

Sipping tea in Sri Lanka

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From a distance they looked like tiny insects with huge white wings resting on the lush green landscape.

But as we drove closer I realised they were in fact women in colourful saris with sacks resting on their backs.

This was my first sighting of a handful of the hundreds of tea pluckers who work on the many tea plantations of Sri Lanka.

Tea is big business here. Numerous myths and legends surround the arrival of tea plantations in Sri Lanka. But in reality it was due to the skill and foresight of James Taylor, a Scottish coffee plantation manager who experimented with a few tea bushes back in 1867.

Three years later the coffee plantations were struck by disease and failed, but within the next few years the island's plantations changed to tea and today Sri Lanka is the world's largest tea exporter.

To get a feel for how the tea plantations were back during British rule, head to the Bogawantalawa Valley in central Sri Lanka. This area is known as the Golden Valley of tea and home to old Ceylon.

Nestled in the surrounding greenery are the Tea Trails bungalows, former residences of British tea estate managers.

Complete with teak floors, fireplaces and private gardens, each abode - Summerville, Castlereagh, Tientsin and Norwood - has been thoughtfully renovated including many original features but adding modern extras such as heated towel rails, beds with mosquito nets, personal butlers and gourmet chefs.

When not being pampered like royalty at Tea Trails, we were taken on a tour around one of the tea factories by Andrew Taylor, a descendant of Sri Lanka's original tea godfather, to witness the production process from leaf plucking - two leaves and a bud - to cup, and to sample various brews picked less than 14 hours earlier.

The Tea Trails experience was the brain child of Merrill J Fernando, founder of Dilmah Tea, the leading tea exporter in Sri Lanka and sponsor of the Sri Lankan cricket team.

A sprightly 78-year-old, which he puts down to the health benefits of 10 cups of tea a day, Merrill has devoted his life to tea but felt he wanted to share his profits and family wealth with others who are less fortunate, so in 2002 he set up the MJF Foundation.

This charitable foundation works with the communities living on the tea estates by providing schools and teachers for the plantation worker's children and medical facilities, plus encouraging workers to set up their own village-like

communities.

Further afield, the MJF Foundation has extended its help to many villages throughout Sri Lanka. One of which is Koulara, close to the Udawalawe National Park. Villagers lost their traditional livelihood of making bricks from clay about 10 years ago when they became unable to compete with larger producers.

The Foundation stepped in, providing equipment and retraining. The villagers are now well on their way to becoming self-sufficient again by producing colourful handmade pottery, wall hangings and earthenware jewellery.

En route to Koulara, we stopped at Udawalawe National Park to pay a visit to the Elephant Transit Home, where they take in abandoned or orphaned jumbo babies from all parts of the island.

The orphans can only be seen at feeding times, when they come in for the threehourly milk feeds, and it's an emotional moment to see (and hear) them all jockeying for position at the feeding bay.

This popular national park boasts more than 400 wild elephants plus crocodiles, water buffalo and golden jackals along with numerous types of birdlife. There are also a dozen or so leopards, but the chance of seeing these largely nocturnal animals is slim.

Next we headed south to the coast. The countryside is varied, and every town is a seething mass of saris, sarongs, bicycles, tuk-tuks, lorries, buses, blaring loudspeakers and open shop-fronts selling everything from cheap clothing to dried fish heads. Sri Lanka is a wonderful place to holiday and we saw most of the island by private car with an English speaking driver-come-guide called Wicky. A jolly grandfather of two who'd been driving tourists around the island for 20-plus years, he not only knew the best places to stop for lunch but had lots of connections when it came to shopping for bargains.

My prized purchases, with Wicky's help, were a handcarved Lankan mask from Ariyapala & Sons, in Ambalangoda, which cost about £30.

And after a bit of haggling, a gorgeous pink sapphire from SCIA on the Kandewatta Road, in Galle.

Later that day we arrived at our next destination, The Fortress at Galle. The hotel, built in the style of a powerful fortress blending Sri Lanka's Dutch and Portuguese influences, sits on the beach front with just 49 rooms, each with either its own courtyard or garden balcony with views across the Indian Ocean and stilt fisherman.

The pool beckoned us to give in to an afternoon of relaxation combined with cocktails. The only downside to staying at The Fortress, and this isn't a complaint, is the ocean's currents are too strong to swim in directly from the hotel's beach. You have to walk about 200m away from the hotel beach to enjoy the surf. The next morning after breakfast Wicky drove us to the Turtle Hatchery at Kosgoda, a short drive up the coast from the hotel. For less than £1 we got to see newly-hatched leather-back turtles, adult loggerheads, green turtles and a couple of albino hawksbill turtles too.

Fishermen dig up turtle eggs and sell them at the market - so what the volunteers at the Turtle Hatchery are trying to do is educate the fishermen and make them aware of the threat they pose to the future turtle population.

After a too-short stay at The Fortress, Wicky drove us further north along the coast road through villages and towns that had been demolished by the tsunami.

Seeing just a concrete slab that had once been a foundation to someone's home made me even more aware of what tragedy this beautiful island had gone through on Boxing Day 2004.

Our next destination before heading back to Colombo was the coastal town of Rathgama and the resort of Aditya.

Built in 2006, this 12-suite tropical hideaway is a wonderfully secluded hotel.

Each suite is named after the 12 Aditya sun gods in Hindu mythology.

The hotel restaurant served fresh, locally-caught seafood and what I liked was that guests could eat anywhere - dinner or breakfast on the beach or around the pool - the hotel will set a table anywhere you chose.

Before leaving Sri Lanka I had one more appointment with the MJF Foundation.

Taking their philosophy a step further, they've provided schooling and an afterschool support network to underprivileged kids to keep them off the streets.

And a group of these children had put together a morning of traditional dances, songs and poems. A truly memorable experience... just like Sri Lanka.

AT A GLANCE

Sri Lanka Airlines flies direct from Heathrow to Colombo from £572pp plus tax. Visit www.srilankan.aero or call 020 8538 2000.

Walkers Tours (www.walkerstours.com) provided the driver and vehicle. It's £50 per day (minimum four days).

Rooms at Tea Trails (www.teatrails.com) start from £100pppn on an all-inclusive basis. Rates at The Fortress (www.thefortress.lk) start from £185prpn. Room-only rates at Aditya (www.aditya-resort.com) start from £135prpn. Contact the tourist board on 0845 880 6333 or visit www.srilankatourism.org.uk

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