

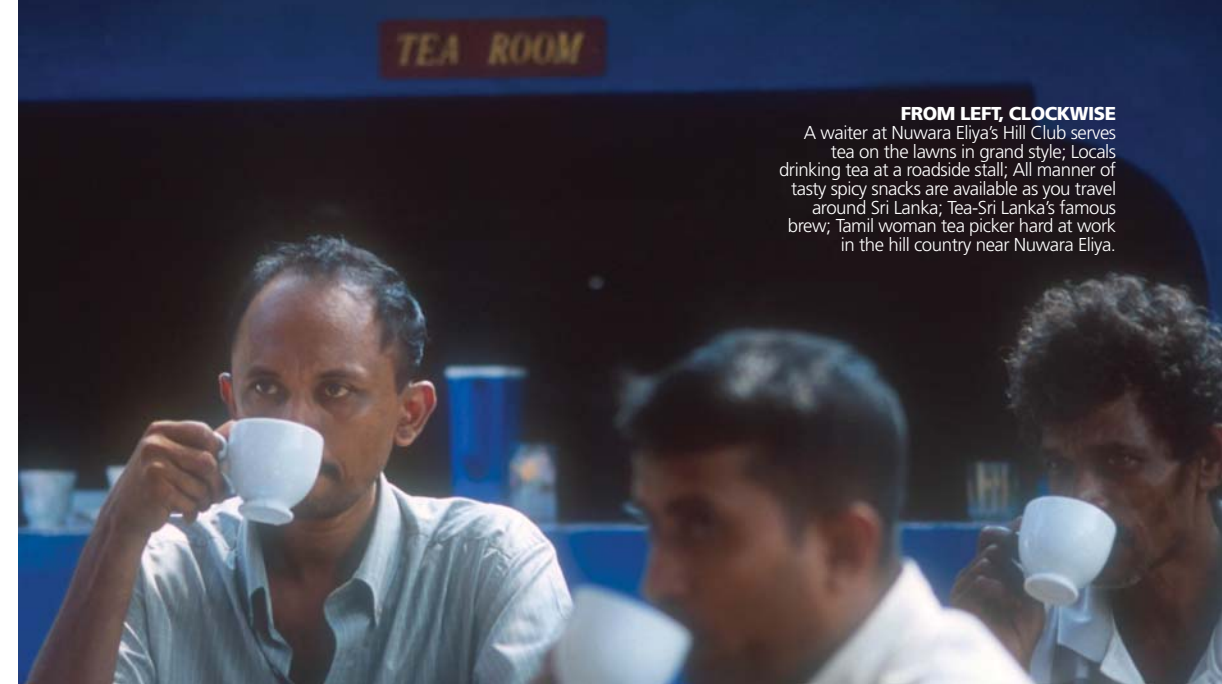
DONE TO A TEA

HANGING LIKE A RIPE MANGO FROM THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT, SRI LANKA IS A BEWITCHING LAND OF GENTLE PEOPLE, ANCIENT BUDDHIST SHRINES, AND PICTURESQUE TEA PLANTATIONS.

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PICTURES KARIN RIIKONEN



FROM LEFT, CLOCKWISE
A waiter at Nuwara Eliya's Hill Club serves tea on the lawns in grand style; Locals drinking tea at a roadside stall; All manner of tasty spicy snacks are available as you travel around Sri Lanka; Tea-Sri Lanka's famous brew; Tamil woman tea picker hard at work in the hill country near Nuwara Eliya.



At every station people board the rickety timber train, and wander through the carriages selling mango slices, parcels of rice and curry, oranges, spiced chickpeas and lottery tickets. Passengers hang outside the open doorways and when the train passes through tunnels the children shriek with delight.

We're travelling east from Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, into the picturesque highlands and from the train windows the dominant colour is a vivid green as far as the eye can see. Lush layers of velvet hug the slopes like a thick shag carpet, manicured and laid out without a wrinkle. The hillsides are dotted with specks of bright colour, as squads of sari-clad tea pickers move through the metre-high bushes deftly picking the leaves and buds and placing them in wicker baskets strapped to their backs. This is tea country – and for more than 130 years Ceylon, Sri Lanka's former name, has been a byword for some of the world's finest teas, unrivalled in flavour and aroma.

