

Hotel

Quest for a cuppa

Tea lovers aren't deterred by civil war, **Peter Apps** writes.

WITH its stunning views over Sri Lanka's rolling green tea hills, the Norwood plantation manager's bungalow was designed to compensate British tea planters for their lonely lives far away from home.

The plantation remains, but the bungalow has been refurbished and converted into a boutique hotel to woo high-spending tourists who want a few quiet days sampling the colonial tea estate life.

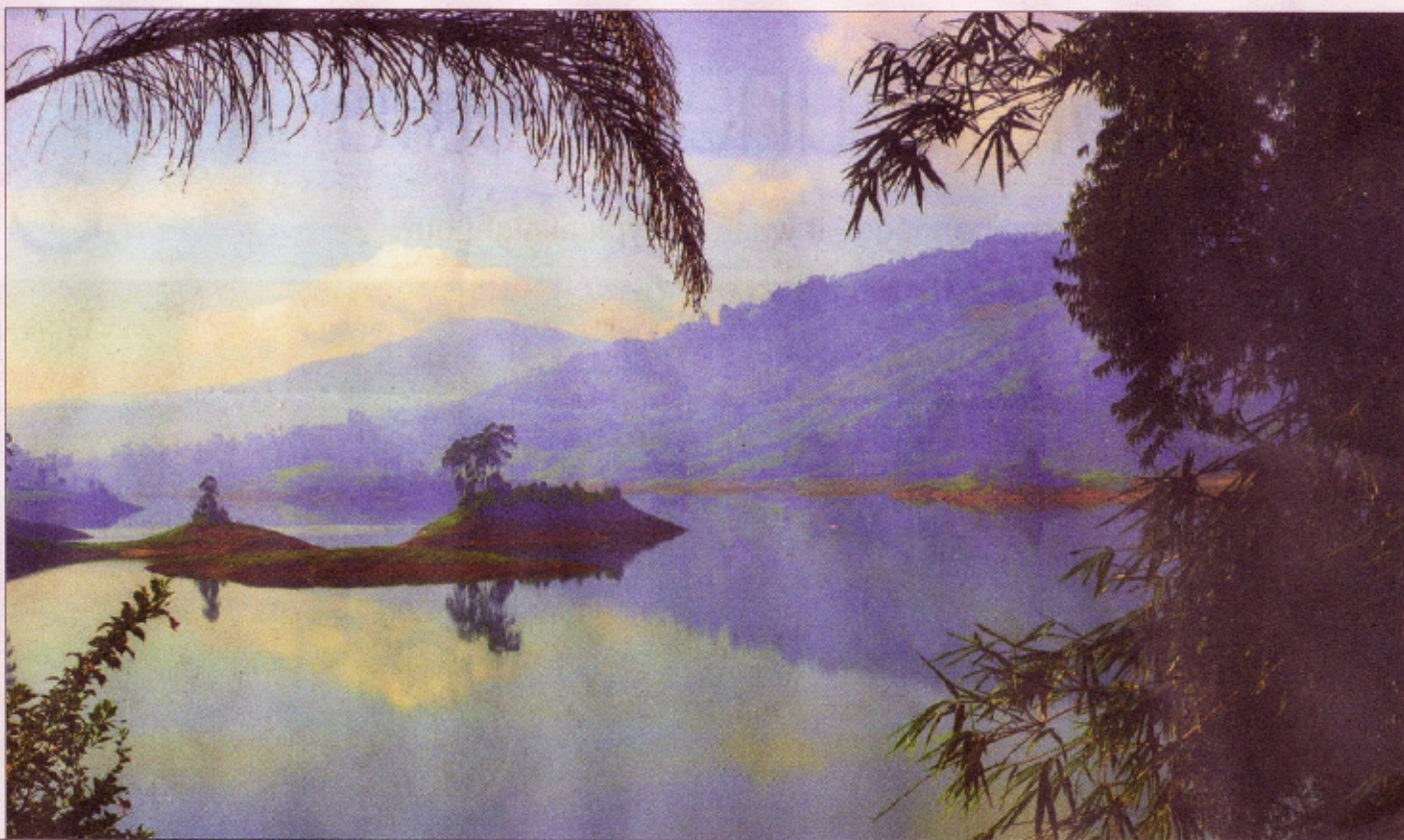
"We have had mostly British visitors," says Asela Wavita, manager for Tea Trails, a firm set up by Sri Lankan tea company Dilmah to manage the bungalows.

"I guess it's the concept, the British colonial feeling, that appeals to them - they can experience what their ancestors enjoyed."

Tea Trails has refurbished four former managers' bungalows set in well-kept gardens, deep in the hills that have produced Ceylon tea since the 19th century. The plantation is about four hours' drive from Colombo.

While there is no immediate threat of violence in the hills, Tea Trails hopes there will be no return to the two-decade-old civil war and that Tamil Tiger rebels and the Government will resume talks that have been indefinitely postponed.

More than 100 people have died in the past month in suspected rebel attacks, ethnic violence and killings in the island's north and east. Two British tourists were wounded in an



Gaining knowledge of tea is part of the destination's appeal



attack on a military convoy last month, but embassies say they believe the rest of the island remains safe.

For some visitors, such as 33-year-old London media consultant Barry Gurtu-Louth, visiting the bungalows with his wife Shivani on their honeymoon, gaining knowledge of tea is part of the destination's appeal.

"We Brits drink an awful lot of tea and it's amazing how little we know about it," he said.

"It's a little bit like wine - the more you know about it, the more you can taste the different types of tea and the more you enjoy it."

With polished wooden beds draped in mosquito nets, colonial-style furniture, gourmet food and swimming pools in the grounds at two of the bungalows, the luxury does not come cheap but deals are all-

inclusive, with all the food and drink a guest could want and a tour of the local tea estate and factory.

Guests can learn how the tea pickers - usually women descended from Tamil people brought in from India by the British to work as migrant labour a century ago - pick the best leaves from the tea bushes that cover the valley's slopes.

Tea Trails says that since the first bungalow opened late last year demand has been rising steadily.

Occupancy, though, is running at only 30 per cent. Sri Lankan tourism

has had a rough time in the past decade, and how well the bungalows do will depend on whether the country can keep attracting big-spending visitors.

The civil war, in which the Tamil Tiger rebels are fighting for a separate homeland in the island's north and east, has scared away tourists.

Visitor numbers started rising after a 2002 ceasefire but the tsunami that ripped through coastal resorts on Boxing Day two years later dealt a fresh blow.

There was fresh violence in December and January, when repeated suspected rebel attacks on troops in the north and east threatened to reignite the civil war.

For Barry and Shivani, who booked their trip even while claymore mines were ripping through military patrols, the conflict seems far away as they tuck into a late breakfast on the terrace overlooking the tea estates.

"It's something we kept an eye on," says Barry, looking out towards the nearby tea factory.

"But the way I look at it is that Sri Lanka is a very similar size to Ireland and I wouldn't let troubles in Northern Ireland put me off going to the south."

TEA TIME: Dilmah has turned former plantation managers' bungalows into boutique accommodation.

TRIP NOTES

■ Each of the four bungalows - Norwood, Tientsin, Castlereagh and Summerville - comes with its own manager, chef, butler and houseboys, and from four to six master suites, garden suites and luxury rooms.

■ Rooms can be booked individually or collectively. Prices are per person per night. Rates start at \$US140 (\$180) triple share. A single person in a master suite in peak season (Christmas and new year) will pay \$US497.

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■ See www.teatrails.com.