



Clockwise from left: The Stafford Bungalow, in Sri Lanka; a worker gathers tea leaves; the swan-towel feature.
Pictures / Supplied; Andrew Stone



Room Check

One mile above sea level, in the Sri Lanka tea country, Andrew Stone spends 24 hours in Stafford Bungalow, a plantation manager's restored estate home

Perfect for: sipping Sri Lankan tea, where it is grown, picked and produced.

Location: about 240km from Colombo, in the cool, misty interior. By road, expect the windy trip to take about six or seven hours before you reach the gracious property, just a few kms from the resort town of Nuwara Eliya. But it's a fascinating drive, with plenty of arresting places along the way, so don't be put off.

In the neighbourhood: fields full – naturally – of tea bushes, busy small towns where you'll see pickers returning from a day at work, the occasional tea factory, big rectangular buildings with trucks loaded with freshly plucked leaves rumbling through the gates, and small garden plots with cabbages, onions, carrots, potatoes and beans. Stafford Bungalow, on a level site surrounded by tea crops planted on steep slopes, has a billiard-flat lawn and a clay tennis court tucked behind a tall hedge.

Tell me more: Time your arrival for the afternoon and you'll get high tea on the lawn, beside beds of roses which lend a subtle fragrance to the fresh mountain

air. Freshly-made scones with cream and strawberry jam accompany our steaming cups of single estate tea. Neatly cut cucumber sandwich triangles sit invitingly in a silver server. Pinch yourself to remember this is the 21st century, not the British Raj, when the plantation had its beginnings under the stern management of two Scottish pioneers.

Meet the manager: our reverie is broken with the arrival of Parakkrama Kiridena, who has added hotel management to his core task of running the plantation. He wears a flat cap, knitted cardigan and corduroy pants, which ward off the approaching evening chill. He must be doing a fine job because last year the recently restored premises won a world luxury hotel award. Para gives us a potted history of the plantation, and urges us to join the other guests for pre-dinner drinks by the living room fire. He doesn't need to ask twice.

Food and drink: Last year Stafford hired a Sri Lankan chef who had been on the staff at the Marriott in Dubai. For dinner he assembled a memorable menu. Discs of

buffalo mozzarella in oil are followed by carrot and ginger soup, with homemade bread. Chunks of sea bass on a stack of vegetables with a drizzle of tamarillo sauce arrived as the main course, with coffee icecream and ginger cake to close proceedings. Outstanding.

The bed: Two swans created by light blankets were perched on the four poster bed, with freshly picked flowers scattered over them. It seemed a shame to disturb the pair. A couple of hotties under the sheets took the edge off the cool night air. The 40sq m room has teak furniture, wooden floors and rugs, and reading matter related to the tea industry. The generous bathroom has a shower which uses rainwater. In the morning, a lovely garden view unfolds when the drapes are drawn and little birds flit among the shrubs.

Morning: The day starts with Para taking us through the plantation. Morning dew covers the bushes. Pickers have been busy since 8, filling sacks held by a strip of cloth across their forehead. It is a timeless scene, the superintendent talking to his workers like family, all the time checking the vitality of the plants. We make our way back to the property, where breakfast awaits. The chef has been put to the test, with a request to make hoppers, a signature Sri Lankan snack known as the love child of a crepe and a crumpet. Cooked perfectly, it's crunchy round the edges and soft in the centre with an egg baked in the base.

Price: between US\$350 (\$510) to US\$400 for two on a half-board basis, which includes breakfast and dinner and high tea.

Website: staffordbungalow.com

In a nutshell: A detour down a lane of history where for a day or so you can enter the tea planters' world.

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