In the middle of the tea-growing region at 1,889m is Nuwara Eliya, which retains its hill station atmosphere more so than anywhere else in the country. Once a favoured haunt of tea planters wishing to escape the heat of the lowlands, it's like a small twee English town transplanted to the tropics: hotels with wood-panelled billiard rooms and mounted trophies, country-style houses with rose gardens, a beautifully maintained golf course and a picturesque racetrack.

It's mid-afternoon and we're hanging out for our first cup of Sri Lanka's famous brew. Down at the Hill Club on the outskirts of town, a white-jacketed, white-gloved waiter emerges from the main entrance carrying a tray containing a china teapot, cups and saucers. He walks through a trimmed hedge



CLOCKWISE

Old timber rattle in tea country; Young Buddhist monks. Buddhism is the dominant creed of the largest ethnic group, the Sinhalese, and is followed by 70% of the population; Women hard at work at a coconut factory. The husk is used to make ropes, mats and mattress filling.



archway, across the immaculately manicured lawns and carefully places the crockery on the linen tablecloth. The whole tea-making ceremony is carried off with delightful panache.

It's in the hill country where the tea plantations and hotels serve the type of brew you'd expect: a rich, golden, excellent quality liquid that is smooth, bright, and delicately perfumed. Although tea is readily available all over the island, from small roadside kiosks, railway stations and local eateries, curiously it is likely to be a concoction called "milk tea" – a poorer quality beverage with hot milk and sugar blended together before being poured into a cup.

If you're interested to learn how a good brew is made, then take a tour of one of the nearby tea plantations such as the Pedro Tea Estate or the Labookellie Tea Estate. It's also a good opportunity to stock up on quality teas to take back home.

A short train ride from Nuwara Elya is the sleepy village of Ella; a highlight is spending a night at the superbly situated Ambiente Guest House. At around 5am you're woken by the chanting of monks from the nearby monastery, to then savour what must be Sri Lanka's most magnificent sunrise view, straight through the Ella Gap to the coastal plains nearly a 1,000m below. All this can be experienced without leaving your bed.

After a couple of relaxing days taking walks in the surrounding hills through tea plantations to temples and waterfalls (guided by Ambiente's pet dogs), we arrange for a driver to take us to Yala West National Park in the country's south-east. Although it sustained some damage in the 2004 tsunami, Yala West is one of the few Sri Lankan national parks still open to travellers.

The cool green hill country is soon replaced by a flat, ochre-coloured landscape, with the air dry and crackling with the heat. This is home to the water buffalo, which can be seen wallowing in muddy waters, often just a curve of magnificent horns, slits of eyes and dark-grey nostrils visible. Water buffalo are not only valued as ploughers of the rice fields, but are also prized for their milk – used to make Sri Lanka's favourite dessert *kiri peni*, or curd and treacle.

Asitha, our driver pulls up beside one of the wooden roadside stalls where the smiling owner is already busy ladling thick, white buffalo curd into three sundae glasses lined up on a tray. Once the curd is piled into the glasses, an elderly lady takes the stopper out of bottle and pours a stream of golden treacle over it.

While having a brief discussion about cricket, the country's national obsession, we enjoy the cool delicately flavoured curd, its slight tartness offset by the treacle, more accurately a syrup from the kitul palm.

As we get nearer to the coast, coconut palms sway in the breeze and the Indian Ocean, the colour of a Ceylonese sapphire, appears to be suspended between the burning white sand and the cloudless sky. Few trees in the world are of greater benefit to man than the coconut. In addition to the milk (which can also be used to cure headaches, upset stomachs and hangovers) and the white pulp that's a side dish accompanying almost every meal in Sri Lanka, the husk is made into rope, mats and mattress fillings.

When the flowers are tapped, a liquid pours out which, after only a few hours

of fermentation, turns into a popular local wine called "toddy". Fermented and refined toddy becomes the country's signature spirit arrack (reminiscent of dark rum and tequila), that mixes well with ginger ale, especially the Elephant House brand.

