



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

OUTSIDE KANDY

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FOR
RANJANI
RENAISSANCE GIRL

“The best way to
explain it is to do it.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



ONE
THE
PROTECTIVE
CHAIN

Protected by a necklace of high mountains - Alagalla Mountains, Bible Rock, Uthuwankanda, Devanagala, Ambuluwawa, the Knuckles and Hanthana - and surrounded by dense jungle ideal for guerrilla warfare, the Kandyan kingdom's natural defences helped it withstand repeated invasions. Secretive, defensive, forever on the alert, the kingdom guarded its independence with valiant and unrelenting focus.

Such behaviour was not quite on a par with the fabled Sakoku isolationist policies that made the Japanese Tokugawa shogunate so famous until they were breached by American gunboats in 1853 – but it certainly had much in common with it.

One mountain, in particular, almost in the very centre of the city, stands out - Bahirawa Kanda, or Gnome Mountain, home to one of the tallest statues of Lord Buddha. It was once, more memorably, home to an atypical human sacrifice involving a particularly beautiful girl, Dingiri Menika, who lived right next to the Flame Tree Estate and Hotel in Galagedera.

Selected to stimulate the moribund fertility of a Kandyan queen, the girl was kidnapped by soldiers, loaded with jasmine, and propelled with elephants, drummers, and banner-bearers to a stake for overnight consumption by demons. Quite why anyone thought a feast such

such as this might make the despondent queen procreate is a mystery. Fortunately, the king's elephant keeper got to Dingiri Menika first; rescued her, married her, in fact - and set up home with her in Welligalle Maya, in Cross Street, close to Kandy Super Phone, Ltd, a present-day mobile phone supplier. But although the king, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, chose to terminate all future human sacrifice, his late-burgeoning liberal values were not destined to bring him any greater luck.

Within a few years, he had been exiled to India, along with at least two of his four wives, the third of whom used her exile for bankrupting shopping sprees.

To the west of the city are the Alagalla Mountains, an especially trekkers' paradise. Its range of dry evergreen, montane, and sub-montane forests is home to many species of fauna and flora, including wild boar, monkeys, squirrels, anteaters, porcupine, monitor lizard, and tortoise – but it is especially noted for its 50 recorded bird species, which include Sri Lankan junglefowls, Layard's parakeets, and yellow-fronted barbets.

A little over 15 miles from Alagalla is Bible Rock itself, a stunning example of a Table Mountain. Over 5,500 feet high, its curious open book shape inspired early Victorian missionaries to give it its canonical name,

though 300 years earlier it performed a vital task as a look out post for the Kandyan kings, eager to spot the latest colonial invasions, especially those of the Portuguese. A classic series of bonfires, running from mountain to mountain, starting here and ending near Kandy, served as a trusted warning signal, much like the famous Armada Fire Beacons in England in 1588. Steep though the climb is, it doesn't take long to get to the top – and one of the best views in the country.

TWO

THE KING'S
LOOKOUT

Some four miles away from Alagalla is the little town of Balana. The Balana pass, on the southern edge of the Alagalla Mountains, was the second of two critical entry points into the kingdom, the other being at Galagedera. "Balana" is the Sinhala word for look-out, and look out it did, commanding from its perch 2000 feet above sea level, a perfect view of the entire territory that any enemy would have to cross.

Balana foiled a Portuguese invasion in 1593. Several later attempts by the Portuguese resulted in their armies being destroyed – most especially at nearby Danthure.

The political, military, and religious machinations that led to this point were as intricate and complicated as anything since the ascent of man.

They involved the scandalous conversion of Buddhist kings to Catholicism, the betrayal of a kingdom, the reassertion of Buddhist militarism, the forcible marriage of the last dynastic princess to a succession of Kandyan kings, and the last great throw of the dice by the Portuguese to seize control of the entire island.

Shameless cheek, betrayal, gorilla skirmishes from impenetrable jungle depths, abysmal weather and escalating terror marked the Danthure campaign.

It was to end on the 8th of October 1594, the Portuguese army of twenty thousand men reduced to just ninety-three at the battle of Danthure.

The survivors were left wishing they had not outlived their compatriots as their noses, ears and genitals were severed.

