



# SHOP

RETAIL THERAPY IN A TUK TUK

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A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE  
SHOPPING TOUR FROM SRI LANKA'S FLAME TREE  
ESTATE & HOTEL

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## RETAIL THERAPY IN A TUK TUK

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR  
ERIC  
PEERLESS NYMPH

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice  
(she was so much surprised, that for  
the moment she quite forgot how to  
speak good English).

LEWIS CARROLL  
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND  
1871

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Retail Therapy in a Tuk Tuk, the subject of this guide, will take you down the one of the world's busiest high streets.

And don't worry about the example chosen – which you may, at first glance, consider eccentric, situated as it is in small village in the middle of an island of barely 20 million people in one of the least visited countries in the world.

Marvel instead - because, yes, you have come to Galagedera, the first village you encounter as you drive into the hills of Sri Lanka from its central plains.

Despite its obscurity, Galagedera's high street, like those of most Sri Lankan towns and villages, is booming.

As retail apocalypse decimates the high streets of the developed world, here the drive to digital, globalization and changing consumer habits have made only the most modest of footprints. Within the next 30 years this will surely change - but for now, to travel down its length in a tuk tuk is like time traveling in Tardis.

Once upon as time, your village looked a little like this.

The tour may may shortchange you on art galleries, artisan food outlets or Jimm y Choo footwear wear; and there is little to no change of breaking for martini, still less an almond croissant – but no matter.

Behind Galagedera's busy frontages are nearly all the things that most people need most of the time: on their doorstep and not concealed behind knotty road networks in gloomy retail park.

Galagedera high street really is that - a long ribbon of

a road, with almost 200 shops and business on either side, beginning on the left as you slip out of the gates of the Flame Tree Hotel and set off down the Rambukkana road.

At almost any time of the day it brims with pedestrians and traffic – especially other tuk tuks. Pause and watch. People talk. They pause and gossip, trade news, they know one another.

In amidst innumerable clothes shops, tiny cafes, photographers with technicolour backdrops, fish mongers, and butchers, wood carvers and timber yards, small shops selling plastic chairs from China, water tanks, clothes, fruit and vegetables, and basic household goods, are a wide range of businesses and services.

TWO

LEFT OUT OF  
THE GATES

It is the hospital you arrive at first, an agreeable village example of the free and universal health care system enjoyed right across the country. Sri Lanka's health system has had a seismic impact on national life, improving life expectancy and dramatically reducing maternal and infant death.

It runs parallel with paid-for private health care with its faster and sometimes more advanced treatment. And it co-exists with an indigenous medicine system that is supported by its own network of doctors and nurses, pharmacies, hospitals, teaching colleges and a bespoke government ministry.,

Galagedera's cottage hospital treats around 300 outpatients a day and around 20 who are admitted to its wards, cared for by around 5 doctors and 40 nurses.

Dental care, basic health care, basic mental health care and maternity care are all provided for, but the more complicated cases and conditions are referred to the main state hospital in Kandy. This includes – on average – 10 snake bites it encounters annually but not the scorpion bites which can be treated locally. Colds, flu, road accidents are all typical of its challenges – but so too are people injured by falling off trees or being hit by falling coconuts.

Next up is the village's central bus station which receives buses to and from Kandy or Kurunegala all through the day. Notaries have their offices here, close to the village Magistrate Court, one of over 5,000 such government offices nationwide and a short walk away from the village's large police office, one of 600 nationwide. Close at hand, and convenient for a tidy court appearance, is the village's tiny handloom workshop: real looms being worked by real people to produce lovely, patterned fabric.

Further along is the Galagedera Primary School and the Sujatha Girls School.

Founded in 1906 this is the only girls school in the area, teaching around 1,000 pupils from first grade on.

The village's main school, Galagedera Central College, is tucked away behind the village. Founded over 120 years ago, this large state school takes in students from ten to eighteen years, with about 70 staff members to educate 1,000 students.

For hardcore consumers, a retail treat offers itself next with The Global Electrics and Paint Shop, owned by one of 3 bothers, the hardware tycoons of the village.

The second brother trades in such item as cement, plumbing and electrics and the third in glass. They are as second generation business family, the enterprise having started 40 years earlier.