Tissamaharama, a busy town surrounded by rice paddies and dotted with temples is the jumping off point for the Yala West national park. We base ourselves at the Tissa Rest House delightfully situated right on the banks of the Tissa Wewa. To visit the national park, it is best to hire a jeep and driver and be in place near a waterhole at dawn or dusk. It's a good idea to chat to other travellers for recommendations.

Yala West is a mixture of scrub, plains, lagoons, and rocky outcrops. Though not in the same league as Africa's safari parks, there are elephant, bears, deer, crocodiles, wild boar, monkeys, wild buffalos, wild peacocks and a small population of elusive leopards calling it home. Later that evening back at our accommodation after a satisfying day's wildlife spotting, its time to order a chilled Lion beer or perhaps an arrack cocktail – somehow a cup of tea doesn't seem to fit the occasion quite the same. ■



Working elephants and their owners may be spotted anywhere, especially in the Kandy area

TRANSPORT

Sri Lanka's rickety railways are a great way to get around and are more relaxed (and perhaps a safer option) than the local buses. Private air-conditioned buses cover all the major routes. One of the best ways of getting around is to hire a car and driver for a day or several days and create your own itinerary. Costs are quite reasonable.

A HISTORY OF TEA

The origins of tea drinking can be traced to Chinese Emperor Shen Nung, who, in 27BC, discovered the drink when a few leaves from the tea plant (*camellia sinensis*) dropped into a pot of water he was boiling. The emperor drank the mixture and declared it gave "vigour of body, contentment of mind, and determination of purpose." Perhaps as testament to the emperor's assessment, tea today comes second only to water in global consumption.

What would life be like without a good cup of tea? It has been eagerly adopted by many countries, and each has a typical and traditional way of drinking it: brewed in billies beside billabongs in the Australian outback, served in summer in the garden with cucumber sandwiches in England, stewed in goat's milk in Afghanistan and with pieces of delicious brown palm candy, known as jaggery, in Sri Lankan villages.

Tea first arrived in Sri Lanka as a substitute for coffee when a devastating disease destroyed the extensive plantations in the 19th century. In 1867, a reclusive Scotsman called James Taylor began planting tea seedlings at the Loolecondara Estate south-east of Kandy. Today, Sri Lanka produces some of the most sought after, fragrant and delicious teas in the world.

THE TEA MANUFACTURING PROCESS

Everyday around 300,000 estate workers (mainly Tamil women) pluck several million tea leaves by hand. Only the bud and the two youngest leaves are plucked, for it is these that have the flavour and aroma.

The plucked tealeaf is then brought to the muster sheds where they are weighed and the first quality inspection is made. The leaves are then moved to the factory where they are withered using large blowers.

The next step in the manufacturing process involves cutting the leaves. This brings out the juices and begins the fermentation process. Fermentation is the critical step. The humidity, temperature and fermentation time have to be well controlled or the flavour is lost.

After fermentation is complete, the leaf is fired to lock in the flavour, to dry it and to improve the keeping qualities. The final step is the separation of the product according to the colour and the particle size. Absolutely no preservatives or artificial flavourings are added in the manufacture of pure Ceylon tea.

TYPES AND GRADES OF TEA

There are many types and varieties of teas, which are graded both by size (from cheap "dust", through fannings and broken grades to "leaf tea") and by quality (with names such as Broken Orange Pekoe, Flowery Pekoe or Souchong).

Tea is further categorised by the altitude at which it is grown. Low-grown teas, produced at below 600 metres, are of good quality and give good colour and strength but lack the distinctive flavour and bright fresh taste of the higher-grown teas and are usually used in blending. Mid-grown teas, grown between 600-1,200m are rich in flavour and give good colour. High-grown teas, at elevations above 1,200 metres are often referred to as the "champagne of teas" like the exquisite Nuwara Eliya and Uva blends, which are renowned for their taste and aroma.

As well as the wonderful black teas, some estates also produce silver tip white tea that yields a very pale, straw-coloured brew and should be drunk without milk. All Sri Lanka's black teas are best drunk with a little milk.