Hakgala Opens a Trail to Farr Inn

Posted on

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You have climbed Sri Lanka’s highest mountain-Pidurutalagala-driven round beautiful lake Gregory, played a round or two of golf on one of the world’s most picturesque courses, caught a trout, perhaps, and eaten fresh strawberries . . .then, all that rather chocolate-box beauty begins to cloy and you decide to make the 650 ft. descent to the Hakgala Botanical Gardens, just six miles away.

Hakgala is one of the places one visits as an essential pan of a pleasant sojourn in Sri Lanka’s famed hill resort, Nuwara Eliya. The site is legendary. It was once the pleasure garden of Ravana of the Ramayana epic, and according to many it was one

of the places where the beautiful Sita was hidden by the demon king. The present botanic gardens were founded in 1860 by the eminent British botanist Dr. G. H. K Thwaites F.R.S., who was Superintendent of the more famous gardens at Peradeniya near Kandy. It was the site initially for experiments with cinchona whose bark yielded quinine, esteemed as a tonic and febrifuge. Quinine at that time was widely used as a specific for malaria. This was perhaps the reason for the popularity of gin and tonic in these parts-quinine being the principal ingredient of tonic water.

The cool, equable climate of the Hakgala area, whose mean temperature is around 60 degrees Fahrenheit, encouraged the introduction of suitable temperate zone plants, both ornamental and useful. These included conifers and cedars from Australia, Bermuda and Japan, and cypresses from the Himalayas, China and as far afield as Persia, Mexico and California. New Caledonia gave Hakgala a special variety of pines and there are specimens of this genus from the Canary Islands, as well. An English oak, introduced around 1890, commemorates the “hearts of oak” of Britain’s vaunted sea power, and there is a good-looking specimen of the camphor tree, whose habitat is usually in regions above 4,000 feet. If you have left your heart in an English garden, you will surely find it again in Hakgala’s Rose Garden, where the sights and scents of these glorious blooms can be experienced in their infinite variety. From there it is a quiet stroll from the sublime to the exotic sophistication of the Orchid House. A special attraction here is the variety of montane orchids, many of them endemic to Sri Lanka. It would be in the worst possible taste to describe the Fernery as a collection of “vascular cryptogams”. But that is how my dictionary describes the plant whose delicate fronds conjure up visions of misty grottoes, lichen-covered stones and meandering streams. The Fernery at Hakgala is a shady arbour of many quiet walks, in the shade of the Hakgala Rock, shaped like the jawbone of an elephant, from which the place gets its name. Sri Lanka’s fems are well represented here, as are those of Australia and New Zealand.

Hakgala is a temperate hill-country garden where also the languid low-country lotus and water-lily float in their serene loveliness. Pinks and blues emerging from a flat-floating background of lush leaves, recalling the calm of yellow-robed monks, white-clad devotees and flickering oil lamps. In time the highland’s bracing breezes dispel the langour of lotus-land and other attractions beckon.

There is a place, a plateau, once inaccessible exc;ept on foot or horseback, where the leopard and sambur roamed free and the hill partridge whirred away at your approach, on short stubby wings. Today, 4 – wheel drive and the ubiquitous jeep are

the favoured forms of transportation through the hairpin bends and over rock-strewn paths that lead up to a quaint and warmly welcoming hospice at trail's end. The Farr Inn today has made several concessions to modernity, but retains much of its picturesque, original charm.On this site, a British planter, Tommy Farr, gathered with his friends in his hunting lodge, swapping yarns round the fire after a day on the plains hunting sambur.They did their hunting on horseback and despatched their quarry with hunting knives, after a long and exhausting chase.



Farr Inn at Horton Plains.

