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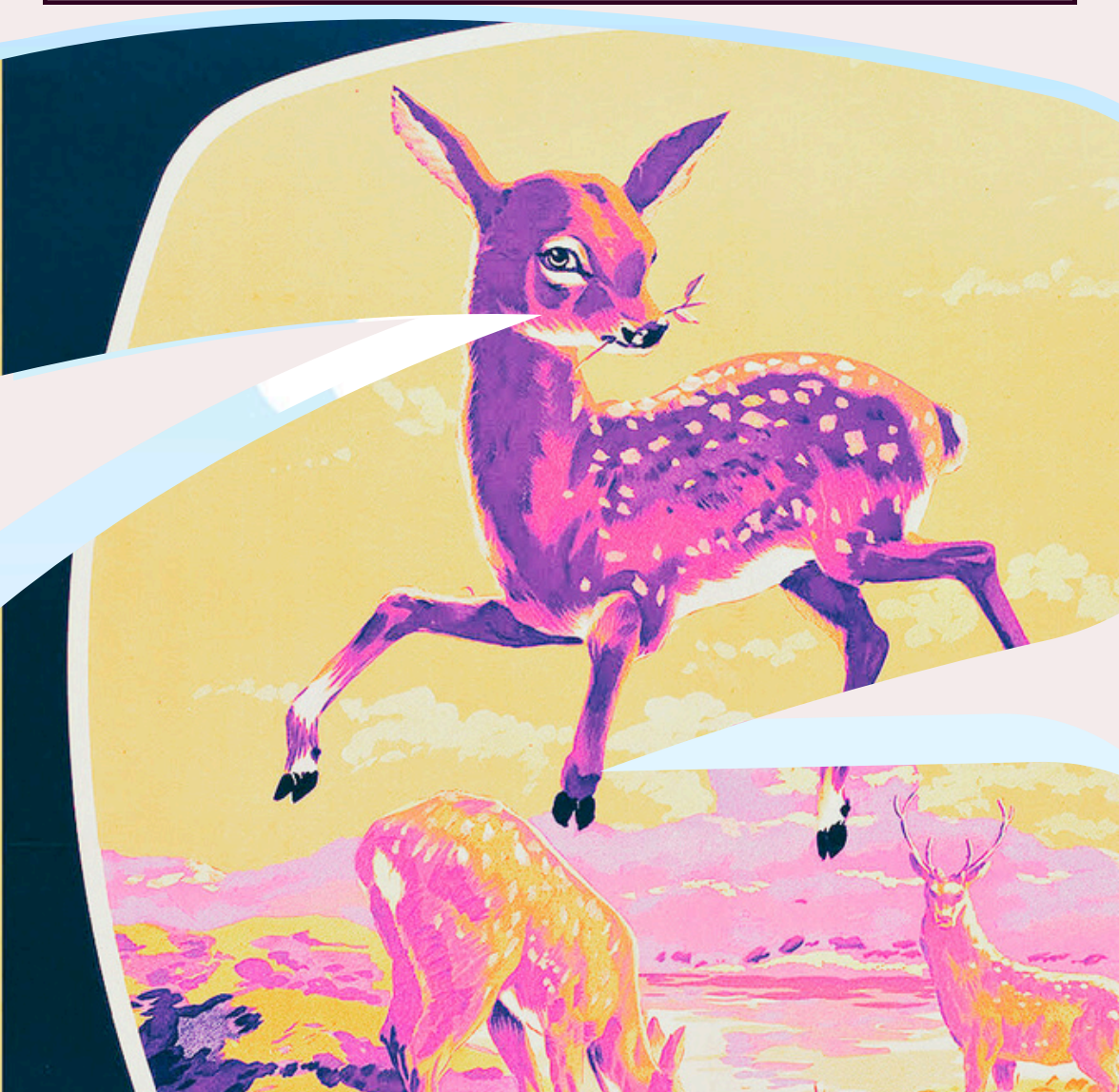
IN SEARCH OF SRI LANKA'S LOST MAMMALS



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In Search Of Sri Lanka's Lost Mammals

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FOR

SEPH

ANIMAL WHISPERER, ICON

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

INTRODUCTION

The ordinary beautiful is the subject of this guide – the search for Sri Lanka's lost mammals. But first a health warning – for fans of Hi, Hallo or Hola. This is not a story of Sri Lanka's mammalian celebrities, its kings and queens, or its most photographed princelings.

