

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

PRETTY

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

15-30 MILES

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



THE CEYLON PRESS
ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

PRETTY CLOSE
ENCOUNTERS

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Attractions & Activities 15-30 miles from
Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR

SARAH

WORLD TRAVELLER, HOME
TRAVELLER, SPACE TRAVELLER

“When you’ve understood this scripture, throw it away. If you can’t understand this scripture, throw it away. I insist on your freedom.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



INTRODUCTION

Pretty Close Encounters is a travelogue fixed on those attractions and activities that lie easily within a fifteen-to-thirty-mile journey from Sri Lanka's Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Almost two dozen strange and wonderful things lie within this radius, including the rumoured 5th century BCE tomb of the island's first queen, the lost masterpiece of one of the world's great carvers; the nemesistic battle field of a Portuguese king; some of the best mountain ranges for trekking; a bird sanctuary; a controversial orphanage for elephants; a temple cherished by the country's first all-island king; 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.

ONE

THE MASTER

But to get the level of things, we start 8,734 km from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel at Kensington Palace's Presence Chamber. Here, where English monarchs received foreign ambassadors, is a fireplace of limewood carvings and cherubs by Grinling Gibbons.

No wood sculpturers are the equal of this Michelangelo of woodcarving, who immortalised Restoration England and his patron, Charles II with his "unequaled ability to transform solid, unyielding wood and stone into something truly ethereal.

None - expect one practicing at a similar time in the middle of Sri Lanka - Delmada Devendra Mulachari.

Mulachari is renowned for many things but the rarest by far is Embekke Devale, a 16 miles drive from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. A medieval masterpiece, the temple has withstood wars, weather and most especially the interminable conflict waged by the Portuguese and Dutch on the island's last kingdom - in nearby Kandy.

By the 1750s it was in a sorry state, its dilapidated walls noted by the rising young artist, Mulachari who lived nearby, his family, one of a number of Singhala artists from the South, having come north to seek work.

Wood carver, sculptor, architect, artist, - Mulachari worked for the last three kings of Kandy; and most especially King Kirthi Sri Rajasinha whose 35-year reign - to 1782 - was preoccupied by restoring many of the hundreds of Buddhist temples destroyed in the colonial wars.

In this the king was greatly helped by Mulachari., who built for him the Audience Hall and the Octagon in the Temple of the Tooth, and the Cloud Wall that surrounds its lake.

Travellers, whether local or foreign, with a temple in mind, head with unfailing sureness to The Temple of the Tooth, and not Embekke Devale. But although just fifteen kilometres apart, the two temples are worlds apart in artistry.

The Temple of the Tooth has a stolid, almost bourgeois respectability. By comparison, at Embekke Devale, you enter instead a magical world in which formality occupies but the smallest of parts. In every section, in every place, are the surviving 500 statues of the great artist, each a masterpiece in of itself.

Exquisitely carved models of entwined swans and ropes, mothers breast feeding children, double headed eagles, soldiers, horses, wrestlers and elephants – all validate why this temple is famed across Asia for its world class carvings.

But there is more. Fantasy intervenes. Erupting from a vein is a figure of a woman; a bird takes on human attributes, a slight of hand reveals that an elephant is a bull; another, that is a lion.

TWO

WILD OR
WILDER?

Sixteen miles in the opposite direction you encounter Pinnewala Elephant Orphanage. Founded back in 1975, it is a very popular tourist attraction, but it has increasingly looked out of place in a modern world more respectful of animal welfare, especially that of wild animals.

A report by Born Free, the wildlife charity which opposes the exploitation of wild animals in captivity, has cast a shadow across the claims made by the Orphanage. The charity's report takes issue with the very term "orphanage," explaining that their "breeding of more animals for the purpose of being kept in zoos, or sent to private collections or temples, clearly does not satisfy" the implication that their animals have been rescued. Its profit motivation, they claim, undermines their mission. They also take issue with the centre's level of animal welfare. Their chaining of male elephants wounds the legs and the use of a spiked shark hook as a training tool is simply cruel. Why anyway, they ask, should elephants be trained at all?

One recent tourist was to blog that "I passed numerous elephants chained in solitary confinement. Now, I can't claim to understand elephant behavioural patterns fully but the fact they were shaking back and for and only doing repetitive movements disturbed me. They also looked like they were in deep distress."

Notwithstanding the amazing sight of scores of elephants bathing collectively in the river at set times of the day, many tourists opt instead to see elephants in their wild setting – in Minneriya, for example, a wildlife park near Dambulla. Though a longer drive, it offers grand sights that are still more unforgettable.

