

Ceylon tea in misty mountains

TEA TRAILS, SRI LANKA

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Explore an exquisitely beautiful area of the tea plantations of Sri Lanka, from the perfect base of one of Tea Trails' elegantly furnished bungalows, a remnant of the colonial era.

With a mere touch on the bell next to your canopied king-sized bed, in a super-spacious room with high ceilings, you summon your butler for your morning tray of the finest Ceylon tea. He opens your curtains to reveal splendid views of manicured gardens, rolling hills or a vast lake with mountain peaks, depending on which room you have been allocated in one of the four authentic planter's bungalows you have chosen for your exotic honeymoon. If you are ready for a bath, he will run one for you.

The roomy en suite bathrooms all have modern equipment, and most include a capacious shower and a bath, with twin handbasins. Oversized white towels are warmed on the towel rail. Handmade green tea soap sits in a delicate container of palm leaf. No attention to detail is spared.

Each original bungalow is set in a different spot in the tea plantations and has several bedrooms that are tastefully furnished with antique pieces from the colonial period. You can relax in comfortable lounge areas, on open verandahs, next to the swimming pool or in a covered garden folly, all with spectacular outlooks. Many of the rooms open out onto a private garden area with table and chairs, where you can enjoy your tea or any of your meals, or simply gaze at the flowers and birds.

Although all four bungalows have attractive features and expansive views, my personal favourite is Summerville, which looks out onto the vast waters of the lake edged by tall trees. To reach Castlereagh, which also has an awe-inspiring lake vista, you paddle across the water in a kayak.

Meals in this hotel are an elegant, leisurely affair, at the time that pleases you and at the bungalow

of your choice. The weather at these mountainous altitudes is relatively cool for Sri Lanka, so linger in bed as long as the fancy takes you, and go for a walk after breakfast. Both European- and Sri Lankan-style foods are on offer, so you may order an array of mild or spicy curries or an English breakfast. The Sri Lankan way is to serve small bowls of individual kinds of curry, like prawn, banana flower, ladyfinger, dahl and aubergine, with rice or string hoppers (a popular kind of rice noodles) in the morning. You may, like Sri Lankan people, eat with your hands if you wish, to experience the marvellous textures of the food.

For lunch and dinner you choose a spot in either your or another bungalow's surrounds, tell your chef what you would like to eat, and he organises it for you. Predictably, in a Relais & Châteaux hotel, the food is outstanding with gourmet Western fare or Sri Lankan delicacies. A small but pleasant choice of wines is available, as well as a range of drinks including the traditional tippie of the tropics: Tanqueray Gin and tonic.

A highlight is the high tea, presented on tiered platters in the afternoon. The traditional English scones, cream and jam are delicious. The cake is irresistible, with different favourites daily like Mountbatten cake, sponge cake, banana bread, Swiss roll or carrot cake and a crustless cucumber sandwich. All this is, of course, served with the Ceylon tea of your choice, from a substantial menu which explains the different types.

Walking trails that each take an hour or two have been laid out between the bungalows through the tea plantations, allowing you to explore the landscape in private and at leisure.

With their dexterous and nimble fingers, women are said to be the best tea pickers. The early tea planters brought in Tamil people from Southern India to work on the plantations, and their female descendants work hard to pick the 16 kg minimum 'bud and two leaves' units per day. Dressed in brightly coloured saris they carry a basket on their back which has a strap on the forehead. Tea pickers and their families live and work on the tea plantations, so as you walk or cycle through their small villages you pass by ornately decorated Hindu temples, small, gaily painted houses set in lush vegetation and tiny shops with fascinating-looking vegetables and fruit.

Not to be missed is the visit to the tea factory, with information given by raconteur and tea expert Andrew Taylor. This delightful Sri Lankan man communicates his passion for tea as he regales you with stories of the history of tea planting in Sri Lanka and methods of tea production. Tasting and grading tea is an art, and Andrew guides you through the ritual of tasting two different kinds. Much like with wine, you have to slurp noisily to draw air into your mouth, swirl the tea around the mouth to allow flavour and tannins to be detected, then spit it out or swallow.

Sri Lanka is a wonderful country to visit, its vital people consistently kind and warm. With spectacular scenery, unique accommodation set in a working tea plantation, great food and impeccable service, Tea Trails is a once in a lifetime place to celebrate your marriage. ♦



Contact details

Sri Lanka in Style is skilled at organising bespoke trips for discerning travellers who want excellent service in well-run boutique properties. www.srilankainstyle.com

Tea Trails

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Other recommended places to stay:

Casa Colombo: A quirky hotel in Colombo, with zany décor and outstanding food, where you have a personal butler. www.casacolombo.com

Wallawwa: Close to the international airport, with a long swimming pool in a verdant garden and an excellent restaurant. www.thewallawwa.com

Why House: Near Galle Fort and the beach, this is a haven with beautiful furnishings, manicured gardens and kind staff. www.whyhousesrilanka.com

Bougainvillea: Set in Victoria Golf and Country Resort, Rajawella, Kandy, with a magnificent view of a river and the foothills of Knuckles mountain range. www.bv-retreat.com

Elephant Stables: Perfectly sited in Kandy with lush gardens drawing birds and great views of the hills beyond. www.elephantstables.com

Ulagalla: Beautiful private villas with pools surrounded by jungle-type vegetation for nature walks, trips to fascinating ancient Anuradhapura, plus delectable dining. www.ugaescapes.com/ulagalla

Leopard Safaris: Stay in this comfortable safari-tented camp close to Yala National Park – with its high density of the Sri Lankan leopard and wide variety of Asian game and birds – to enjoy being pampered in a customised vehicle with a well-informed naturalist. www.leopardsafaris.com; noel@leopardsafaris.com

