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On the trail of tea and turtles

Will Buckley and family are enchanted by Sri Lanka's plantations and beaches - and find a warm welcome despite recent troubles

Will Buckley

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The Ceylon Tea Trails may well be the most entrancing place I have ever stayed. A collection of four colonial-style bungalows built for British tea estate managers in the days of the Raj, they enjoy spectacular views overlooking the rolling green of Sri Lanka's hill country. The five of us - my wife Gronnie, Fred and Daisy, both 11, Mo, eight, and I - had boarded the battered old steam train at Kandy for the beautiful three-hour journey to Hatton.

The kids hung out of the train windows and the views of the valley below and beyond were sumptuous. From Hatton, it was a short drive to 'Norwood', the stunning residence which was to be our home for the next three nights, 4,000 feet above sea level, overlooking the Castlereagh reservoir.

Guests staying at any of the Tea Trails bungalows are welcome to visit the three other bungalows for lunch or afternoon tea. Days can be spent walking from one bungalow to the other or on a tour of one of the factories nestling either side of the valley followed by a tea tasting. These are conducted by Andrew Taylor whose grandfather was one of the early planters and whose family history, which he is more than happy to relate, is Dickensian. There is suspected murder, bolting mothers and the theft of an inheritance. To hear it all while sitting beside the croquet lawn and partaking of cucumber sandwiches is to go back a century or two.

The bungalows come with staff and the food and service are exceptional. At Norwood the meals are prepared by chef Vajira Gamage who has returned to Sri Lanka after working for 16 years in Paris. After Damien, our host, overheard Freddie mention that he was missing peanut butter a small jar appeared the next morning at breakfast.

This is high-end tourism at its zenith. A place of such beauty that drinking an early morning coffee - you can take the whole tea thing too far - and watching the mists rise in the valley, you realise that the mad-eyed Scotsmen who set out east from Colombo may not have been bonkers after all. Their lives are commemorated in a small Anglican chapel built in 1861 where services are held once a month. From here you have a panoramic view of the reservoir and dam where half of Sri Lanka's energy is created. Far below a group of boys was taking advantage of low water to play cricket on the sands.

From the Tea Trails we travelled down to the beaches of the south coast, a 10-hour haul by minibus. Ten years ago Gronnie and I had travelled to Galle and spent an idyllic week in a Doris Day-style cottage on Unawatuna beach. Grimly, after the tsunami, the cottages are no more and the beach is more ramshackle campsite than tropical paradise. The tourists are returning to the south, but slowly. You do not see many as you walk round Galle centre and sun-cream is in short supply, a sure sign that there is an absence of Westerners.

We stayed in two villas on the beach. The first, Sanda Kirana, has a cloistered swimming pool. The second, Villa Victoria, bang next door, has a landscaped garden. Both are open to the elements and the breeze comes off the sea and cools the properties. To fall asleep and awaken to the plangent Indian Ocean is to be transported to a calmer place. Every need is catered for with your hosts buying fruit and fish from the market and turning them into sumptuous feasts.

Excursions from the villas included a trip to release turtles into the sea, from where some will return up to 30 years later to exactly the same beach to lay eggs, and a visit 10 miles inland to Illuketia, a lovely old plantation house, where you can lunch on the verandah watching monkeys swing in the jungle in front of you, and follow your meal with a swim in a pool surrounded by a spice garden.

Throughout our stay, having booked our holiday through Fleewinter, a company which specialises in villa breaks in exotic locations, we were bussed round the island with our guide, Wimal Kanaheraarachchi. He proved to be the perfect host, imparting sufficient information to keep us informed without overdoing it. Highlights of our tour included a visit to the Pinnawela elephant orphanage where the children coped admirably with an elephant ride while I turned into a jibbering wreck, and to the temple at Sigiriya, an astonishingly imposing monument, which stakes a claim to being the Eighth Wonder of the World, and the beautiful and serene Dambulla Cave Temple.

The majesty of the ancient buildings stands in contrast to the ramshackle tombstones which are depressingly prevalent on the west coast. Up to 50,000 Sri Lankans perished in the tsunami and the country remains scarred and ravaged, both literally and psychologically.

Sri Lanka is a country dependent on tourism, which tourists are avoiding. This is a tragedy because it is a wondrous abundant island inhabited by gloriously friendly people and there can be few happier places in the world to enjoy a family holiday. By spending your holiday money in Sri Lanka you can, in a small way, assist the process of recovery.

Essentials

Will Buckley and family travelled with Fleewinter (020 7112 0019; fleewinter.com) which offers luxury villas and bungalows throughout Sri Lanka. They booked their flights with First Choice (firstchoice.co.uk). A two-week family trip staying in Fleewinter properties in the Hill Country, Galle, and near Colombo between November and March 2009 (excluding the peak Christmas period) costs approximately £1,770 per person, including all accommodation, transport and flights, based on two people travelling.

Is Sri Lanka safe to visit?

There have been recent sporadic Tamil Tiger-linked terrorist attacks in Colombo, including explosive devices on buses and trains. The current Foreign Office advice is that British citizens should not travel beyond Puttalam in the west and Trincomalee in the east, including the Jaffna Peninsula, and to avoid the Yala National Park which reopened to the public last January.

Britons should carry identification with them at all times, particularly those with Tamil ancestry because they are more likely to be targets for detention. See fco.gov.uk for more details.

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