Mountain Beauty and Glimpses of History

Posted on

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Mist-filled mountain passes, old English cottages, fine-flavoured tea, elegant golf-links – they are just part of the marvellous hill station called Nuwara Eliya. Situated around 6,000 feet above sea level, Nuwara Eliya, literally the town outside the city is an intrinsic part of Sri Lanka’s amazing variety. You can travel from hot, humid, palm covered plains to the clear, sparkling air and tea-covered hills of the central highlands in a mere 4.5 hours. Up there, you will find it hard to believe you are on a tropical island only a few degrees away from the equator.

No one captures the special magic of Nuwara Eliya better than an Englishman, Henry Cave, who wrote this at the turn of the century: In the West Highlands of

Scotland, both landscape and climate, at their best, may be suggestive of Nuwara Eliya, but the latter has a special charm of situation which as we shall see, possesses advantages over every other health resort in the world. Here we can enjoy the purest and most invigorating air with a temperature best suited to the health of Europeans and yet look down upon a luxuriant tropical country at our feet. We can experience the change from a glorious bright day to a cold Scotch mist, and yet if we choose, we can leave the moist atmosphere and leaden sky at will and by an hour's walk reach dry hills and sunny plains.

Cave's reference to Nuwara Eliya as a health resort is significant as this was the original purpose of the town. The history of Nuwara Eliya is intertwined with the British who discovered and built up the town as a mountain retreat to revive "the enervated constitutions of denizens of the low country, who use 1t as a sanatorium for recruiting the energies they have
lost!" (Cave)

To get to Nuwara Eliya, you have a choice between travelling by road or rail. The two most popular routes for motorists take you either through Kandy where you can visit this fascinating and historic hill capital on your or by way of Hatton where you will pass the distinctive profile of Adam's Peak, a sacred mountain shrine to most Sri Lankans. Along both
routes, you can enjoy the most spectacular scenery which gradually changes from rice-fields and coconut
palms to rubber plantations, spice gardens and finally to the unbroken, green-carpeted hill-slopes of the tea
plantations.

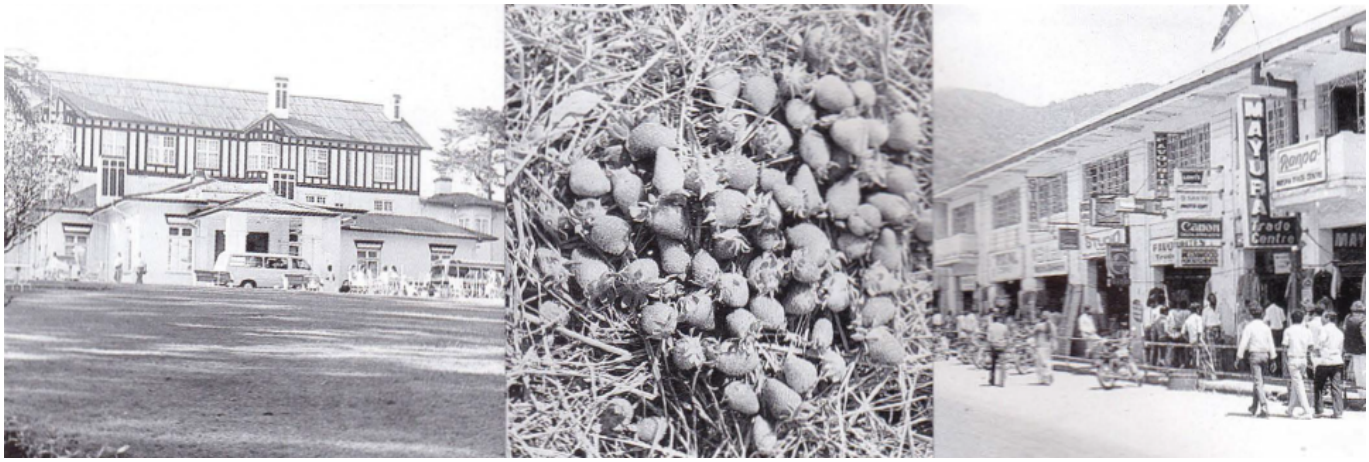
If you travel via Kandy, do look out for two famous passes on the way – Kadugannawa Pass, a few miles before Kandy, and Ramboda Pass, just before you reach Nuwara Eliya. At Ramboda, be prepared for some stomach-churning hair-pin bends that can be quite daunting when heavy mists cloud the climb. On a clear day, however, few words can describe the panorama of towering mountain massifs and deep valleys that Ramboda Pass reveals. The train ride is, in a sense, more exciting as the railway cuts through the heart of the hill country, passing along precipitous ledges and through long, deep tunnels on its way. There is no train station in Nuwara Eliya town so you have to disembark at Nanu Oya, a few minutes drive away. From there, a regular bus service or taxis will carry you into town.

