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CLOSER TO HEAVEN

Justine Picardie discovers Sri Lanka's sacred sites and natural glories.
Plus: *Diane Kordas* on her favourite Greek island, Mykonos



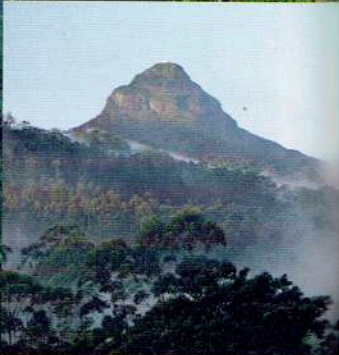
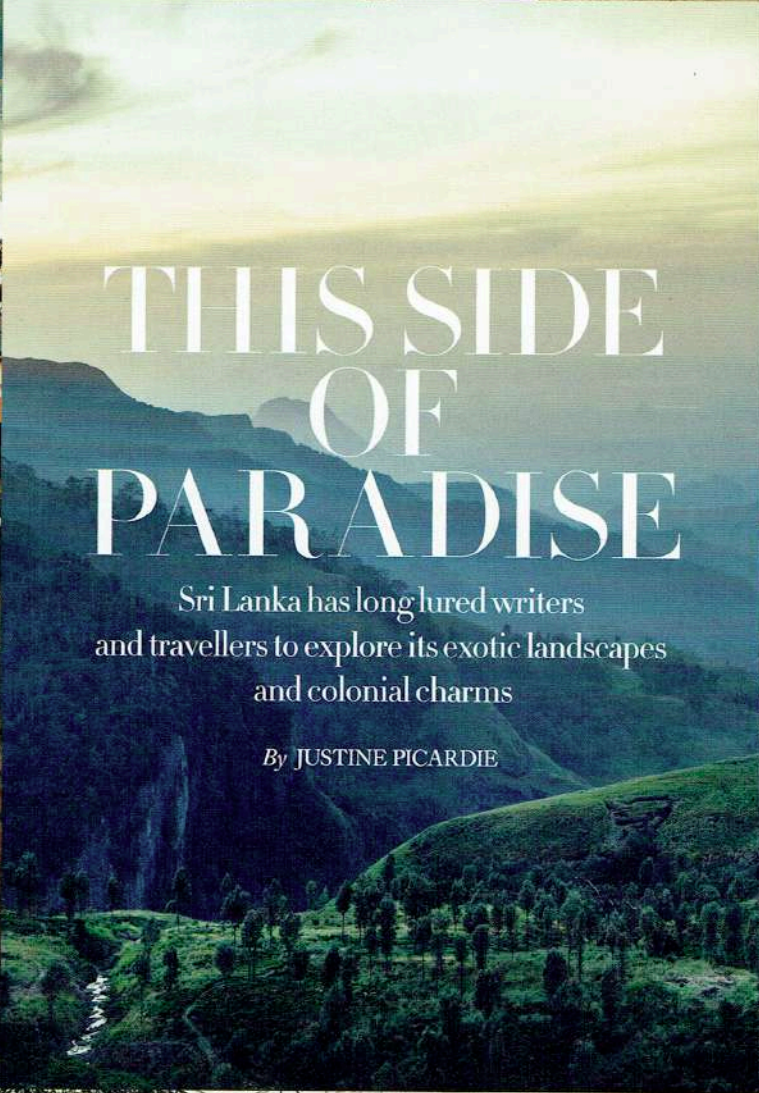
Below, from left: the former residence of Sir Thomas Lipton. The view from Thotalagala. Top right: Jungle Beach



THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

Sri Lanka has long lured writers and travellers to explore its exotic landscapes and colonial charms

By JUSTINE PICARDIE



Maniumpathy hotel in Colombo. Above right: Adam's Peak. Left: Thotalagala

Legend has it that the isle of Sri Lanka is 40 miles from the Garden of Eden; so close, according to a 14th-century European traveller, 'tis said the sound of the waters falling from the fountain of Paradise is heard there'. Such is its allure that everyone I know who has ever explored this teardrop-shaped island – including my husband, who went in 2003, during a ceasefire in the civil war that afflicted Sri Lanka for more than a quarter of a century – described it as a truly enchanting place, despite its history of conflict. Hence my husband's long-held desire to return, accompanied by me, to discover if the magic he remembered had survived the rise of mass tourism.

We landed in Colombo in mid-August, and its choking traffic jams and angry car horns seemed far from paradisiacal; but we were fortunate to be staying in the quiet oasis of Maniumpathy, a stylish little hotel hidden away on a side street, furnished with Ceylonese antiques and scented with vases of fresh flowers. Our bedroom gave onto the courtyard garden, where birds sang in the laburnum-trees; and after a restorative night's sleep in a deeply comfortable four-poster, we set off early in the morning to catch a seaplane to Castlereagh Reservoir, in the hill country of the Central Province.