Rather, it is a tour of the island's plebs: its most ordinary of mammals, the ones lost in the scramble to see elephants and monkeys, deer, leopards, wild boar, buffalo, even bears. These telegenic superstars were once enriched by yet more glamorous species, but of these little remains but memories etched on fossilized rocks. The island's lions became extinct 38,000 years ago, if not more. Its tigers, hippos, and rhinos vanished ever further back. But what remains is more than sufficient - Asiatic elephants and Trump-like toque macaques; leopards, sloth bear, boars, buffalos and barking, hog, spotted, and sambar deer.

This guide is dedicated to those mammals that live far below the radar. Some are rhinestone-common, others rarer than Burmese rubies. So comprehensively overlooked, they have become the island's lost mammals: the Cinderella quadrupeds that bipeds rarely notice.

And endangered though so many of them are, they remain, like all Sri Lanka's land mammals, a breeding ground for argument.

The disputes start with attempts to settle the actual number of land mammals on the island. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, one hundred and three mammals, endemic or otherwise, are found across Sri Lanka – but that number is a red rag to the tens of thousands of scientists with a passion for post 1700 CE Linnaean taxonomy. Some argue for more, others for less.

A much more relevant question is how many mammals are there likely to be in 2050. For survival is, of course, the critical question. As Darwin meant to say: "It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive, but those who can best manage change."

And change is demanding profoundly impossible things of the country's diminishing mammals. Over a third of the total on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's list face such threats to their existence that they are more than likely to become extinct.

Twenty-one species face so existential a threat that they are judged to be endangered. These include such iconic mammals as the Sri Lankan elephant, leopard and two of its most celebrated monkeys.

Nine others are teetering on the edge of becoming extinct in the wild - including the sloth bear and golden palm civet. Six more, including the otter and the tufted Gray langur, are likely to become so vulnerable as to join these nine.

That leaves just over half of Sri Lanka's land mammals that are judged to be of least concern – including 13 shrews, mice, rats and 30 bats, and leaving what is left to own up to so little data as to be unclassifiable.

"Sometimes," said Seneca, "even to live is an act of courage," a sentiment of particular relevance to the philosopher who had been ordered to kill himself by Nero but made such a hash of it that it took several attempts and many hours to accomplish. But suicide is a peculiarly human undertaking. For Sri Lanka's land mammals, their march to the precipice of oblivion is one prompted not by them but by human actions - poaching, deforestation, urbanization, pollution and climate change.

What you see today, however ordinary, is likely to be obliterated, tomorrow. Which makes their observation now such a privilege and a thrill – be it of a bat or rat, cat or shrew.

Size, contrary to all rumours, really does not matter. Once you engage with any creature every bit as entitled to share your scrap of earth, you move from a human-centric view of life to something more universal; and with this perhaps, the conclusion that neither of you has a greater right to have things just your way. "The world," noted Eden Philpotts, "is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper."

TWO

TINY & TINIER

Bats, oddly enough, are the best place for an emergent Sri Lankan zoologist to start their observations, for Sri Lanka is bat country, its incredible range of environments supporting 30 of the world's fourteen hundred bat species.

But of the many bats and bat families that live here, keep your exacting eye focused on the appearance of just one. Should the Sri Lankan woolly bat fly across your binocular lens, you are among the blessed, for it is the country's only endemic bat.

This tiny creature, barely 50 milometers from head to tail, was first described by tea planter W.W.A. Phillips in 1932. One of Sri Lanka's most notable early naturalists, Phillips was famous for paying villagers 5 cents for every live snake they brought to his house. His observations of the tiny woolly bat are as true today as they were back in the 1930s. They enjoy sleeping in curled up banana fronds. They have a preference for hills between five hundred to a thousand metres high. And as the decades have clocked by, fewer and fewer have been sighted.