Six miles away is the small Kurulu Kele Bird Sanctuary which, despite its proximity to Kegalle, nevertheless is famed for the sheer abundance of different species that

live in its forest. A 25 mile drive from here takes you into trekking country.

Protected by a necklace of high mountains - Alagalla Mountains, Bible Rock, Uthuwankanda, Devanagala, Ambuluwawa, the Knuckles and Hanthana - and surrounded by dense jungle ideal for guerrilla warfare, the Kandyan kingdom's natural defences helped it withstand repeated invasions.

The Alagalla Mountains, twenty miles from The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, and to the west of Kandy is an especial trekkers' paradise, offering its visitors a range of hard core or easy treks, the easiest being a hint of a path that begins at Pilimathalawa and ends at Pottapitiya. Its more off-road adventures including climbing, rock scaling, and navigating through forests. Its wide range of dry evergreen, montane, and sub-montane forests are home to many species of fauna and flora, including wild boar, monkeys here, squirrel, anteaters, porcupine, monitor lizard, tortoise – but it is especially noted for its 50 recorded bird species which include Sri Lankan junglefowls, Layard's parakeets, and yellow-fronted barbets.

A little over 15 miles from Alagalla is Bible Rock itself, a stunning example of a Table Mountain. Over 5,500 feet high, its curious open book shape inspired early Victorian missionaries to give it its canonical name, though 300 years earlier it performed a vital task as a look out post for the Kandyan kings, eager to spot the latest colonial invasions, especially those of the Portuguese. A classic series of bonfires, running mountain to mountain, starting here and ending close to Kandy was the trusted warning signal that was used, just like the famous Armada Fire Beacons in England in 1588. Steep though the climb is, it doesn't take long to get to the top – and one of the best views in the country.

THREE

A DEADLY
WAR

Balana foiled a Portuguese invasion in 1593 but just a few years later, in 1603 another attempt was made.

The Portuguese observer Queyroz wrote "the new fortalice of Balana stood on a lofty hill upon a rock on its topmost peak; and it was more strong by position than by art, with four bastions and one single gate; and for its defence within and without there was an arrayal of 8,000 men with two lines of stockade which protected them with its raised ground, and a gate at the foot of the rock and below one of the bastions which commanded the ascent by a narrow, rugged, steep, and long path cut in the Hill."

Three days of bitter fighting eventually led to its capitulation, the Portuguese conducting a special Thanksgiving service in the fort, but it was a very short victory.

Within days the Portuguese had fled, their long retreat back to Colombo beset by guerrilla fighting. But by 1616, by the accent of Senerat, one of the few notable inept Kandyan monarchs, Balana was reoccupied by the Portuguese - and improved with a drawbridge over a moat, the addition of a large water tank for sieges and the clearing of trees to a distance of a musket shot.

And it was here, around Balana, at the Battle of Gannoruwa, that the imperial ambitions of the Portuguese finally met their grim finale.

The largely mercenary army of Diogo de Melo de Castro, the Portuguese Captain General, had marched up from Colombo a third time to try, in 1638, to capture the Kandyan kingdom of Rajasinghe II. The king, sitting with deceptive and majestic leisureliness under the shade of a great tree, conducted the battle with razor sharp stratagems.

Weakened by mass desertions, just 33 Portuguese soldiers survived of the 4,000 that made up the army, almost all of them reduced to heads piled up before the victorious king.

Just 20 years later, the king, in an alliance with the Dutch, managed to drive the Portuguese from the island once and for all. This proved to be a mixed blessing as his dubious alliance merely saddled him with a new colonial occupier, the Dutch – who were to prove much more professional and ruthless as they went about their colonial mission.

Ruins of the fort remain even to this day, most especially the foundations of the higher buildings in their quadrangular layout of 3 circular bastions. Parts of the lower fort are lost in the jungle - its many ramparts, ditches, and buildings.

