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Halgolla: Bungalow with a sense of living history

Regular readers may remember I used to write a monthly feature in this newspaper in the 1990s about plantation bungalows and their history. Such bungalows were not part of the tourist circuit then as company planters were not permitted to take paying guests. So I was delighted to receive an invitation to visit the Halgolla Plantation Home since it is a genuine bungalow with its owners (now retired) in residence.



Bed and breakfast in private houses is an old established practice in the UK and Europe with guests becoming part of the resident family for a few days, dining with the hosts and joining in their lifestyle. In Sri Lanka this is not common but is a wonderful option for visitors and Sri Lankans who don't want the expense of staying in a boutique hotel or being part of a package deal at a soulless beach resort.

The owner of Halgolla Plantation Home is a third generation Sri Lankan, and a beautiful portrait of the founder of the dynasty, A. J. Van Der Poorten, hangs on the bungalow wall. So do many other portraits and exotic paintings and family photographs, not to give the place an atmosphere of authenticity, but because these are the personal mementoes of the couple who are the hosts.

For them, turning their home into a bed and breakfast place means entertaining complete strangers, which could be a tiresome experience for both hosts and guests if the visitors are seeking a slick, designer-style modern cabana where they can canoodle in privacy. For a successful stay in a plantation home, guests with a real interest in the Sri Lankan way of life as well as congenial hosts are essential. The Halgolla Plantation Home has welcoming charm in abundance.

First, the difficult part: getting there. This plantation of 45 acres is north of Galagedara off a trail through tropical wilderness close to the 17km marker on the road from Kurunegala to Kandy. The owner provides details on how to get there but be prepared for a long and mysterious drive on an unmade road, so van or 4WD vehicle is necessary. Mains electricity only came to the place last year, proving how isolated it is.



The bungalow: Quintessential, traditional Sri Lankan experience

Even when we drove in through the gate, we still weren't sure which of two roads to take although we could see the bungalow atop a hill. It's the one on the left for entrance, and the one on the right for egress. The exterior of the house is almost hidden by foliage and it is only when we went inside we could see its extent.

As it was built as a private home rather than a working plantation bungalow, it is unique in design. There are two lounges linked to the dining area and a separate kitchen in an adjoining building; another building once housed the billiard table.

There are two rooms dedicated to paying guests. One is called Nellie's Suite and has a double bed with mosquito net and a single bed in an alcove. There is an attached bathroom with hot water (the owner will proudly explain how this is provided by an old-fashioned boiler). The other room for two (Ben's Suite) also has an attached bathroom.



Going back in time: Portrait of original owner A. J. Van Der Poorten

Meals are available on request and are prepared in true Sri Lankan style, often utilising produce from the plantation and recipes that a hotel chef wouldn't understand. Portions are not for the faint hearted and the lunch we enjoyed had at least ten curries, as well as a sumptuous, chunky home-made mango chutney.

Guests have the run of the house and are welcome to read from the owner's extensive library although they are more likely to want to explore the surrounding countryside or listen to the hosts' incredible tales of Sri Lankan life. Artefacts from the original bungalow remain, including a beautiful, handmade, stained glass window probably installed in 1890. There are old bookcases and cabinets and a priceless davenport with side drawers and a hinged writing slab.

The Halgolla website assures guests of peace and relaxation, adding that the bungalow is "ideal for artists and writers, those who love nature and hiking and appreciate quiet pursuits." There is a sense of living history, which adds to the fascination and privilege of being able to stay in this

plantation home.

With rates starting at Rs 4,500 for the double room with meals available as extras, and driver's quarters, this is the quintessential, traditional Sri Lankan experience, ideal for discerning visitors whether local or foreign.

Halgolla Plantation Home, Galagedera; tel: 081 3808007 or 072 2849770 ;
www.halgollaplantationhome.com

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