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Sri Lanka's sun, tea and sand

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Anna Murphy relishes Sri Lanka's lush plantations, tasty curries, quaint traditions, lovely beaches - and lack of fellow travellers.

Much of my life I have wanted to go to Sri Lanka. But every time I've been on the verge of booking, the Tamils have caused trouble. This year, when I finally bought a flight, things kicked off again. But I went anyway, and am glad I did. Avoid the north-east, the centre of the troubles, and you feel safe.

At times I felt that I had the island to myself - and what a superb island it is: its beaches are Bounty-advert perfection, its tea country the prettiest I've seen, its temples drip with character. The food is sublime and my accommodation was fantastic - and affordable.

You could spend a fortnight visiting Sri Lanka's sights, but in a convenient cluster near the island's centre - north of the hill town of Kandy, where I began my trip - lie three of the most remarkable.

At Sigiriya, a slab of rock rears out of the forest like a giant's thumbnail. Paintings of pneumatic women adorn the stone, with poems alongside that were engraved 2,500 years ago. A royal winter palace once sat on top of the rock.

Just to the south are the cave temples of Dambulla. In the main cave are colourful statues of Buddha, lined up like schoolchildren in front of a psychedelic backdrop of swirls and chequerboard. Locals leave offerings of lotus flowers - pink, white and lilac - or trays of intricately cut watermelon and guava.

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Sigiriya rock, adorned with art and poems, rises out of the forest like a giant's thumbnail

A few miles to the east, at Polonnawura, the island's medieval capital, are the vast figures of the Gal Vihara - four Buddhas carved into the granite in various poses.

Despite the many sights that are ripe for exploring, it was tempting to relax at base. Kandy House, a 200-year-old walauwa (or manor house), is built around a cool courtyard; its rooms furnished with antiques and its garden a manicured jungle. In the evenings I sat outside, admiring birds of paradise, drinking a concoction called a ginger kick and steeling myself for the feasting ahead. Supper was a panoply of curries - beef, okra and, most deliciously, hibiscus - followed by watalapan, Sri Lanka's answer to crème caramel.

My next stop was a surprisingly luxurious 1930s tea plantation bungalow, reached by a train that winds among the hills. We crossed slopes covered in a brilliant carpet of green tea bushes, which looked almost like the lawns of English suburbia. The illusion strengthened when we arrived at Norwood, the bungalow, with its Axminster rugs, its well-upholstered sofas and its bay windows overlooking a garden of begonias and hydrangeas. Beyond lay more plantations, the ant-like figures of Tamils - imported from southern India in the 19th century and identifiable by their dark skin and bright clothes - working away with huge baskets on their heads. In the distance rose dramatic peaks.

Visitors can cycle or walk between the four plantation bungalows, but I found it hard to drag myself away from Norwood. This was a place where, should I wander out of my room and ask for a cup of tea at around 4pm I might find myself served a full high-tea, a tottering fine-china tower of scones, ham-and-mustard sandwiches and lemon tarts. Then it was cocktail hour and the staff would press me to accept a Castlereagh Signature - I never

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discovered what the recipe was, but it tasted lethal. On my pillow at bed time was a bud of tea - the "first flush", picked in the morning - and between the sheets a tartan-covered hot-water bottle - it can get chilly at 3,100ft.

From the tea plantations I travelled to the fortress town of Galle on the south coast. Europeans and Americans have been buying property there for a song for years, and I suspect that if it weren't for the effects of the tsunami and terrorism it would have turned into a sort of Marrakesh-cum-Lower East Side.

Galle's Dutch-built Old Town was largely untouched by the tsunami, thanks to its beefy ramparts. Its streets are lined with charmingly named dwellings - Jasmine Cottage; Ernest House - with pitched roofs that sweep down to verandas. Small wooden gates and fences separate cottages from the street, and front doors are of stained glass. Around one crumbling square are the courthouses, where lawyers sit outside, tapping away at ancient typewriters.

The former New Oriental Hotel, renamed Amangalla and now part of the Aman chain, is right in the middle of it all. These days it is even more glamorous than in its 19th-century heyday and its vast proportions are made more elegant with an array of antiques. If you lounge long enough by the pool in the garden, you're liable to be offered a bowl of delectable home-made ice cream. The hotel has an excellent hammam, and its barber will provide the closest of shaves while you recline in the original N O H-marked chair.

It was not always so perfect, as illustrated by an entry in a guestbook from the 1970s. "This is the Fawltly Towers of Asia," wrote one unhappy customer. "If you are reading this when you have just checked in, check out now..."

Today, though, I advise the opposite for this wonderful island: check in as soon as you can, before the rest of the world discovers its charms.

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