

It Is Time For Nuwara Eliya



Flowers in bloom in Nuwara Eliya

As we passed through the Ramboda Tunnel, it was with some reluctance that I quelled the impulse to stick my head out of the window to yell at the top of my lungs like a little kid. However, instead I sat demurely enjoying the cool climes and breeze that rustled around us, while my heart sang with joy at the prospect of visiting Nuwara Eliya... Steadily we snaked along the roads, at times narrow, to reach Little England where spring has just begun to spread its warm embrace.

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On the way...

Sun dappled green hills that stretched as far as the eye could see framed one side of the road while on the other lay numerous tea estates where tea pluckers were busy deftly picking and throwing tea buds into the sack they carried. At times this all too familiar scenery gave way to patches of evergreen forests, far away lakes, waterfalls, small way side shops serving hot pol roti and plain tea and religious places, lending a charming undertone to the whole journey.

A small boy clutching a bunch of flowers in both hands and waiting patiently by the side of the road caught our eye. Rounding the next bend we saw the same boy and intrigued we stopped. Dubbed 'flower runners' by some, these little ones nimbly run along the slopes between roads to entice travellers into buying bouquets made of wild flowers, daisies and carnations of vibrant colours. Soon he was joined by two little girls all clamouring for us to buy flowers along with some sound advice about how to keep the flowers fresh for longer.

Leaving these young ones to their busy schedule, we proceeded on and soon reached our destination where our adventures began in earnest...

A bit of history

Many assume that the history of Nuwara Eliya begins with the British colonial period, though some experts claim that the town may have a history that goes

back more than 6,000 years. Part of an inscription found by the British and still preserved in the District Secretary's office is an attestation to this fact as it is said to consist of letterings prohibiting any from entering the area.

The rediscovery of Nuwara Eliya, which stands for 'a light to Kandy', and the beginning of its colonisation is attributed to a surgeon by the name of Dr John Davy, who stumbled across the grassland around 1818. Afterwards from time to time Nuwara Eliya was a hunting ground, a sanatorium and holiday resort for the British, who craved a bit of home away from home in the cool climate. And with the initiation of tea plantations more and more British colonials, including Sir Edward Barnes, Governor of Ceylon (1824-1831) and Sir Samuel Baker sought to settle in Nuwara Eliya. In order to provide for the basic necessities, traders from southern Ceylon also came to the hill country, thus establishing a colony.

Colonial buildings

One of the most iconic buildings in the town is the Grand Hotel, declared a national heritage site in the 1990s. A grand old building set amidst manicured lawns, the structure was first built by the then Governor, Edward Barnes, in the late 1820s as a holiday residence and was named Barnes Hall. After Barnes' departure, it was rented and purchased by successive governors and planters before finally coming to the ownership of Nuwara Eliya Hotels who changed the single storey building into an elegant structure with more additions throughout the ensuing years turning the governor's residency to an architecturally celebrated hotel.

Next to the Grand Hotel is the Hill Club, built in 1876, which holds a striking contrast to the white clad Grand Hotel with its grey stoned façade. Established by coffee, cinchona and tea planters and rising two storeys, the building is surrounded by a charming garden and a walkway that leads to its grand entrance.

The Queen's Cottage nestled in the midst of an extensive green landscape stands out in its ivory grandeur and is currently the vacationing residence of the President. Originally built as an English country house, the architecture is predominately colonial with a fair dose of sophistication and has been the residence of countless Governors of Ceylon who came to Nuwara Eliya to escape the tropical heat of Colombo.

And if you are to step into the middle of the town, the post office with its red brick

exterior is bound to capture your eye. More than 100 years old and currently under renovation, it is said to have been built in the Tudor style, and has a clock-spire rising from one side. Also in the town of Nuwara Eliya is the St Xaviers Church, initiated in 1838 with its current structure being built during 1848. Light brown in hue, the architecture of the church follows a pattern that seems to be a recurrent theme in Nuwara Eliya, be it a new build or one that dates back to the colonial era. With its pews that continue all the way to the altar and grand interior, the church was pervaded with the spiritual essence that seems to attract many to seek the blessings of the lord. Though not a time for mass, there still were many devotees knelt in front of statues placed around the church, deep in prayer, their lips moving silently, perhaps beseeching solace.

