

The Deep Hill Country of Sri Lanka

Posted on

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It was a clear, cold and crisp morning as we wound up the road higher into the misty mountains. Further up along the road the jeep passed over a dam that fed the river into a turbine and in the pale green picture of a pasture, with a plantation of pine trees in the background a herd of cape cows vanished slowly into the mist. The jeep grunted at the sharp bends and suddenly we came to a sign board that informed us we were entering a protected forest. The wet greenery was all around us and the morning was misty with a firm drizzle that kept us shivering in our light tropical clothes. My friend in the jeep said this was warm compared to her recent visit to Norway. The rest of us ignored her. We were on the first leg of a trip that would take us into the deep hill country of Sri Lanka and we were bound for World's End and then to the beautiful rest house at Belihul Oya. The south west monsoon sent it's filmy rain clouds through the gaps and a few mountains rose above the white sheet reminding me of a picture taken on K2 in the Himalayas, but these mountains were friendly by comparison.

Geologically speaking Sri Lanka's mountains are old and weathering has taken its effect. My friend in the back seat said these mountains were taller than the snow clad one's in Norway, and nobody argued. These Explore mountains are the source of all the important rivers in Sri Lanka, and innumerable streams feed each other here and one is never far from the sound of water rushing down the mountain slopes. The driver suggested that we stop for a bath in one of the streams, and there was a loud protest from the back seat. I was gathering the impression that she was a snowbird or something but changed my mind hastily. The road climbed higher. and we rolled into the Farr Inn one of Sri Lanka's most isolated hotels. The staging area for any trip to Horton Plains, the island's highest plateau and of course to World's End, which offers a splendid view on clear days. One can see right up to the coast which shines like a silvery band. but unfortunately the clouds had moved in before us, and we chose to drive around Horton Plains with its rolling grasslands and pocketed clumps of forest that still harboured a few deer even sambhur and an

occasional leopard as well as the nearly extinct bear monkeys. The plains have a network of streams which are fed with Rainbow Trout from hatcheries located further down at Nuwara Eliya, and its ideal to go fishing, if you have fisherman's bent, that is. As we came down a number of tiny waterfalls hung like veils from the cloudy scenery.

Many of the larger falls have typically Sinhalese names such as Diyaluma and Dunhinda, but some have English names, – St. Clair, Aberdeen given by nostalgic English planters. The hills offered much to the colonials who have given it much of its artificial beauty, and its major man made features. They developed a network of roads and towns that have important functions today. Nuwara Eliya and Bandarawela were developed as resorts and Diyatalawa, which had a POW camp during the Boer war, and later became a centre for a military training camp. Till recently, Nuwara Eliya looked very much like a picture book impression of a remote English town some going even further to call it 'Little England'. Now it is somewhat changed but there is something of a revival in Nuwara Eliya and most of its hotels are back in business.

Nuwara Eliya is probably the country's National Holiday Resort competing with only the beaches for popularity. The town was first developed to house veterans who were recovering from battle in the Boer war, though even during the time of the Sri Lankan kings, it is mentioned as a place where the sick could go for health reasons. To some who came later it was something of a promised land, and it certainly was so for Baker, the discoverer of the source of the Nile, who came here with plans to start a model farm. But unfortunately his plans failed and now the only thing that remains are the foundations to his house and his tombstone in the graveyard.

Baker has good company as a number of prominent Colonials are buried there, including the famed Victorian Photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron. For its residents, as well as visitors, Nuwara Eliya offers most in April when the 'season' is 'in'. Large numbers from Colombo and the coastal suburbs decamp for the hills in a tradition set by the Colonial British, taking in the air and then doing the rounds of horticultural shows, hill climb in motor cars, pony races, bridge parties, and generously rubbing shoulders with the important. From Nuwara Eliya we headed up to Hakgala, special to me because of the roses that grow there. On the way we stopped to explore a bit of road here and went a little deeper into enjoying the view. Really one could not take in everything. My friend was disappointed that we would not go to Ella, another famed view through the gap in a mountain massif to Sita Eliya the place which according to legend has links with the epic Ramayanaya.

We reached Hakgala late in the morning with little time to have a picnic lunch on the lawns that spread around in the botanic gardens. The rock resembles a gigantic molar tooth of an elephant and the name derives from the Sinhalese word for just that. Coming down from Hakgala it is the ever-present tea bushes that dominate the scenery. The dwarfish bushes that cling tightly to the mountain sides like emerald boulders. As we climbed down dizzily with the road snaking below ahead of us for hundreds of feet down and miles ahead another mist began to settle down, and a line of tea pluckers clad in gunny bags to match the coarse tea bushes came across a field of tea with neat little signs which indicated the plucking roster of the estate. We cut into an estate road and drove up to the Superintendent's bungalow. A large well appointed house commanding an excellent view of the scenery around. A white shirted and saronged caretaker showed us around, the Boss being away. We entered the drawing room with its ornate ceiling and matching fireplace and while we were exploring the rest of the house the Boss came in. A far cry from the planter Sahib of an age gone by. The young man smiled shyly and said that the main problem was boredom, eased a little by television and a VCR, and now as then, plenty of liquor. We explored tiny streams that began life in a bubbling spring in a corner of a moss grown crevice tucked in a nook on a hill. The rest of the trip was spent exploring tiny pockets of forest which escaped the zeal of the planters, where the strange birds and flowers still thrive. It was fascinating insight as to how the hills would have been with its entire forest cover untouched with montane fauna complete with elephant and leopard. It also recalled the times when the mountain freshness provided refuge to the ancient Kings of Lanka when invasion or out palace feuds threatened them. The hills provided a natural fortress and hideouts. From the mountains we gradually descended homewards, through Kandy which still retains most of the medieval traditions of the Sri Lankan kings and the main gateway to the tree and forest covered beauty of the mountains.



At the trout streams at Horton Plains.



Cascade of beauty: the Diyaluma Falls.