Endeminicness aside, it is hard to exclude from any Sri Lankan bat list the common flying -fox bat - the megabats of the bat world. With a wingspan of 1.5 metres and a weight of some 1.6 kilos, they effortlessly live up to their name. Nocturnal, fruit eating and curiously infecund (producing perhaps just one pup per year), they are an unmistakable part of any skyline – especially around city parks where they gather at dusk to hang off trees, discussing the day's events with aristocratic nonchalance. Although unlikely to turn suddenly into airborne artillery, they are best kept at a distance, harboring as they do such a wealth of diseases as to make biological warfare warriors jealous.

Even more understated than bats are mice. The island is home to some 7 mouse species - but look out for just 3; and send for champagne and chocolate eclairs from the Boulangerie Utopie in Paris should you ever be so fortunate to see one of them. They are of course tricky things to spot – being so tiny. But harder still, for these particular 3 are (almost) rarer than unicorns.

All three are endemic - Mayor's spiny mouse; the exceptional Sri Lankan spiny mouse; and the almost equally rare Ceylon highland long-tailed tree mouse.

The Ceylon highland long-tailed tree mouse was discovered in 1929 by the Dutch tea planter Adriaan Constant Tutein-Nolthenius. Little more than 21 centimetres in length, nose to tail, it is found in Sri Lanka's hill country where it lives in trees, venturing out only by night, a timid and reticent nightclubber, never likely to dance shirtless.

The Sri Lankan spiny mouse barely reaches 18 centimetres from nose to tail. Its reddish grey back and sides morph into white underparts, with huge gorgeous smooth scooped-out ears that stand like parasols above large dark eyes. It is a mouse to fall in love with.

Mayor's spiny mouse inhabits the smaller end of the mouse spectrum and comes in two variants, one which inhabits the hill country and one of which prefers low wetlands.

Telling them apart is almost impossible: both are covered with reddish grey fur and exhibit rather unsatisfactorily small ears. Seeing them is also a challenge for they are both nocturnal creatures. One of their more interesting (albeit worrying) points of difference from other mice is their capacity to carry many other creatures on them – including mites, ticks, sucking louses and small scorpions.

Mice however, being cute, offer little of the challenge to the animal lover that do rats. Rats abound in Sri Lanka but look out for the two endemic and now very rare species – the Ohiya rat and the Nillu rat.

Thirty centimetres in length, nose to tail, with steel grey fur and white undersides, quite why the Ohiya rat is named after a small village of barely seven hundred souls near Badulla is a mystery. It lives quietly in forests and has gradually become ever scarcer in counts done by depressed biologists. Its cousin, the Nillu rat, is now only found in restricted highland locations such as the Knuckles, Horton Plains, Nuwara Eliya, and Ohiya. Little more than 39 centimetres in length, its fur tends to be slightly redder than the typical grey of many of its relatives.

Mice or rats may be hard to spot, but shrews, secretive, tiny, shy and elusive, make easy work of mice-spotting. Petit, nocturnal, and modest, they rarely hit the headlines. Yet of Sri Lanka's 20 or so endemic mammals, 6 of its 9 shrew species are only found here. Lilliputian they may be, but for any species this is a considerable achievement.

And of the 6, it is the Sinharaja white-toothed Shrew that takes pole position. The rarified world of shrew scientists became jubilantly animated in 2007 when this entirely new endemic species was agreed upon. Extensive research by Sri Lankan scientists determined that what had been masquerading in Sinharaja as the Ceylon long-tailed shrew was actually a quite different species, and one that had, till then, not been properly recognised or identified. A closer study of its bone structure, taken with the simple observation that it had a shorter tail, resulted in the formal recognition of this new endemic species. But curb your happiness, for its distribution is now so restricted as to be almost

invisible and has been found in only 2 areas on the edge of Sinharaja Forest.