Tripping about town

The town of Nuwara Eliya is lively to say the least and as we walked about we realised we were not the only visitors to town. There seemed to be more visitors than residents swarming the streets, peering into the shops and strolling casually enjoying the many new and perhaps familiar sights. Weaving through the crowd we made a beeline for the Bale Bazaar, also known as the winter market. A small byroad located by the main road, decked with the Bale Bazaar board, ushered visitors into the market and we were pleasantly surprised to see a smattering of bottle caps pressed onto the tar road at the entrance lending a deliciously artsy air. Wherever we looked, the shops were filled with winter jackets, coats—some decidedly stylish and suave, hoodies and even t-shirts and comfy yoga pants! Stepping into each of the stores, we let our hands and eyes drift through the wide array of winter-wear options while inquiring about prices. GAP, Abercrombie and Fitch, North Face and Burton along with UCLA hoodies seemed to dominate the offerings at the shops. Clearly this was the go to place for all your winter clothing needs!

The Salalihini Wasanthaya, organised by the Municipal Council of Nuwara Eliya under the guidance of Mahinda Dodampe Gamage, Mayor is a festive season. Starting from April 1st to the 30th, the whole town will be filled with countless activities including, horse races, motor racing, flower shows, carnivals and musical shows to name a few events.

Bidding adieu to the winter market, we made our way to Victoria Park where

countless visitors were flocking to make the most of the sunny day. Lawns gleaming emerald in the warm sun rays and, come April, flowers blooming in a myriad of shades will only aid to enhance to beauty of the park. The far away whistling of a train called us to the small children's park, situated at one corner. Children seated, kicked their feet in joy in the '*punchi kochchiya*' (small train) as it made its way through the tiny railway track while parents watched with smiles. Back at the entrance to the park, we stepped into the museum, located to a side, which was built by Mahinda Dodampe Gamage, Mayor of Nuwara Eliya. The museum houses an interesting collection of photographs and documents depicting the early years of the town and is a treasure trove of knowledge for history buffs.

Our next stop was the Gregory Lake... The sight of the lake in the midst of green lawns and hills imparted a breathtaking picture. Clear blue skies, horses grazing peacefully, and small houses dotting the landscape made us feel as if we had stepped into another world or even a country that is not quite part of Sri Lanka. People were leisurely walking about the paved pathways that ran alongside the lake while countless others were paddling in swan boats or passenger boats in the waters. At another corner there was a lively party of school kids, who had come on a field trip, singing and dancing, enjoying the rare freedom from school books.

Boating, picnicking or grabbing a snack from the vendors seemed to be the popular choices of the visitors to Gregory Lake. There are many boat services along the lake front and Kalum Pradeep owns a boating service with 15 various types of water vessels. Named the Ruhunu Magam Boat Service, swan boats (also known as paddle boats), speed boats, jet skis and canoes provide a range of options for visitors to choose from. While the older and younger crowds preferred boating, little ones were all about pony riding and one end of the lake grounds are dedicated just for that.

At once, with a shout, a man came hurtling through the air. Startled we looked up to see a rope where one end was tethered high onto a tree with a wooden deck and the other was secured to the ground some ways off. From the deck, people would be hitched onto the rope with plenty of safety gear and pushed, many getting the thrill of sliding along the rope from higher up to the ground.

Alpine Hotel

A driveway by the main road leads to this cosy hotel characterized by its unusual

yet enchanting façade. Built in the colonial style, the exterior is white and green with colonial patterned grid windows decking almost every inch giving a distinctive air to the hotel. After receiving a warm welcome at the front desk, guests are directed to one of the 25 luxury rooms arrayed with all amenities, some even with a cosy fire place, needed for a comfortable stay. A favourite among many vacationers is the Oak Room with its timber tones and loft. There are two restaurants, which serve a range of scrumptious dishes, while the hotel offers a pool table to indulge in a game with friends and a bar as well. Located close to the major attractions, the hotel also organises adventure trails for guests on request.

As April approaches, Nuwara Eliya takes on a new life, with flowers in bloom and the crisp air providing a breath of freshness to the whole town. Every nook and corner is filled with countless activities, be it at the famed Turf Club with horse races, a hand of golf at the Victoria Golf Club, motor racing and flower shows to name just a few. And it is indeed a treat to head out to Little England to experience the beauty of nature and adventure in equal doses.