A memorial of sorts, even if only in the heads of passing guests, can be felt at the Danthure Rajamaha built centuries before the events that were to immortalise it occurred.

Just a few years later, in 1603, another attempt was made.

The Portuguese observer Queyroz wrote "the new fortalice of Balana stood on a lofty hill upon a rock on its topmost peak; and it was more strong by position than by art, with four bastions and one single gate; and for its defence within and without there was an arrayal of 8,000 men with two lines of stockade which protected them with its raised ground, and a gate at the foot of the rock and below one of the bastions which commanded the ascent by a narrow, rugged, steep, and long path cut in the Hill."

Three days of bitter fighting eventually led to its capitulation, with the Portuguese conducting a special Thanksgiving service in the fort.

was a very short victory. Within days, the Portuguese had fled, their long retreat back to Colombo beset by guerrilla fighting. But by 1616, aided by the ascent of Senerat, one of the few notably inept Kandyan monarchs, Balana was reoccupied by the Portuguese - and improved with a drawbridge over a moat, the addition of a large water tank for sieges and the clearing of trees to a distance of a musket shot.

Ruins of the fort remain to this day, most especially the foundations of the higher buildings, in their quadrangular layout with 3 circular bastions. Parts of the lower fort are lost in the jungle - its many ramparts, ditches, and buildings.

And it was here, around Balana, at the Battle of Gannoruwa, that the imperial ambitions of the Portuguese finally met their grim finale. The mercenary army of Diogo de Melo de Castro, the Portuguese Captain General, had marched up from Colombo a third time to try, in 1638, to capture the Kandyan kingdom of Rajasinghe II.

The king, sitting with deceptive and majestic leisure under the shade of a great tree, conducted the battle with razor-sharp stratagems. Weakened by mass desertions, just 33 Portuguese soldiers survived of the 4,000 that made up the army, almost all of them reduced to heads piled up before the victorious.

king. The king, with his alliance with the Dutch, had managed to drive the Portuguese from the island once and for all. This proved to be a mixed blessing as his dubious association merely saddled him with a new colonial occupier. The Dutch were to prove much more professional and ruthless than the Portuguese as they went about their colonial mission.

But Portugal's failure marked the blossoming of the last kingdom - the kingdom of Kandy. The kingdom was to endure for over two hundred years and to meet head-on the invasive forces of two more colonial armies – the Dutch and the British.

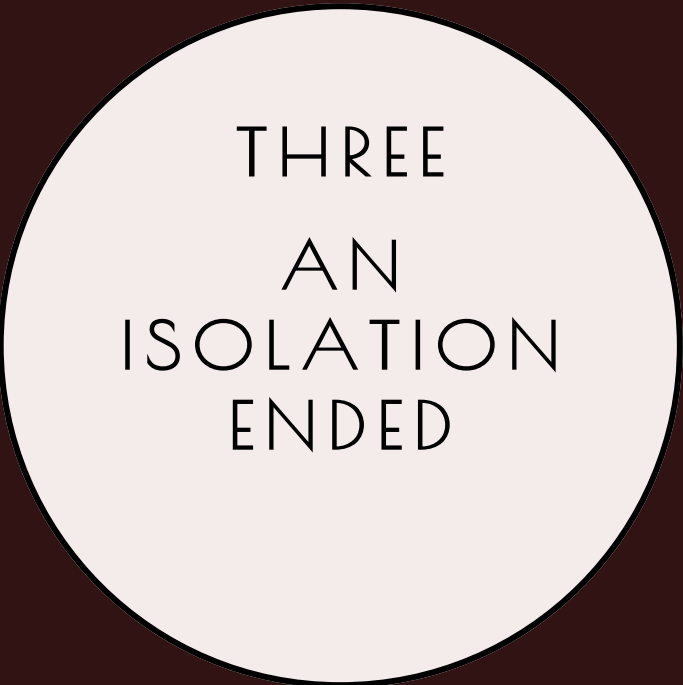
And although it ultimately succumbed, betrayed more from within than without, it put up such a fight as to ensure the continued survival of the island's culture until it could be better cherished after independence in 1948.

And fight it did. The Kandyan kingdom, having seen off the Portuguese, next repulsed two major attempts by Dutch armies in 1764 and 1765 – as well as one of the two British attempts. The last, in 1815, succeeded more through bribery than through military prowess.

