

Jagath Kumara (left) and fellow stilt fishermen at work off Koggala Beach in southern Sri Lanka



GREAT ESCAPE

Jump in for Indian Ocean adventures...



The Stafford Estate, founded in 1880, forms part of Sri Lanka's thriving tea industry – the country is the world's second-largest exporter

4. Hill country

Take a tour of the cool central highlands and you'll soon be wandering through bright-green tea fields and learning the ancient art of proper tea drinking

PARAKKRAMA KIRIDENA slurps a mouthful of brown tea from a china spoon, sucks it several times against his teeth, and swallows. 'We have to put the manners to one side when tasting,' he says, laughing as he puts the lids back on the many small bowls of liquid in front of him. 'It's a kind of art, tasting tea. There is no literature on it, you just have to feel it.'

Parakkrama should know. He has been in the industry for more than 20 years, working his way up from lowly 'junior creeper' to the heights of tea superintendent. At the Stafford Estate near Nuwara Eliya, he is in charge of every element of tea-growing, looking after his workers and their families from birth to death. 'As a planter, you must be a father, a lawyer, a judge, a scientist, an agriculturist, an accountant,' he says. 'You are responsible for every incident on the estate and for every inch of the land.'

It is a role that has changed little since the British arrived, originally to plant coffee. Tea was only introduced when the coffee plants were devastated by blight, but it has thrived since. The customs of those times are embedded in the local way of life up in these hills. Afternoon tea is still a tradition, taken in grand old hotels, with a Sri Lankan twist: curried samosas and vegetable rotis served alongside scones and strawberry jam. Nuwara Eliya might have been transplanted straight from England to the tropics, with its racetrack, mock-Tudor houses and swan pedaloos for rent on the boating lake.

Tea factories such as Dambatenne near Haputale, or the Heritance near Nuwara Eliya, look like they'd be more at home in the Britain of the Industrial Revolution than 21st-century Asia. Hulking buildings that squat in the hills, their vast rooms are given over to processes used to roll, dry, ferment and sort tea leaves before they're packed off to brokers around the world. There is no mistaking the landscapes of Sri Lanka's highlands for Europe though. On terraces cut into the sharply rising hills, every patch of land is farmed, plots of banana or leek alternating with the pleasing curves of tea plants. Tea-pluckers in bright saris move along the red paths, picking the young leaves and tossing them into the sacks on their backs.

At Stafford, it's the first of three daily breaks for the pluckers. Parakkrama, stick in hand and white socks pulled almost to his knees to prevent scratches from the bushes, strolls down to the muster station where they gather. He greets each woman as she enters, the cool of the room welcome after a morning in the unrelenting heat. They empty their bags to be weighed, the estate's field officer records each haul – usually 18kg per day – on their name cards, and the leaves are spread across the stone floor, ready to be taken by truck to nearby factories. Work done, the ladies sit on low benches around the carpet of leaves, and chat over tea and chapatis. Noting that this tradition, too, is little altered over the centuries, Parakkrama remarks: 'You can't change it. It's in our blood now.'

Break over, Stafford's pluckers, field officer and tea superintendent make their way back to the fields. Parakkrama pauses, takes a lungful of air, and smiles. 'It's true, I am now a stress-free man. Look,' he says, gesturing to the green, rolling hills, the smell of incense drifting in from the estate's Hindu temple, 'with this as my office, how could I not be?'

For the final stage, head east to Ella by bus or car to experience the full train journey to Kandy; or you can board at Nanu Oya, just south of Nuwara Eliya. ➔

Essentials



➔ For a slice of a tea-planter's life, the only place to stay is **Stafford Estate**, Parakkrama's tea plantation 14 miles from Nuwara Eliya. It has a welcoming atmosphere, its four rooms are supremely comfortable and the staff are a delight (from £220; staffordbungalow.com).
 ⓘ Tour of Dambatenne tea factory £1.50 (Haputale); high tea at Heritance Tea Factory £7 (heritancehotels.com/teafactory).



A tea plucker at Stafford with the stick she uses to shape the bushes as she picks the leaves. LEFT Sorting the tea leaves before they are sent for processing at the factory



An elaborate tea ceremony at the Heritance, making frothy chai. RIGHT Stafford Estate superintendent Parakkrama Kiridena

