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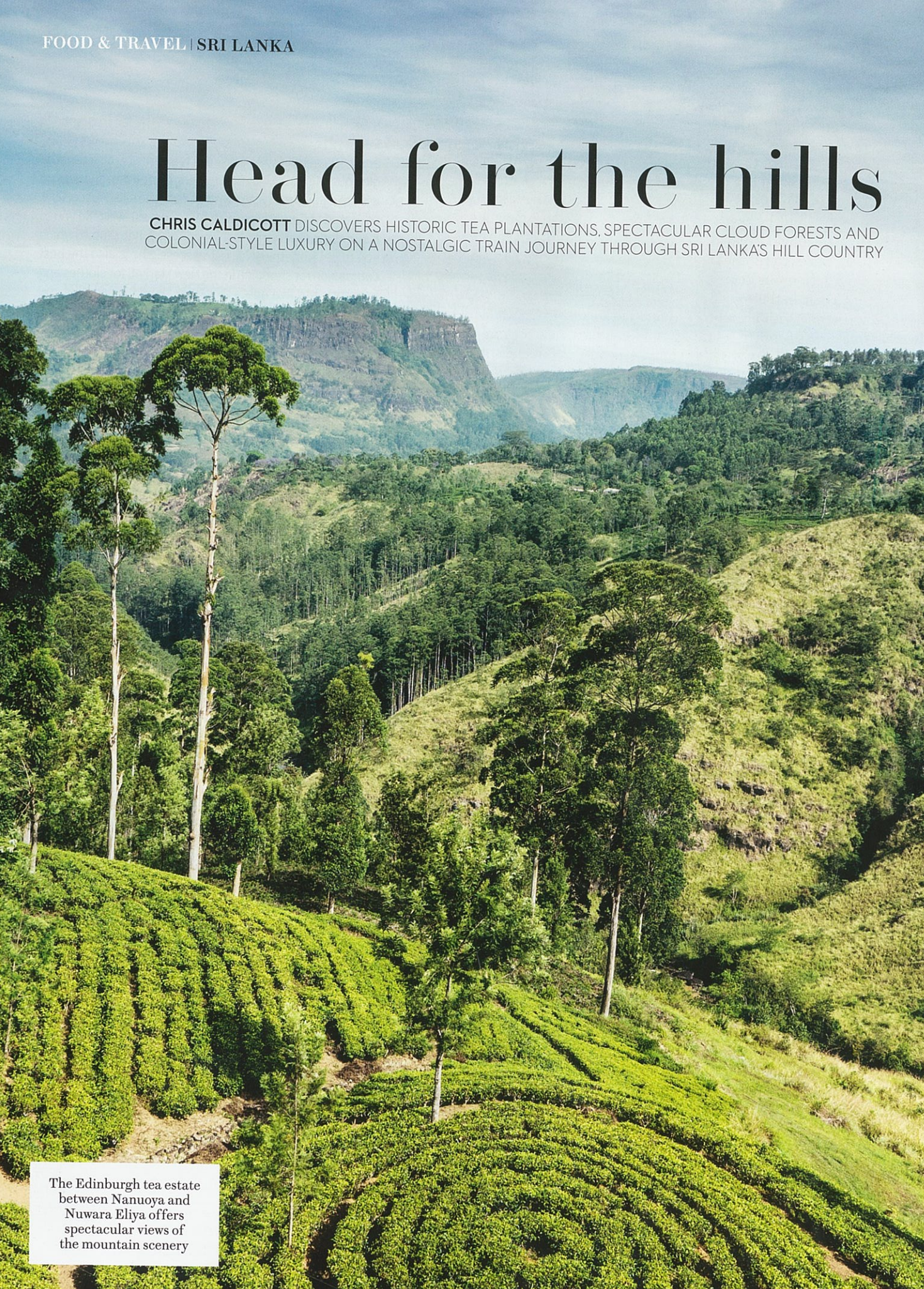
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AND IDEAS FOR SUSTAINABLE SHOPPING

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Head for the hills

CHRIS CALDICOTT DISCOVERS HISTORIC TEA PLANTATIONS, SPECTACULAR CLOUD FORESTS AND COLONIAL-STYLE LUXURY ON A NOSTALGIC TRAIN JOURNEY THROUGH SRI LANKA'S HILL COUNTRY



The Edinburgh tea estate between Nanuoya and Nuwara Eliya offers spectacular views of the mountain scenery

Sri Lanka's welcome recovery from its turn in the spotlight as a target for global terrorism has created a new opportunity to awaken your inner train enthusiast and experience the evocative slow-train journey from the Indian Ocean to the colonial-era tea estates of its Hill Country. Built by the British in the 19th century to transport tea from the plantations to the ports, the line – a triumph of railway construction – is reputed to be one of the most scenic in the world.

I begin my journey with a night at The Wallawwa, an elegant country-house-style hotel in an 18th-century manor set among tranquil gardens, a blissfully short drive from both the airport and Colombo, then head for the hills the following morning.

As the hill train draws into Colombo's Fort Railway Station, it is busy with rushing commuters, extended families and eager hawkers. A crush of passengers converges on the train, so I am relieved to be travelling luggage-free (mine is instead being transferred by car) in a reserved seat in an airy, vintage-style carriage.