The British capture of Kandy brought to an end a war that had lasted for over 200 years, since the first full-scale Portuguese attack on the kingdom.

It had been one of the longest wars in the world
and quite possibly the longest war in Asia.

During this time, the conflict had put the
kingdom on a more or less permanent
emergency footing, making it little short of a
miracle for it to function effectively and flourish
— still less to exist.



THREE
AN
ISOLATION
ENDED

Accessing the kingdom became an obsession after the British annexation. Roads became the new colonists' first major fixation. Sri Lanka excels at the improbable and the unexpected - and close to Balana is a village that is, in its modest way, a beacon to this history of transportation on the island.

Kadugannawa shot to modest fame in 1820 when the British, fresh from having seized the entire country and put down a major rebellion, set about building a proper road to connect Colombo with Kandy.

At the Kadugannawa Pass, they faced a rock of such magnitude that blasting it away or circumnavigating it was out of the question. Instead, an army of builders led by Captain Dawson of the Royal Engineers pieced a sufficiently large hole through it to allow horses and carriages access.

Although Dawson died of a snake bite before the road was completed, the Captain was credited with building the island's first modern highway; and, rather extraordinarily, his own workers clubbed together to build a tower in his memory, the Dawson Tower. Somewhat shakily, it still stands.

As befits a location of such transportational importance, the country's National Railway

Museum is also to be found in Kadugannawa. The country's first train ran in 1858, and the network now covers 1,500 kilometres, using a lock-and-block signalling system of such antiquity that trainspotters mark the country as their number one travel destination to witness history in action.

Harder critics argue that little has changed since 1858 – not least because the railway department runs one of the country's greatest deficits – averaging an annual forty-five-billion-rupee loss.

But, as Seneca said, "it is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor." And who can be poor who can ride in trains and carriages of such vintage beauty, with doors and windows open to catch the breeze; with food sellers who scamper up and down with doubtful offerings; and – from time to time - destinations that are all too briefly reached.

All this history is celebrated at the Museum, home to innumerable old engines, locomotives, rail cars, trolleys, carriages, machinery, and equipment.

Despite all this, the real, most secret glory of Kadugannawa is the largest deficits, averaging an annual loss of forty-five billion rupees.

Trainspotters, tourists and pontists flock like sheep to the Nine Arch Bridge, a viaduct built in 1919 between Ella and Demodara.

But connoisseurs go to a smaller, older one much closer to home – the Triple Arches Bridge of Kadugannawa, built in 1887 when the first rail lines were being laid. Today it is a dreamy ruin, its arches lost in the ever-encroaching jungle.

Listen hard – for here you can still catch the chatter of long-departed passengers heading to the hill country.

FOUR

THE WILD
HEART

Despite the destruction of Kandy's ancient isolation and the rapid growth of the city from 1815 onwards, the old capital managed to retain some of its key green wilderness areas.

Even now, one of Kandy's greatest secrets remains its nature.

The city sits in a valley surrounded by 5 main hills, up which, like an indulgent bubble bath, buildings of later regret have begun to creep. But one side of the city remains nicely protected - UdawaththaKele Forest.

Once a forest hunting reserve for the kings, it is now a magical 104-hectare protected nature reserve. It is home to 460 plant species; butterflies, snakes, snails, lizards, toads, frogs, insects, monkeys, civet, deer, loris, boars, porcupine, the ruddy mongoose, giant flying squirrels, bandicoots, and bats. But its real draw is its birds.

Over 80 species have been recorded here, many endemic, including Layard's parakeet, the yellow-fronted and brown-capped babblers, the Sri Lanka hanging parrot, the three-toed kingfisher, mynas, golden-fronted and blue-winged leafbirds, spotted and emerald doves, Tickell's blue flycatcher, the white-rumped shama, the crimson-fronted barbet, the serpent eagle, and brown fish owl.

Other birds – turtles, cormorants, egrets, pelicans, eagles, owls, herons – can be found swimming away on Kandy Lake. Known as the Sea of Milk, the lake is surrounded by a dramatic Cloud Wall across much of its three-kilometre circumference and is overhung by huge rain trees. In its eighteen-metre depth lurk whistling and monitor lizards, turtles, and numerous fish, including an exotic 9-foot-long alligator Gar – a fish with a crocodilian head, a wide snout, and razor-sharp teeth.