Their rather surprising neighbour is Green Life, a plantation investment company that specialises in guavas. Given that the fruit, delicious in jams, deserts and chutneys, originated from south America but has been used in traditional Sri Lankan medicine for hundreds of years, it is likely that it arrived sometime after 1505 with the Portuguese. Guavas are grown mainly in the dry zone, not the hill country of Galagedera so this anomaly of an office is rare and mysterious thing, as much to me as to its manager.

Then you encounter one of the village's great retail treasures: the Ayurveda Medicine Shop. Once little larger than a wardrobe, this enterprise has ballooned in the past 8 years and sells over 100 different pungent herbs, which are made up to whatever prescription the customer presents.

Amongst its many wonders is devil's dung. Made from the dried latex of carrot related plants from central Asia, this curious version of Asafoetida finds greater favour amongst cooks than patients for the smooth onion like flavour it bestows with generous grace to any dish to which it is added.

The village boasts a branch of Durdans Laboratories whose range of basic medical tests often saves a longer journey to the main hospitals in Peradeniya.

The chain began in 1945 and is one of several leading private health care providers, such as Lanka Hospital and Asiri.

The village, being about 40% Muslim, naturally boasts its own mosque, this one a large white and green structure, whose Iman's call to prayer, a welcome musical improvement on the previous incumbent, can be heard daily across the jungle.

Sri Lanka has well over 1 million tuk tuk on its register so it is no surprise to find several 3-wheel garages in the village, one of the better ones being New Chooti Motor Centre.

Most tuk tuk drivers are careful and law abiding souls; even so, the vehicles account for almost 4,000 road incidents annually, almost 8% of them fatal.

As the row of shops thins out on the left, you pass the Government Vet, their animal mandate including the usual tally of cats and dogs, but also sizable numbers of goats and some 100 weekly out calls for cows.

Nearby is the Hanna Gold Shop, one of several tiny gold shops in the village, their products typically 22 carats or less.

It lies close to a large Village Sports ground - usually silent and locked except on those days when politicians come to town, eager for large rallies; or for very occasional music performance or even sports tournaments themselves.

Most the main political parties have little branch offices in Galagedera; and the village tends to be a swing constituency, typically voting in whichever party happens to win any particular election in any particular year.

THREE

HOMeward  
BOUND

Beyond the sport's ground the village peters out to paddy and the occasional house or roadside café, but on the other side of the road heading back into Galagedera, it starts up again, this time with the capacious Office of the Agricultural Instructor.

Set up in 1935 and now staffed by 32 people, half of whom are field officers, they are part of a government network that provides practical support to small famers, with subsidized sales of plants and fertilizer, water provision and horticultural advice for the main commercial crops – rice, pepper, cardamom, coconut, clovers, cinnamon and rubber.

Financial advice is also on hand with a branch of the Agricultural Bank set up in its grounds, as well as help of a more spiritual nature, derived from the not insignificant shrine to Lord Buddha that greets you on your arrival.

Along from here is the Jabbar Central College, a mixed gender Muslim school and a branch of Lanka Petrel, a filling station with reasonably non rusty tanks and reliable petrol.

The almost-next door B & B Bake House is another of the village's treasures. Going for over 20 years it turns out over 350 loaves and 1000 other assorted muffins, cakes, buns and sweet eats twice daily, in time for the early morning rush and the end of day homecoming.

Another near and treasured is Kandurata Spice, one of 3 spice shops in the village. This one has been running for over 40 years and is now in its second generation of family owners, sourcing its crops from local farmers.

Alongside very well graded quantities of nutmeg, mace, clove, cinnamon, cardamom and pepper, it also sells rubber sheets, areca nuts and, unaccountably, brooms.

Dried fish - especially sprats, skipjack tuna, shark, sardines, and queen fish - is a staple in the Sri Lankan diet and is found in the most unexpected of dishes. The smoking gives the meat a pleasing flavour, colour, and taste; more importantly it offers the most affordable source of animal protein to its consumers.

Many shops sell it in the village, including the popular Fish Bar, which can be found next to the One Up Shoe Shop, whose tag line ("The Best Footwear") well reflects its commodious range of trainers and chappals.

