by famous people including a huge Ironwood (Tsar Nicolas II); a rather stunted Camphor Tree (Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike); a Yellow Trumpet Tree (King Akihito of Japan) and a Sorrowless Tree (Queen Elizabeth II).

A Cannonball Tree planted in 1901 by King George V and Queen Mary of the United Kingdom is however pipped to the post for age by the one growing at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Its bamboo collection includes the giant bamboo of Burma, the largest known in the world, yellow building bamboo, feather bamboo, prickly bamboo, and Dwarf Chinese bamboo.

The fern collection includes over a hundred indigenous and exotic species, whilst the Spice Garden houses the oldest nutmeg trees in the world, including ones planted in 1840.

A more scientific garden lurks close by – at Gannoruwa - a government model farm where perfectly formed fruits and vegetables can be seen growing in surprisingly regimented lines, their behavior an inspiration for anyone catching a train at Fort Station.

Indoors, under dark and humid cover, sprout beds of mushrooms with prima donna tendencies.

The advice of Gertrude Stein, that doyenne of high-living culture, is as good a way to end any tour: "whoever

said money can't buy happiness," she remarked, "simply didn't know where to go shopping." It is more than likely that she had Warunas in mind - one of the country's best antique shops.

Sometimes defined as anything older than PlayStation 2, antique hunting is an edgy sport on the island. Seek - and you may not find; but if you wish to be sure that what you are looking at has real provenance and history behind it, then enjoy a short visit to Waruna's Antique Shop, conveniently located between Kandy and Peradeniya.

From ancient flags and wood carvings to paintings, furniture, jewellery, and curios, Waruna's cavernous shop is an Aladdin's Cave of credible, marvelous, and trustworthy discoveries.

Sip tea and rummage with the virtuoso of vintage; and think back over an island history that turns base metals into gold and makes the solution to world peace appear straight forward.

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