

CALM IN A TEACUP

A VISIT TO THE SPRAWLING TEA ESTATES OF **SRI LANKA** IS A REFRESHING BREW OF RICH HISTORY, ROLLING VISTAS AND BLANKETS OF THICK CLOUD THAT DRIFT INTO YOUR HOTEL ROOM

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

“I n my next birth, I want to be born in India,” I overhear Maheswari say in Tamil to her friend who is working silently, head bent over the tea bush, hands rapidly transferring the leaves to the basket slung over her back. While the friend ignores Maheswari and carries on with work, the other women giggle and whisper among themselves.

Now I am curious; what does Maheswari think about India? And what kind of promise does the country hold for her? I ask her in our common language. “So that I do not have to work here in this tea garden all my life,” she replies. “I can come as a tourist and take photos like you are right now.” I remember reading that the tea industry in Sri Lanka provides employment to over a million people, in a country of 20 million. Maheswari is one among them.

She has been seeing a lot of visitors from India in the last few years, since peace was officially declared on the tiny island. And though not all of them speak Tamil or stop to chat with her, she thinks they are friendly people. At any rate, visitors from

India are not new to Sri Lanka; several centuries ago, the Chola emperors of south India arrived as conquerors and ruled for over 75 years. And much earlier, in the 2nd century B.C., Emperor Ashoka had sent his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitra to Sri Lanka to spread the tenets of Buddhism. More recently, South Indians – like the forefathers of Maheswari and her co-workers – have moved to Sri Lanka to work in the tea plantations of Nuwara Eliya and its neighbourhood.

Tea was brought into Sri Lanka originally from China, and later Assam, in the mid-19th century. Today, the country is the world’s second-largest exporter of tea. It was in 1867 that Scottish tea planter James Taylor first started the commercial cultivation of tea here – and till as recently as the 1970s, most of the tea plantations were owned and managed by the British.

Nuwara Eliya, at almost 7,000 feet, is where the British headed for the summer, to escape the scorching heat of the plains. Once up there, they set about converting this quaint bit of Sri Lanka into a piece of their own homeland. In the town and in the sprawling estates along the way, I spot names like Labookellie, Norwood and Court Lodge and immediately understand why tourist brochures proudly refer to Nuwara Eliya as “Little Britain”.

We are staying at the Tea Factory Hotel, literally named for

BREATH OF FRESH AIR: A morning mist rolls over the tea estate at Hapatule, Southern Highlands, Sri Lanka



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the tea factory that once stood there, on top of a hill, in the middle of the plantations. This factory once served the Hethersett plantation, named after the initial owner Mr Flowerdew's hometown back in Ol' Blighty. Inside the hotel, the original pieces of machinery from those tea-processing days have been kept intact and there are signboards to remind guests of the history of each spot within the current premises.

The hotel's watering hole, for instance, was once the tea packing room, while the room we are staying in was the withering loft (says the notice on the wall). That night, I swear I could still inhale the faint fragrance of the Ceylon tea from a few decades ago.

Locals, including tea workers, call the plantation Pooapanie Estate, a literal translation of Flowerdew. "Pooapanie" is also, perhaps, a picturesque reference to the thick grey mist that covers the hills around the hotel at all times of the day. The next morning, I wake up to see blanket upon thick blanket of white cloud covering the valley visible from my room, some of which drifts inside as soon as I open the windows. Our plan is to head out to nearby Ella, certified by my trusty guidebooks as one of the prettiest spots in the country, but the idea of driving on the steep narrow mountain roads in such poor visibil-

ity is not a welcome one.

So, we wait for the sun to finally emerge from behind the clouds and then set off towards Hakgala Gardens, just outside town. It is then that I hear the first mention of the Ramayana in many days in Sri Lanka. Hakgala is believed to have been the original Ashoka Vatika from the legend, the pleasure garden of the Lankan king Ravana and the place where he held Sita captive for many days. My guidebook says that the people of Sri Lanka believe that Ravana had his capital (summer capital perhaps, just like the British?) in Nuwara Eliya. The garden itself is devoid of tourists, with only a few local families out on a walk, with the mothers admiring the roses and orchids in bloom and the kids gleefully chasing after the monkeys swinging from the tall trees.

My guide grunts in a non-committal manner when I ask him about it. "There are many stories," he waves the questions away without directly answering them. However, on the way back to the hotel, he stops the car at the small, garishly painted Seetha Kovil (Sita's temple) just before the garden and orders us in. Inside, I see people peering at the rocks near the water, looking for the footprints of Hanuman, who (it is believed) visited this place in his search for Sita.

Back at the Tea Factory, I am reading the list of "things to do" that the management has thoughtfully provided for guests who seek activity rather than relaxation, even in such a place. One of the attractions on offer is the opportunity to pluck and process your own cup of tea. That, however, sounds too much like work and I am content to simply walk in the middle of the manicured tea gardens in the estate, to work off the heavy breakfast. A gang of local kids have congregated at one spot, evidence of their abandoned game (a rubber tyre and a long stick – playthings of children everywhere in the subcontinent) on the ground, and are grinning broadly.

It turns out that a European couple has taken up the hotel's offer and are at work in the plantation. My husband and I stop to watch them, plucking one tentative leaf at a time, guided by a woman worker who clearly cannot wait for them to finish, so she can get on with her job for the day. The man has a bright lungi under his T-shirt that he keeps tripping over as he walks on the narrow mud path, but his partner seems perfectly comfortable in the deep green sari that sets off her pale skin to her advantage.

The route back to Colombo the next day is scenic, with tiny waterfalls all along the

OH, SO GREEN: 1. On the road from Nuwara Eliya to Colombo; 2. Workers on the tea plantations originally moved from Tamil Nadu many generations ago; 3. Unusual flowers at the Hakgala Gardens; 4. The small hill towns around Nuwara Eliya, once home to the British; 5. Lush green tea estates cover the hills of Nuwara Eliya as far as the eye can see; 6. The mini organic tea factory at the hotel; 7. The original tea processing machinery inside the hotel

way. We stop for rest at the St Clair's Tea Centre, named for the waterfall across the hill. Sipping on fresh Orange Pekoe, I remember the story of the discovery of tea. The Chinese Emperor Shen-Nung (the story goes) in 2737 B.C. was heating water when a few leaves from a wild tea bush accidentally fell into the water. He liked the taste and flavour imparted by the leaves and declared that the liquid gave one "vigour of body, contentment of mind, and determination of purpose".

The discovery of tea was an act of serendipity, meaning it was discovered by accident. And that makes me think that there is something right about the way tea is strongly associated with Sri Lanka. After all, it is the country's original name – Serendip (or Serendib) – that gives us the word serendipity. W

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