Nature tamed is another aspect of the city. “Will you come to our party today, Carrie Wynn? / The party is all ready now to begin; / And you shall be mother, and pour out the tea, / Because you’re the oldest and best of the three.”

Elizabeth Sill, a Victorian children’s writer, was the first person noted to use the phrase “being mother” when it came to pouring out the tea. Its echo is heard in almost every country of the world, pouring, one hopes, Ceylon Tea. But although tea is now synonymous with Kandy, it was something of a latecomer to the city’s attributes.

FIVE

TEA

Just outside the city centre is Giragama, a tea factory set amongst several tea-growing hills, which offers Stalinist-style tours and presentations. The factory is a short hop from where the very first tea bushes were grown on the island. Tea first arrived here in 1824, with plants smuggled from China to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya.

Now the island's dominant culinary export, the crop began life accidentally. Famous though the island is for its remarkable teas, it was first famous for its coffee. In 1845, there were just thirty-seven thousand acres under cultivation, but by 1878, coffee estates covered two hundred and seventy-five thousand acres.

Tamil labourers arrived (seventy thousand per year at one time) to help the industry grow, and in 1867, a railway was built from Kandy to Colombo to carry coffee. It was, said the papers, a "coffee rush," but one that benefited many – for a third of the estates were owned by native Sri Lankans. Investors flooded in, and by 1860, Sri Lanka was one of the three largest coffee-producing countries in the world.

But in 1869, just as it seemed as if the coffee boom would go on and on, the crop was hit by a killer disease - *Hemileia vastatrix*, "coffee rust" or "Devastating Emily" as the planters knew it. It took time to spread – but within thirty.

years, there were barely eleven thousand acres of the plant left. The industry was wiped out. That the country did not follow suit is thanks to a Scot named James Taylor and his experiments with tea. He emigrated to the island in 1852 to plant coffee and spotted early the effects of coffee rust.

On his Loolecondera Estate in Kandy, he immediately began experimenting with tea until, from plant to teacup, he had mastered all the techniques and processes required to succeed with this new crop.

In 1875, Taylor sent the first shipment of Ceylon tea to the London Tea Auction. Despairing coffee-planters sat at Taylor's feet to learn tea production. Within about twenty years, tea exports increased from around eighty tons to almost twenty-three thousand tons in 1890.

Tea had caught on. The few estates that made up the eleven hundred acres of planted tea back in 1875 had, by 1890, grown to two hundred and twenty thousand acres.

Today, the country is the home of the cuppa. Its climate is perfect for the plant, and its modern history is in part moulded by it. Tea accounts for almost two per cent of total GDP and employs over a million people, directly or indirectly.

Terrain, climate, light, and wind shape quite different brews. The varied regions of the island make distinctively different teas – just as the different parts of France or Spain make such dissimilar wines. The most subtle tea is said to come from Nuwara Eliya. Here at six thousand feet, the climate is rugged, bracing, cold enough for frost, and best able to foster teas that are golden-hued with a delicate, fragrant bouquet.

A more balanced flavour comes at four to six thousand feet from the Uva region. Here, the bushes are caressed by both the NE & SW monsoons and a drying Cachan ocean wind that closes the leaves, forcing a high balance of flavour. It is aromatic, mellow, and smooth. A very tangy-flavoured tea comes from Uda Pussellawa, at five to six thousand feet, a thinly populated region famed for rare plants & leopards, and bombed by the NE Monsoon, producing a strong, dark, pungent tea with a hint of rose.

From Dimbulla, at three to five thousand feet, comes a tea with a very clean taste. The region is drenched by the SW monsoon – which means crisp days, wet nights, and a complex terrain that makes a reddish tea, most famous as English Breakfast Tea. Kandy, the first home of tea, is noted for its most classic of tea flavours. Here, the tea plantations are typically at two to four thousand feet, to inspire a bright, light,

and coppery tea with good strength, flavour, and body.