FOUR

ROBIN HOOD
& THE JUNGLE
TOWER

Eight miles on from here, off the old Kandy-Colombo road, is Saradiel Village, the home of Sri Lanka's Robin Hood, hung by the British on 7 May 1864 in Bogambara Prison Kandy, along with his childhood friend, Mammale Marikkar - the last two people to be publicly executed. To the British, Saradiel was little more than a gangster, though today his exceptional good looks would have won his modelling and TV contracts aplenty. But his reputation amongst Sri Lankans is that of a bountiful re-distributor of wealth, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Many highway robberies, imprisonments, escapes, and escapades later, he was eventually tracked down to a house in Mawanella, and following a robust shoot out, captured. Over 150 years later his fans constructed a 6 acre replica village of his life and times, bristling with life size recreations of devotions at the temple, his mother serving coffee, snake charmers, gypsies, toddy drinkers, house scenes, kitchens, laundries, and workshops for the village goldsmith, potter, and astrologer.

Eighteen miles south is the Ambuluwawa Tower, a bizarre winding minaret with an open spiral staircase that gives architecture a bad name but still offers excellent views across the high tea and paddy of Gampola. The town was once home to the short lived kingdom of Gampola, whose shrine was to briefly house the Tooth Relic itself, now in Kandy. It is especially famous for the Christian - Buddhist debates held here in 1871 under the Botalapitiya Bo tree. The debates marked the resurgence of Buddhism than had been battered by centuries of colonialism. The Tower is piously surrounded by Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian temples and promotes itself as a multi-religious centre. Rumours that it doubles up as a broadcasting antenna are said to be baseless.

FIVE

5 FORGOTTEN
STORIES

Twenty miles north of The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel marks the start of an extraordinary 5 temple circuit tour to places long lost to modern travellers. Visitors occasionally explain how temple-d-out they can become in Sri Lanka, but the condition is easily fixed by properly knowing not just the nature of the temple you visit, but its context within the island's wider history and culture. Thus armed, to visit its temples is be given the gift of reading. Everything suddenly becomes explicit, multi coloured and alive.

The circuit starts at the Vilbawa Rajamaha temple, which legend connects to Kuveni, the wife of the island's first king, Vijaya. But Kuveni was not simply a wife – nor even a weaver of cloth, a mother, lover, or queen. She was 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.

Kuveni, and her husband Vijaya, were the pin-up lovers of their generation, the Bonnie and Clyde of 543 BCE. Only theirs was a more unorthodox passion - more akin to Dido and Aneas, with the queen immolating herself.

But whilst it is hard to find a corner of Sri Lanka that is not branded "Vijaya," in besotted memory of the country's founding paterfamilias, it is much harder to find similarly smitten organisations who bear the name "Kuveni." Coming from a nation fond of boasting the modern world's first female head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960, this seems a monumental omission.

But delve a little further and it becomes exactly clear why Kuveni is the queen the country is too alarmed by to properly acknowledge.

Kuveni was to confound and challenge all ancient ideas of womanhood; and go on challenging them to this day. Her story starts as she sits trapped at in her modest palace, a pawn in her father's political armoury. She is, naturally, no ordinary princess. Descending from King Ravana, the ten-headed evil demon king who fatally kidnapped the wife of the Supreme Being – her bloodline offers up a clue, if ever one was needed, to a family proclivity for prolific violence, chaos, and injustice. But in Vijaya she spots a way to escape the prison of her family.

Vijay, a shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls "evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds," was exiled by his father and arrived in Sri Lanka, a man in need of friends. Friends, land, food: in fact, at the time he arrived on Sri Lanka's shore, he was a man in need of pretty much everything. And in Kuvani he found just about everything.

Overcoming some immediate disagreements in which she almost eats him and imprisons his entire band of feckless followers, she performed a faultless volte-face, gives them food and clothing and, according to the ancient Mahavamsa Chronicle, beaming with broad indulgence, if Chronicles can be said to beam, "assumed the lovely form of a sixteen-year-old maiden."

Although marriage was what Vijaya and Kuveni agreed on, so too did they execute a plan to annihilate her Yakka tribe. But much good any of this did her. In using Vijaya, she was, in turn, to be even more devastatingly used by him. Soon after inaugurating his new kingdom at Tambapanni, and fathering two children, Vijaya abandoned her, sending to India for a more respectable princess, one who was drawing-room perfect, and banishing his native wife to the wilderness.

Rejected by both husband and the people she came from and had betrayed and killed, Kuveni climbed or was forced to the top of a mountain and hurled down, cursing her disloyal husband as she died. Her husband was to die without heirs. His successor was struck down by a (presumably related) disease, and his entire children made demented by bloodshed, civil war, and familicide.

Across the entire island a lonesome scrap of haunting folklore offers a hint as to the final tomb of Queen Kuveni. There is nothing to verify it except the curious behaviour of the local people. Visitors to the village are welcomed to its little temple, the Maligatenna Raja Maha Viharaya, but not permitted to walk to the top of the little hill above it, where the queen's crypt is said to lie.