Almost as elusive as this rare beast is the Ceylon jungle shrew - barely 20 centimetres long, nose to nail, with grey fur and a preference for subtropical or tropical forests. The Ceylon pygmy shrew takes this one stage further, being so tiny as to barely measure 9 centimetres, nose to tail.

But though just this side of microscopic, it is a much more handsome than many of its relatives and sports fur that is nicely chocolate brown to dark grey.

As benefits so small beast, it has a commendably long Latin moniker, much of it deriving from being named for Marjory née Fellowes-Gordon, the wife of the amateur Dutch naturalist who first recorded it.

Highly endangered, it has been recorded as living in the low mountain rainforests of the Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces, with a possible third sighting in the Western Province.

Equally hard to see is the Ceylon long-tailed shrew, which measures a mere 12 centimetres nose to tail. It has only been recorded in 5 highly fragmented areas in the Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces, despite its record of once living as happily in the high mountain forests as in the lowland ones.

Covered in predictably modest brown fur with hints of grey, there is little about its appearance to help mark out the treasured and rare life it still attempts to cleave to, so validating that adage: never judge a shrew by its cover. Also restricted is the Ceylon highland shrew, found now only in the central highlands.

THREE

HEARTLAND

Closer to earth, keep an eye out for the island's much unheeded otters, hares and anteaters.

Famously family oriented and playful, the Ceylon otter is shy to the point of near invisibility. Not that this deterred their most famous fan, Henry Williamson, author of "Tarka the Otter" - "What is this life, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?" he asked with a rhetorical flourish.

Covered in dark brown fur and about a metre long, the Ceylon otter weighs in at 8 kilos and dines on fish. It is scrupulously hygienic, with specific areas of the otter domicile earmarked as otter loos – this despite the fact that their poo is said to give off a scent not unlike that of jasmine tea.

Curiously, Sri Lanka lacks rabbits – but it does have a hare. Just the one. And an endemic one too. The Ceylon black-naped Hare is a mere 50 centimetres head to body tail and distinguished by a black patch on the back of its neck and huge scooped ears, large and lovely as salad servers.

But more remarkable yet, with its dexterous overlapping and generously rounded scales, is the scaly anteater, a unique cross between an architectural marvel, a tank, and a chain-mail-clad Viking warrior.

Measuring some 6 feet nose to tail, it makes its home in rainforest and grassland. It is a dedicated burrower, digging out burrows designed for sleeping, others for eating, and no doubt yoga, film-watching and partying too.

It follows a strict diet – eating just ants and termites, or, at a push, beetles, its long sticky tongue an evolutionary triumph that is capable of digging into the deepest of insect nests.

Sadly, these toothless mammalian marvels are teetering on the edge of being critically endangered, not helped by increasing deforestation. A still greater threat is poaching for their meat and its scales. Made of keratin, the same protein that forms our own hair and nails, their eye-catching body parts are internationally traded as aphrodisiacs or curios.

A happier story is that of the crested porcupine. This creature is widespread, at home in most habitats right across Sri Lanka. It is highly territorial. When threatened, their sharp quills will spring up, their teeth will clack loudly and, emitting a most unpleasant smell, they will go on the attack with the unswerving dedication of an infrared homing missile.

Widespread too are the island's 4 mongoose species. The common Ceylon grey mongoose is the smallest. Shy around people, it is fearless with snakes, its kill strategy focused on tiring the snake by tempting it to make bites it easily avoids.

Its thick, grizzled iron-grey fur and neuro-transmitting receptors leave it immune to snake venom; and for anyone living up-country, it is a fine companion to have around.

Marginally more colourful is the brown mongoose – a species that comes in several iterations, each so marginally different as to be as impossible to tell apart as Herge's Thomson and Thompson. The highland Ceylon brown mongoose, the Western Ceylon brown mongoose and the Ceylon brown mongoose are, to all but the most scrutinizing scientific eye, practically alike.

Over 80 centimetres nose to tail with dark brown fur and black legs, and along black enviably tufted tail, they are of breathtaking beauty.