A more caramel flavour is found at a little over sea level - Sabaragamuwa, home to sapphires and humid rainforest. The region is hit by the SW monsoon, which makes for a robustly flavoured dark yellow-brown tea. The last and lowest-lying tea region is Ruhuna, which runs from the coast to the Sinharaja Rain Forest. The region is shielded from monsoons and has soil that promotes rapid, long, beautiful leaves that turn intensely black, producing strong, full-flavoured dark teas.

Tasting all this delicious tea that emanates from so many different parts of the island is more than a little distracting – for the greatest irony in the country's tale of tea is just how secretive its real origins have since become.

Loolecondera, the estate where it all started, still exists just outside Kandy, surrounded by hills of tea – but it is almost entirely inaccessible.

Determined tea adventurers with reliable 4-wheel drives can just about make it up to the estate.

But like so much in Kandy, it hides in plain sight. It is perhaps a human inevitability that anything given half a chance to become a secret will become so – though perhaps this is truer in Kandy than elsewhere.

FIVE
GARDENS

The only secret Kandy cannot really hide lies just outside the city centre: the Perediniya Royal Botanical Gardens. Here, glorious, drunken avenues of Cook's Pines, Palmyra Palms, Double Coconuts, Cabbage Palms, and Royal Palms lead off into shady dells. The garden was refashioned in 1821 and is today one of the finest, if not the finest, botanical gardens in Asia; the modern garden was established by Alexander Moon for the receipt and experimentation with plants introduced for commercial development. Moon's catalogue published soon afterwards listed one thousand one hundred and twenty-seven "Ceylon plants."

This commercialisation of land was the start of a massive period of deforestation in the country. In 1881, eighty-four per cent of Sri Lanka was forested. In less than twenty years, British colonial agriculture reduced forest cover to just seventy per cent.

Moon was one of a line of prodigious British gardeners in Sri Lanka, an enthusiastic enforcer of a project begun in 1810 under the advice of Sir Joseph Banks when a garden was opened on Slave Island in Colombo. In 1813, the garden moved to Kalutara, where there was more space for planting, before finally transferring to the better climate of Peradeniya. Now the gardens stretch over one hundred and fifty acres with four thousand plant species filling the space.

Its palm collection is among the best in Asia, with about 220 species. Still, the garden's chief glory is its arboretum of ten thousand trees, many over a hundred years old, which are relied upon to flower in stunning colours. Among them is a Javan fig tree with a canopy of about 1600 square meters.

There is even an arboretum of trees planted by famous people, including a huge Ironwood (Tsar Nicolas II), a rather stunted Camphor Tree (Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike), a Yellow Trumpet Tree (King Akihito of Japan), and a Sorrowless Tree (Queen Elizabeth II).

A Cannonball Tree planted in 1901 by King George V and Queen Mary of the United Kingdom is, however, pipped to the post for age by the one growing at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Its bamboo collection includes the giant bamboo of Burma, the largest known in the world, yellow building bamboo, feather bamboo, prickly bamboo, and Dwarf Chinese bamboo. The fern collection includes over a hundred indigenous and exotic species, whilst the Spice Garden houses the oldest nutmeg trees in the world, including ones planted in 1840.

To any Sri Lankan, the term "kumarihaami" is immediately graspable. On the surface, it appears to be merely somewhat.

cautiously describe elderly ladies who enjoy considerable influence within their families and communities. But this in no way captures the degree of social richness and power - shot through with often obstinate and glittering eccentricity - that is a proper Kumarihaami.

A cross between a dowager duchess and an exiled Queen, her word is law, and her recommendations are ignored at your very considerable peril. Nancy Aster, the Empress Dowager Cixi, or the fictional Dowager Countess of Grantham in "Downtown Abby" are all good foreign examples. Sri Lankan examples today can be found in any town or village on the island.

Or, better still, on the pages of many a contemporary Sri Lankan novel, not least Ashok Ferrey's "The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons."

Peradeniya's Royal Botanical Gardens, one hopes, has something of the Kumarihaami about it.

Managed by a government department that excels as much in bureaucracy as in horticulture, its attributes, like those of the eternal dowager, imply that it will go on and on forever.

This much I hope is true for "when great trees fall in forests," said Maya Angelou, "small things recoil into silence, their senses eroded beyond fear."

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.