Why Sri Lanka is everyone's cup of tea

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Mike Watson travels to Sri Lanka to see tea plantations and learn more about the island's history Next time you pour yourself a cup of tea, drink a toast to Devastating Emily. That was the lurid nickname of a leaf virus that wiped out the coffee crop in Ceylon in the 1870s.

But a group of mainly Scottish pioneers weren't to be beaten. They were already growing tea – green gold. The plantations they established and the bankrupt coffee estates they bought are still producing some of the best of the world's crop.Four thousand feet up in the centre of the country, now Sri Lanka, life has hardly changed since those days. The British connection is still strong and many plantations have British names – Blair Atholl, Brookfield, Kew and Kirkoswald. On the winding railway (designed by Brits) up to the best plantations there's even a station called Great Western.

Until recently the area was hardly a holiday region. Transport isn't easy in Sri Lanka; most people travel in crowded buses that hurtle and roar around the hairpin bends.This is definitely not a self-drive destination and most visitors hire a car with a driver for their trip. You'd be a nervous wreck five minutes after leaving the airport, even if Sri Lankans do drive on the left (in theory). The four-hour drive from Colombo, the island's capital and site of its only international airport, can be arduous even with a skilled and friendly driver like ours.But it's worth it. Tucked away amid the rolling, vivid green tea estates is Tea Trails, four large bungalows that were once the homes of European planters.Now tourists sample the luxurious life they once lived, complete with complementary gin and tonics, British cooking and even clotted cream high teas.These historic buildings, with a total of 20 luxurious bedrooms and suites, have been restored by Dilmah, one of Sri Lanka's leading tea producers.Each bungalow has its own manager, butler, chef and gardeners. They all have beautifully-kept grounds and overlook, or are close to, Castlereagh Lake, a reservoir in the Bogawantalawa Valley, known as the Golden Valley of Tea.And there's plenty to do from your bungalow base. Activities include white water rafting, mountain biking, kayaking on the lake and treks and walks through the hillside tea plantations.

We stayed in a bungalow called Norwood and spent a fascinating morning walking through the estate for lunch at the lakeside Castlereagh bungalow.After a meal on the veranda we crossed the water on an outrigger canoe to a third bungalow, Summerville, where we met a descendant of the Scot who set up the first tea factory on the island.James Taylor, the son of a wheelwright from Kincardineshire, left Scotland in 1852 at the age of 16 to work on a coffee plantation. He learned about tea in India and after the leaf blight in Ceylon he was the man who put the country's tea on the world map.Today Andrew Taylor is Tea Trails' planter in residence, having turned down a top trade job in Colombo to stay in the hills he loves and share his wealth of knowledge with visitors.

One essential visit is to one of the tea factories, huge three or four-storey multi-windowed buildings where – in less than 24 hours – freshly picked leaves are turned into the black tea that we know so well.Tea bushes are members of the camellia family and have to be pruned regularly to produce leaves and buds throughout the year. The top two leaves and bud are picked by teams of Tamil women, whose ancestors were brought to Sri Lanka from south India by the planters.First, the pluckings are 'withered' – demoisturised with the use of huge fans. Then they are crushed and fermentation begins. Stopping this at the right point by 'firing' in a heated chamber produces the finest tea, which is graded by quality and size, from the best 'leaf' tea to the 'fannings and dust' which go into tea-bags.The higher the altitude, the better the tea, so the Bogawantalawa has a great reputation.The tea is taken to Colombo for auction and more than 90 per cent is exported. But you can buy it at one of the many factories, which welcome visitors and have their own shops.The gateway to the tea country is Nuwara Eliya (City of Light), the highest and most British of the island's towns. It's bustling and crowded, a strange mixture of modern concrete, 19th Century Scottish-influenced architecture and hedges and rose gardens.We had a quick tour of the Hill Club, which looks like a stately home but has a mixture of stone and mock-Tudor walls. There's a huge billiards room, reading room and stags' heads on the walls. Nothing seems to have changed since it was founded in 1876 so if you want dinner you'll need a jacket and tie.Nuwara Eliya started life as a sanatorium for the British Army and still has market gardens which grow crops such as lettuce, strawberries and blackcurrants which seem a little out of place until you enjoy them by the pool at your bungalow.One way to get to the town is by rail. The nearest station is at Nanu Oya, about six miles away, and you can catch trains to Colombo and Kandy, capital of the Hill Country.On our way to Tea Trails we joined the train at Nanu Oya, a train spotter's delight. The station is an enchanting shadow of its former self, with lengthy platforms, single-sex waiting rooms and the original wooden arrival and departure boards – the tracks may be overgrown but the station staff are helpful, immaculately dressed and keep up the traditions of yesteryear.Our train arrived on time, which apparently isn't always the case. We had reservations in the observation car at the back, which gave us a great view of the plantations, hills and waterfalls as we wound our way slowly round hairpin bends and through damp tunnels. It's not the Orient Express, but it was a highlight of our trip.Sri Lanka has plenty of other attractions to offer visitors and we managed to cram in several in our short stay.The island's beaches are famous and a good stop after a long flight is Negombo, just a few miles from the airport. Sri Lankans are mad on cricket and there were some very promising youngsters playing on the sands.Also on our itinerary was some culture – two World Heritage Sites, the cave paintings and Buddha statues at Dambulla and the 200-metre high Sigiriya rock fortress and gardens.

And you can't miss the elephants. We saw 50 of them at dusk at the edge of a lake in Kaudulla National Park, and later visited the Pinnewala elephant orphanage, where around 80 animals of all ages live and bathe twice a day in the nearby river under the gaze of the tourists. In busy Kandy we visited the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, which houses a tooth of the Buddha and is a pilgrimage site for the country's Buddhists.By contrast, we stayed at the Kandalama Hotel, in open country by the side of a lake. The huge complex is built into a hillside and concealed by trees and undergrowth. Rooms have wonderful views and the infinity pool is almost worth a visit in itself.Your driver will take you to spice gardens, jewellery merchants, silk and batik producers, and fix safaris. He'll almost certainly talk about cricket.But my lasting memory of Sri Lanka will be the dark green hillsides of the tea country.

Travel factsMike Watson was a guest of Tropical Sky which offers seven night tailor-made tours to Sri Lanka from £1,099 (two sharing) in May and June 2008, incl return flights ex-Heathrow with Sri Lankan Airlines, all transfers and surcharges.Accommodation, on B&B basis, includes one night at The Beach Hotel in Colombo, one night at Heritance Kandalama, two nights in deluxe room at Earl's Regency Hotel in Kandy and two nights' all-inclusive in a luxury room at The Tea Trails.Package includes air-conditioned vehicle, with English-speaking chauffeur guide, and entrance fees to Dambulla, Sigiriya, Pinnewala elephant orphanage, and Kandy Temple, a cultural show as well as the Tea Trails plantation and tea factory. Regional departures including Birmingham, Newcastle, Manchester and Glasgow start at an additional £150 per person.(Courtesy : yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk)