

THE FLAME TREE HERALD TRIBUNE

IN THIS EDITION

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news, views, reviews, & off - grid jungle intel

WHAT MAKES AN ELEPHANT SPECIAL
HAIRCUTS TO ENVY
CASTING FOR A CASTE
A SQUAWK OF PARROTS

AN ELEPHANT LIKE NO OTHER



Sri Lankan elephants are, as you might expect, unlike any other elephants anywhere. Standing as they do at the very top of the food chain, the endemic exceptionalism that they embody is actually commonplace for all island wildlife, still less its human life.

Compared with the African elephant, the Sri Lankan variant is smaller, with softer, darker skin; an arched, not concave, back; and a twin rather than a single domed forehead, as if they have two brains. Because they live more in forests, they have smaller ears and rely less on them to regulate body heat.

Sri Lanka's elephant, Elephas maximus maximus, as scholars fondly call it, is Asia's largest elephant subspecies. They stand out in any beauty competition with the other elephant species that originate from Asia – from India, Sumatra and Borneo, not just because they are larger, but because they are also much darker, though they set off this colour with an unrivalled degree of pinkish-white pigmentation spots around their face and trunks – inimitable beauty spots.

Whilst it is clear that they evolved from the Indian elephant - Elephas maximus indicus - by sheer dint of having lived here on an island uninterrupted by the evolutionary influences of the mainland, protected by the country's island status, they have grown to be so far apart from their mother species as to now be a fully and separately classified subspecies.

They have grown larger simply by consuming more or less of the same highly nutritious diet for thousands of years. Sri Lanka's diverse lowland dry zones fed by plentiful monsoon rains, its wet tropical forests, and abundant seasonal vegetation have given them a most unending feast. From this, special genetic traits have developed that give Sri Lankan elephants greater height and larger skeletons, though no scientist has yet explained what drove the genetic divergence behind their darker skin and freckled, depigmented patches.

For any elephant anywhere, Sri Lanka is the epicentre. With an elephant density well over one hundred elephants per thousand square kilometres, the island is, by a vast measure, Asia's most important country for elephants.


It was a dream.

CINNAMON



Nothing else, except perhaps Buddhism itself, water technology, or Sri Lanka's island status, has had such a marked impact on the country as cinnamon.

Its glittering commercial allure drew in monopolistic colonisers, and the consequences were to remake the island - utterly. Lured by cinnamon.

First came the 15th-century Portuguese, who broke the Arab traders' monopoly and took over the Maritime Silk Trade — until, that is, the Dutch stepped in.

The Dutch brought a draconian commercial mindset, establishing Sri Lanka as a de facto cinnamon estate with stringent laws to maximise what would become one of the world's most profitable monopolies. They imposed huge fines and deportation on anyone who cut down a cinnamon tree without permission.

When the British arrived in 1796, the cinnamon monopoly fell into their hands — but only momentarily. British control of Sri Lanka coincided with the natural dissolution of the global cinnamon monopoly.

But it dissipated in a way that merely made things more interesting, for by then the profit-minded vendors of cinnamon had branded something else as cinnamon - Cinnamomum cassia, a cousin of the plant then living mostly in China, but soon to be planted right across southern East Asia. It was cheaper, faster, and easier to grow and profit from. It was almost like Ceylon Cinnamon, too. Almost — but not quite.

Ceylon Cinnamon (Cinnamomum verum) is a plant that you can only find in Sri Lanka. It has an arresting, distinct flavour compared with Chinese cinnamon. It is sweeter, more subtle, and less bitter than Cinnamon cassia. It has a softer texture and a lighter colour. As one food writer put it: "It is the flavour equivalent of being hugged by your grandmother."

Of the 80 chemical compounds both varieties contain, there is little to compare in how well they are known to improve insulin levels, increase blood sugar uptake, reduce cholesterol, and act against bacteria and fungi, even to the point of inhibiting tumour growth. Both stop the buildup of tau, a substance that can lead to Alzheimer's disease. Their metabolism inhibits the progression of Parkinson's Disease. Their polyphenols detoxify enzymes, protecting against cancer cell growth. And both stimulate calorie burning. But they differ in their coumarin content, a compound that can cause liver damage. Compared to Chinese cinnamon, Sri Lankan cinnamon has extremely low levels of this dangerous chemical - 250 times less, to be exact. It is therefore the only sure variety to use for health benefits.

