The Tea Factory

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Nuwara Eliya in central Sri Lanka is about 2000m above sea level. It is the tea country of Sri Lanka. Lush tea plantations stretch endlessly over the rolling terrain.

Tea was introduced from China to Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was formerly called) in 1824. In 1867, a Scottish planter, James Taylor, first started commercial planting of tea in Ceylon. Ceylon's main industry then was the planting of coffee. In 1869, a blight known as coffee rust (*Hemileia vastarix*) destroyed almost all the coffee plantations in the country. The coffee planters, financially broke but undaunted in spirit, set about replanting the wasteland where coffee once thrived with tea bush. Today, with a total area of 188,970 hectares and an average annual yield of 280 million kilograms, tea has become Sri Lanka's premier agricultural produce.

Sitting majestically on a hill in Kandapola in Nuwara Eliya overlooking the surrounding tea plantations is a tea factory. It is, however, no ordinary tea factory. It is, in fact, The Tea Factory, a luxurious hotel in which I spent a night in September last year together with my wife and a group of friends.

This Aitken Spence hotel was concerted from a tea factory and was officially opened on 24.11.1996 by the then Minister of Media, Tourism & Aviation of Sri Lanka. It won the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Building Conservation Award on 04.10.2000 and Prince Charles was the chief guest and guest speaker at the ceremony held in London. On 17.09.2001, the hotel won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Merit Award 2001.

The original exterior of the old factory building has been retained to reflect its past. The hotel's colour scheme gives an indication of how much has been done to transform the factory's interior: green for the original structures, red for new additions and gold and silver for ducting and piping. Many of the original fixtures have been retained too: the generator from 7 decades ago was the throbbing heart of the entire operation in an era when there was no national grid to supply the necessary power, and the pulleys and fans were the sinews and lungs of the building. All this will remind hotel guests of the old tea factory's glorious past when millions of kilograms of high quality tea were produced to grace breakfast tables and drawing rooms all over the world.

The hotel has, as part of its dining facilities, a full-size replica of the restaurant car of the toy train that used to ply in the area of Nuwara Eliya from the end of the 19th century till 1950. It is sitting on small-gauge rails and opens its doors to diners with a shrill whistle, a cheery "All Aboard" and a wave of a green flag by its maitre d'.

I think we can learn something from the Sri Lankans and convert one of the abandoned tin dredges in our country into a hotel too. ■