About 15 miles on from here is the Ridi Viharaya. Although substantially restored in the 18th century by the Kandyan king, Kirti Sri Rajasinghe, the temple dates back to the 2nd century BCE – roughly the same time as the text of the Rosetta stone was chiselled into a basalt slab in distant pharaonic Egypt.

To better understand the supreme importance of this ancient temple, take a look at pictures of the oldest of the island's 3 greatest stupas, the Ruwanweliseya, built between 161 to 137 BCE by King Dutugamunu.

The first steps in its construction are told in extraordinary detail by the Mahavamsa Chronicle. "King Dutugamunu had the workers dig a 7 cubit deep excavation. He had soldiers brought in round stones and had them crushed with hammers. Crushed stones were placed at the bottom of the excavation and compacted using elephants. The Elephants had their

their feet bound with leather to protect their feet. Fine clay was brought in from a nearby river. This clay was known as butter clay since it was very fine. King

Dutugamunu ordered to spread butter clay on top of crushed stones. After placement of the butter clay layer, the King ordered to bring bricks. Bricks were placed on top of the butter clay layer. On top of bricks, mesh of iron was placed. Mountain crystals were placed on top of iron bars. Another layer of stones was placed on top of mountain crystals. On top of stones, 8" thick copper plate was placed. Copper plate was sprayed Arsenic and Sesame oil. On top of the copper plate, seven inch thick silver plate was placed."

And that was just the beginning. The king was to die before the stupa was completed and the Mahavamsa tells the story of the dying monarch being carried on a palanquin to see the works. Standing for centuries, and now much restored, its fabled relic chamber has yet resisted all attempts at excavation.

Within it is said to be a vessel filled with Lord Buddha's artifacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a silver replica of the Bo Tree.

The Mahavamsa Chronicle notes its sovereign importance:

"The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered.'"

The money for all this construction came from silver ore that was mined from beneath the Ridi Viharaya, the ore itself a serendipitous discovery by monks and merchants. On an island famed for gemstones that seem to pour from its rivers, silver deposits are so rare as to be almost non-existent. This one, able to finance so great an undertaking as Ruwanweliseya, would have turbo charged the local economy for a period, a more modest version of the California Gold Rush which helped build California. Or the one in ancient Athens, where the discovery of silver in Laurium funded a navy which in turn turned Athens into a superpower. That the ore was used to build a temple in Sri Lanka is a telling comment on the very different priorities encountered here.

In thanks for this, the king built Ridi Viharaya over the mine. Seen today, it comprises 25 caves, inhabited by (naturally) unseen Arhat monks, the entrance to the entire complex marked by a rock and stupa which is thought to be the location of the original temple and the place where the king once stood to be correctly dressed before beginning his devotions. Also visible is a Polonnaruwa era temple decorated with Kandyan paintings and carvings of dancers in a distinctly Hindu style; a pavilion for drummers; the main temple within the original cave from which the silver was extracted and now filled with ancient statues and tiled in Dutch porcelain Bible tiles; and the Uda Viharaya, or the upper temple, dating to the Kandyan era, and decorated with mythological animals.

Twenty miles, and over 500 years, on from here is the Arankele Forest Monastery established by one of the island's greatest kings, Dhatusena. Weith him a new dynasty had come to power in the land, seizing the state bank from a band of invading Pandyan Tamils in 459 CE and rebuilding its crumbling infrastructure. The new king encouraged, cajoled, and persuaded

many of the people displaced by the Pandiyan invasion to return to repopulate the abandoned regions in Anuradhapura from their refuge in Ruhuna. And he secured his kingdom's food supply, repairing water infrastructure and buildings at least twenty-six new tanks, half of them so vast and robustly made that they are still in working order today. A good example is the Maeliya Wewa tank, just north of Kurunegala. One of a series of none smaller cascade tanks, it still provides harvested rainwater to 202 farmers, across 155 acres.

Another, near Mannar, was described by Sir James Emerson Tennent in 1860 as a "stupendous work," and so it is – with an embankment of seven kilometres and a capacity today of carrying thirty-nine million cubic metres of water within its 4550 hectares bowl. But perhaps the greatest of all his works was double reservoir complex, Kala Wewa and Balalu Wewa close to the Avukana Buddha statue. Together these tanks store 123 million cubic meters of water, their central slice feedings into a eighty-seven-kilometre canal that descends in perfect milometers to deliver its water to Anuradhapura, whilst feeding thousands of acres of paddy land on its way.