We grow it here on the Flame Tree Estate, our climate making it the perfect spot for the plant; the growing spice likes it hot but not blistering – a steady temperature of around 25˚C to 32˚C - and its demand for plenty of moisture means it is a firm fixture in the central hilly area of the country – in Galagedera, in fact.

It is grown most easily from seeds, 3-4 per pot, and planted out about 4 feet apart in these clusters, whose competing roots ensure a beautifully shrubby plant, best able to give off many branches to peel, and so limit the dangers of any one plant racing to become a fifteen metre tall tree.

Although today it is typically grown in large, well-managed monoculture estates, like a sapphire, its best mounting is when it is surrounded by many other things, an approach that led long ago on this island to the development of a unique form of gardening– the Kandyan gardening technique.

This variety of gardening mimics a tropical rainforest.

In spaces of an acre or less, taller trees are interplanted with shorter ones. The resulting fusion garden typically includes jackfruit, mahogany, mango, teak, and, of course, as many spice plants as can be squeezed in. It fosters an astonishing biodiversity - a self-sustaining ecosystem that drives up the health of the soil and the resilience of the plants to disease. Erosion is minimised; fallen leaves keep soil temperatures at favourable levels and improve fertility. And planted in its sunnier spots is cinnamon, the greatest of the island's species.

We prune our own bushes here, although it was common not so long ago to hire wandering groups of specialist cinnamon peelers who all came from the same caste. In the time of the kings, and especially in the Kandyan kingdom, some castes specialised in just about everything, from washing clothes to preparing temple flowers. The caste that specialised in cinnamon peeling was the Salagama (or Chalia) caste. They originated in South India, arriving here as early as the thirteenth century and settling largely around Galle, with strategic village outposts as far north as Kandy and Chilaw.

To watch them prune a cinnamon bush is like watching Yehudi Menuhin play Elgar's Violin Concerto in B minor.

Our home-spun approach is infinitely more modest – but it gets the job done.

Pruning starts every year at about 18 months into the plant's life, with cross-branches removed and the plants kept to a height of around 3 metres. Harvesting occurs twice a year after about 3 years.

It is simple enough if you are merely after large cinnamon scrolls. However, the Salagama peelers are masters at peeling the branches to a target width, with different widths determining the final grade of the spice. Thirteen different grades are recognised, determined largely by the diameter of the quill. The highest, known as Alba, has quills less than 6mm in diameter.

Here, we merely cut a straight, young branch from the tree and trim off small leaves, shoots, or knots to leave a smooth, clean stick.

Next, we scrape the outer bark to remove the rough, bitter greyish-brown layer and reach the heart of the spice – the yellowish-green or light-brown inner layer.

Stage three is to loosen the inner bark with a smooth, heavy object (a copper stick is best). Rolling bruises the inner bark and loosens it from the hardwood core underneath.



And lastly, of course, you dry it – leaving the peeled sheets in indirect sunlight so they naturally curl into cinnamon sticks, or "quills".

Keep Michael Ondaatje and the Cinnamon Peeler in mind as you do all this, though. For you are not just knocking up an ingredient for the kitchen in a sort of pick-your-own way. You are on the cusp of telling anyone you might randomly encounter: Smell Me – for you are well on your way to becoming a sort of human Monarch Butterfly, rearranging your every organ, limb, and nervous system to transition from leaf-munching caterpillar into what Juan Olivarez said was "one of the treasures God left on this earth."

You touched
your belly to my hands
in the dry air and said
I am the cinnamon
Peeler's wife. Smell me.

THINK




Fine cuisine of outstanding quality, a sophisticated selection and unbeatable taste.

WHY IS IT ALWAYS BETTER TO HAVE YOUR HAIR CUT UNDER FRANGIPANI TREES?

Dilrek, the barber, is most certainly one of core benefits that comes with running an estate and hotel in the middle of the jungle in central Sri Lanka.

Like all barbers, Dilrek is always changing his hairstyle. His hair is thick and black, endowed with a vigour that ensures it grows as fast as Formula 1 cars at Silverstone. Sometimes, the sides are shaved to a brutal Number 1, leaving the middle section standing proud as a soufflé above his forehead. Sometimes it is all cut soldier-style, or trimmed neatly everywhere, like the well-meaning coiffure of a young accountant. Occasionally, Dilruk turns his full attention to the sideboards, fashioning them with a careful attention to detail so that they curl out in luxuriant twists like tiny croissants. Rarely – but most grandly – the beard and moustache are brought into the mix, often cut in the opposite style to the head hair, so presenting you with a magnetic Before-and-After image.