Widespread though they are, seeing one is something of a challenge for they are introverted beasts, with a marked preference for deeper cover, dark forests and, like Greta Garbo, a penchant for being left alone.

Also hermit like is the Ceylon ruddy mongoose. A retiring forest dweller, it has grizzled ruddy brown hair, a sleek body and a tail that ends in a flourish of black tufts.

But the Versace of the mongoose world is the stripe-necked mongoose, sporting an outfit that marks it out as one of the island's most striking mammals. A dark grey head morphs to reddish brown and grey on its neck before blooming into a heady grizzled covering of bouffant fur that gets redder and longer the further down the body it goes. A pink nose, black legs and a reddish tail that ends in a curved tuft of black hair make up the rest of this most alluring of beasts.

Two mammals speak of Sri Lanka's troubled colonial past, the most notable being the diminishing herds of feral donkeys found in Mannar, Talaimannar and Puttalam.

These are the descendants of equine immigrants that entered the great port of Maathottam near Mannar - once the shipping gateway to the ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom. Arab traders were probably responsible for importing the beasts to carry their cargos inland.

The species that lives here is said to be a direct descendant of the Nubian African wild ass, now extinct in its native Ethiopia and Sudan. Extinction also faces it in Sri Lanka. There are said to be fewer than 3,000 still alive, though a charity, Bridging Lanka, has stepped in to try and nurse them back to happier times.

As sorry a tale can also be found among the Mannar ponies. Strung out to the west of Jaffna in the Palk Strait is the tiny coral island of Delft, bared fifty square miles and home to less than five thousand people. And five hundred wild ponies.

Dotted with baobab trees, archaeological marvels from ancient to colonial times, and abundant wildlife, Delft has become the last refuge for the Sri Lankan wild pony, the direct descendant of the ponies exported to the island by the Portuguese and Dutch from Europe and their colonies in the East, to provide basic transportation.

Left behind at Independence, and superseded by cars and lorries, they have carved out a fringe existence on the hot dry island, fighting off as best they can dehydration and occasional starvation.

FOUR

ENIGMATIC FELINES

A more contented existence is enjoyed by Sri Lanka's embarrassment of cats – civets, rusty spotted cats, fishing cats, jungle cats and of course leopards. Of all of these, the civet is by far the most interesting.

When life was simple, long ago; and when beige, like black or white, came in just one colour choice, it was thought that the island was home to just one endemic civet.

But scientists, zookeepers, and wildlife photographers have in the past 15 years worked hard to evaluate this snug assumption. By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings (beige, off-beige or off-off beige), they have instead come to the conclusion – now widely accepted in the scientific community - that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets: the wet zone golden palm civet; the montane forests golden palm civet and the Dry zone palm civet.

In fact, the debate about numbers is a passionate ongoing one, with some scientists now claiming that a fourth civet also merits separate recognition: the Sri Lankan mountain palm civet, found only in Dickoya, a refinement that makes the various divisions of Darwin's Galapagos finches look modest.

But although each civet is zone specific and different enough to be so classified, it would take much effort by armchair naturalists to ever tell them apart.

All are golden beasts - more golden brown on their backs and lighter gold on their stomachs, though the montane golden palm civet is, the trained eye, a little darker all round. From nose to bottom they measure 40 to 70 centimetres – like large cats; and weigh in from 3 to 10 pounds.

They are mild, secretive, forest-loving creatures, living their life on trees and in high hollows, solitary and nocturnal, munching their way through fruits and small animals. Occasionally they can be more sociable: for four long months one lived very comfortably in the space between my bedroom ceiling and the roof, a home from home where it raised its many excitable and noisy offspring. Like Miss Havisham or Howard Hughes, their very reclusiveness makes any encounter more existing exciting? than having to Pope to dinner, always supposing that this kind of dinner party is your thing.

Most curiously – and unexpectedly – their farts are widely known on the island to smell very pleasantly like the flower of the joy perfume tree – the magnolia champaca, a scent immortalized in Jean Patou's famous perfume 'Joy', a perfume that outsold all others, excepting Chanel No. 5.

