

Ascending Talawakele

Posted on



Arriving by train

Nestled in the cool heights of Sri Lanka's largest tea growing area near Nuwara Eliya, Talawakele is a town that, although small, is far from sleepy. Sounds of construction reverberate throughout the picturesque Hill Country valley as the Upper Kotmale Dam nears completion. You can arrive via winding mountain roads or train, but either will subject you to an unforgettable view of Sri Lanka's tea industry blanketed across the many peaks and troughs of the Hill Country.

Words Benjamin Fowler Photographs Menaka Aravinda

Our vehicle winds its way up the mountain, and I watch in amazement how the landscape changes with the altitude. More and more the familiar tropical trees begin to mingle with pines and evergreens. At certain moments I'm reminded of a Tuscan vineyard and a bend in the road later, the Pacific Northwest. The view

gradually settles into vast tea plantations; the thin road a mere ribbon laid across the many properties.

The climate and especially the altitude (1,200m above sea level) makes the area perfect for tea. And despite many steep inclines, the dynamic hills are not inconducive to planting and harvesting tea – pathways for the harvesters to pluck the tea leaves reflect the hills' contours so perfectly the dirt paths seem like a natural feature of the land; as if a topographical map were laid over the land itself. Tea pluckers, brightly attired, are easily visible amongst the waves of green plants and just as generations before them, they deftly pluck the leaves with great skill and experience.

Devon falls seems to burst eagerly out the mountainside itself

Onwards through the old estates, a waterfall arrests our attention. Devon Falls seems to burst eagerly out the mountainside itself. As we stand in awe from the other side of the enormous valley, next to us a painter begins to capture the sight on canvas, electing to use brash brushstrokes of white to convey the water's dynamic descent.

Not much farther down the road is St Clair's Falls – Devon's stout counterpart with smooth plateaus of water widely flowing into other pools even farther down. Both falls form from Kothmale Oya, an offshoot of Mahaweli River, Sri Lanka's longest. The dam releases water every half hour to allow the waterfalls to continue uninterrupted, except between the hours of six and ten in the evening when the day's highest electricity usage necessitates the water be used to power the generators. Next the dam itself comes into view, and with it the town of Talawakele.

Despite its size, the town bustles with activity and energy. A Kovil, currently under-construction greets you to the town centre. Sri Kadiresan Kovil, features a myriad of statues sculpted with high precision by Indian craftsmen. All inside is slab-gray, but will in due time dazzle with vivid colours. At the moment the whole structure remains draped with cross-hatched palm fronds like a present waiting to be opened.

Aside from the sounds of commerce, there's the ever-present sound of construction taking place in the area. Walking by, between the shops you can catch quick glimpses of concrete walls that signify how high the water will rise once the river, downstream for the town, gets dammed. That is, if your attention isn't somehow focused on all the colourful sights and smells that are abound in the town centre.

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Considering the area's agricultural fertility, when walking through the town's main square it's no surprise to find such a high frequency of fruit and vegetable shops. They offer a wide variety of fresh and colourful crops, which are sold to shops all around the country. A local favourite that's hard to miss is *Saravita* or Beeda, which is when the heart-shaped betel leaf is packed with Areca nut, slacked limes, tobacco, dyed coconut and spices. The wrap is slightly intoxicating and responsible for a redness of the mouth and teeth visible on many of the townsfolk.

The Talawakele railway station is a main stop along the Hill Country line, and is the most convenient way of arriving. It also presents a rare, cinematic view of areas of the Hill Country inaccessible by car. We wander past old machines laying around the station – testament to the work ethic that pervades the town. From the view of the station platform the colossal Great Western – Sri Lanka's sixth highest mountain – dominates the view.

Higher up on many of the surrounding hills are clusters of attractive olive-green houses, their colour bright and clean. Also shops, roads, supermarkets, and a colourful school on the other side of the river have that similar full-colour sheen. Though small now, the concrete walls make it easy to imagine how large the river will grow once dammed. To climb up the mountain face in view of the dam, the town, the falls, and farther up the tea plantations and the breathtaking mountains, will surely provide an overwhelming view of the past and future of this land and those who inhabit it.

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