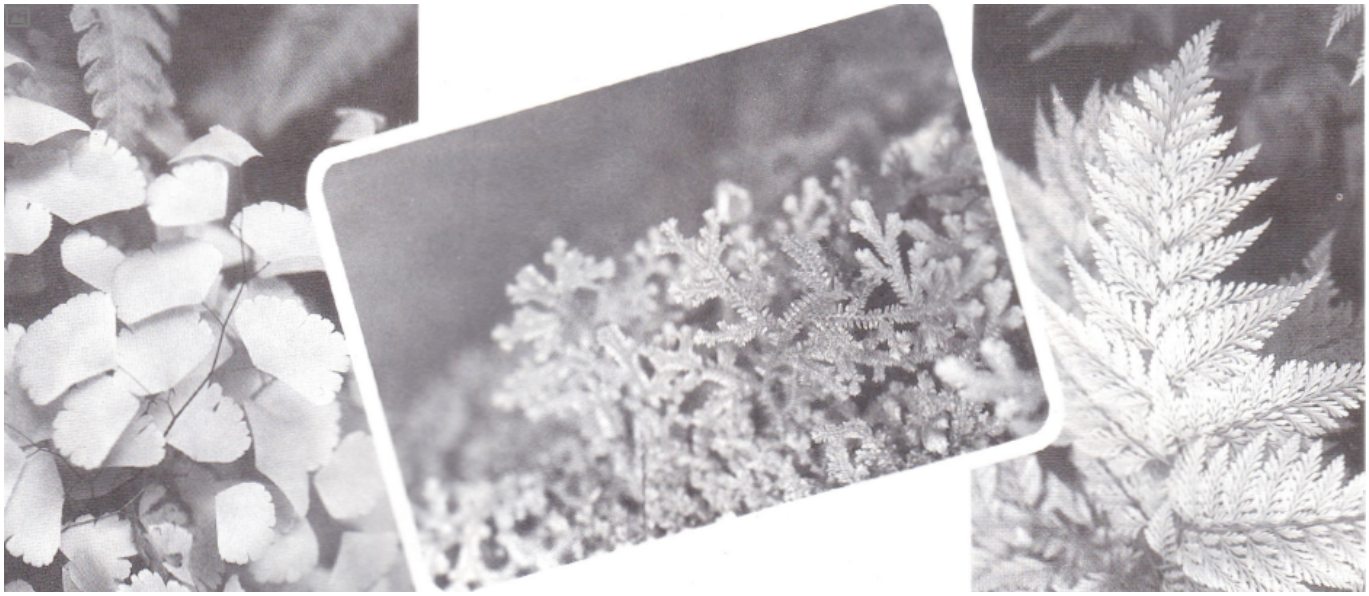
Most of the paths of Horton Plains that lure picnickers away from the cosy warmth of the Inn and attract hikers from the surrounding towns and villages were, originally, the beaten tracks made by the horses' hooves of the intrepid Tommy Farr and his friends in their quest for adventure. One such bridle-path leads to what is known as World's End, a sheer precipice of 3500 feet. From its rim, on a clear day, the view is sometimes awesome and always breathtaking. Looking down from the brink is not recommended to the faint-hearted, the vertiginous or the morbidly imaginative. It conjures up a sort of weightless feeling, impelled by the sheer majesty of the drop to the confused carpet of tree-tops wreathed in mist below. If you wait long enough, the clouds will, sometimes, scatter and the sun-warmed rocks condense and disperse the mists that veil the surrounding vista to reveal the distant sea. If, like Thoreau you are one of those who has never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude", you will find a stroll by yourself on the Plains a rewarding experience. There is so much to observe and feel; the indigenous orchids, montane flora, birds and butterflies that are endemic to this region. Not far from the Farr Inn you may rest awhile by a gently flowing stream or cast a fly upon the waters and lure from "here and there a One such bridle-path

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No single word describes Sri Lanka’s particular charm than diversity. Especially apposite superlatives like overwhelming heart stopping and breathtaking are concomitant clihes. How else could one describe the view from the Haputale Gap – on the road from Nuwara Eliya to Haputale – or Lipton’s Seat, from which Thomas Lipton, the 19th century British millionaire, looked out over his lush green acres of tea, falling away below him as far as the eye could see. Higher, a lofty 6,000 feet is the Ohiya Pass and a tea estate called Non Pareil, at which the writer spent many a holiday as a schoolboy, when his uncle was Superintendent there. The road to the bungalow, then was inaccessible except by palanquin. The planters of that era took the field on horseback and bags full of freshly packed tea came hustling down to collection points by wire-chute. The glass panes of the bungalow’s windows had to be constantly replaced because of damage by migratory birds, attracted by the lights at night, which came crashing through them. Then there were the frequent exciting trips we made to see the tumbling Bambarakanda Falls, Sri Lanka’s highest waterfall.

But you have just drunk your fill of the view through the Haputale Gap and you must be on your way down the Badulla Road to Bandarawela which, climatically, is the holiday choice of most Sri Lankans, who prefer its milder but still bracing atmosphere. About four miles away is Diyatalawa, whose treeless hills and pockets of plain form perfect grounds for military manoeuvres. During colonial times,

Diyatalawa was also a rehabilitation centre for British troops and Fox Hill, with its vulpine image of white stones, bears witness to this. There was also a little village up in the hills nearby that was known as ‘Little England’ because of its occasional blue eyes and blond hair. There are higher hills and loftier mountains, but none more close and presenting such infinite varieties of view than in the hill country of Sri Lanka.



Some ferns found in Hakgala – Farleyense, Seleginalla, and Davaliya.