Their link with luxury doesn't stop there. Civet coffee, which can sell for $1300 per kilo, has thankfully yet to make an appearance on the island, associated as it has become with cruel farming practices. The custom in the past was kinder, with partially digested and fermented coffee berries collected from civet poo in the jungle and sold on to ridiculously wealthy coffee bubbas.

But it is the Asian palm civet that is the most widespread.

More happily known as the toddy cat, this is a small beast, little more than 5 kilos in weight, its stocky body painted with gorgeous markings: grey fur with a white forehead, white dots under its eyes and beside its nostrils – a sort of Panda in the making. It has acclimatised to urban life with alacrity, making its home in attics and unused civic spaces – and, of course, palm plantations.

FIVE

RARE THAN RUBIES ON MARS

But it is the last of the mammals with which this guide is concerned is the most remarkable – the one which, if sighted, would work all life long as a personal meditation on gratitude for the lifelong magic of Sri Lanka's natural world.

The rarest prize of all possible animal sightings goes to the loris. The what?? You might well ask. The loris. The most eminent of all recluses, few people have ever heard of the loris unless they have been to Sri Lanka; and had a good look around. A very good look.

Restricted to just this island, and a few splinters of land in India, Borneo and Java, the loris is the ultimate tree hugger's tree hugger – mammals of beguiling rarity and beauty, whose talent for invisibility outsteps even that of Tolkien's Frodo when wearing The Ring.

Constructed with small bodies and lean, outsized limbs, their round heads bear a set of disproportionately immense panda eyes set within circles of black fur that give them the look of learned, albeit eccentric, professors of philosophy peering through dark tortoiseshell spectacles.Tiny, touching and telegenic, they come across as happy-looking Gollums. It is no surprise therefore to learn that, tiny though they are, they have very large brains. In any pub quiz, you would want them on your side. Their ears are almost invisible, but should they grasp you with their fingers or toes, you would immediately feel the resolute strength that comes from a creature that lives almost entirely on tree branches.

They are known to be inordinately social, wrestling for the sheer fun of it and sleeping together in tightly packed groups within tree branches, specially built tree nests or tree holes. Of the 11 loris sub species firmly agreed upon and recorded, 4 are based in Sri Lanka.

The highland Ceylon slender loris is the larger of the 3 grey slender lorises. Its limbs are more heavily furred and, according to less charitable observers, present a less delicate appearance than that of its cousins. Like most lorises, it has grey and white fur, but its frosting is more striking. It favours wet mountain dwellings below 1500 metres.

Its close cousin, the northern Ceylon slender loris was only discovered in 1932 in the Knuckles Range, though it has subsequently been found in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Trincomalee and Matale. This species sports a very distinctive facial stripe.

The third loris, the Ceylon mountain slender loris is known in Tamil as “kada papa” or "baby of the forest”. It has shorter limbs and longer, thicker fur as might be required to keep warm on cool mountaintops. Its last recorded sighting was in 2002, on Horton Plains.

But it is the red slender loris that is the most cherished. A tiny, tree-living creature, its mothers have the intriguing habit of coating their offspring in allergenic saliva, a toxin that repels most predators. It weighs in at up to 172 grams and has a body that extends to little more than 17 centimetres.

It has dense reddish-brown fur and the classic slender hands and legs of all the species, an evolutionary peculiarity that enables it to climb easily through treetops to gather the fruits, berries and leaves on which it feasts.

By day they sleep in leaf covered tree holes, a habit that must help account for their relatively long-life span (15-18 years). In island folklore it has a cry that can call devils to a house, so it is often regarded with a

certain amount of dread. To wake up and find one staring at you is considered to be one of the worst possible omens; should it then reach out and touch you, your body will respond by becoming skin and bones, the sad fate of many of these most remarkable mammals unless and until governments, tourists, natives, and institutions take to heart Francis of Assisi's observation: "God requires that we assist the animals, when they need our help.

Each being has the same right of protection.

"We can, said philosopher Emmanuel Kant, "judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals."

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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.

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