Nothing could have prepared me for the dramatic beauty of that journey, flying over billowing white clouds, then skirting the mountain known as Adam's Peak, its soaring summit rising towards the clear blue skies above. Revered as a sacred site by several different religious traditions, it is held to be the place where Buddha left his footprint, and also where Adam first stepped on Earth, when he was cast out of Eden. We had an easier descent from the firmaments, circling over the vivid green patterns of the terraced tea plantations that cover undulating slopes, before landing on the waters of Castlereagh. There, we were met by our driver, Indika Wijesuriya, who was to be our guide for the next two weeks, and taken to Camellia Hills, a bungalow overlooking the reservoir, and surrounded by the lush Dunkeld tea estate. The views are spectacular – silvery mists wreathing the ranges of mountains beyond – and there are cooling breezes that

make walking the tea trails a pleasure, rather than an arduous trek. We followed the serpentine path that leads up the slopes from Camellia Hills, through the fields that were first established in the 19th century by British settlers (hence the familiar place names of this region – Norwood and Hatton among them). Bamboo orchids grow wild alongside the plantations, and violet-blue blooms of morning glory scramble over rocks. There was no sign of the reclusive leopards that live in the forests above Camellia Hills – just a troop of wild monkeys that scampered away on our approach. After several miles, we reached a village inhabited by tea-plantation workers, where again, there is the juxtaposition of a British past (chrysanthemums, dahlias and roses in the front garden of the manager's bungalow) and contemporary Sri Lanka (a brightly painted Hindu temple; children returning home, in their school uniforms; a young couple with their newborn baby). And everywhere we walked, people waved at us, and smiled with real warmth.

In between exploring the area, we feasted on a series of delicious home-cooked meals; for the chef at Camellia Hills is remarkably good, serving up fragrant Sri Lankan curries, using locally sourced ingredients – fresh coconuts, herbs and spices, and vegetables grown in the adjacent gardens. I also read Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the*

Family, his brilliant memoir of returning to his homeland of Sri Lanka – or Ceylon as it was known during the era of British colonial rule, though it has had other names, reflecting its turbulent history. As Ondaatje records: 'Serendip, Ratnapida ("island of gems"), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon – the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language.'

On the next stage of our journey, from Camellia Hills to Thotalagala, we passed poignant reminders of the island's history – a small Anglican church, surrounded by the 19th-century graves of British tea planters who died in Ceylon; and then other memorials to more recent deaths, as a consequence of the bitter civil war, as well as the military checkpoints that were established during that period of conflict. But everywhere seems so peaceful, now; and the natural splendour of the island is breathtaking. Nowhere is this more evident than at Thotalagala, a 19th-century tea planter's bungalow perched high on the edge of the Haputale escarpment, and surrounded by 20 acres of verdant gardens. Soon after we arrived, we were settled outside on the lawn with a pot of freshly brewed tea, beneath the shade of an ancient banyan-tree. Above us, a black eagle glided on the invisible currents of mountain winds; below, the plains of south-eastern Sri Lanka, stretching as far as the horizon. A chorus of frogs sang from a lily pond, accompanied by the rustling of eucalyptus leaves; and all around were flourishing poinsettias and arum lilies.

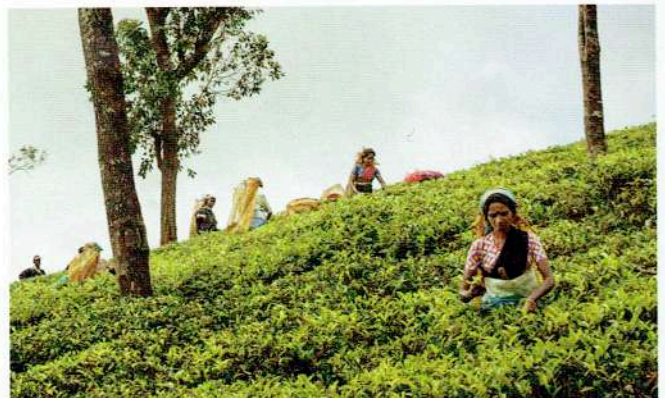
It would be tempting not to move from this restful haven: inside, there is a wood-panelled cigar snug with leather chairs that beckon in the evening; and our bedroom was as idyllic a sanctuary as anywhere I have stayed the world over, combining period charm with unobtrusive modern luxuries. But we did venture out to follow footpaths through the surrounding tea plantation, and when I went for a solitary walk, I happened upon a herd of goats, whose friendly owner encouraged me to follow him across the rocks, to his small-holding. There, I was introduced to three generations of his family, and

shown around their neatly tended vegetable beds.

We also paid a visit to Sir Thomas Lipton's former residence, where the Scottish tea baron was able to survey the commanding vistas over his vast estate. His garden – established in the late 19th century, when Lipton first came to Ceylon – still looks splendid today, with emerald-green lawns, herbaceous borders and clipped topiary; all immaculate, as if its original owner were about to return from his morning constitutional to the highest point on the estate, Lipton's Seat, with its panoramic view of his empire.

