

# Nuwara Eliya gears for festive season with new attractions

Nuwara Eliya is a popular holiday resort at anytime of the year, but it is in the month of April that the town really comes alive with hundreds of holiday makers flocking to this picturesque town in the hills for the Sinhalese and Tamil New Year. The 'season' starts in early March, so that by the end of March it becomes difficult to find accommodation to both Sri Lankans as well as foreign tourists.



Chandana Lal Karunaratne

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### Shifting the venue

Although traditionally the event was held inside the city limits, the mayor told us that they have decided to take the event out of the city limits and near the Gregory's Lake. "As the event became larger, it became apparent that holding the event at the city was causing a lot of problems, a lot of traffic jams, pollution, overcrowding and lack of space to increase the activities," he said.

Coping with this frenzy of activity and influx of visitors is no easy task. One has to think about providing water, sanitary facilities to the thousands that crowd the city and come up with a traffic plan so that the transportation does not collapse.

Nuwara Eliya MC has a big role to play during the season or 'Wasantha Udanaya', as it is the chief organiser of the events. The Mayor met Chandana Lal Karunaratne, the Mayor of Nuwara Eliya to talk about preparations for the festive season.

"We have been doing this for almost three decades with the assistance of various media organisations, government institutions, entrepreneurs and the Armed Forces. I have been handling 'Wasantha Udanaya' since 2003. Dur-

ing these five years, I have seen many changes, with some events being dropped and others added," he said.

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"For example in some parts of the city street vendors cannot operate. Although this is essential to maintain the city, their absence will take out some of the life and colour from the festivities," Chandana Lal Karunaratne said. "Because of that, we have decided to

shift the venue from Nuwara Eliya town to Gregory's Lake. We believe that the surroundings are very conducive to hold such an event, and we are going to start a Rs. 300 million development project centered on the lake," he added.

### Preparing the ground

In the month of April, the population of the city almost doubles and it is up to the Municipal Council to make sure that all facilities are provided to the crowds.

"We expect that many will come when the school holidays are given. We have to make sure that facilities like water and sanitation are adequately provided. We do not want to have any health issues, so the health division will inspect all hotels to ensure that they serve healthy food to the guests," he said.

Security is also a main issue this time around and the mayor said that they have taken steps to ensure the city is safe. "We are very concerned about the security and we know that people are really worried about it. Because of that we have made special security arrangements. We have beefed up the Police force and we have set up security check points to make sure that the city is safe," he said.

### New events

In the past several people flocked to Nuwara Eliya to watch the horse racing events, or the Australia vs. Sri Lanka Cricket matches during the season. But with the passing of time, people's tastes have changed, so the authorities have been quick to introduce new events to meet their demands.

"We have added new events like Magasthota motor cross and musical shows. These events with more traditional events like the Governors' cup horse racing and the flower show will cater to the needs of all," the mayor said. (RK)

By Poornima Ravishan Wijemanne and Rathindra Kuruwita

At 1:30 a.m. we were three heavy-headed and tired fellows - the two of us and Thushara - sent on our way to Nuwara Eliya to discover how the city was preparing for the season.

With the Sinhala and Hindu New Year coming up, people in Colombo are losing track of their sense of time, proportion and responsibility, and Avurudhu feels like one long day, spanning weeks, maybe months, of fullness.

When you keep saying this to yourself, you feel like you haven't lived enough and sad that you must go to Nuwara Eliya.

Rushing with the tedious hum of the van engine, nodding off to sleep, waking up now and then - to find first the clear yellow city lights and then the derelict grey watery fields reflecting the sky slowly being replaced by the impenetrable mist that lights up when thunders crashes overhead - we finally arrive in Nuwara Eliya.

Industriousness is a distraction which prevents one from enjoying the aesthetics of Nuwara Eliya. In fact, if one were to enjoy it properly, one must learn how to be a sloth; willful lethargy and slowness improve one's capacity of feeling Nuwara Eliya.

# Getting the feel of Nuwara Eliya

The following are a few places we recommend visiting at Nuwara Eliya to get the feel of the place.

### Hakgala Botanical Garden

The Hakgala Botanical Garden is a fine place to experience Nuwara Eliya. Growing out of a high mountain side and overlooking the road and neighbouring mountains, the area covers a place that is said where King Ravana, of the famous legend the Ramayanaya, hid the kidnapped Queen Sita of India.

It is home to various important trees and flowers but most importantly it has plenty of green that you can lie on and gaze at the undulating green and light brown stretches, growing dimmer and misty as they continue unendingly into the distance.

Hakgala has some vantage points with huts from which you can get a wonderful view of the garden's surrounds. The Hak-

gala atmosphere is best enjoyed when you are alone. To visit in twos and threes would be tolerable but any more than that, say a visit with the family, will limit your fun.

Most of the garden is neatened up with cement tiles, spiked cable borders and 'do not touch/enter' sign boards. It is a pity that it is so. The trimmed hedges and cement tiles ruin the aesthetics of Hakgala.

