



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

A VILLAGE SHOPPING TRIP IN SRI LANKA

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FOR
ERIC
PEERLESS NYMPH

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice
(she was so much surprised, that for
the moment she quite forgot how to
speak good English).

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Retail Therapy in a Tuk Tuk, the subject of this guide, will take you down one of the world's busiest high streets.

And don't worry about the example chosen – which you may, at first glance, consider eccentric, situated as it is in a small village in the middle of an island of barely 20 million people in one of the least visited countries in the world.

Marvel instead - because, yes, you have come to Galagedera, the first village you encounter as you drive into the hills of Sri Lanka from its central plains.

Despite its obscurity, Galagedera's high street, like those of most Sri Lankan towns and villages, is booming.

As the retail apocalypse decimates the high streets of the developed world, here the drive to digital, globalisation, and changing consumer habits have made only the most modest of footprints. Within the next 30 years, this will surely change - but for now, to travel down its length in a tuk tuk is like time travelling in a TARDIS.

Once upon a time, your village looked a little like this.

The tour may shortchange you on art galleries, artisan food outlets or Jimmy Choo footwear; and there is little to no chance of breaking for a martini, still less an almond croissant – but no matter.

Behind Galagedera's busy frontages are nearly all the things that most people need most of the time: on their doorstep and not concealed behind knotty road networks in a gloomy retail park.

Galagedera High Street really is that - a long ribbon of

a road with almost 200 shops and businesses on either side, beginning on the left as you slip out of the Flame Tree Hotel's gates and set off down Rambukkana Road.

At almost any time of the day, it brims with pedestrians and traffic – especially other tuk-tuks. Pause and watch. People talk. They pause and gossip, trade news; they know one another.

Amidst innumerable clothes shops, tiny cafes, photographers with technicolour backdrops, fishmongers, butchers, woodcarvers, and timber yards, and small shops selling plastic chairs from China, water tanks, clothes, fruit and vegetables, and basic household goods, there is a wide range of businesses and services.

TWO

LEFT OUT OF
THE GATES

It is the hospital you arrive at first, an agreeable village example of the free and universal health care system enjoyed right across the country. Sri Lanka's health system has had a seismic impact on national life, improving life expectancy and dramatically reducing maternal and infant deaths.

It runs parallel with paid-for private health care, with its faster and sometimes more advanced treatment. And it coexists with an indigenous medicine system supported by its own network of doctors and nurses, pharmacies, hospitals, teaching colleges, and a bespoke government ministry.

Galagedera's cottage hospital treats around 300 outpatients a day and around 20 who are admitted to its wards, with care provided by around 5 doctors and 40 nurses.

Dental care, basic health care, basic mental health care, and maternity care are provided, but more complex cases and conditions are referred to the main state hospital in Kandy. This includes – on average – 10 snake bites it encounters annually, but not scorpion bites, which can be treated locally. Colds, flu, and road accidents are all typical challenges – but so too are injuries from falling off trees or from falling coconuts.

Next up is the village's central bus station, which receives buses to and from Kandy or Kurunegala throughout the day. Notaries have their offices here, close to the village Magistrate Court, one of over 5,000 such government offices nationwide and a short walk away from the village's large police office, one of 600 nationwide. Close at hand and convenient for a tidy court appearance is the village's tiny handloom workshop: real looms operated by real people to produce lovely, patterned fabric.

Further along are the Galagedera Primary School and the Sujatha Girls School.

Founded in 1906, this is the only girls' school in the area, teaching around 1,000 pupils from first grade on.

The village's main school, Galagedera Central College, is tucked away behind the village. Founded over 120 years ago, this large state school takes in students from ten to eighteen years, with about 70 staff members to educate 1,000 students.

For hardcore consumers, a retail treat offers itself next with The Global Electrics and Paint Shop, owned by one of 3 brothers, the hardware tycoons of the village. The second brother trades in items such as cement, plumbing and electrics, and the third in glass. They are a second-generation business family, with the enterprise having started 40 years earlier.