A different aspect of the country's colonial past was similarly

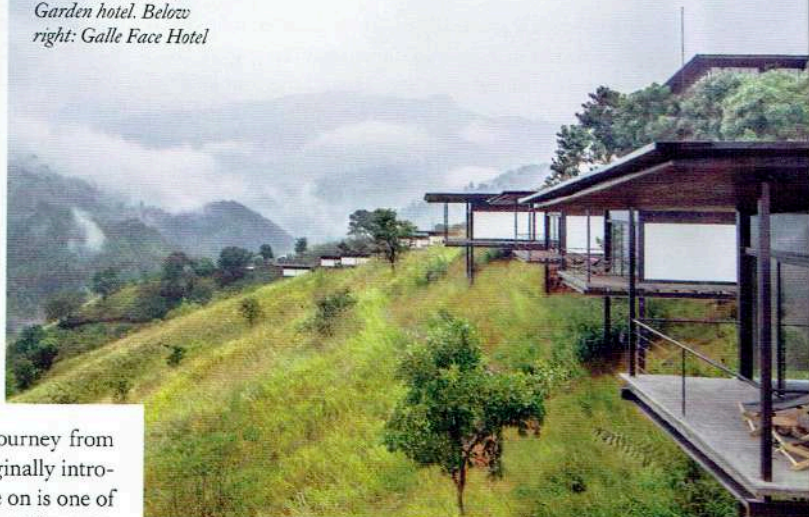
Nothing could have prepared me for the dramatic beauty of the journey



ESCAPE



Santani Wellness Resort & Spa. Left: Water Garden hotel. Below right: Galle Face Hotel



evident when we departed Thotalagala, on a train journey from Haputale to Nanu Oya. The railway network was originally introduced by the British in 1864, and the line that we rode on is one of the most scenic, reaching a high point of over 6,000 feet. The train was packed with locals and tourists, but I was happy to stand by an open doorway, beside a railway engineer who pointed out magnificent waterfalls, precipitous bridges and forests of azaleas. From Nanu Oya, we drove to Nuwara Eliya, once known as the Little England of Ceylon, for lunch at the colonial Hill Club. Portraits of the Queen and Prince Philip hang above the fireplace, alongside Victorian paintings of Scottish landscapes and a mournful stag's head; all reminders of a long-ago era (memorably described by Leonard Woolf in an account of his time in the Ceylon Civil Service from 1904 to 1911. 'White society,' he wrote, 'was always suburban... in Colombo and Nuwara Eliya, the social structure and relations between Europeans rested on the same kind of snobbery, pretentiousness, and false pretensions as they did in Putney or Peckham.')

We came across no such pretentiousness anywhere in Sri Lanka – from the serenity of an award-winning modernist spa near Kandy (Santani, designed with streamlined minimalism, so as not to distract from the wild glories of its mountainous setting), to a welcoming hotel on a stretch of deserted northern coastline (the delightful Jungle Beach, where we stayed in a thatched wooden villa, steps away from the pristine sand and gentle waves of the Indian Ocean). Elsewhere on the island, I particularly loved our time at Ulagalla – a sister hotel to Jungle Beach – which is built around a 150-year-old mansion, and set within expansive grounds that are also home to monkeys, peacocks and the occasional elephant. Its swimming pool is one of the loveliest in all of Sri Lanka, and the perfect spot for birdwatching; and there are bicycles

provided for every guest – a good way to explore the surrounding area, which includes the ancient temples and Buddhist monasteries of Anuradhapura.

Such is the remarkable diversity of Sri Lanka that a day there can easily encompass rare wildlife and archaeological wonders, without the sense of being rushed. While at the Water Garden hotel in the Central Province, for example, we rose early one morning to climb the nearby fortress of Sigiriya, where a fifth-century king built his citadel atop the sheer cliffs of Lion Rock (so called because this royal stronghold was designed in the form of a vast stone lion, whose paws and claws can still be seen today on either side of the steps that lead to the summit). After a restorative lunch and a refreshing swim in the tranquil surroundings of the hotel, we set out with our guide to the Minneriya National Park, where we encountered a dozen or more families of wild elephants, with babies and playful young calves, gathering together around the reservoir, which also provides a natural habitat for flocks of water birds, including pelicans, herons and cormorants.



Ulagalla Resort. Right: elephants in Minneriya National Park



After two weeks of travelling, we returned to Colombo for a final night, staying in the city's grand dame, the Galle Face Hotel. It was here that Arthur Conan Doyle resided in 1896, where he observed 'the long roll of the Indian Ocean... under a grey-streaked sky, with the rain-swept hills of Ceylon, just one shade greyer, lining the Eastern skyline'. We were more fortunate, watching a rose-gold sunset over the sparkling sea; and promising to each other that though this was the end of our journey, we would return again, for there is so much more to discover in an island where Paradise still seems tantalisingly close, on the other side of a mountain peak, where the sound of a hidden fountain calls... □

Ampersand Travel (020 7819 9770; www.ampersandtravel.com) offers 15-night Sri Lanka itineraries from £5,200 a person B&B based on two sharing. This includes stays at Mamunpathy, Camellia Hills, Thotalagala, Santani Wellness Resort & Spa, Uga Jungle Beach, Ulagalla Resort, Water Garden Sigiriya and Galle Face Hotel, return international flights from London, sightseeing and private transfers.