Sadly, he was less capable in navigating the minefield of family politics and inspired his son Kasyapa to commit an act of patricide that made him every bit the equal of Oedipus. Having killed the great king Kasyapa was to go onto the create one of Aisa's most sensational pleasure places at Sigiriya.

But Sigiriya and all it stood for was a universe or two away from Dhatusena's forest monastery at Arankele. As secretive a place today as it was then, Arankele was the home for forest monks, subscribers to a distinctive tradition within Buddhism that emphasizes a simpler and more hermit like existence than other monastic chapters. Even so, the site, at its heyday, housed over 1,000 forest monks. The remains of the buildings that

they used still lie scattered between vast hardwood trees: a hospital, stone walls, moats, medical wards, mediation halls, paths, herb grinders, baths – and of course scores of caves in which the solitary monks lived.

A further short drive, this time heading back south, takes you to the Maraluwawa Rajamaha Viharaya, built by prince Pussadeva, the nephew of King Dhatu-sena, and remarkable for the copper plates it houses. These were lovingly copied by the Kandyan kings from the disintegrating originals that described that this was the place where the prince listened to the preaching of the island's last great saint or Arhath, Mahadeva Thero.

A further short drive on from here takes you to the last temple, this one at Nathagane, which dates back to the 2nd century BCE and was a hundred years later to provide a welcome hideaway for the remarkable king Valagamba, known by some as the boomerang king for his amazing ability to bounce back from even the most disastrous encounters.

Valagamba's older three brothers had been kings before him, but the last of the trio, Khallata Naga, managed to get himself murdered by his army chief, who did his best to marginalise and even kill Valagamba. He failed. Valagamba won the ensuing fight, killed the murderous general and took over the throne by 103 BCE. But within months, the new king was defeated by the armies of 5 Pandyan Tamil chiefs. Deposed a second time, the king evaded capture, and his many escapes and hiding places were to illuminate the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt, this cave temple in Nathagane and the one in Galagedera itself being among his most famous safe houses.

SIX

BINDING
WORDS

Eventually grappling his way back to power in 89 BCE, Valagamba retook his crown through a series of small, successful incremental skirmishes - although, given the murderous incompetence of his Dravidian interlopers, it may have been like pushing on an open door. His second reign was to last for over a dozen years, and it was under his patronage that the Pali Canon, the largest and oldest compendium of Buddhist practices was commissioned, putting into robust written form the teachings that had until that moment been passed on just orally.

This commission was carried out in the Aluvihare Rock Temple, itself barely 30 miles drive from The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel. Eighty times larger than the Bible, the Pali Canon reveals much more than the importance of Buddhism itself.

It embodies the island's enduring attachment to rules, regulations, and laws. The country's legal system today is a mixture of Roman-Dutch law, English law, Kandian law, Thesavalamai and Muslim law. Overwriting all this is its constitution. But overwriting even this is what is most commonly accepted as correct; and that is largely dictated by the mores of Buddhism itself, its paramount religion.

Under his patronage 500 monks assembled in Aluvihare to begin the task. It was to be momentous moment for the challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly, they had to recite the doctrines. That would have taken many years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer. Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms. The resulting Pali Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada Buddhism's. It was written in the now extinct Pali

language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century CE. Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself – but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates.

The Cannon lays out in clear and unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct that Buddhists should follow. It is made up of three parts. The first, the Vinaya concerns itself mainly with the rules for monks and nuns. The second, the Sutta Pitaka is the Cannon's practical heart, comprising around 10,000 teachings and poems of Buddha and his close companions that focus on the typical challenges of life. The last, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is where the higher teachings sit – the ones most focused around Enlightenment.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pali Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power. But under his patronage copies were despatched across the kingdom and to other Buddhist countries. Aluvihare Rock Temple still exists, its caves dotted with ancient inscriptions, but its great library was burned down during the Matale Rebellion in 1848.

Important though the site is, it is typical of island life that just 5 miles drive from here is a magnificent Tamil kovil based in the centre of Matale and dedicated to Mariamman, the Hindu goddess of rain and fertility.

Built in 1874 and restored after the anti-Tamil riots here in 1983, it houses over 1000 statues carved by the celebrated Tamil artist, Nagalingam, and his son Ramanathan, assisted by 100 designers, painters, and architects.

DISCOVER MORE

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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.

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.

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