New Year Revels at Nuwara Eliya

Posted on
Lake Gregory adjoins the town

The hill town of Nuwara Eliya has long been the most popular place for Sri Lankans to enjoy the national holidays for the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year in April. It’s fun for tourists too and this year looks set to be better than ever.

Words Royston Ells

While tourists are drawn to Nuwara Eliya because of the nostalgia it inspires, with its colonial buildings, golf course and flower-filled park and gardens, Sri Lankans love the town for its carnival atmosphere. This is about to erupt next month, as it has done every April for generations. This year, however, because of the booming tourist trade and the prosperity it has brought, Nuwara Eliya is more ready to rock than ever before.

There has been a recent renaissance at this legendary hill station, originally created by the British in the 19th century as a cool retreat from the heat of the lowland plains. The town’s many colonial-era bungalow guesthouses have been spruced up and new ones are being built on every spare plot as demand for rooms in Nuwara Eliya soars.

The town’s staid hotels and clubs have seen their gloomy Edwardian bedrooms brightly renovated, and contemporary restaurants, coffee shops and wine bars have replaced draughty dining halls. Pot-bellied staff waddling along in tunics and sarongs have retired from the traditional hotels and been replaced with smartly uniformed young ‘team members’ eager to help visitors. Another harbinger of prosperous times is the eight-storey shopping mall being constructed overlooking the roundabout of flowers at the entrance to the town from Nanu Oya.

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The towering trees that kept out the sunlight have either been pruned or reduced to

gnarled trunks. Policemen spur on traffic, oversee pedestrian crossings and prevent impromptu parking. The remodelling and greening of Victoria Park, the clearing of the race course and the cleaning of the vast Lake Gregory have added a new vivacity to the town.

Nuwara Eliya's modern image as the country's fun place to be in April is in contrast to the more formal celebrations of the last century. The grand balls and banquets attended by the crème of Colombo and plantation society are no longer held. Gone, too, are the gymkhanas, trout fishing, clay pigeon shoots, polo, hockey, croquet and hunting. There is still an annual horse race to which the fashionable flock, however, as well as flower shows and keenly contested competitions for the best lawns, gardens and hedges.

In spite of its development in recent years, Nuwara Eliya has managed to preserve its green appeal. It is still bordered by the lush fairways of the long-established golf course, and Victoria Park in the town centre has been spectacularly revived. Now it has well-mown lawns where tourists sit on the grass in the sunshine, artistic topiary and gorgeous herbaceous borders. There is a children's park, a new museum and signs advising visitors to "Drop garbage in kept bins." Entrance is Rs 50 for locals.

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While horse racing attracts locals, visitors can hire a pony for a trot around the town led by a groom. On Lake Gregory, canoodling couples hire pedaloes shaped like swans for gentle jaunts, and there are motorboats for sightseeing. In the April season, there are organised boat, jeep and bicycle races too. There is a golf tournament and special New Year games like pillow fighting and tug-of-war are held in the grounds of the hotels.

Temporary stalls and tents lining the streets sell sweaters to ward off the chill when the temperature drops at night. As well as street stalls selling Sri Lankan food, there are hot dog and ice cream trucks, beer and barbecue counters, and Indian, Chinese and Thai restaurants doing booming business. You'll find queues at all of them, despite the huge number of options, as New Year revellers line up to enjoy street food.

Part of the rejuvenation of the season is that older Sri Lankans who used to patronise the traditional hotels and attend sedate soirées there now rent bungalows or stay in their own holiday apartments and entertain privately. It’s left to the younger generation to dance at mobile discos, stroll the streets as music blasts out from loudspeakers at every corner, and party all day and night as carnival fever infects the town.

When the noise and the crowds of roaming, happy youngsters get too much, Nuwara Eliya has the perfect escape: a drive to the top of Sri Lanka’s highest mountain, Pidurutalagala. At 2,524 metres, the peak affords a magnificent panorama of the town, the race course, Lake Gregory and distant, conical Adam’s Peak. Out of bounds to the public for years, entrance to the mountain is still controlled by the military, but it’s free to both locals and foreigners. A guard warns motorists not to stop on the drive to the summit as leopards lurk in the forest.

While the April season begins in the first week of the month, it slips into higher gear during the second week, culminating in the celebrations of the New Year holiday on April 13 and 14. But in Nuwara Eliya, the fun continues until the end of the month. And if you miss it, there’s a mini-season in August too.