Their rather surprising neighbour is Green Life, a plantation investment company that specialises in guavas. Given that the fruit, delicious in jams, desserts, and chutneys, originated from South America but has been used in traditional Sri Lankan medicine for hundreds of years, it likely arrived sometime after 1505 with the Portuguese. Guavas are grown mainly in the dry zone, not the hill country of Galagedera, so this anomaly of an office is a, and electrical goods are rare and mysterious things, as much to me as to its manager.

Then you encounter one of the village's great retail treasures: the Ayurveda Medicine Shop. Once little larger than a wardrobe, this enterprise has ballooned in the past 8 years and sells over 100 different pungent herbs, which are made up to whatever prescription the customer presents.

Amongst its many wonders is devil's dung. Made from the dried latex of carrot-related plants from Central Asia, this curious version of Asafoetida finds greater favour amongst cooks than patients for the smooth onion-like flavour it bestows with generous grace to any dish to which it is added.

The village boasts a branch of Durdans Laboratories whose range of basic medical tests often saves a longer journey to the main hospitals in Peradeniya.

The chain began in 1945 and is one of several leading private health care providers, such as Lanka Hospital and Asiri.

The village, being about 40% Muslim, naturally boasts its own mosque, this one a large white and green structure, whose Imam's call to prayer, a welcome musical improvement on the previous incumbent, can be heard daily across the jungle.

Sri Lanka has well over 1 million tuk-tuks on its register, so it is no surprise to find several 3-wheel garages in the village, one of the better ones being New Chooti Motor Centre.

Most tuk-tuk drivers are careful and law-abiding souls; even so, the vehicles account for almost 4,000 road incidents annually, almost 8% of them fatal.

As the row of shops thins out on the left, you pass the Government Vet, their animal mandate including the usual tally of cats and dogs, but also sizable numbers of goats and some 100 weekly out calls for cows.

Nearby is the Hanna Gold Shop, one of several tiny gold shops in the village, whose products are typically 22 carats or less.

It lies close to a large Village Sports ground - usually silent and locked except on those days when politicians come to town, eager for large rallies, or for very occasional music performances or even sports tournaments themselves.

Most of the main political parties have few branch offices in Galagedera, and the village tends to be a swing constituency, typically voting for whichever party happens to win in any given year.

THREE

HOMeward
BOUND

Beyond the sport's ground, the village peters out to paddy and the occasional house or roadside café. Still, on the other side of the road heading back into Galagedera, it starts up again, this time with the capacious Office of the Agricultural Instructor.

Set up in 1935 and now staffed by 32 people, half of whom are field officers, they are part of a government network that provides practical support to small farmers, with subsidised sales of plants and fertiliser, water provision and horticultural advice for the main commercial crops – rice, pepper, cardamom, coconut, clovers, cinnamon and rubber.

Financial advice is also on hand with a branch of the Agricultural Bank set up in its grounds, as well as help of a more spiritual nature, derived from the not insignificant shrine to Lord Buddha that greets you on your arrival.

Along from here is the Jabbar Central College, a mixed-gender Muslim school and a branch of Lanka Petrel, a filling station with reasonably non-rusty tanks and reliable petrol.

The almost next-door B&B Bake House is another of the village's treasures. Going for over 20 years, it turns out over 350 loaves and 1000 assorted muffins, cakes, buns, and sweet eats twice daily, in time for the early-morning rush and the end-of-day homecoming.

Another near and treasured is Kandurata Spice, one of 3 spice shops in the village. This one has been running for over 40 years and is now in its second generation of family owners, sourcing its crops from local farmers. Alongside very well graded quantities of nutmeg, mace, clove, cinnamon, cardamom and pepper, it also sells rubber sheets, areca nuts and, unaccountably, brooms.

Dried fish - especially sprats, skipjack tuna, shark, sardines, and queen fish - is a staple in the Sri Lankan diet and is found in the most unexpected of dishes. Smoking gives the meat a pleasing flavour, colour, and taste; more importantly, it offers consumers the most affordable source of animal protein.

Many shops sell it in the village, including the popular Fish Bar, which can be found next to the One Up Shoe Shop, whose tag line ("The Best Footwear") well reflects its commodious range of trainers and chappals.

Rush Mobile, just on for here, is probably the best phone shop in the village, and though they don't repair phones, they do sell a wide range of accessories.