A saffron-robed Buddhist monk blesses fellow passengers as candy-coloured houses give way to rice paddies and groves of king coconut and banana. Villagers use the railway line as a road and gaggles of schoolgirls scatter to smile and wave as we pass.

The chugging locomotive picks up speed as it begins the ascent, stopping sporadically at colourful, flower-festooned stations where food sellers work the windows offering home-cooked treats. An immaculately dressed station master, resplendent in gold buttons and epaulettes, blows his whistle to signal departure and we move on. Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines, cricket matches and scenes of everyday life are fleetingly framed by the train's windows.

It is all change at Kandy; local passengers are replaced by other tourists and tribes of young backpackers who sit precariously in open doorways, legs hanging out over the tracks. The train climbs out of town into a new mountain landscape of verdant jungle, palms laden with ropes of fruit and jackfruit trees dripping with wild honeycomb.

I get my first sight of hillsides carpeted with emerald-green tea bushes – a taste of the journey ahead – just before pulling into Hatton station where Upal, who has driven

from Colombo with my luggage, is waiting on the platform to take me to Camellia Hills. While colonial-era traditions at this former tea-planter's bungalow are kept alive – afternoon tea, open fires, croquet and G&Ts before dinner – its design shuns dark furniture and chintz in favour of a fresher look, complete with an infinity pool that overlooks Castlereagh Reservoir.

The next day's short hop to Nuwara Eliya cuts right through the heart of tea country. As far as the eye can see, swathes of deep green are stippled with the colourful saris of nimble-fingered pickers. My hotel is the four-bedroom Goatfell, on a ridge above the hill station of Nuwara Eliya, where I am served a tantalising spread of curries made with homegrown organic ingredients.

On the third day, I travel through swirling cloud, past high waterfalls and dense jungle en route from Nanuoya to the Haputale escarpment, where I spend the night at 145-year-old Thotalagala – one of the most historic tea-planter's bungalows in Sri Lanka and the epitome of colonial-style luxury. I arrive in time for a factory tour, followed by high tea in the tiered garden of Sir Thomas Lipton's former home nearby.

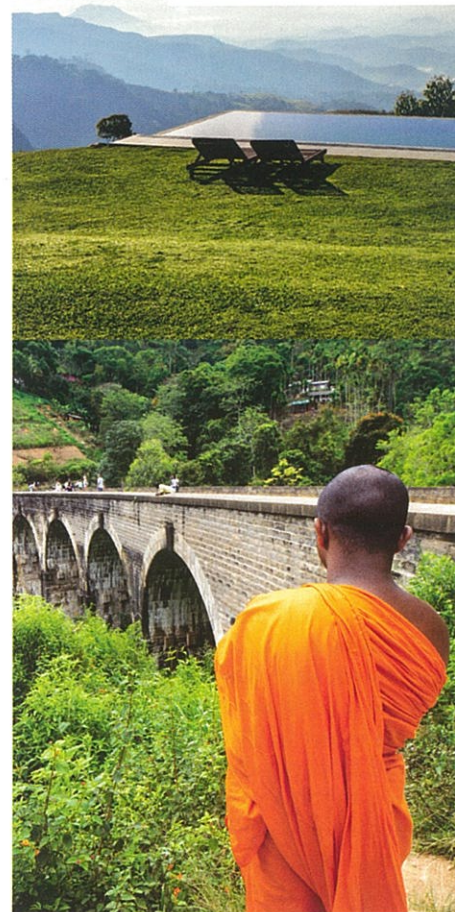
On the final leg of my rail journey up to Demodara, the train hugs the mountainside as it passes through cloud forests, every new tunnel revealing plunging valleys and spiny ridges, until the crowning moment of the journey – the crossing of Nine Arches Bridge, between Ella and Demodara. This architectural marvel – built from stone after the steel allocated for it was allegedly commandeered for manufacturing in the First World War – earns its name from the vast arches through which, from the gorge below, can be seen nine glimpses of the sky.

At recently opened Nine Skies bungalow, I wake the next morning in time for the hoot of the 'down' train, which echoes round Ella Peak as the train completes the spiralled Demodara Loop round the mountain and continues its journey back to the coast.

I return to Colombo by road, breaking the journey at Banyan Camp on the shores of Hambegamuwa Lake. Its open-sided lodges are ingeniously constructed with materials from the forest. That night, floating on a candlelit raft and feasting on grilled prawns and a curry made from foraged vegetables, I reflect on a train journey that has delivered an epic experience of some of the world's most spectacular scenery.



FROM TOP The railway line was built by the British during the colonial era. A view from the pool at Thotalagala, a 19th-century bungalow on the Haputale escarpment. A saffron-robed Buddhist monk looks across the Nine Arches Bridge, a landmark between Ella and Demodara



Ways and Means

Chris Caldicott travelled as a guest of Wix Squared (020-3808 6383; wixsquared.com), which offers a seven-night tailor-made trip to Sri Lanka, from £2,400 per person based on two sharing. This includes two nights at The Wallawwa, near Colombo, B&B, at the start and end of the journey, one night each at Camellia Hills, Goatfell, Thotalagala and Nine Skies, all-inclusive, one night at Banyan Camp, full board, plus all train journeys, transfers and international flights □