Dilruk is a mere WhatsApp away and arrives, gear in hand, right down to the hair sheet, at precisely 8 am. He sets up his barbering chair in the shade of a frangipani tree. Today, yellow and orange orioles flit from branch to branch. On his last visit, it was a baby giant squirrel. Before me stretch long dewy lawns, acid green topiary hedges, and brick paths lined with gothic mothers-in-law tongue. Schnauzers chase suicidal squirrels before coming to rest under my chair.

Dilruk's style is very mellow. Softly does he wield his long, sharp scissors; they move like elven whispers around your head. Although built with the sturdy compact efficiency of a Challenger 2, Dilruk is so light on his toes that you never know where the next cut will land. He gives off no smell or sound as he steadily moves around my head, so different to the boisterous Italian barbers on Fulham Road who rattle through the colourful highlights of their day and life like Hello Magazine. Instead of coming out of the encounter like a chocolate sundae sprinkled with too many hundreds and thousands, Dilruk leads you out of it as if you had both been on the same meditation.








The most genuinely kind staff I have ever encountered!



SQUAWK

SQUAWK

SQUAWK

Parrots love this island – and Layard's parakeet is easy to spot, as it has a long, light-blue tail, a grey head, and a fondness for sudden, prolonged screeching. The green-all-over rose-ringed parakeet is a giveaway too - with a bright red beak and the slimmest of head rings. But the most striking is the male plum-headed parakeet. He is a stunner, his proud red head offset with purple and blue feathers. He would turn heads in any nightclub.

Two other parrot species live on the island: the Alexandrine parakeet, similar to the rose-ringed parakeet but much larger. It's a bit of a city dweller. The other, the sparrow-small, endemic Sri Lankan hanging parrot or lorikeet, is a rare creature: a twitcher's crowning glory.

All these birds appear in G. M. Henry's celebrated 1958 Guide to The Birds of Ceylon, which sits in the hotel library, along with some of his original watercolours. Henry was one of the last great ornithologists – the sort you would fight to sit next to at dinner.

As much a discoverer as a describer of species, he wrote extensively about the island's wildlife. Born on a tea estate in Sri Lanka in 1891, he wrote a bird guide that is remarkable not only for its comprehensiveness but also for its entertainment value. His descriptions are unforgettable and funny; of the lorikeet, he remarks, the bird is not simply another parrot but a convivial and restless one with highly ridiculous breeding habits. Reading his identifiers, you almost feel you have met the bird concerned at a party.


Absolute calm in the middle of the jungle.



SPLASH

BATHGAMA OR PADU - Agricultural labour

BERAVA - Traditional drummers and dancers, though sometimes also agricultural labourers.

GATTARA - A subgroup considered social outcasts within the GOYIGAMA.

GOYIGAMA - The most numerous caste, traditionally farmers.

KATUPULLE - Messengers or clerks.

KINNARA - A highly segregated, lower caste tasked with menial work (such as weaving mats).

NAVANDANNA OR ACHARI - Metalworkers, goldsmiths, and painters.

NILAMAKKARA - Temple servants.

PANNA - Grass-cutters.

PATTI - Shepherds

POROVAKARA - Wood cutters.

RADA OR HINNA - Washermen.

RADALA
The Kandyan aristocracy and nobility.

RATE-ATTO - Farmers.

RODIYA - The lowest caste.

VAHAL - Servants of the Radala.

VAHUMPURA OR DEVA - Jaggery and farming.

A FEW KANDYAN KINGDOM CASTES TO CHOOSE FROM


The place is paradise.



BLUE FOR YOU

A lucky handful of museums outside America house Sri Lankan sapphire.

The oldest by far is The Aphrodite Sapphire. Modestly sized and safely housed in a gallery of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, this is not simply a sapphire, almost certainly from Sri Lanka, but also one of the earliest and most beautiful Roman jewels in the world. Carved sometime in the first century, it depicts Aphrodite feeding an eagle.


I cannot recommend it highly enough.





A LITTLE BIT OF GRIEF

For most people in Sri Lanka, grief is the most public of activities. Buddhists, of course, see death not as an end but as the start of a new form of existence. But it is not one that goes unacknowledged.

For several days, the body of the just departed is kept at home, visible to all in an open casket as scores, hundreds even, of mourners come to pay their respects, all dressed in white. White flags fly at the entrance of the home, and the grieving family, with no time to grieve, is kept busy pouring hot tea and handing out biscuits.