No matter how much you've read about Nuwara Eliya beforehand, your first glimpse

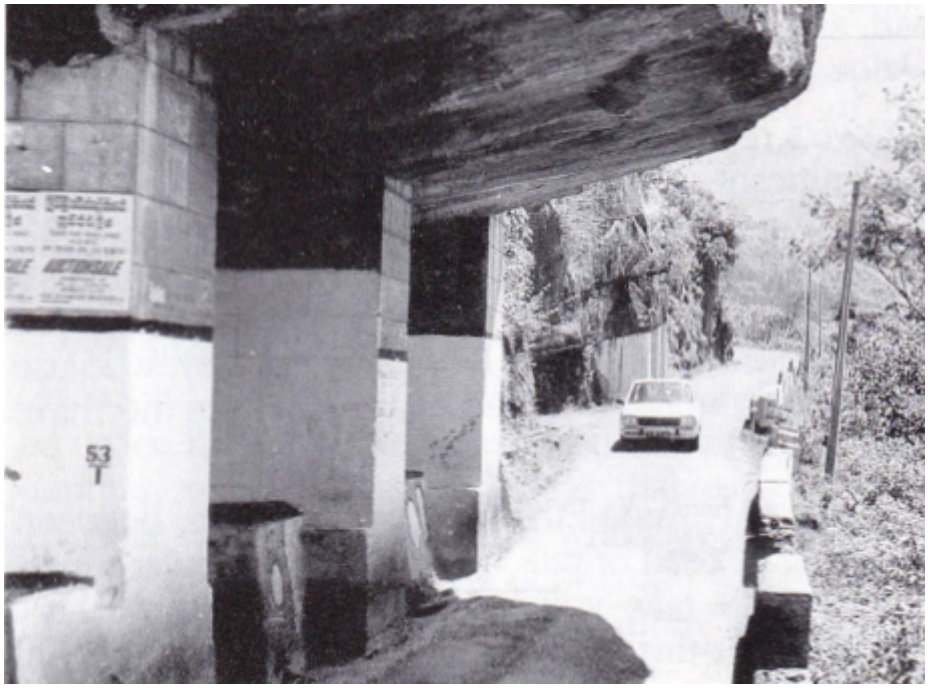
of this charming hill town will take you by surprise. It is so “English” as to be quite unreal, more like some elaborate set designed for a film. This illusion owes itself to the fact that the British created Nuwara Eliya almost entirely on their own. For Sri Lankans cared to live so high up in the hills where temperatures average 600F in warm weather and biting rains and frost are commonplace during the cold months. In fact, one of the first accounts of pre-British Nuwara Eliya, by Dr. John Davy describes it as a plateau-like area covered with “alpine” woods and ‘ the dominion entirely of, wild animals; and, in an especial manner. of the elephant, of whom we saw innumerable traces”. Between 1819, when Davy visited Nuwara Eliya, and today, the elephant population has disappeared altogether along with its jungle habitat. Your first impression of the town, apart from the tea plantations on the way, is that it is an agricultural station and you will be right. Some of the country’s finest vegetables and exotics such as strawberries are grown here. Vegetable gardens compete with beautifully laid out flower-beds fine lawns and carefully-trimmed hedges as you enter the town proper.

One of the first buildings of any note in Nuwara Eliya was Barnes Hall built in the early 1800’s by Governor Edward Barn Today, Barnes Hall, renovated and expanded, stands as the Grand Hotel with 150 rooms overlooking the golf-links in the centre of town. Other well-own hotels include St. Andrews and the exclusive Hill Club, the latter modelled after English hunting clubs complete with stone fireplaces, stuffed fish and animal heads and exclusive membership regulations.

By the mid-nineteenth century as coffee and later tea, flourished in the hill country Nuwara Eliya began to grow in importance. More and more private residences sprang up as the town grew popular as a holiday resort. It is this building boom which left behind some of the extraordinary architecture still seen today – the Queen Anne and Georgian styles with their gable roofs and timber frames amongst the best of them. Also watch out for distinctive buildings such as the Post Office with its distinctive clock-spire and a charming little Anglican church, Holy Trinity Church, dating back to 1852.



Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya – a touch of old England. Luscious fresh red strawberries lying on a bed of bay in Nuwara Eliya. A street in Nuwara Eliya town.



Ramboda Pass – on the way to Nuwara Eliya.

Nuwara Eliya town really comes alive with the advent of the hoc season around April. The usual leisurely pace of life is shattered by invading hordes of determined holidaymakers mainly from Colombo. The “Season” is in full swing as anyone who is of any consequence comes to Nuwara Eliya to see and be seen.

There is always plenty to do as the authorities organise races, dances and golf tournaments to eep the visitors happy. But things were not always fine and dandy as this extract from an administrative report written in 1894 reveals : “During the fashionable season there is no suitable build in for balls, theatricals, fancy bazaars, etc., no bandstand or general meeting place. I should like to combine all these objects in one. A large “winter garden·· might be constructed with a gymnasium for boys and girls) and girls, ballroom, theatre, covered promenade, and skating rink, library and billiard room, racquet court, and perhaps covered tennis court ; while outside there should be lawns for croquet and lawn tennis and well-kept gardens with a bandstand attached to the building opening into the ballroom on one side and to a lawn on the other.

Not all these grandiose schemes came to fruition, however. Horse racing, golf, and trout fishing have survived over the years although the races today are a dim reflection of their former glory. The 18-hole golf course, in the centre of town, is referred to as one of the best 18 hole courses in the world with fir trees lining the fairways and a gurgling trout stream running through it. The Golf Club was founded in 18889 the game reaching Nuwara Eliya about 12 years after it was first brought to the country by the Gordon Highlanders, a Scottish military regiment.

The Nuwara Eliya Racecourse saw its beginnings around 1873 with the grandstand a mere makeshift, thatched over construction. By the turn of the century, however, the Races were a huge success. Said one British resident. All Colombo flocks to Nuwara Eliya for the races and the sporting fever extends even to the ladies who vie with one another in the latest Parisian confections.

Every bungalow, hotel, and club is taxed to its utmost capacity. “Today, the Parisian outfits are much less evident and horses have given way to ponies but the old racing spirit lives on. As for trout fishing, Nuwara Eliya is the only place in ri Lanka where you will find it. Also introduced by the British in the late nineteenth century, trout hatcheries were started off as an experiment. Their success is evident today as trout fishing continues to flourish. Only fly fishing is permitted by the Depamnent of Wildlife Conservation which issues permits on payment of a daily fee. The best fishing is found in the Horton Plains, a few miles out of Nuwara Eliya town. The Plains, named after another British Governor, is a . atural Reserve famous for its unique, highland vegetation found nowhere else in the island. Horton Plains is a must for nature lovers and is best travelled in a four-wheel drive vehicle. There are also two guesthouses in the splendid isolation of Horton Plains, Farr Inn Rest House and Andersons’ Lcxlge for those who wish to spend a few days there. If your

appetite craves even more startling sights, trek along to the famous World’s End where the mountainside literally drops off to a depth of 1500 feet.

If somewhat more cultivated natural surroundings are your preference, then the Hakgala Botanical Gardens, a few minutes from town, will delight you. The fernery and rose garden are the Garden’s best features along with beautiful, shaded walks, shrubberies and magnificent, tall trees from highland forests. Another man-made creation, closer to the town, is Lake Gregory, as picturesque venue for boating and sailing and pleasant walks. Originally a swamp, like the golf links area, it was drained on the orders of Governor Sir William Gregory in the 1870’s. As you’ve probably gathered, Nuwara Eliya is a comparatively flat area surrounded by mountaintops. The tallest of these peaks is Pidurutalagala, rising 2000 feet above the town. For those willing to make the trek up (you can literally walk to the edge of the peak at the Northeast comer of Nuwara Eliya) the rewards are great as our traveller, Henry Cave, seems to have found “From no other mountaintop in the world can you literally see over a whole island of such extent and beauty as you can from this. From shore to shore lie out stretched in every direction forests and plain, mountain ranges interlaced in intricate confusion, masses of verdant patana lands, interspersed with glittering streams.

Nuwara Eliya then is no ordinary hill town. It offers the visitor great natural beauty combined with a unique glimpse of a part of Sri Lankan history that is preserved, almost untouched, in its rarified mountain air.



The old Post Office building in Nuwara Eliya – with the spire.