Rush Mobile, just on for here, is probably the best phone shop in the village and though they don't repair phones, they do sell their many accessories.

A busy printer, Chandena Offset, is also to be found here, its office set up with sophisticated production capacities to design and print on paper, wood, plastic or resin. Stopping by at almost any time of the day and see a continual flow of customers eager to get adverts printed for poppadams, Muslim delicacies, fliers for shop launches, wedding invitations, and CVs. Always, lots of XCVS.

There are a range of barber shops and beauty salons in the village though you can't really beat arranging for Dilruk to come to cut your hair on site at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel under the frangipani trees.

Several Foreign Employment agencies have tiny branches in the village too. In just six (albeit turbulent) years from 2019, 1.3 million Sri Lankans have left the country to work abroad – nearly 6% of the entire island population. The paperwork for leaving, still less getting a job, is tortuous process and although the greater number end up in the Gulf States, many western agencies such as the UK's NHS have become dependent on appropriating foreign talent.

The branches of several large nationwide banks can be found in the village, the Bank of Ceylon, with its Soviet-style service; the People's Bank and the NSB. All have ATMs; and, even better, air conditioning.

A busy mini retail park of 5 shops in a row also lies on this side of the road, all of them owned and managed by relatives of Priyanka, our go-to guy for hotel shopping, whose range of aphoristic T shirts provokes daily comment.

The shops include the village's main religious shop. Although the odd statue of Ganesh can be spotted, its stock is largely focused on Buddhism. Statutes of Lord Buddha in cement, plaster of Paris, stone, fibre glass and ceramic fill every ledge and floor space, along with religious paintings and items that worshipers can buy to gift to monk: robes, pillows, sheets, ceremonial yellow sun umbrellas.

It also sells a range of religious accessories including fly whisks, incense, bells, oil lamps, walking sticks and even electric lights in the shape of the sacred Bo Tree.

The village supports a tiny branch of Cargills, an outpost of the island's oldest supermarket chain, which began life in 1844 with branches in Kandy and Galle before opening its iconic main branch on the site of the old Governor General's palace in Colombo in 1902. This red and white brick structure was designed by the Scottish architect, James Skinner, father of many of the island's greatest buildings before he hung himself at his offices in Colombo fort on 26 December 1910, having never recovered from an earlier bicycling accident.

Just around the corner is Super Meds Central Pharmacy owned and run by Harsha for over 10 years, and able to source most medicines.

Opposite is the Post Office, a large building with 32 staff who collect and redistribute thousands of letter and parcels daily across the Galagedera region. Here too people pay utility bills, make money orders and even – still – send telegrams.

Up from here is the village's Pradeshiya Sabha, one of 276 across the island. These local councils are where many public services are accessed and governed – including the management of public spaces, roads, sanitation, and water supply, public health and safety, the collection local revenue, the implementation of local development plans and the enforcement of by-laws and planning regulations.

FOUR

LOOSE ENDS

Should you then wander on past the entrance to The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, heading on the main road to Kandy you encounter two plush cafes.

The Royal Lion Hotel, the first of these, also offers rooms.

Further along is Café OMeili, set up and managed by Srimal, a stylish and enterprising ex banker with a side line in hill country strawberries. His air conditioned and beautiful designed premises sells a wide range of coffees, teas, soft drinks and made-on-site snacks would put most coffee shops in London or New York to shame.

Going on up the hill you take you to the nearest liquor shop, which like all shops of this kind go by the name Wine Shop.

Selling any kind of liquor here demands of its retailer such quantities of patience as would trouble the dead. The types of licence offered by the Excise Department are many and manifold, and often given to small random changes, suspensions or adaptations.

Further licences are required for different types of alcohol. And still more for its storing, importing and distribution, still less its importation. Its fees are no less a minefield and of course, there are strict rules about when, be it the hour or the day, that liquor can be sold.

# DISCOVER MORE

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"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at [www.flametreestate.com](http://www.flametreestate.com).

## A GIFT FOR READERS

Of course, as a reader, you naturally qualify for special treatment should a holiday bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:  
[generalmanager@flametreestate.com](mailto:generalmanager@flametreestate.com)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