But, thankfully they have left some area a little less well arranged - or maybe, understanding the need, intentionally so. We recommend a walk up the route to the left immediately after the curator's bungalow. This leads to the only decent plot of natural romantic scenery.

### St. Claire's and Devon Falls

Going along the A7 Highway from Colombo, just before the Thalawakele town, one sees the St. Claire's and Devon Falls pouring down from the neighbouring mountain to

the Kotmale River running below. Devon Falls - named in honour of Devon, a coffee planter - is the first you see on the way. Pouring pure white, violent water down several levels, the Kotmale River and seen from a little way along the road, the St. Claire's Falls is the widest waterfall in Sri Lanka.

### Shanthipura

Shanthipura is the highest habitation in Nuwara Eliya. Going up to the village, one finds a road titled Shanthipura Kalapura branching off to the left. Follow that to an observation post, built in 1975 under the directive of then Prime Minister Sirima Bandranaike. There is considerable parking space and one can climb up to the roof, look down and capture the entire Nuwara Eliya with just one gaze.

### The Holy Trinity Church

The still-functioning over 100-year-old pipe

organ and the famous stained glass windows are only some of the reasons that make the Holy Trinity Church important.

Built in 1845 and consecrated on February 24, 1852, by Bishop Chapman, the Church was visited by Queen Elizabeth II of England with the Duke of Edinburgh Prince Philip in 1954.

The Church was gifted with a special stained glass with the royal emblem, inscribed, "Kings shall come to the brightness of thy rising." The Church and its adjoining vicarage are marked by the government as heritage sites, preventing the improvement or alteration of the present arrangements.

The Church has a pipe organ, one of the few that still function in Sri Lanka, which has a history of over 100 years. "The Church is not allowed to improve the organ due to its historical value and instead has to maintain it at a heavier cost," said Church Vicar Lakshendra Kumar.

"The Church belongs to the Colombo Anglican Church or the Church of Ceylon. This Church is in charge of the main parish of the up-country deanery that is bordered by Maskeliya, Ramboda, Ragala and Uda-pussallawa," he added.

The pews are made of Burma teak and each pew is owned by a single family. Each pew is fixed with umbrella holders - another ancient feature - that have detachable collectors. At the foot of the aisle is the baptismal pond gifted to the Church by Archbishop of Colombo in 1847.

### Horse racing

Horse racing is synonymous with the Nuwara Eliya season. Although it was on the decline for several decades after the 1960s, it has made slow but steady progress since the mid 1990s.

Horse racing was at its height in the 1950s but after the 1960s there was no thorough-

bred racing for 10 to 15 years with the rise of the import duty on horses. Although many thought the sport had died, with the reduction of the import duty in 1978, interest in the sport revived and people began importing horses once again.

"Although things are now slowly reaching the standards of the glory days a decade back, things were in a really bad state. Horses were not too impressive and the crowd had lost interest. But from the mid 1990s the 'Turf Club, with the help of the Municipal Council, turned the tide. Now, once again, it is one of the biggest attractions of the season," said Nuwara Eliya Mayor Chandana Lal Karunaratne. The main event in Sri Lanka's horse racing, the prestigious 'Governor's Cup,' will be held on April 13 and is one of the highlights of the season. There will also be a Grand Ascot-style fashion show by famous fashion designers and there will be a band present to add colour to the event. As always, the event will draw a colourful and enthusiastic crowd, said Karunaratne.

"This is one of the oldest traditions in the city. Spectators turn up sporting stunning fashions, complete with triangular umbrellas and feathered hats. There will be prizes for the best-dressed ladies and smartest and prettiest fillies as well as for the best hats," he revealed.



Raju N. Veerasingham, T. Sevandhi Fernando, Ranjith Godage

## Special programmes, offers, for Nuwara Eliya holiday makers

Nuwara Eliya turns into a hive of activity during the month of April. As the tourist season sets in, the streets become choked with cars, vans and minibuses, and the hotels are packed to the brim with local and foreign tourists. It's a happy time for hoteliers who organise special seasonal programmes to their patrons.

The *Nation* visited several top hotels in Nuwara Eliya to find out what their special programmes were for this popular tourist season.

### The Grand Hotel

The Grand Hotel is one of the most famous hotels in Nuwara Eliya. It was the former residence of Sir Edward Barnes and is an excellent example of Victorian architecture. Although it is a large hotel, it still retains the old world charm and characteristics of a mansion. The *Nation* met Resident Manager, Raju N. Veerasingham to talk about their preparations.

"As the largest and most sought after hotel not just in Nuwara Eliya, but in the whole of the Central Province, we believe that it is necessary for us to gear up for the April Season. We want to create a fun and fabulously thrilling festive atmosphere for the holidaymakers," said Veerasingham.

