The Emergence of Ella

Posted on
Tourists staying in Ella like to hike in the surrounding countryside

Ella, once a simple hamlet in the hills and intertwined with legend has emerged as one of the most popular destinations in Sri Lanka for adventurous tourists. How did that happen?

Words Royston Ellis **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Situated 240km by road (269km by rail) at 1,041m (3,415ft) above sea level, Ella is at the crossroads where the A23 climbs up through Wellawaya from Hambantota in the deep south and meets the road that leads to the surfers' haunt of Arugam Bay on the east coast. It's close enough to Nuwara Eliya and the hilly tea country for a day trip. However, it's not just its central location that has made Ella so popular with visitors.

DISTANCE : 240KM Drive from Colombo

It has also become part of the trail for those visiting sites associated with the great Indian epic Ramayana first told some three thousand years ago. In that, Sita, the wife of Rama-—a king of Ayodhya in Hindu scriptures—was abducted by Rawana, the king of Lanka, and held captive in a cave near Ella. This cave can be seen on the way to the eponymous Rawana Ella Falls, 5km south of Ella.

However, legend and location is not enough to explain Ella's increasing popularity. The scenery captivated the 19th Century colonisers and often quoted about Ella is Sir Emerson Tennent. In his book on Ceylon published in 1859 he wrote: "Perhaps there is not a scene in the world which combines sublimity and beauty in a more extraordinary degree than that which is presented at the Pass of Ella."

This view, Ella Gap as it is known today, was chosen as the site of the Ella Resthouse, one of the chain of places where travelling government officials could stable their horses and rest for a night. The Automobile Association's handbook to Ceylon written in 1950, nearly a century later, records the resthouse as having four beds and "a beautiful view down Ella Gorge."

800 BEDS AVAILABLE

Thirty years later there were two more guesthouses; now there are eight hotels and over 70 guesthouses or bed & breakfast “homestays” with an estimated 800 beds available for tourists. Ella has expanded almost unnoticed as villagers have thrown open their doors to visitors, and Sri Lankan entrepreneurs have acquired land and built accommodation to meet the increasing demand. Ella, like Hikkaduwa on the west coast, has grown independently because people wanted to stay there and they appreciated the welcome they received.

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Some tourists like Ella because of its salubrious climate without the extremes of heat on the coast or the chill of Nuwara Eliya. For others the attraction is being able to trek, either to the Falls where it’s possible to bathe, or to explore the countryside by hiking.

DID YOU KNOW?
It’s a short walk from the station to the village

Many independent travellers reach Ella by train, by the sleek new Chinese-built power sets with an air-conditioned 1st class as well as comfortable 2nd and 3rd class, which arrive in the afternoon after an early start from Colombo. There is also a traditional train with an observation car, and two privately-run luxury carriages, that arrives at Ella about 5pm from Colombo.

DON’T BE LATE! TRAIN ARRIVES 5PM

The railway station sets the laidback mood of Ella. Built in 1918 of granite blocks it resembles an English country cottage with flowers at its front, although there is a modern asbestos canopy over the sole platform. It’s a short walk from the station to the road running through the village where many houses have been converted into shops and cafés offering wholesome food, curd and treacle, and even fish and chips.

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A huge signboard near the drive up to the old resthouse proclaims “Welcome to Ella Tourist City” and helpfully lists Ella’s attractions. These include the Rawana Cave and Temple (3km), the Mini Adam’s Peak (2km) and, of course, Ella Gap.

This is best viewed from the lawn of the former resthouse where the sight of the landscape suddenly dropping away is stunning. The hills stretching to the far horizon include the Maha Galbokka Rock, and the Hambegamuwa, Kotawehera Gala, Bubula Kandha and Bambaragama Kandha mountain ranges tapering done to the south coast.

RAVANA CAVE & TEMPLE 3KM

MINI ADAM’S PEAK 2KM

Ella’s popularity began with adventurous visitors stopping there in transit to the east coast. The gentle charm of the place and its inhabitants persuaded many of them to stay longer.

Tourists who stay in Ella have declared it to be their favourite place in Sri Lanka. Why? As one traveller explained, “Because ofgood food, good vibes, and good value.”