A busy printer, Chandena Offset, is also to be found here, its office set up with sophisticated production capacities to design and print on paper, wood, plastic or resin. Stopping by at almost any time of the day, I see a continual flow of customers eager to get adverts printed for poppadams, Muslim delicacies, fliers for shop launches, wedding invitations, and CVs - always, lots of CVs.

There is a range of barber shops and beauty salons in the village, though you can't really beat arranging for Dilruk to come to cut your hair on site at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel under the frangipani trees.

Several foreign employment agencies also have small branches in the village. Western agencies, such as the UK's NHS, have become dependent on appropriation. In just six (albeit turbulent) years from 2019, 1.3 million Sri Lankans have left the country to work abroad – nearly 6% of the entire island population. The paperwork for leaving, still less getting a job, is a torturous process. Although the greater number end up in the Gulf States, many Western agencies, such as the UK's NHS, have become dependent on the appropriation of foreign talent.

The branches of several large nationwide banks can be found in the village: the Bank of Ceylon, with its Soviet-style service; the People's Bank; and the NSB. All have ATMs and, even better, air conditioning.

A busy mini retail park of 5 shops in a row also lies on this side of the road, all of them owned and managed by relatives of Priyanka, our go-to guy for hotel shopping, whose range of aphoristic T-shirts provokes daily comment.

The shops include the village's main religious shop. Although the odd statue of Ganesh can be spotted, its stock is largely focused on Buddhism. Statues of the Lord Buddha in cement, plaster of Paris, stone, fibre glass, and ceramic fill every ledge and floor space, along with religious paintings and items that worshipers can buy to gift to monks: robes, pillows, sheets, and ceremonial yellow sun umbrellas.

It also sells a range of religious accessories including fly whisks, incense, bells, oil lamps, walking sticks and even electric lights in the shape of the sacred Bo Tree.

The village supports a tiny branch of Cargills, an outpost of the island's oldest supermarket chain, which began life in 1844 with branches in Kandy and Galle before opening its iconic main branch on the site of the old Governor General's palace in Colombo in 1902. This red-and-white brick structure was designed by the Scottish architect James Skinner, father of many of the island's greatest buildings, before he hanged himself at his offices in Colombo Fort on 26 December 1910, having never recovered from an earlier bicycling accident.

Just around the corner is Super Meds Central Pharmacy, owned and run by Harsha for over 10 years, which can source most medicines.

Opposite is the Post Office, a large building staffed by 32 people who collect and redistribute thousands of letters and parcels daily across the Galagedera region. Here too, people pay utility bills, make money orders and even – still – send telegrams.

Up from here is the village's Pradeshiya Sabha, one of 276 across the island. These local councils are where many public services are accessed and governed – including the management of public spaces, roads, sanitation, and water supply; public health and safety; the collection of local revenue; the implementation of local development plans; and the enforcement of by-laws and planning regulations.

FOUR

LOOSE ENDS

Should you then wander on past the entrance to The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, heading on the main road to Kandy, you encounter two plush cafes.

The Royal Lion Hotel, the first of these, also offers rooms.

Further along is Café OMeili, set up and managed by Srimal, a stylish and enterprising ex-banker with a sideline in hill country strawberries. His air-conditioned and beautifully designed premises sell a wide range of coffees, teas, soft drinks and made-on-site snacks that would put most coffee shops in London or New York to shame.

Going up the hill, you reach the nearest liquor shop, which, like all such shops, goes by the name Wine Shop.

Selling any liquor here demands of its retailer such quantities of patience as would trouble the dead. The types of licence offered by the Excise Department are many and manifold, and often given to small random changes, suspensions or adaptations.

Further licences are required for different types of alcohol. And still more for its storage, import, and distribution; still less for its importation. Its fees are no less of a minefield, and, of course, there are strict rules about when liquor can be sold, be it the hour or the day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. He gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director for sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently, "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques, and its healthy menus fuse street food with fine dining. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Today, its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa, rubber, coffee, vanilla, cinnamon, coconuts, and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com. It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press.

As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to let him know how you came across us and to make arrangements that best suit you: GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com.