Around the body, monks recite their mournful prayers and occupy themselves with rituals as white cloths are offered to indicate the detachment of worldly possessions; as water is poured to assist the transfer of karmic merit so that the just-departed may have a better chance of reaching a nobler realm than the one so recently vacated. When Latha Walpola, the "Nightingale of Sri Lanka", died in 2025 after a career that chalked up nearly 700 songs and 600 films, Independence Square was mobbed as hundreds of thousands of mourners came to pay their respects, including the President, Prime Minister, and so many other politicians that no parliament could ever claim to have been better attended.

Not that her cremation would have brought much rest to her family. After a typical cremation, everyone comes together again for an Alms-Giving ceremony, repeated 3 months later and then 12 months later. The monks do rather well in all this; their prayers being rewarded by gifts of food and more useful practical essentials. Tamil Hindu rituals take even longer; their ceremonies often last up to 16 days. Only the island's Muslims and Christians get on with matters at speed, the Muslims burying the dead within 24 hours and the Christians well within a week.

The life of the dead may be placed in the memory of the living, but even for Latha Walpola and her extraordinary creative output, forgetfulness will gradually descend like a Fog of Forgetfulness until eventually, as Shehan Karunatilaka put it, "Nothing is forgotten. We don't remember where we put it."

We expect answers to all this, and of course, the lucky believers aside, there are few answers. The big stuff looms over us like the shadow of a great cliff. We can escape many of these awkward questions in the West, for there death is shunted away like false-bottom drawers in marvellous, beautiful desks; in hospices and discreet funeral parlours. They are never places where Gloria Gaynor could go and sing out loud: "I Am What I Am." In Sri Lanka, you are constantly reminded that the very opposite is true. It is unavoidable. Here you open up your closet as it were and, lying there so calmly and fatally composed, sing out loud like Gloria: "Life's not worth a dam till you can shout out, I am what I am."

There is a compelling virtue in this, an aid-mémoire, a Post-it note on your over-busy brain: "Memento mori," whispered the mandatory slave in the ear of whichever victorious Roman General was enjoying his public triumph in his four-horse chariot. "Remember you must die". And that, like nothing else, helps you plot and plan your day-to-day regardless of any interrupting power cuts. It spurs you on, a mindful thorn you would be foolish to remove from the sole of your foot.



Be sure to walk around the grounds and enjoy an amazing massage.

SO, WHAT SHOULD I CALL YOU?

EARLIEST NAMES

The earliest island names, recorded in Brahmi inscriptions of the 3rd century BCE, include names such as Abaya ‘fearless’, Mita ‘friend’, or Sena ‘Army’. By the time of the Sigiriya graffiti (7th century CE), double-barrelled names appear – for example, Mahamal Bud, Golagamu Niladevala and Salame Dev.

‘GE’ NAMES

Traditional Sinhalese ancestral house, family caste, or profession names act as the first part of a name, and the word itself often ends with “ge”. So, for example, "Muhandiramlage Simon" indicates that the person comes from the "House of Muhandiram" and that his name is Simon. The GE name is carried down to all descendants regardless of gender and is often abbreviated to a single initial. In modern times, it is also increasingly extinct.

TAMIL NAMES

Sri Lankan Tamils use two names for an individual - the first (which is often just abbreviated) representing their father’s name and the second representing their own. To this is often added the name of a favoured diety - Kanapati for example (a reference to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god), Murugan or Lakshmi (Goddess of Fortune).

MOOR NAMES

Moors, Muslim Arabs, have multiple naming methods. Some follow the Singhalese “GE” tradition. Many follow the Tamil custom, though often adding other family names to the prefix. Moors of Malay descent also add the prefix TUAN for males and GNEI for females. The individual’s own name is also then added, and, in most cases, the individual has several given personal names.

CASTE

Caste often also adds its own tell-tale identifier to island names – the word “Banda”, for example, being very common among members of the Govi caste.

COLONIAL

The Portuguese left a very large number of their surnames behind, often borne by those who converted to Christianity rather than just by those who were descendants by marriage. Examples include Silva (of the Woods), Costa (Sea Coast), Perera (Pear Tree), Oliveira (Olive Tree), and Guerrero (Warrior). The Dutch were less successful in leaving their mark on the names, though a few still survive – such as Karolis, Tepanis, Harmanis, Yohanis and Girigoris.



RESET


We found
a true
marvel
here.



> The place is beautiful, a little piece of heaven on earth.



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A PODCAST TO LISTEN TO ABOUT RAIN

