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Tea Trails

by **Rory Spowers**

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There is something slightly surreal about the 'tea country' in **Sri Lanka's Central Highlands**. Avenues of eucalypts tower above sinuous lines of manicured tea and small Anglican churches sit beside Hindu shrines at the roadside. Old planters' bungalows nestle behind the bright orange flowers of African Tulip trees, bougainvillea rubbing shoulders with begonias and dahlias in the garden. One moment it's the **Scottish Highlands**, then the Australian outback; turn a corner and it's the Lubérons of **Provence**; then the light changes and it's a Scottish Glen, or the pine woods of Ojai. And so it goes on, constantly surprising.

In fact, it is often hard to spot a piece of native vegetation while walking in these hills. Ecologically, what happened to this landscape over the last 150 years is quite staggering, as the jungle was systematically erased, terraced and, almost every square inch of it, planted with tea. The sheer scale and perfection of the stonework terracing and road-building that created the basic infrastructure for the tea industry is also something to marvel at - mile upon mile, traversing near-vertical ridges and meandering up endless emerald green valleys.

Although internationally famed for the industry, tea was not grown commercially in **Sri Lanka** until 1867, by the enterprising James Taylor, at a time when coffee was the principal crop in the region. Two years later, the great coffee blight struck and people followed Taylor's example of planting tea. **Sri Lanka** now provides a 20% share of the global demand for the green leaf and is the world's largest exporter.

Until now, travel within the tea country has been relatively restricted. Apart from some second rate hotels in the decaying faded charm of **Nuwara Eliya** - the former British hill station known as 'Little England' but now more like 'Little **Sri Lanka**' - and the novel conversion of the Tea Factory in a nearby estate - with one restaurant inside a railway carriage - there have been few places to make a base for a few days and truly explore. As a result, most pass through **Nuwara Eliya** to see the stunning views down to the



Rory Spowers, 39, has been living near Galle in Sri Lanka, with his wife and two sons, since March 2004. He is currently writing a book, to be published by Harper Collins in January 2007, which follows the creation of 'Samakanda', the transformation of an abandoned tea estate into a tropical 'forest garden', ecological learning centre and eco-tourism destination.

Rory is a writer and broadcaster whose last book, *Rising Tides*, a history of ecological thought, was critically acclaimed by *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer* and a variety of magazines. Rory also has a background as a travel writer and has presented various BBC R4 programmes. His first book, *Three Men on a Bike*, was a bizarre tale of cycling through Africa with friends on the original three-seater 'trandem' used by *The Goodies* on BBC TV. This trip inspired Rory to walk the length of India in 96, making a pilgrimage from Kanyakumari, the southern tip of the country, up to Calcutta.

In 2002, Rory co-founded *The Web of Hope (WoH)* (www.thewebofhope.com), a UK registered charity compiling an expanding on-line database of role models for sustainability, social justice and positive change. This database provides the basis for an educational roadshow performed in schools.

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south coast from World's End, experience the bizarre blend of Scottish moorland and African savannah on Horton Plains, or make a trip to Adam's Peak, the pyramidal pilgrimage spot revered by every faith - then they journey on. Whole areas of the tea country remained hidden.

Merril Fernando at Dilmah Tea was one of the few that recognised this. In collaboration with Miguel Cunat, now the General Manager of **Sri Lanka** In Style, a recently launched specialist service in providing tailored trips to the best of the island's villas and boutique hotels, Miguel spent many weeks covering every path he could in the tea country, by whatever means, mapping out 'perfect walking holidays'. This 'recce' trip formed a core strand within the Tea Trails concept, four restored and recently opened bungalows in the Bogawantalawa Valley, overlooking the Castlereagh Reservoir.

Architecturally, planter's bungalows were rarely that exciting, functionality taking precedence over aesthetics. The Tea Trails renovations therefore - Castlereagh, Sumerville, Norwood and Tientsin - need to be seen in that context, since they have remained faithful to many of the original features and materials. The lime green corrugated sheeting on the roof for example, may remind one of a golf club in **Perthshire**, but it does resonate truthfully with the past. Likewise, the 'prettified' garden beds that greet one at the Castlereagh, which would out-dazzle window boxes in the **Cotswolds**, are slightly disarming.

The interiors are sparse but welcoming. The two adjoining sitting rooms at the Castlereagh, with comfortable sofas, simple fireplaces, prints on the walls, board games and old magazines, make one feel instantly at home. After the heat and hassle of **Colombo**, or the humidity of the south, the cooler temperatures are a huge relief and tea by the fire becomes a savoured ritual after a long day's walk. Again, bedrooms and bathrooms are inviting, with fine linen, four-poster beds and the first heated towel rails I have encountered in the tropics. Across the lake at Sumerville, the scale is even grander, each bedroom having its own private garden and sitting room, while the front terrace provides expansive views across the valley.

Days start with 'Bed Tea', the order and time for which is taken the night before. (It always felt slightly insulting asking for 'bed coffee', like requesting tequila in **Burgundy**.) Bacon, eggs, sausage, baked beans and home-made marmalade can all feature at breakfast. We chose superb rice and curry for lunch, but could have just as easily gone for coq au vin with mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables. Tea-crusting rack of lamb made a big impression one evening. The house Australian wine is included in the room rate, along with all that you may want from a basic bar, stretching to gin, whisky and vodka.

The walking is idyllic, suited to all ages and levels of endurance and endeavour. The hotel dropped us by van at Norwood Bungalow, beside majestic clumps of giant bamboo, and we walked for three hours back to Castlereagh. The trails wound through shaded groves of eucalyptus, then opened up into vistas of terraced tea, an

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undulating sea of grassy hues, the waves rippling to the horizon like one giant flood of green. The radiant faces of Tamil tea-pickers greeted us from the terraces and sacks of 'green leaf' lay piled up beside small Shiva shrines at the verge. Despite the almost omnipresent tea, the landscape does keep evolving, passing vast abandoned tea factories and patches of neglected tea, where wild flowers now dominate, or through market gardens growing all the 'upcountry vegetables' - leeks, beets, carrots, cabbages. We went alone but Tea Trails can provide guides if needed.

For those feeling more energetic, the bungalows can also provide mountain bikes, or arrange white water rafting nearby. There are rumours of ballooning as well, which may hopefully prove more than hot air. I can certainly vouch for the mountain biking, having never ridden on such exhilarating tracks anywhere, greeted by one stunning view after another at every turn, all the time surrounded by the soft green light of the tea in clear mountain air. Like skiing really - except green not white, and about as good as it gets when it comes to taking exercise.

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