He added that they will have special Avurudhu programmes from April 9 to 20. According to him the entire atmosphere of the hotel is geared to soothe the frayed nerves of holidaymakers who have come there to get away from the heat and noise of the city. "Our garden has been winning the award for the 'Most Beautiful Garden' for 17 long years and is one of our main attractions," he said.

But since, "leisure time is incomplete without good food", he said that the Grand Hotel is ready with a "Premium Menu" renowned for its succulence and variety. The Barnes Hall would be having sumptuous buffets for breakfast and lunch. "Hawkers Street" will cater for those revellers with a live band," he said.

Customers can take their pick from a variety of delicious food served at the Supper Club, a fine dining restaurant, the Magnolia Coffee Shop, and the Grand Indian Restaurant which specialises in authentic Indian dishes and sweets, which will also have special programmes.

Grand Hotel also has special programmes for children. "We have lined up exciting events such as 'Kids Hall' and 'Kids Playground' because we are well aware that most of our patrons have families with young children," he said.

### St. Andrew's Hotel

Built in the latter half of the 19th century St. Andrew's is a Tudor-style colonial mansion. When we entered the building, we felt that we are entering another world, a world of open fires, candlelit dinners and well-stocked wine cellars.

The hotel is offering a special 'set menu' and live music for the patrons during this season.

### Alpine Hotel

One of the newest luxury hotels in town, Alpine Hotel is renowned for its eco-tourism programmes. The hotel offers excursions to mountains, water falls, boat rides in Gregory's lake and safaris to the Hakgala Botanical Gardens, Horton Plains, Mahinda Kumara, the owner of the hotel told *The Nation* that they expect to introduce a lot of new programmes in the season.

"We hope to introduce a lot of exciting programmes for the season," he said. "We will have music with a D.J., barbecues and special menus for the patrons. We expect a lot of visitors after the school holidays and we are ready to treat them in style," he added.

### Collingwood Hotel

Like many other hotels Collingwood is also offering "special programmes" for the season including music, festivities and special menus.

"We expect a lot of guests this month, and we have planned to offer them live music and special menus at an attractive rate," the proprietor of the hotel, V.J.C. Kumara said.

### Galway Forest Lodge

Over looking the 27 acre Galway nature reserve, this forest lodge is situated away from the hustle and bustle of the city. The Executive Resident Manager Ranjith Godage told us that while they have not planned any special programmes they are offering the patrons a place where one can rest and relax while enjoying nature.

### Windsor Hotel

Situated at the heart of the city the Windsor Hotel offers a haven for the traveller who wants to enjoy a calm relaxed holiday. Resident Manager T. Sevandhi Fernando said, "The hotel is situated at the heart of the city but it is a very tranquil place. Since the festivities are held outside the city this time around this is an ideal place for you to come and relax," (RK)

# Oh to be in 'Little England'!

There's an assumption that many families go to Nuwara Eliya when their maids take leave to go to their villages for the Avurudhu. These residents, mainly from Colombo, continue to stay in Nuwara Eliya, also known as Lanka's Little England, till the festive season is over. Due to the large crowds who gather at this holiday town, Nuwara Eliya begins to look more like Pettah, with traffic jams and the hustle and bustle of activities.

The only draw back to going to Nuwara Eliya is that one keeps meeting the same people we meet year after year at Nuwara Eliya, with most ladies, gossiping about the latest fashion trends and the latest "hot" news. But all this ends when the season starts, and the race course comes alive as the Governor's cup starts. The ladies dress up in the most glamorous Victorian style clothes, wearing gloves, hats with nets and trendy shoes, and the paparazzi click away to showcase these new styles in the fashion pages of news-

papers and magazines. While the winners of the horse races get the coveted governor's cup, the female spectators are given a special prize for the best dress, best hat and so on. Once the races are over, the thrilling motor races commence. For those who want to roam the streets of Nuwara Eliya, there are plenty of street hawkers, waiting to sell them a host of products. For them this is best Avurudhu gift as their business flourish with the massive influx of visitors. On the Nuwara Eliya streets

you can find anything you want, from tiny rings to strawberries, at a cost. There are shops with candles and Nuwara Eliya souvenirs. The strawberry farms are flooded with visitors eagerly buying fresh strawberries which are a rare delicacy in Colombo. The vegetable markets too are flooded with visitors eager to purchase fresh upcountry vegetables which cost more during the season. Nature lovers usually visit Nuwara Eliya's Galway Bird Sanctuary which is a 27 acre

park where one could catch a glimpse of a great variety of rare tropical birds. The Hakgala Botanical Gardens, Victoria Gardens and Horton Plains are also popular places for Nature lovers to visit. As everywhere when a city is flooded with local and foreign tourists it becomes dirty. One can find *silli silli* bags strewn all over the city as well as uncleared garbage, posing a serious problem to the municipality which will have a hard time cleaning the city, after the season.

(Pix by Pushpakumara Matugama)