The Viceroy Express: A Journey to Remember

Posted on

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One of the charms of the island is its infinite variety, wrote Leonard Woolf more than eighty-odd years ago. The variety has not changed. In fact, it has been enhanced, and once sampled leaves lifelong memories of the sheer grandeur of its pristine beauty in a kaleidoscope of changing colours. Climb aboard the gleaming cherry red and anchor blue Darlington-built 1927 loco, named after a former governor of then Ceylon, Sir Thomas Maitland, now the “Viceroy Special”, and enjoy one of the most picturesque and leisurely train journeys in the world here in Sri Lanka. I did it, so I know and can share it with you. Leaving Colombo on a cool morning, welcomed as we were by the fascinating sight of firemen shovelling coal into the furnace, supervised by a spruce, white clad engine driver – again from days of old, now retired, but specially commissioned to drive this coalpowered giant -it looked as if the loco had just come out of Stephenson Hawthorne’s workshop. These

were the beginnings of that nostalgic dip into the past. “Welcome aboard” read the banners, but what was more important was the transformation within. The plush saloon cars, panelled with satinwood were designed in period style.

It was fully air-conditioned and had comfortable reclining seats. The smart, batik-clad stewards and stewardesses were geared to provide five-star service during the journey. There was no doubt that here, for certain, was a trip to relax, throw off one’s cares for just a while, and go down memory lane. For the younger ones it promised a new experience of what travel must have been in the past, as the ”Viceroy Special” chugged along through some of the island’s most spectacular scenery.

The 72 mile, four-and-a-half hour journey to Kandy, Sri Lanka’s salubrious hill capital, was spiced by frequent stops for the thirsty engine to be replenished with many gallons of water. Since all other trains are power-driven, requests for water have to be made to stations. along the way, well in advance.

Leaving the clutter and crowds of the busy city, the train traveller gets that indefinable pleasure of the ever-changing scene: swaying coconut palms soon blend with lush, green rice paddies where farmers still use oxen to plough fields and smiling villagers and school children who stop, stand, stare and then wave merrily at you.

The climb increases, the chugging gets more laboured and more spirals of billowing smoke melt into the distance. Another stop at Kadugannawa, the gateway to the hills and a most precipitous narrow stretch to manoeuvre. Passengers get off the train to watch a second engine being installed at the rear of the train. For us too a chance for a glimpse of the rolling hills, still mist-covered, and deep breaths of the cool, nippy air. This is the beginning of the tea country. Yes, tea pluckers are busy picking two leaves and a bud . . . cameras are hastily focused . . . the scene is so luscious … so peaceful … so very, very different. …

All aboard again and from now on the air is tinged with the delightful aroma of tea and spices brought on by the wafting breezes. A cascading waterfall comes into view now and then. The meandering Mahaweli Ganga, the longest in the island, and its tributaries can be seen far below. This is a journey with never a dull moment.

And inside the “Viceroy Special” is a world of old world splendour with 100-year-old fittings such as ribbed wall-fans, shining brass light brackets and doorknobs and

wall-to-wall carpets. Stewards and stewardesses serve food and drink which could tempt gourmets. All this comes from well-stocked kitchenettes designed by a chef at one of Colombo's five-star hotels. Each has its own deep-freezer, refrigerator, cooler and microwave oven.

Thatched cottages catch the eye amid the rolling green countryside, and what better way to enjoy all this than in the deluxe club car which seats 30 passengers, either sipping a cool, cool beer or something stronger like scotch on the rocks, or a special cocktail to suit one's own taste and mood.

Just one more pause for the old steam giant's final thirst-quencher and then it's Kandy, at 1,674 feet above sea level.

Coaches are lined up to take the "Viceroy" passengers to a Kandy hotel with a magnificent view of the city spread below. M.ore light refreshments are on order at the hotel, with a welcome drink too. And then after a thoughtful pause to freshen up, it's out again for a quick tour of fascinating, historic Kandy and its environs.

The star attraction is the Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Buddha's Tooth Relic, which is situated beside the famous Kandy lake. After the temple it is a drive round the lake, with a visit to the Kandyan Arts and Crafts Centre to watch Kandyan craftsmen at work or buy any of an array of curios and souvenirs. Then it is time for the Kandy Bazaar, with its interesting narrow streets, the many shops of jewellers and gem merchants, the Kandy Market with its numerous stalls which sell the best of Sri Lankan spices, as well as a great variety of fresh fruits – avocados, mangoes, sweet pears, pineapples and combs and combs of ripe yellow bananas.

Return to the hotel for a late lunch which leads on to a tropical siesta, and good Sri Lankan tea before it's time to take off to the Kandy Railway Station for the return journey to Colombo.

Another four hours pass soon enough replenished with several cool beers or soft drinks and snacks as the train puffs along in the gathering dusk. Darkness soon softens the ragged edges of day. The songs of crickets rise over the constant chug of the engine. Suddenly it's the old "Iron Horse" cutting through the night.

This was a one-day trip to Kandy. Trips from three days for relaxation on quiet stretches of beaches, enjoying the hot sun and listening to the lap of the waves on the sand, or the longer round tours of up to 12 days are on offer or could be

arranged.

While coastal runs could be made as far down as Matara (100 miles) hugging the beach most of the while, with stops at resorts such as Bentota and Hikkaduwa, the longer Viceroy Tours could include Nuwara Eliya and the Hill Country, or the Ancient Cities and Sri Lanka’s Cultural Triangle.

The Nuwara Eliya Tour takes one to the island’s lovely tea country in the cool hills more than 6,000 feet above sea level, which has as its centre Nuwara Eliya, the mountain resort which is a monument to British nostalgia. The seem of tea mingles here with that of cypress, eucalyptus and wild mint. The architecture is Tudor and Georgian with more than a touch of the English country manor. Many rounds of golf are possible at t. Andrew’s Golf Course, named after the original course in Scotland, and complete with gorse too. From Nuwara Eliya there could be excursions to the Hakgala Botanic Gardens and I to a tea plantation to see Sri Lanka’s green gold being grown, plucked, blended and finally brewed for, you as it should be.

The blue and red engine of the Viceroy Special.

The Cultural Triangle Tour would take one to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The former, the first set of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom has its many famous monuments of Buddhism, its royal parks and pleasure gardens and the Sri Maha

Bodhi, the world’s oldest historically documented tree. You can stay in a hotel overlooking one of the historic tanks of Anuradhapura which date back to the first centuries of the Christian era and visit monuments dating from the last centuries of the era before Christ.

Polonnaruwa was Sri Lanka’s medieval capital, which flourished from the 10th centuries. It is a place where many treasures of sculpture are well preserved and where most of the land is watered by the Parakrama Samudra – the great Sea of Parakrama, a gigantic man-made lake which is a veritable inland sea.

It’s a long way from 1864 when the first passenger train left Colombo’s Fort Station on its inaugural journey to Ambepussa and back again to Colombo. The idea of the Viceroy Special was thought of by Clifford Jones of C&V Jones Travel, Manchester, when he was on a holiday in Sri Lanka. Being a steam railway enthusiast he visited the railway yard at Dematagoda, a suburban north of Colombo and soon discovered the possibilities of bringing back some of the charm and excitement of the days of steam and rail.

The spacious and comfortable interior of the locomotive.